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Coming to terms with Gonzo journalism : an analysis in Russian formalism.

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COMING TO TERMS WITH GONZO JOURNALISM: AN ANALYSIS IN RUSSIAN
FORMALISM

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B.A., University of Louisville, 2016
M.A., University of Louisville, 2019

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A Thesis Approved on

15 April 2019

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DEDICATION

This work is the product of a long academic journey; a journey that I would like to dedicate to my wife, my children, and my mother. Thank you for your encouragement, love, and support. This thesis is also dedicated in memory of Hunter S. Thompson and to the city of Louisville. Thank you for always inspiring me.

“A man who procrastinates in his choosing will inevitably have his choice made for him by circumstance” —Hunter S. Thompson (*The Proud Highway*)

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ABSTRACT

COMING TO TERMS WITH GONZO JOURNALISM: AN ANALYSIS IN RUSSIAN FORMALISM

Beau Kilpatrick

15 April 2019

Gonzo journalism is notoriously difficult to define because of its ambiguous nature. To date, scholarly definitions focus on historical interpretations of Gonzo's content, its connection to social and political contexts, or the biography of Hunter S. Thompson. These definitional attempts neglect the formal devices of the composition. This thesis aims to redefine Gonzo as its own genre by using the nearly forgotten methods of Russian formalism—specifically the works of Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp, and Boris Tomashevsky—to analyze the formal devices and components of its form. The results are twofold; first, it acts to rejuvenate an unpopular literary theory by illustrating its value in examining literature and, secondly, it reveals key identity markers that encourage Gonzo's redefinition. Thus, the outcome of this thesis is to establish Gonzo as its own genre that is objectively defined by its composition rather than subjective interpretations of its content, context, or author.

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INTRODUCTION

A complex literature that resists attempts of being identified by the classification of genres, resists definitional attempts, and remains a paradox because of its ambiguity of being many genres at once, while not being a genre at all, is the Gonzo journalism pioneered by Hunter S. Thompson. Although Gonzo is classified as a branch of journalism, the counterculture nature of the style denies the very ethics that journalism values: remaining objective, fair, and critical (Associated Press 2015). Instead, Gonzo journalism has created its own foundation of pursuing unpopular interpretations of truth, allowing for a narrative structure to frame subjective accounts of reality. To further complicate the insufficient definitions, Gonzo shares many identifying traits with other genres besides journalism, like fiction, autobiography, and creative nonfiction among others. In fact, its definition lacks unanimous approval by the scholarly community and definition attempts often contradict each other because each interpretation focuses on identity markers of single, yet different, genres. To date, scholarly definitions have tended to focus either on historical interpretations of Gonzo's content as it is connected to its social and political contexts, or on its relationship to Thompson's biography. Each definition attempt lacks the substantial evidence needed to establish order onto a counterculture literary style that naturally challenges dominant ideologies of society, government, journalism, and academia (Hellmann; Reynolds; Sinding). The unsuccessful attempts to accurately define this peculiar literature becomes a question of content and

context. Many efforts towards establishing a definition have been attempted by searching the content of Gonzo texts and making connections with the principle trademarks of other genres. Context has also been unsuccessful in providing the means for establishing a reliable definition. By context, I mean the contemporary state of American culture, society, politics, and academia surrounding the conception of the Gonzo text. Although these public spheres may have influenced the content, the compositional form of Gonzo journalism remains unscathed by these influences and interpretations. Previous attempts at definition have neglected to acknowledge the formal devices used in the construction of the composition.

This thesis aims to redefine Gonzo literature as a genre within itself by using the nearly forgotten methods of Russian formalism—specifically the works of Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp, and Boris Tomashevsky—to dissect and analyze the formal devices and components of the Gonzo compositional form. Identifying the textual components of the narrative, plot, character function, and composition will reveal recurring patterns, techniques, motifs, and devices that construct the Gonzo form. This is achieved by way of detailed mapping of the texts that focuses on form, methods, devices, and function among many other formal elements. The outcome of utilizing the theories of Russian formalism is to uncover the blueprint of the Gonzo form and, in turn, unlock the Gonzo paradox that expresses subjective perspectives of American culture in a unique manner. The results of this analysis will be twofold; first, it acts to rejuvenate an unpopular school of literary theory (Russian formalism) by illustrating the value of its usage in examining contemporary literature and, secondly, it reveals key identity markers of Gonzo literature that encourage its redefinition through the sum of its parts. Thus, the

outcome of this thesis is to establish Gonzo as its own genre that is objectively defined by its compositional characteristics rather than subjective interpretations of its content, context, or author.

LITERATURE

The scope of my examination of Gonzo will be limited to texts that best capture the Gonzo style. The pioneer text of Gonzo journalism, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1970), along with Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) and “Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl” (1973), are prime examples that encapsulate the peak of Gonzo literature. Also, Oscar Zeta-Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) will be considered as an outside Gonzo text by an author other than Thompson to address the counterarguments that have been made over time. These texts illustrate an overwhelming number of techniques, themes, and functions of compositional choices that have yet to be analyzed and require further examination if Gonzo is to be understood more clearly. It will be beneficial to understand the scope of interpretive work that has previously been performed on Gonzo literature before moving into the methodology of the Russian formalists and how their theories may provide a valuable solution.

Some scholars have attempted to use the biography of Thompson to characterize the genre (Cowan, 2009; Jirón-King, 2008; Mosser, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Tamony, 1983). Jay Cowan (2009) uses the lifestyle of Thompson to explain how the Gonzo genre came to be. He claims that it takes a particular type of person to perform in their own story and that Thompson’s lifestyle provided a unique opportunity to create an original perspective. Likewise, Dr. Shimerlee Jirón-King examines the Gonzo narrative through

the biography of Thompson and his partner Acosta. Her goal is to trace the genre to its roots and tie its inception to a historical moment in the lives of Thompson and Acosta. Jason Mosser looks at the professional career of Thompson in an effort to understand how the style began and the type of person it takes to become a Gonzo journalist. Much like the work of these scholars, Jason Mosser uses Thompson's early biography as the basis for his examination in an attempt to understand how Thompson's participation in cultural moments blurred the line between subject and reporter. Finally, Peter Tamony examines the narcotic usage of Thompson and how drugs and the American counterculture influenced Gonzo writing. Others have interpreted the Gonzo content by using social and political contexts (McEneaney, 2016; Novae, 1979; Swingrover, 2004; Whitmer & Van Wyngarden, 1987). Kevin McEneaney argues that Gonzo literature is used as a social and political critique. He claims that the genre is full of dark humor, but the motive is to expose flaws within our society and political system. Bruce Novae looks at specific cultural events, which he argues, gave motivation to Thompson's writing—Vietnam, Kent State shooting, Black Panthers at Yale—which served as a “literary Molotov cocktail” that was his “alternative to armed revolution.” (40). E.A. Swingrover's *The Counterculture Reader* and Whitmer & Van Wyngarden's *Aquarius Revisited* look into the biographies of notable counterculture authors—Hunter S. Thompson, Timothy Leary, Ken Kesey, Tom Wolfe, the Merry Pranksters—and how their participation in cultural events influenced the writing of the 1960s counterculture. Because these authors link so many authors of the same period together, there is an overgeneralization that all of these writers were linked to the New Journalism. Many others have also tried to confine Gonzo within the parameters of multiple genres, like New Journalism (Hellman, 1979;

Swingrover, 2004; Whitmer & Van Wyngarden, 1987). John Hellman's work is based upon Gonzo journalism being part of the New Journalism and the body of his examination is based on this premise, which distorts his interpretation of Gonzo because every reference is made in relation to the standards of journalism and the style of the New Journalism. Although there are many investigations on Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo journalism, few are related to the subject of this investigation, and none have attempted a formal textual analysis of Gonzo. However, there are three sources that share similarities with this project. Shimerlee Jirón-King and Bill Reynolds take non-argumentative objective approaches in researching the history of Gonzo by examining Thompson's early works. However, they use Thompson's biography as the determining factor for its definition and conception. Michael Hames-García's analysis of Gonzo journalism examines themes of carnival—an interesting concept to keep in mind when considering the thematic focus of Tomashevsky—in the Gonzo content of Oscar Zeta-Acosta; Thompson's attorney who is caricatured in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and who also chronicles autobiographical experiences in a similar fashion as Thompson.

Gonzo journalism is representative of mid-twentieth century counterculture literature. To better understand American literary counterculture, the state of literature and journalism during that time should be considered; but not as a tool to interpret Gonzo through lenses of social and political contexts, but to understand the compositional differences between Gonzo and related counterculture literature. *The Counterculture Reader* (Swingrover) and *Aquarious Revisited* (Whitmer & Van Wyngarden) provide examples of New Journalism and other literary journalism of the 1960s that should be considered in contrast. Arguments in genre studies and identification (Baumgartner,

2017; Hellman, 1979, 1981; Sinding, 2010; Stephenson, 2012)—specifically: autobiography, first-person novels, and literary journalism—will prove useful when comparing the results of this study with comparative genres; supporting efforts in solidifying a more substantial definition of the Gonzo genre.

The scholarship concerning Gonzo journalism lacks solidarity. There is a division on how to best define the genre. The most common mistake is the misinterpretation of Gonzo journalism as New Journalism. Although the two have similarities, there are enough differences between the stylistic components, narrative structures, character elements, and plot development to confidently separate the two. The main distinctions are of narrative perspective. The Gonzo author is caricatured as the main character, an active participant, whose trajectory is always aimed towards reaching the chaotic center of the story's action. In contrast, the New Journalist is positioned at the edge of the action, a non-participating observer, who is careful to avoid the center of chaos. Furthermore, throughout the narrative, the Gonzo protagonist devolves into an embodiment of the grotesque through interactions with themes of carnival. This symbolic infection represents the perceived villainy of the American counterculture; an action not obtainable by New Journalists who (loosely) adhere to the ethics of journalism.

Another misconception about Gonzo is that Thompson's biography characterizes the genre. Claims that Gonzo is the product of Thompson's lifestyle or vice versa, further complicates the definition by blurring the lines between text and reality. Another common assumption is that Gonzo lacks structure, credibility, organization, and is based on a first-draft model. This is usually justified by hollow claims of Thompson simply being a genius. Although I agree that he possessed the gift of imaginative writing,

simplifying Gonzo journalism as the revolutionary product of a brilliant author is a weak conclusion to a deficient argument. If true, these complications would prohibit other authors from attempting to compose in the Gonzo style. However, an analysis of the Gonzo work of Oscar Zeta-Acosta disproves the recursive definition, and the first-draft model.

Gonzo journalism's resistance to definition has caused the researchers named above to errantly rush towards definitive conclusions using the criteria of many different genres: journalism, creative nonfiction, autobiography, and fiction. Though there have been many attempts to define Gonzo, surprisingly, there is no evidence of a formal textual analysis ever being performed on the genre—perhaps this is because Russian formalism is viewed as an outdated method that has little value—which may provide the information to finally solidify an accurate definition. By following the operations of Russian formalism, Gonzo will be examined with special attention being shown to literary devices, character function, motifs, themes, motivations, plot development, and stylistic choices that aim to present an avant-garde reality of American culture.

This examination will be framed by methods of Russian formalism that were developed in the early twentieth century by Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp, and Boris Tomashevsky. Russian formalism holds exceptional value when considering experimental literature because it operates to break down texts to their core components through analyses of compositional trends, uncovering key identity markers that aid in definitional attempts. The goal of the analysis is to better understand the compositional form and how form influences the work's value. Furthermore, this work will illustrate

modern usability of Russian formalism—a somewhat neglected methodological approach.

Russian formalism never really gained traction as a valuable method of literary theory. It was, in fact, a neglected methodology in the United States. By the time the theory made its way to the U.S., academia was already engulfed with the methodology of the New Criticism, led by Cleanth Brooks. This methodology focused on close readings of literature and, like Russian formalism, ignored cultural background, history, and biographical information. The popularity of New Criticism, and its user-friendly application, was a popular classroom strategy that dominated the middle decades of the 1900s. Much like the New Criticism, Russian formalism also focuses on the text itself, rather than author biography, historical moments, or social and political contexts. The difference lies in interpretation of content. Where New Criticism focuses on the interpretation of content, Russian formalism analyzes the perception, theme, sequence, and function of the content in an effort to understand a literary form. This is specifically why the methods of Russian formalism are valuable to the understanding of uniquely complex genres of literature like Gonzo. The majority of scholars look at these contexts, along with author biography to examine the genre. And those who ignore social and political contexts choose to interpret the content of Gonzo in a manner that resembles the methodology of New Criticism. Furthermore, there has been many efforts to define Gonzo but none of these efforts have taken a formal approach—which, although more difficult in its application, is designed to understand the formal elements that define a literature.

Shklovsky's conclusions in "Art as Technique" and "The Relationship Between Devices of Plot Construction and General Devices of Style" explain how compositional devices, such as defamiliarization, influence narrative structure and plot development. In the context of defamiliarization, the goal for any form of art is to find new and challenging ways to express ideas, to take a familiar concept and present it in a way that makes it seem unfamiliar. Shklovsky claims that, over time, perception becomes an automatic process and the value of art is diminished when instant interpretation is possible due to an over-familiarity ("Art as Technique" 21-22). He suggests that the value of a work is determined by the amount of time it takes for interpretation. This is why defamiliarization, as a "roughening" device that makes a text harder to interpret, is a central concept of his theories. To better understand defamiliarization, Shklovsky closely analyzes a range of texts to identify the compositional devices within. Some of the devices he notes are disorder of genre conventions, displacement of time in the narrative arc, exposition style, motifs, manner of character description, and techniques of dialogue, just to name a few. Shklovsky uses this data in comparison to other genres to determine if a text fits the conventions of that related genre. These comparisons consider if a work is novel in its presentation, is a violation of acceptable genre structures, and if it establishes an unfamiliar form to communicate familiar concepts.

The concept of defamiliarization is generally perceived to create awareness of audiences where they are more present in the act of perception and are more politically activated. However, for the purpose of this investigation, the conception of this method needs to be slightly modified to better serve the purpose of its application. The application methods will remain the same and most of the intent will also remain intact—

sharing familiar content in a new way, roughening of the surface, and the purpose of prolonging the perception process of interpretation. However, the connotation as it applies to the purpose of defamiliarization will shift slightly. Rather than a call to action that politically charges audiences, the purpose will be toned back some to not extend beyond the literature into the realm of reality. Yes, Gonzo literature is highly defamiliarized in its presentation of a bizarre reality, but it does not call for audiences to perceive reality any differently. The defamiliarization methods remain within the pages of the literature and the author does not aim for audiences to interpret their realities any differently. Defamiliarization in Gonzo serves to offer a unique perception of reality as the author interprets it in an effort for readers to vicariously explore an alternative reality through the lens of the American counterculture. Shklovsky's work provides the primary foundation that supports and frames the theories of other key Russian formalists, such as Propp and Tomashevsky.

Vladimir Propp focuses on functions of compositional devices in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) and *Theory and History of Folklore* (1946). Propp's documentation of compositional devices, their sequence, and their function is critical in understanding how to anatomize literature. His method exposes the vital components of a text's form and establishes definition of the text through the sum of its parts. His operation begins by identifying the compositional devices; the narrative situation, challenges and obstacles of characters, and the goals of characters to achieve their purpose. After the initial process of identification, Propp determines the function of each device and its purpose. He then maps the sequence of interactions between functions. This mapping process establishes a

blueprint, allowing comparisons to be made between texts. The comparison of texts is essential in locating patterns and identifying markers that characterize a genre.

When considering patterns of compositional devices found within and across text, the contributions of Boris Tomashevsky are vital to the theories of Russian formalism. Tomashevsky simplifies his methods into five categories: theme, story and plot, motivation, the protagonist, and plot devices. Unlike Shklovsky and Propp, who limit their attention to content, Tomashevsky argues that the theme of the content holds a work together and maintains its form. Further, he claims that themes successfully bond a text if they are realistic and trigger audience responses. He also identifies motifs within a story that collectively solidify the themes. Rather than analyzing the function of devices like Propp, Tomashevsky examines the author's motivations for introducing motifs and the effectiveness of building a textual theme. These examinations share Shklovsky's goal of uncovering and understanding defamiliarization. Tomashevsky simply adopts a different approach. Once the motivations of motif are understood, he examines the protagonist of the text. He claims that the protagonist is the result of the content forming and is the link that holds all of the motifs together to formulate the theme. Finally, Tomashevsky notes the plot devices that are utilized and translates these as genre identity markers that are then compared to genres similar to the text. It is when the results of these five steps are combined that Tomashevsky understands the form of a text, its defamiliarization, its genre identity and how to value its artfulness.

The goal is to address the widely ambiguous interpretations of Gonzo journalism by substantiating a logical definition. The concluding definition will be the result of a formal textual analysis, using the text itself to establish definition rather than social,

political, or cultural contexts. The operations of this analysis derive from a relic of literary theory and rejuvenates its methods by recognizing the value of Russian formalism in modern literary academia. Sometimes the books with the most dust hold the keys to unlocking new ideas that may generate profound discussions about, arguably, the most unconventional genre in American literature.

RUSSIAN FORMALISM METHODOLOGY AND GONZO ANALYSIS

SECTION I

VICTOR SHKLOVSKY AND *FEAR AND LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS*

This section introduces the methodology set forth by Victor Shklovsky and utilizes his procedures for the textual analysis of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Moving forward, it is best to understand the multiple factors that Shklovsky considers in his methodology. The goal of his work is to understand and evaluate the artfulness of a text. His main theory, *defamiliarization*, claims that art results from perception and interpretation, the more challenging a text is to interpret, the more original the artwork must be. Shklovsky argues that perception becomes automatic over time, so it is important for authors to *defamiliarize* subject matter, to "roughen the surface," so as to express ideas in new ways. This concept extends the perception process and forces audiences to spend more time interpreting in an effort to "recover the perception of life" ("Art as Technique" 11-13). To illustrate this process, his analysis, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary" (1921) provides readers with an example of how Shklovsky applies his theory to a text. Using a similar approach, the methods that follow will be applied in the examination of Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Shklovsky's theory begins with an evaluation of the first impression of the text as a whole. He then considers established conventions of related genres and how the text

either abides by or challenges those conventions. Time is the next factor that Shklovsky considers; particularly the timeline within the narrative, digressions from the timeline, and displacements of time. In regard to the timeline, he looks at the storyline of characters to understand when and how their paths intersect. Motifs are also noted in his methodology because the development of action, setting, narration, and character are key facets to understanding the motifs that influence form. Narration plays an important role for Shklovsky because he analyzes how characters, objects, and events are developed, and the motifs that connect each element to the form. This relates to the importance that is placed on methods of presentation, which links back to narration. Next, he analyzes devices and techniques. Devices may include objects that complicate and push the narrative forward; such as devices of compositional style (introductions to secondary storylines, digressions, beginning and end of the narrative), emotional devices that conjure the audience's empathy (love, death, sadness, joy), and techniques that are primarily focused on the way characters interact with each other, the narrator, and the reader. These may include the unique diction of a particular character, his or her tone, structure of conversation, and the style of language used. All of these elements are calculated to evaluate the level of defamiliarization within a text and if that conclusion is enough to classify the text as an original artwork. Are all questions answered, motifs connected, and secondary stories satisfied? Does the text use a conventional ending of the related genre or is it novel in its presentation by violating normal conclusion structures? Does the text position itself in an unfamiliar way to communicate a familiar concept? Questions like these lead Shklovsky to his final conclusions and it is through these methods that this project will analyze Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is Thompson's landmark text that is considered by critics to be a hodgepodge of journalism, fiction, and autobiography¹. For the sake of argument, this text will be referred to as a novel. To best grasp how this novel begins the process of defamiliarization, a breakdown of the first paragraph will set the tone for the analysis. The novel begins *media res*, "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold" (3). This opening line introduces readers to the narrator and a yet unknown pair of characters (Raoul Duke and Doctor Gonzo), who have already begun to embark upon a journey. It also introduces to the reader the main Gonzo motif of drug use. The narrator, often considered to be a caricature of the author, immediately eliminates the possibility of a fourth wall by inviting the audience into his thoughts, speaking to readers and himself in the first-person, "I remember saying something like 'I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive . . .'" (3). The narrative's action begins rather quickly and steadily increases intensity with each line of the first paragraph, creating a foundation built upon the motif of drug use that will frame the Gonzo narrative. The narrator continues, "And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas" (3). The narrator's use of the word "suddenly" relates to Shklovsky's ideas of timeline and the importance in understanding at what point on the timeline that the action is taking place. "Suddenly" allows the reader to identify that this

¹ Baumgartner, Michelle. "What Do Gonzo Journalism and the Kentucky Derby Have in Common?" *Study.com*, May 2017.

Cowan, Jay. Hunter S. Thompson: *An Insider's View of Deranged, Depraved, Drugged Out Brilliance*. The Lyons Press, 2009.

Hellman, John. "Corporate Fiction, Private Fable, And Hunter S. Thompson's Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72." *Critique*, vol. 21, no.1, 1979.

moment is not a deviation in time but, rather, the action is taking place in the present moment. Also, when thinking about time, the concept of tempo can be addressed here. Reading tempo is related to the motif of speed and acceleration that is present in Gonzo's form. When the sentence above is read, the tempo naturally increases. This is due to lack of punctuation. The word "and" is used four times while the sentence itself only contains two commas. This repetition of the word "and" does not allow the reader a brief pause that often accompanies a comma. Instead, the reader continues to read the long-winded sentence with minimal hesitation. Furthermore, the entire paragraph is full of vague language and themes of appearance versus reality. The narrator constructs a false reality where factual data, like the present location of the action being "somewhere around Barstow," is shrouded in vagueness and descriptions of bizarre appearances are speculated with greater detail. The speculation is vague; "what looked like," but the details of appearance have greater depth, "huge bats... swooping... screeching... diving." Much like the drug cycle that inspires Gonzo's form, drugs inspire creativity where the visual is embellished and provide an escape from the boring, vague reality of the user. The physical realities in Gonzo are drab; it's the endless possibilities of the escape that are highlighted within this form. The drug-use motif, coupled with its effects of speed, panic, and escape that are present in this opening paragraph, are weaved throughout the entire text and each influences the other.

The motif of drug use is essential to the Gonzo form. What this means is that much like the course that drugs take on a subject (initial escape from sobriety, increasing momentum of effects towards inebriation, prolonged periods of heightened intensity, displacements of time, paranoia-panic-escape, return to sobriety), the Gonzo form

follows a very similar cycle. The protagonist initially escapes from his or her normal community and routine. In this case, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo escape their daily lives in Los Angeles. They increase the momentum of their journey to the heart of the Las Vegas community through extreme drug use, criminal activity, and a disregard for the consequences. Their experiences while in Las Vegas can be described as a period of heightened intensity due to the compounding effects of extreme drug use. This creates displacements of time, through moments of blackout, which complicate the narrative's timeline and require attempted recollection to fill these gaps. This resembles the vagueness that accompanies descriptions of physical realities—"Somewhere around Barstow"—and the heightened intensity mirrors the detailed embellishments of the bizarre that are often paired with the appearances of things not of this reality—"Huge bats... screeching... swooping... diving" (3). Finally, it is when they recognize the extent of their activity and acknowledge the possible consequences of their crimes that intense paranoia sets in. Paranoia leads to the character's panic and escape becomes the primary objective. This sense of escape becomes urgent and desperate. The depravity of the characters' actions results in a panicked urge to escape the intensity. It is only when this escape is made that the narrative's momentum slows down, normalcy is reestablished, and a period of reflection by the narrator takes place. Shklovsky would describe this return to normalcy as "The Return" and "every return to the norm is experienced as a deviation" ("Devices of Plot Construction" 20-21). This moment of reflection stems from the drug-cycle motif and frames Gonzo literature's method of presentation as a unique deviation from the related genres of journalism, fiction, and autobiography. The form of Gonzo "creates for itself its own content" ("Devices of Plot Construction" 24). What this

means is that because the Gonzo form mirrors the drug cycle, it generates content that is based upon drug use, fantasy, and exaggeration. This is true regardless if the text's topic is events in Las Vegas, the Super Bowl, or the Kentucky Derby. Shklovsky adds that "a particular form seeks fulfillment," meaning that the natural consequence, where form and content influence each other, fulfills the purpose of the form's foundational motif. For Gonzo literature the foundational motif is the cycle of drug use: initial escape, increasing momentum, heightened intensity, displacement of time, paranoia-panic-escape, and the return.

If form creates its own content, as Shklovsky insists, and the Gonzo form is based on the cycle of drug use, then the content generated within should reflect a proportionate sense of immorality; and it does. Vulgar language and exaggeration are key methods of presentation in Gonzo literature and illustrate the unique technique of language that the Gonzo protagonist often possesses. This vulgarity is exemplified in the final sentence of the beginning paragraph, "And a voice was screaming: 'Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?'" (3). This analysis of the first paragraph of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* illustrates the key motifs that guide most of the narrative, along with the peculiar language style of the Gonzo protagonist and the compositional techniques that are commonly found within Gonzo literature. Furthermore, this first paragraph is an announcement to audiences that the messages communicated throughout the text will be framed by the motif of drug use and will be delivered through the narrator's lens of exaggeration; a delivery method that raises issues of unreliable credibility and deviates from commonly accepted forms of journalism, fiction, and autobiography.

By beginning the novel *media res*, readers immediately recognize a deviation in time, acknowledging the nonlinear form that quickly begins to shift from past to present. Lapses in the present time are often in the form of flashbacks or efforts to recall intoxicated moments of blackout. Throughout the text, there are twelve moments of flashback that deviate from the main timeline and are presented in a vacuum of time and space, unrelated to any other timeline. There are also three notes written during the moments of blackout that are included in the narrative to help explain particular lapses of time, including a whole chapter that is an incoherent transcript of one of these episodes (161-68). The novel also includes brief descriptions of hallucinations about possible future outcomes, anecdotal recollections of past events, and random news articles that do not connect to the surrounding events of the narrative. These inclusions create displacements of time and space, and further distort the narrative's timeline. The narrative builds momentum in the present timeline through quick bursts of intense action, increased tempo of quick conversation, and escalating hostility of language. But then the timeline jumps ahead to give readers the outcome first and then backtracks again to explain how the situation came to be. This technique adds to the defamiliarization process that Shklovsky values by never allowing readers to put the pieces together on their own; instead, the audience requires answers to be provided by the problematic, drug-ridden narrator. This idea of relying upon the interpretations of an unreliable narrator challenges the notion of credibility in an autobiographer and obstructs the principles of objectivity that contemporary journalism values.

Although the timeline is important to consider, it is the devices of presentation method, technique of character development, and the style of language that truly sets

Gonzo literature apart from commonly related genres. The method of presentation concerns the narrator's perspective of audience and the delivery of narration. The Gonzo narrator speaks to the reader in the first-person, then speaks to other characters in the first-person as well, essentially erasing the fourth-wall boundary between reader, author, and text. This method can be seen when our protagonist and narrator, Raoul Duke, converses with Dr. Gonzo and the reader at the same time, "How long can we *maintain*? I wondered. How long before one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy? [...] Jesus! Did I *say* that? Or just think it? Was I talking? Did they hear me?" (5). This method draws the audience into the action and assigns further responsibility to readers as they become active participants in any given conversation within a scene. Essentially, the reader is positioned as an invisible character—similar to that of a New Journalist—always observing from the edge of the action without ever getting too close to the center of the chaos; the Gonzo plot. This method of delivery, by default, negates scholarly interpretations of Gonzo literature as a tract of New Journalism². This is because Gonzo literature assigns the reader's position as that of a New Journalist, which automatically defines Gonzo as *other*. This contradiction of previous scholarship is not open to interpretation because Thompson (founder of Gonzo) vehemently states the position of Gonzo as it opposes the New Journalism led by Tom Wolfe, "I'll have your goddamn

² Swingrover, E.A. *The Counterculture Reader*. Pearson Longman, 2004.

Whitmer, Peter O., and Bruce Van Wyngarden. *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America*. Macmillan, 1987.

Sinding, Michael. "From Fact to Fiction: The Question of Genre In Autobiography And Early First-Person Novels." *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2010, pp. 107-130.

Hellmann, John. *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*. Illinois UP, 1981.

femurs ground into bone splinters if you ever mention my name again in connection with that horrible ‘new journalism’ shuck you’re promoting” (“Pig in the ‘filthy white suit’” 1971). Shklovsky would claim that the device of positioning of the reader as a New Journalist is a parody, “a device in a state of deterioration can still be used to parody the device itself” (“Devices of Plot Construction” 39). According to Thompson, journalism was in a state of unreliability and he denounced the ideas of objective journalism, “So much for Objective Journalism. Don’t bother to look for it here—not under any byline of mine [...] there is no such thing as Objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms” (*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* 33). Although the reader is positioned as an insert for the position of parody, Gonzo literature maintains autonomous power through its authoritative narrator who actively participates in the action while maintaining the reader’s subordinate position as merely a spectator on the edge of the action. This device is powerful because it promulgates the narrator’s control of the timeline by constantly stopping the action to either move forward or backwards to explain how other events impact, or are the result of, the present storyline.

Gonzo literature further maintains its own authority by utilizing a vulgar style of language that audiences must accept to move past the opening paragraph. Note how the opening paragraph of the novel concludes, “‘Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?’” (3). Not only is this a form of invitation that must be accepted, it is a disclaimer to audiences that bizarre vulgarity is one of the principle elements of the Gonzo identity. However, the language of this line is extremely mild in comparison to the rest of the novel. The technique of character development in Gonzo is directly linked with its style of language. It does not matter if the narrator is speaking to the reader or if

the protagonist is talking with another character, the style of language barely fluctuates depending on those involved. In fact, the vulgar language is normalized and becomes the standard. Take for instance this average conversation between Duke and Dr. Gonzo:

“Christ, if we keep her full of acid that’s more like *two* grand a day; maybe *three*.”

“You filthy bastard! he sputtered. I should cave your fucking head in!”

He was shielding his eyes from the sun. I spotted the Whale about fifty feet from the door.

“There it is, I said. Not a bad looking car, for a pimp...” (115)

This partial segment of an average conversation between the two characters includes connotations of religious vanity, drug use, sex trafficking, personal insult, and a violent threat of harm followed by an accusation of procuring prostitution; but this is the normal language style of Gonzo and neither character takes offense to the vulgarity of the language used, and neither must the audience if they wish to engage with Gonzo literature. The vulgar language style and technique of character development has an additional purpose that complicates the Gonzo identity; it influences specific settings—particularly settings that resemble South American concepts of carnival. These settings are characteristic of Gonzo literature and the vulgarity of language and content allows for natural development of grotesque characters who interact with each other within the settings representative of carnival. Thus, the method of delivery, style of language, and technique of character development reveals a dominant thematic that reoccurs throughout multiple Gonzo texts. However, examining narrative themes is not the forte of Shklovsky and will be elaborated upon using the thematic theory of Boris Tomashevsky.

RUSSIAN FORMALISM METHODOLOGY AND GONZO ANALYSIS

SECTION II

BORIS TOMASHEVSKY'S "THEMATICS" AND "THE KENTUCKY DERBY IS DECADENT AND DEPRAVED"

The work of Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky is similar to Victor Shklovsky's in that the two formalists analyze texts to better understand their form in ways that help to better define a given literature. Shklovsky and Tomashevsky share similar points of interests in their investigations, such as motifs, time, and plot constructions; however, they use different approaches and techniques when considering the objects of their curiosity. Tomashevsky's theory in "Thematics" (1925) focuses on five key points of analysis: selection of themes, story and plot, motivation, the hero, and the vitality of plot devices.

For Tomashevsky, themes are considered the material that unites all parts of a work. Themes work to provoke reader response by creating a connection through relatable interest. Tomashevsky claims that "the effect that a given theme will have on the reader is a significant consideration in its selection" and that "a work must be interesting, and a writer choosing a theme is guided by the "interest" inherent in that theme. But interest—personal interest in something—takes many forms" (63). This is done through provocation of emotions; a device holds greater significance if the emotions are relatable to the audience's reality. He further adds that, "themes that are "real" in the

context of contemporary cultural thought—satisfies the reader [...] the more significant and long-lasting the theme, the better the guarantee of the life of the work” (64). This explains why romance, fantasy, and tragedy are popular themes in literature. These genres are popularly widespread because of their relatability to audiences; most readers can relate personal experiences to these themes. When examining story and plot, Tomashevsky’s thematic theory parallels the work of Shklovsky. Story and plot are initially determined by the overall first impression of the work and basic genre classification (novel, biography, poem, etc.). Furthermore, Tomashevsky explains that “a story requires not only indications of time, but also indications of cause” (66). A story is the action of a narrative while the plot, as noted by Tomashevsky, is how the “events” or sequences of actions are arranged and how these events are presented to the reader (67). Any work that does not incorporate either of these elements is descriptive in nature and does not fit the form of a story and nor does it utilize the device of a plot. Timeline of the narrative is also considered to help understand how the thematic elements are connected and further the understanding of how these connections assist in providing the general definition of genre classification.

Tomashevsky claims that stories are the result of causal and temporal relationships of thematic elements, anything else is either a descriptive text or a form of didactic poetry (66). By thematic elements, Tomashevsky is speaking of motifs and how “mutually related motifs form the thematic bonds of the work” (68). His concentration on motifs expands on Shklovsky’s work through the organization of motifs into the subcategories of “bound motifs” and “free motifs.” Bound motifs are those that must be included for the sake of the story and the genre, while free motifs do not directly impact

the form of a text. However, Tomashevsky explains that free motifs, while not required for the story to be told, are “presented so the tale may be told artistically” (68). To explain this in terms of Gonzo literature, bound motifs are foundational to the chronological essence of a story and include the drug use that shapes each text, along with concepts of gross bizarreness that formulate the environments which are so paramount in the Gonzo genre. They combine to create the cyclical form that is uniquely constructed in Gonzo texts. Free motifs in Gonzo literature can be considered as digressions from the form and artistic liberties that are used in a stylistic sense, such as the dominant use of dissonant exaggerated details, sarcastic tones, and digressions from the main timeline. For example, a free motif in Gonzo could be the reoccurrences of particular styles of automobiles that the characters commonly use in the narratives (large fast convertibles), or, the inclusion of arbitrary news articles that vaguely connect to the story during that moment but serve no real purpose in advancing the narrative. There are many other idiosyncratic elements of Gonzo that could be interpreted as free motifs. Free motifs work together in the text to create a situation within the storyline but do not impact the chronology or causality of the story like that of bound motifs. Furthermore, Tomashevsky classifies motifs as static or dynamic. Static motifs do nothing to change the situations caused by free motifs and Tomashevsky describes these as, “descriptions of nature, local color, furnishings, the characters, their personalities, and so on—these are typically static motifs” (70). These may be simple in nature, for example, the action usually taking place at night, characters being of the same social class or having similar hobbies, or music references being made to help illustrate the scene. However, I would argue that the personality of the Gonzo protagonist is not a static motif because this

character's personality must be dynamic, which is fundamental to the Gonzo form; it takes a particular character who is savvy in the drug-ridden counterculture to navigate the grossly-bizarre environments that are portrayed through the lens of extreme narcotic usage. This idea is supported by Tomashevsky when he later says, "the actions and behaviors of the main characters are typically dynamic motifs" (70). Although static motifs may be easier to relate to the plot because they are concerned with stylistic presentation, it is dynamic motifs that are centrally applied to the story because they influence the direction of events that keep the narrative moving forward. Dynamic motifs are responsible for drastically changing the direction of the storyline. In terms of Gonzo literature, these may be moments where the characters' drug use incites an escalation of violence among the characters within the environment, or where paranoia creates a fear of legal prosecution, leading the main character to escape the scene and renegotiate the direction of the narrative. Dynamic motifs are often connected to character tension and exciting forces that put the story in motion towards its climax.

The third concept in "Thematics" concerns motivation. Tomashevsky examines the motivation of themes and questions how different motifs are connected to create a holistic theme for the text. Such motivations are either misleading or realistic. Misleading motivation is a common device in mystery novels that purposefully deceive readers with elements of surprise and misdirection. Realistic motivations are more common in Gonzo literature because scenarios are based in reality; although the environments are purposefully defamiliarized, they are real places with real limits and real consequences. However, much like the theories of Shklovsky, Tomashevsky states that defamiliarization is "a special instance of artistic motivation" and "the old and habitual must be spoken as

if it were new and unusual. One must speak of the ordinary as if it were unfamiliar” (85). The idea of defamiliarization is a primary principle of Russian formalism and, based on the concepts of these theorists, is a major deciding factor that separates Gonzo literature from its relative counterparts; particularly New Journalism and autobiography.

Tomashevsky’s theory then examines “The Hero,” also known as the protagonist, of the text. Much like the idea that form creates its own content, themes and motifs create their own hero. This means that the Gonzo text, which mirrors the drug cycle, will inevitably create motifs that are related to the different phases of that cycle. In order to successfully navigate Gonzo’s themes and motifs, the protagonist must be a figure who can navigate every stage of the form’s cycle, be a figure that embodies the pro-narcotic politics of the American counterculture, and the hero must become the literary link that connects all of the motifs together (Tomashevsky 90). This can only be successful if the protagonist has the motivation to embody the facets of each motif and align his or her identity with the primary theme set forth by the literature’s form. This explains why the Gonzo protagonist is unpredictable, erratic, narcissistic, and has questionable morals. The Gonzo form demands that its protagonist reflect the personality attributes commonly associated with the effects of narcotic usage.

The vitality of plot devices that Tomashevsky concludes his theory with is the result of combining the four prior key concepts and, he notes, how the composition either conforms to an established genre or solidifies its own authority. Tomashevsky argues that “each literary period, each school, is characterized by the system of devices which are present in the common style (in the broad sense of “style”) of its literary genres and preferences” (92). The two main concepts to consider are whether the style and

compositional devices are conventional to any comparable genre of that period. If the text has successfully managed to defamiliarize its subject matter, the text will be composed of its own unique style and devices of presentation. The devices that are commonly attributed to an established genre are considered “conventional devices.” These are the descriptive facets that define a genre as unique from others. However, new genres will split away from the conventional when “free devices” are introduced into a text that require redefinition and examination of a text to determine its autonomy (92-95).

Tomashevsky defines free devices as, “devices peculiar to individual writers, works, genres, movements, etc.” (93). This is an important assumption when examining a body of literature and deciding if a text establishes its own authority as an individual genre. He further theorizes how free devices create autonomous genres through an example of how the style of the futurists differs from that of the symbolists:

It is opposed to another style, an unrealistic style, which does not bother about concealing the devices and which frequently tries to make them obvious, as when a writer interrupts a speech he is reporting [*sic*] to say that he did not hear how it ended, only to go on and report what he has no realistic way of knowing.

(Tomashevsky 94)

This example can be applied to how Gonzo literature shifted away from the conventional devices of New Journalism, parodied the conventions, and established its own authority through opposition. To prove Tomashevsky’s point, his five key concepts of “Thematics” will next be applied to Thompson’s archetypical text, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1971).

“The Kentucky Derby” follows two characters as they explore Churchill Downs, observe spectators, and interact with the Louisville environment. The two characters are caricatured personas of Hunter S. Thompson and the renowned illustrator, Ralph Steadman. The theme, motifs, and devices of the text reinforce the theory that the Gonzo form is cyclical in nature and mirrors the drug cycle. It further supports that Gonzo literature is autonomous and requires redefinition as its own genre, which is the topic of concern in this investigation. When this text was first published, it would have been impossible to define its theme or form. It has taken a body of Gonzo literature to collect enough data to determine the identifying characteristics of the Gonzo genre. In theory, the theme of “The Kentucky Derby” text can be summarized as two characters observing and interacting within a grossly-bizarre festival-like setting, while interpreting the events of the derby festival through a constant state of intoxication. The state of inebriation comes from alcohol, which is slightly different from Gonzo’s (later) dominant cyclical device of drug use, but the effects of unreliable narration that arise from this lens are equally similar to the body of other Gonzo texts. This is illustrated when Thompson recalls his and Steadman’s final moment of sobriety before escaping into the bizarre, “This was the last coherent decision we were able to make for the next forty-eight hours. From that point on—almost from the very moment we started out to the track—we lost all control of events and spent the rest of the weekend churning around in a sea of drunken horrors” (275). This information clearly resembles the effects of drug use that appear in other Gonzo texts and shows how the protagonist embodies the pro-narcotic American counterculture that is needed to navigate through the storyline. The reason for alcohol induced intoxication, rather than drug use, is logically due to the infancy of

Gonzo and the genre testing the boundaries of audience response, connection, and acceptance; and although the agent of intoxication is slightly different, the resulting effects are identical, and the Gonzo form remains the same.

Deviations from the story's timeline are minimal due to the shorter length of the text and the timespan of the 72-hour weekend in which the story takes place, further implying that the form creates its content. The bound motifs of intoxication and concepts of gross bizarreness, which are definitive facets of Gonzo literature, are present in this text and motivate the perpetuation of the cyclical narrative that will continue to frame the Gonzo genre. Although the author is originally from Louisville, he lived in California at the time and escaped his normal routine there to return to his hometown as a caricature of himself for the iconic horse race. Likewise, the second character had to escape his state of normalcy in Europe to join the protagonist for this story. The bound motifs of inebriation and gross bizarreness are presented during a moment of self-reflection by the narrator, "There he was, by God—a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature . . . like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It was the face we'd been looking for—and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible . . ." (281). This moment of reflection in the text illustrates how Gonzo uses bound motifs of intoxication and gross bizarreness to create its own theme. Furthermore, it illustrates how the protagonist of the story is created by the form and fulfills his role as the hero. After reading the text and understanding the amount of deviant behavior that takes place, this illustration of the hero makes more sense because the hero has to possess the capability to navigate the themes of the text. The connotations associated with these

attributes of gross bizarreness, not only characterizes the theme, but, influences the tempo.

The Gonzo tempo is very unstable. This instability mirrors the cyclical form of the drug cycle and the effects of narcotic usage. Momentum speeds up, slows down, comes to a halt, then takes off again; and all of these shifts come with little warning in advance. The tempo of the text is important to consider because it reinforces certain elements of Tomashevsky's theory of "*Thematics*." The unstable tempo that accompanies the "hero's" speech is a reflection of the characteristics created by the form and assigned to the hero. These characteristics are necessary for the hero to navigate the story line, to be the representative of the themes, and to be the agent of solidarity that embodies the power to connect all of the motifs. Tomashevsky reminds us that, "we must not forget that the emotional attitude toward the protagonist is set by his function in the work [...] whose character in real life would provoke revulsion and disgust [...] The protagonist, rather, is the result of the story material into a plot" (89-90). Furthermore, the unstable momentum reflects the bound motifs of the hero's personality (mirroring the acceleration-of-intensity stage of the drug cycle), illustrates the constant speeding up and slowing down in the plot's timeline, and supports the concept of defamiliarization that is supported by the Russian formalists.

Momentum begins to build after the two characters are introduced and are getting to know each other. The caricature of Thompson presents his position as the hero—who has the capability of navigating the bizarre environments of the derby—when describing what the infield will be like to his new coworker, Steadman. This scene also exemplifies

the unnatural tempo associated with the form of the text through its increase of momentum (to one of its highest moments) through the sentence structure and form:

Hell, this clubhouse scene right below us will be almost as bad as the infield. Thousands of raving, stumbling drunks, getting angrier and angrier as they lose more and more money [...] The aisles will be slick with vomit; people falling down and grabbing at your legs to keep from being stomped. Drunks pissing on themselves in the betting lines. Dropping handfuls of money and fighting to stoop over and pick it up. (272)

The words “raving” and “stumbling” create a sense of motion and panic, which is followed by a lack of commas and the repetition of words to create a prolonged sense of nonstop action; “angrier and angrier” and “more and more.” The following three sentences include very strong verbs, “falling... grabbing... pissing... fighting,” to depict explicit action that is connected to senses of panic and horror, causing a natural increase in reading tempo. It is after the pair’s “last coherent decision” that the action reaches moments of maximum intensity that are marked by the bizarre events at Churchill Downs and the surrounding environments of Derby Day weekend. The day after the derby is when the momentum shifts to intense paranoia and panic, and escape becomes the primary objective. However, the instability of predictable momentum is exemplified by the final paragraph of the text. As Thompson returns Steadman to the airport, the momentum increases, mimicking the intensified action of the narrative, towards its final sentence without any signposts or warnings towards the abrupt conclusion:

The journalist is driving, ignoring his passenger who is now nearly naked after taking off most of his clothing, which he holds out the window, trying to wind-

wash the Mace [*sic*] out of it. His eyes are bright red and his face and chest are soaked with the beer he's been using to rinse the awful chemical off his flesh. The front of his woolen trousers is soaked with vomit; his body is racked with fits of coughing and wild choking sobs. The journalist rams the big car through traffic and into a spot in front of the terminal, then he reaches over and opens the door of the passenger's side and shoves the Englishman out, snarling: "Bug off, you worthless faggot! You twisted pigfucker! [Crazed laughter]. (282-83)

Once again, the form of the sentences creates a natural increase in reading momentum. This is due to the use of strong adjectives and extended length of sentences. Like the scene previously described at the race track, this excerpt creates a prolonged sense of nonstop action that is the product of the hero's ability to shape the direction and intensity of events within the narrative. Based on Tomashevsky's theory, the unstable momentum is the result of Gonzo's bound motifs—prolonged drug use and the formulation of bizarre environments—and also reflects the time and space of the action. The combination of all of these elements sets the Gonzo theme apart from contemporary literature because increasing the momentum at the very end of a text is an idiosyncratic element of the Gonzo form—a free device—along with vulgar language being comfortably used among the characters. Once again, the caricature of Thompson is presented as the hero because the character is able to successfully navigate the themes, be the agent that negotiates the motifs, and ties up all loose ends of the narrative and returns normalcy back to the characters and environments. It is after the two characters make their departures from the bizarre, returning to a sense of normalcy, that the cyclical form completes its revolution.

The cyclical form of Gonzo literature was established in this archetype text and the form continues to structure the genre.

By using the methods of Boris Tomashevsky, it can be determined that the form of Gonzo literature includes more than just a cyclical narrative; the form also reflects the bound motifs of drug use and defamiliarized environments, along with the free device of an idiosyncratic delivery. The Gonzo form also requires the narrator to be a hero of sorts. Although this hero may “provoke revulsion and disgust,” the hero must be capable of successfully navigating the grossly-bizarre environments where the American counterculture can be found and exploited (90). Furthermore, this hero must possess the ability to tie up all loose ends of the narrative and return a sense of normalcy to the characters and environments that have been figuratively infected by the bizarre. Also, Tomashevsky’s methods regarding the vitality of plot devices, specifically free devices, lead to the discovery of drastic changes in reading tempo that are subject to change at any moment, without signposts, and directly relates to Gonzo’s natural sense of nonstop action, panic, and intensity. The repetition of strong verbs does not allow readers to pause during these moments; instead, readers tend to speed up their reading, which matches the acceleration-of-intensity stage of the form, in an effort to vicariously experience the climatic action that is purposefully extended through the sentence structures. This free device of narrative delivery challenges the conventional devices of genre forms commonly related to Gonzo and parodies their form, especially New Journalism, because it illustrates the hero’s involvement in the action and, unlike New Journalism, it showcases the influence that protagonist has in determining the sequence of events. Finally, it is through Tomashevsky’s work on understanding how motifs and devices

influence theme that Gonzo solidifies its defining form. When the bound motifs of drug usage and gross bizarreness, the free motif of exaggerating every detail with a hint of dissonance, and the free devices of unstable momentum and idiosyncratic narrative delivery are constantly presented and combined, it exposes the predominant Gonzo theme as an opposition to convention and reinforces the theory that the drug cycle is the foundational model for the cyclical form of Gonzo literature. This evidence of form further demands the negotiation to redefine Gonzo literature, not simply as a compositional stylistic choice, but as its own autonomous genre that is unique into itself.

RUSSIAN FORMALISM METHODOLOGY AND GONZO ANALYSIS

SECTION III

VLADIMIR PROPP AND “FEAR AND LOATHING AT THE SUPERBOWL”

Vladimir Propp took the methods of the Russian formalist another step forward by applying his methods of examination to the analysis of a very large body of Russian folktales. The goal in doing this was to better understand narrative structure, genre elements, and the facets of form that makes each genre unique and different from one another. His work in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) focuses on the analysis of different character types, defining different kinds of action within the narrative, and how each—character and action—function within the genre. Although Propp’s work was quite extensive, due to the vast number of one hundred stories he analyzed and the 151 fairytale functions that were produced from his investigation, his exact methodology proves to be too grand for the scope of many projects, including this one. However, his methodology is quite valuable when considering the form of multiple texts, and how the identification of these formal elements can help to better define a genre. But, due to the nature of the highly expansive scope of his methodology, it will be best to generalize his key points—primarily: situation, obstacles, goals, motivations of the characters, spheres of action, alternate storylines, and the sequence of functions—into a working model that can be more appropriately applied to the range of this project.

The best way to understand Propp's methodology is provided in the following summary. Propp's work primarily focuses on the function of narrative elements and how function is used to evaluate a genre. Propp claims that the goal of his methodology as "the basic task is the extraction of *genera*" (25) and that "the result will be a morphology (i.e., a description of the tale according to its component parts and the relationship of these components to each other and the whole)" (19). Essentially, Propp argues that by separating and identifying particular literary elements, the results can be synthesized to formulate a definition of a genre. The definition of a genre, according to Propp, is determined by literary function, which is established through the examination of narrative action, personages of characters, and motifs. Function, Propp explains, "is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action" (21). Function is determined by analyzing the purpose of each character, the sequences of actions, and how these are repeated within the narrative structure of the genre. The resulting conclusion will be a sequence of functions that maps the form of the narrative. Although Propp's work is focused on the extracting and identifying of literary elements of the fairytale form, including components of narrative, character, and plot, his work can be applied to the construction and definition of any genre—including Gonzo—with the appropriate modifications of terminology.

The first step in Propp's methodology is to identify the "initial situation" of a tale, for example, "the members of a family are enumerated, or the future hero (e.g., a soldier) is simply introduced by mention of his name or indication of his status" (25). To understand the situations within the narrative, one has to identify the primary challenge being presented. The challenge will then shed light on the obstacles that complicate the

path of the characters. From here, it is determined what is needed to overcome these obstacles, which reveals the goals of the characters involved and what must be achieved for success. These clues are primarily attributed to the protagonist; however, other characters have functions that affect the protagonist's progress within the narrative. Understanding the challenges, obstacles, goals, and functions reveal the basic framework of the narrative. Propp uses the example of a wizard providing a boat to a hero that allows the hero to reach another kingdom (20). This shows that the function of the wizard is one of charity and encouragement, assisting the hero in continuing the narrative towards its next event. These functions are constant and essential to the plot. For example, once the functions are identified, a sequence of functions can then be assembled to map the narrative, and may take a form like this: a hero seeks the guidance of a council, the council advises the hero to seek out the assistance of a wizard, the wizard provides the hero with the necessary tools to continue the journey, the hero uses the tools to further the narrative arc towards its next event, the hero is then allowed to save the day. The sequence of functions relates to Tomashevsky's theory concerning plot devices because this sequence provides the form needed for narrative presentation. The sequence does not change the action of the story, but rather, structures the plot through the presentation of events to the reader. The identified functions of characters, actions, and motifs are added to the collective function of the narrative.

Next, it is necessary to examine the motivations of characters. Motivations, as Propp defines, "are meant both the reasons and the aims of personages which cause them to commit various acts" (75). Continuing with the wizard and hero example, the hero may seek out the boat of the wizard to reach the other kingdom, but why? The motivation of

the hero may be to save the kingdom from an evil monster, to seek revenge against a guilty foe, or to establish a new life away from a haunting past. Understanding the motivations of characters will help to identify what compels them to set and achieve their goals. Understanding the motivations also helps to identify character function within the narrative. The concepts of motivations and functions of characters are determined by where they appear in the narrative. Propp progresses to identify the “spheres of action” of each character (79-83). To identify the spheres, placement of the characters in time and environment must be known. Some characters will only appear in certain locations and at certain times because their motivations will only be relative at that specific moment in the narrative’s timeline. These markers identify the sphere of their presence and lead to the understanding of why particular characters were placed there and what their function in the narrative is. However, some characters will occupy more than one sphere of action and this may complicate the analysis of their function. For example, the wizard who helped the hero reach the other kingdom might also have plans to attack the other kingdom. In this example, the function of the wizard is no longer seen as a positive helper, but rather an evil agent who might have a motivation to harm the hero by setting an ambush. When analyzing characters, Propp claims that it is important to consider the multiple facets of the character’s identity, such as age, resources, social class, and motivations. These identity markers may reveal particular circumstances about that character that may be important to their function within the narrative.

After the investigation of character motivation, he then examines any alternative storylines. There is particular interest in how multiple storylines interact with each other, how they are introduced, any overlaps, and how they are related. By following these

steps, data can be provided to aid in the understanding of the text, the results can then be compared to those of similar texts, and the dominant functions can then be added to the collective evidence regarding Gonzo that has been gathered through the use of other Russian formalism methods. Propp's methodology will now be applied to analyze three of Thompson's works: introducing "Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl: No Rest for the Wretched" (1973) ("F&L Superbowl"), and referencing "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" (1970) ("The Kentucky Derby"), and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) (*Las Vegas*).

"F&L Superbowl" is an article that was published in *Rolling Stone Magazine* and fits within the established factors, thus far exposed, of the Gonzo genre. The article is supposed to be about the 1973 Super Bowl between the Washington Redskins and the Miami Dolphins, however, in the unique style of the Gonzo genre, the subject is highly defamiliarized, the protagonist is a caricature of the author/narrator, and the narration is questionable because the story is told through the unreliable lens of the narrator's narcotic usage. The text further agrees with the proposed Gonzo form because the descriptions of the events, characters, and environments are presented through terms of the grossly bizarre. The utilization of Propp's methods will yield results that echo, support, and further define the Gonzo form.

Although the title suggest that this text is a sports article that summarizes the details of a football championship, it reads more like a narrative about the deterioration of sports journalism, the protagonist's career, and the vices associated with the narrator and his environment. These are also common themes in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and "The Kentucky Derby." The situation that the story actually addresses is the satisfaction

and success of the protagonist's career as a so-called journalist. The narrator describes the obstacles of professional standards in the field of journalism, a lack of interest in the events at hand, the façade of professionalism, and false representations of social classes. The goal of the narrator is to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction by sharing a subjective interpretation of the truth as he sees it. This is also the primary motivation for the Gonzo narrator across the texts already mentioned. Raoul Duke discusses the irony of the situation as an unreliable Gonzo journalist and his position to provide an uncanny account of the truth:

It was treacherous, stupid, and demented in every way—but there was no avoiding the stench of twisted humor that hovered around the idea of a gonzo journalist in the grip of a potentially terminal drug episode being invited to cover the National District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. (*Las Vegas* 80)

The narrator of "The Kentucky Derby" also shares a similar situation when considering his position as a journalist:

Prevent[ing] drifters like Steadman and me from spending all day in the clubhouse, harassing the gentry and rifling through a handbag or two [...] Or Macing (*sic*) the governor [...] And unlike most of the others in the press box, we didn't give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the *real* beasts perform. (271)

The situations mentioned illustrate the narrator's self-awareness as an unreliable journalist, the primary goal of sharing a subjective truth, and the irony of engaging with environments that he interprets through the lens of the grossly bizarre.

Although there is only a single character involved in the dialogue of each of the narratives, the protagonist, other characters are referenced but do not share the immediate time and/or space with the narrator in the present. The most common reference in “F&L Superbowl” is to a former sports journalist, Grantland Rice, who represents the standard for elite composition in the field of journalism. Besides other sports writers occasionally being mentioned for their lack of talent, an amateur wrestler is mentioned to express the beginning stages of the narrator’s career; a political campaign manager is conjured to recollect the former political aspirations of the main character; and other names appear to illustrate the protagonist’s history of drug use and paranoia. The referenced characters serve as digressions from the main timeline and allow the narrator to reflect on previous times that represent either the height of sports journalism, failed attempts at achieving professional success, or reference times of self-gratification achieved through drug use and other vices. To summarize, these references function to shape the identity of the protagonist and to illustrate the values of the narrator.

Character motivation seems to be one of the most puzzling factors to analyze in Gonzo literature because of its form. Remember that the Gonzo form is cyclical, mirrors the drug cycle, and also presents itself in terms of the grossly bizarre. So logically, the motivation of characters is to always complete the cycle’s revolution without really achieving anything substantial. The characters are motivated by temporal experience, always living in the present moment with a disregard for future consequences of their actions, “no point in looking back. The question, as always, is now...?” (*Las Vegas* 180). That is, until they reach the stage of the cycle where the intensity becomes too much, and escape becomes the primary objective. The characters are motivated to experience the

grossly bizarre until the realization of consequences sets in and, then, the motivation shifts to that of escape and self-preservation. Therefore, it is the moment, the temporal experience, that motivates the Gonzo characters. To explain this concept further, the narrator of “F&L Superbowl” describes his fluctuating motivations as a sports journalist:

There was a time, about ten years ago, when I could write like Grantland Rice. Not necessarily because I believed all that sporty bullshit, but because sportswriting was the only thing I could do that anybody was willing to pay for. And none of the people I wrote about seemed to give a hoot in hell what kind of lunatic gibberish I wrote about them, just as long as it moved. They wanted Action, Color, Speed, Violence. (“F&L Superbowl”)

In the beginning, the narrator claims that his motivation for attempting to be an elite journalist was based on the financial security he received by striving to follow the professional standards of journalism. Then, the narrator marks a shift in his motivation. His motivation was no longer strictly about money or pushing to be the best writer within the sports journalist mold. Instead, the motivation became one of style and promotion. When the style of writing shifted from professional accounts of the sports to “lunatic gibberish,” it was more than just the promotion of athletes, it became a motivation for the writer to promote himself and the bizarre Gonzo form that was being introduced to the world. The narrator further explains the motivations for defamiliarizing the Super Bowl for this text, “Here we go again, back on the same old trip: Digressions, tangents, crude flashbacks.... When the '72 presidential campaign ended I planned to give up this kind of thing.... But what the hell? Why not? [...] I've been here all night drinking coffee & Wild Turkey, smoking short Jamaican cigars and getting more & more wired.” The narrator

mentions that he “planned to give up this kind of thing,” meaning that he had planned to give up writing in the Gonzo form. However, the text speaks to the narrator’s failed attempts at politics, so, the motivation to continue the Gonzo form could stem from the failure of conforming to prominent society. The anti-conformity to social norms is common throughout Gonzo literature, “I’d abused every rule Vegas lived by—burning the locals, abusing the tourists, terrifying the help” (*Las Vegas* 173). However, through the narrator’s self-reflection, we sometimes see temporary efforts to conform to common social practices, “But from now on let’s try to be careful when we’re around people I know. You won’t sketch them and I won’t Mace them [...] We’ll go native” (“The Kentucky Derby” 275). This failure to successfully adhere to social norms and to enter a higher echelon of professional class motivates the protagonist to revert back to writing through the lens of alcohol and narcotic usage, creating subjective views of events and environments that are grossly bizarre.

Noticing the placement of the protagonist in different situations, and times, speaks to the spheres of action that Propp discusses to be an important factor in the formulation of the narrative’s sequence of functions. “One might note that many functions logically join together into certain *spheres*” (Propp 79). To better understand the chronology of functions and how they should be constructed into a logical sequence, the spheres of character, action, time, and location must be accounted for. As stated previously, Gonzo’s form creates its content, so in the case of “F&L Superbowl,” the content, including its timeline, is quite short in comparison to other works like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Therefore, there are only a few spheres of action in the text to analyze, rather than the numerous spheres in *Las Vegas*. The protagonist occupies a space in every one of

these spheres, both past and present. This is true for all Gonzo texts, where the main character is always present in every scene. The narrator first occupies the sphere of present-day California where the football championship and its environment are described with first-hand accounts from the press box. Descriptions of the football game, the ilk of grossly bizarre athletes, the massive coliseum, and the disorderly drunken fans are all accounted for in this sphere, along with memories of the golden era of sports journalism. The second sphere concerns a digression from the present timeline to discuss the journalism roots of the protagonist in Florida (digressions from the timeline complicate the identification process of spheres because they have to be identified, then placed in chronological order to achieve the sequence of functions). This sphere is filled with positive recollections of a glorified past, a time in the narrator's life when things were simpler, and life was more rewarding. The time referenced here likely alludes to a time prior to the inception of the Gonzo form. Much like the memory itself, this sphere does not last long, and the action returns to the present timeline. However, at this point, the sphere of the present has shifted; the present has changed and so has the location—from the stadium press box to the narrator's hotel room. The next sphere of action is two years prior when the protagonist had failed to win an election where he ran for sheriff and was then planning a political campaign for the United States Senate race. This sphere is also short-lived and has the opposite motivation from the previous sphere in Florida. The political sphere showcases difficult times and unsuccessful attempts to succeed in American politics. The protagonist returns to the present sphere in his hotel room where the political sphere is then re-interpreted as his failure to achieve success and helps to explain the present stagnation he feels towards his profession and position in society. The

final sphere of this piece illustrates the cyclical form of the Gonzo genre. The protagonist assumes the sphere of the recent past—being the days leading up to the Super Bowl—when he accounts for his drug usage and inebriation leading up to writing about the football championship, “I was out of my head.... But his brain was too clouded to pick up on it.” He then describes gambling on the game with drug addicts and drinking heavily at an unrespectable nightclub, affectionately identified as the “Losers Club.” As the final sphere shows, the spheres of action come full circle. The first sphere takes place at the time of the game—the second goes back to the beginning of the narrator’s professional career—there is a shift in the present that creates a new sphere in the narrator’s hotel room—the fourth sphere describes actions that took place two years prior—and the final sphere brings the narrator to Los Angeles for the Super Bowl. Although the spheres mimic Gonzo’s cyclical form, it is the characters who put these spheres in order.

The spheres of action in “The Kentucky Derby” follow a similar trajectory. Most of the spheres are presented to take place in the present, via present tense usage, with the first sphere being the arrival of the protagonist to the Louisville airport—the second sphere moves the present forward to the hotel room where the protagonist is staying for the weekend and evaluating the situation—the third sphere is a new version of the present, the day before the derby at Churchill Downs with the secondary character, Ralph Steadman being introduced—the protagonist dominates the occupancy of the fourth sphere on the day of the derby by providing the subjective interpretations of the environment, its people, the effects of intoxication, and by controlling the dialogue with the secondary character—there is a strange sphere of memory that comes next which takes place that evening, but is narrated in hindsight the morning after—the sixth sphere

takes place the final morning, there is another shift in time to the present, and this is where the two characters reflect on their assignment and obtain the goal of their mission, finding the “special face [...] of a disease-ridden caricature” to summarize the grossly bizarre (“The Kentucky Derby” 281)—finally, the two characters share a final interaction before departing at the airport in which they arrived. Once again, the spheres of action come full circle and further support the argument for Gonzo’s cyclical form.

The characters of the “F&L Superbowl” narrative have unique attributes that are the product of the Gonzo form—mirrored by the drug cycle—the characters influence how different spheres and storylines are constructed and placed within the narrative. The protagonist details his professional biography as a sports journalist and introduced character references as evidence to support his actions. Grantland Rice, the iconic sports writer, serves to establish the status quo that the protagonist tries to imitate early in his career, but then Rice becomes a symbol for that which the narrator vehemently opposes. The drunken fans and monstrous athletes become images of the bizarre reality that the narrator is forced to confront, much like being forced to confront the background characters and environments in *Las Vegas* and “The Kentucky Derby.” The amateur wrestler, Kazika, who is mentioned in the sphere of positive recollection in Florida justifies the absurdity in sports journalism that the narrator feels and helps to illustrate the insincerity of his professionalism that actually led to a sense of satisfaction. The political campaign manager, Gary Hart, helps the protagonist realize his limitations. Hart does not take the aspirations of the protagonist seriously and, in fact, Hart makes his own run for the US Senate, betraying the comradeship between the two characters. In the spheres of action that follows, it is drug addicts, alcoholics, and the drags of society who populate

the environment of the main character at the “Losers Club.” Ultimately, this is where the protagonist often finds himself the most at ease with his position in the world. This is also illustrated when Raoul Duke arrives at Circus-Circus, casino of the grossly bizarre, “This is the place [...] They’ll never fuck with us here [...] In this town they love a drunk. Fresh meat. So they put us through the turnstiles and turned us loose inside” (*Las Vegas* 45-46). However, this uncouth group of characters serve to show how the protagonist thrives and succeeds in their presence. This is where the protagonist expresses bizarrely creative ideas, absurd fantasies, and seems to have the upper hand with most of the people and situations that he encounters.

Besides the protagonist, and sometimes the second character, most of the characters of Gonzo literature are rarely described beyond their surface. And, although these characters occupy spheres of action that digress from the main timeline, their storylines are minimal and a return to the present never takes too long. Rather than utilizing multiple storylines that intertwine and complicate the plot, the secondary storylines in Gonzo can be considered speedbumps in the narrative rather than detours that take audiences around whole segments of time and action. This fact actually eases the act of constructing Propp’s method of identifying the sequence of functions because Gonzo’s cyclical form does not allow for extravagant digressions. Propp hypothesizes that, “if functions are singled out, then it will be possible to trace those tales which present identical functions” (22). Propp is stating that identifying the common functions among texts will serve to define a genre based upon its formal literary functions. The biggest challenge in extrapolating the literary functions of Gonzo is reorganizing the plot sequences and placing the spheres of action in chronological order. Identifying the

sequence of functions for “F&L Superbowl” would be constructed as follows: the protagonist begins his journey by accounting a memory of his career—failed attempts at other professions—receiving a job opportunity in his natural profession—exploring the environment—reporting an event—experiencing a hostile shift in the environment—escaping to safety—reflecting on the experience. Although Propp would use the sequence of function to map the narrative of multiple fairytales, one hundred to be exact, it can be used to map the form of many other genres, like Gonzo.

The sequence of functions in Gonzo literature may vary slightly, but ultimately, share a similar structure that creates a formal pattern. The sequence of function for *Las Vegas* may include more functions, but will still have the basic outcome: The protagonist receiving a job opportunity—consulting his attorney—the two travel to the location of the job—interacting with the environment—the environment becomes hostile—escaping to safety—reflecting on the experience—the two relocate to the next job opportunity—interacting with secondary characters and the environment—a hostile shift in the environment—escaping to safety—reflecting on the experiences. To apply this method to “The Kentucky Derby,” the sequence of functions would be: the protagonist accepts a job opportunity—introduction between coworkers—exploring the environment—retreat to safety—reflecting—interacting with the environment—reporting an event—a hostile shift in the environment—escaping to safety—reflecting on the experience. All three of these texts share similar sequences of functions, which help to illustrate the Gonzo form. Because the sequence of function is structured chronologically, concerning the story’s action on a timeline and not the plot devices, it does not explicitly illustrate the cyclical form of Gonzo. The cyclical form comes from the author’s decisions in choosing

particular plot devices, as mentioned by Shklovsky and Tomashevsky, plot devices concern how the actions are placed in order of presentation.

CONCLUSION

Boris Eichenbaum once said in his essay, “The Theory of the ‘Formal Method,’” (1926) that “we have no theory that can be laid out as a fixed, ready-made system” (139). The methodology utilized in this project proves this statement to be true because of the plasticity of its application. There are so many facets to the methodologies of the Russian formalists that investigators have the liberty to build their own model of formalism to dissect and interpret literature. This further supports the notion that the formal method was never secured as a fixed methodology, that it thrived on its flexibility; a valuable contribution to literary studies that has long been forgotten in the wake of contemporary theoretical lenses of interpretation. The model constructed for the benefit of this examination of Gonzo literature was composed primarily from the works of Victor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Vladimir Propp.

Victor Shklovsky contributed the concept of defamiliarization to literary theory, which can be used to shed light on specific characteristics of the Gonzo genre. Shklovsky said that “the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (“Art as Technique” 12). Defamiliarization in Gonzo prolongs audience’s perception of its form and is most likely to occur within the themes and situations of drug use, the narrator being a caricature and representative of

the pro-narcotic American counterculture, and the elimination of the fourth wall—
inviting audiences to vicariously experience the grossly bizarre with the protagonist.

I have argued that Gonzo authors use the following three techniques to achieve defamiliarization. The first technique is contrasting vague geographical details with heightened descriptions of physical appearance. This can be seen in the opening lines of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, “We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (1). This provides very little description of the characters’ location, which would seem to be an important detail since the opening statement sets the precedence for the rest of the text. However, the physical details of an insignificant character are extremely detailed just an hour later, “The woman’s face was *changing*: swelling, pulsing... horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel! Deadly poison!” (24). The narrator can barely recall the location where the journey began when he was still somewhat sober, but an hour later, when the drugs took hold, he was able to explain the vivid details of a woman’s face through the lens of narcotic usage. The second technique of defamiliarization is the inclusion of unhinged self-reflections. Readers witness this in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* when the protagonist realizes the extensive damage done to his hotel room and plays a tape recording of the drug activities from the night before, “Ah, this terrible gibberish. Grim memories and bad flashbacks [...] I was slumped on my bed in the Flamingo, feeling dangerously out of phase with my surroundings [...] The room looked like the site of some disastrous zoological experiment involving whiskey and gorillas” (180). This is just one of multiple scenes where the narrator has a moment of realization and describes the bizarre setting in which he finds himself. These moments of unhinged reflections are

found in all of the texts discussed and illustrate bizarre realities, creating doubt concerning Gonzo's reliability. Finally, the third technique of defamiliarization is Gonzo's use of fragmented temporalities that disorient the reader in space and time. The narrator often jumps forward on the timeline to explain the results of his actions before explaining the action itself, the narrator uses flashbacks to illustrate how things in the narrative came to be, and locations in the present often shift without any signpost or foreshadowing. The protagonist is often just as confused as the readers when time and location shift abruptly because it defamiliarizes reality and audiences' perception is challenged when interpreting Gonzo literature.

Furthermore, Shklovsky's methodology yields more results that further the understanding of Gonzo's form. Narrative action begins very quickly, and momentum picks up swiftly. Momentum increases through the reading tempo which is created by word choice and punctuation. It is the vague descriptions of location, but detailed examinations of bizarre appearances, that creates the false realities presented in Gonzo. The form mirrors the drug cycle and the multiple stages related to that cycle, which can be seen in the cyclical nature of the form: initial escape, increasing momentum, heightened intensity, displacement of time, paranoia-panic-escape, and the return. Because form generates its own content, the content within reflects a sense of immorality. Furthermore, the unreliable sense of time that is associated with narcotic usage is reflected by the deviations in Gonzo's timeline. These deviations never last too long—much like the effects of narcotic usage—and are more like speed bumps rather than full detours, consisting mainly of hallucinations and flashbacks, never a full second story. Because time is defamiliarized—jumping ahead, looking back, assuming the present—

this forces audiences to rely on the interpretations of the unreliable narrator, challenging the standards of related genres that are often connected to Gonzo. The method of delivery and presentation that encourages the elimination of the fourth wall (where audiences are invited into the scenes) parodies the related genres of New Journalism, objective journalism, and autobiography.

The methods of Tomashevsky allow for the examination of themes and illustrate how theme helps to shape the form of a text. The bound motifs of intoxication and the concepts of gross bizarreness are definitive facets of Gonzo literature, further shaping the genre's theme, which are present in these texts and motivate the perpetuation of the cyclical narrative. The cyclical form limits the timeline of the narrative, making digressions minimal, and supporting the motivation of characters to complete the cycle. Gonzo stories begin as an escape from an initial starting point and end with a return to that same point. The protagonist is the product of this cyclical, drug-ridden form and must possess the ability to navigate through the themes and stages of the form. Narcotic usage is unstable, as are the drug users, which is why the form creates within itself a sense of instability. This explains why the tempo is often unpredictable. When the bound motifs of drug usage and gross bizarreness, the free motif of exaggerating every detail with a hint of dissonance, and the free devices of unstable momentum and idiosyncratic narrative delivery are constantly presented and combined, it exposes dominant Gonzo themes as oppositions to literary conventions and reinforces the theory that the drug cycle is the foundational model for the cyclical form of Gonzo literature.

Vladimir Propp's methodology relies heavily on the extensive categorization of narrative elements. Although his sample size is quite extensive and the amount of results

in his research can seem overwhelming, it is his key points of emphasis—the initial situation, character motivation, spheres of action, character function and the sequence that follows—that is invaluable to the understanding the form of complex literature. The results achieved through the application of Propp’s methodology suggests that the initial situation is what forms the defamiliarization of the event being discussed within the story. The narrator’s motivations are revealed to be the delivery of subjective accounts of the truth that are presented through the lens of narcotic usage. The narrator acknowledges his or her own unreliability through self-reflection and awareness. The constant action of the protagonist, and the need to self-reflect, dominates the narrative and secondary characters only function to illustrate and further develop the personality of the protagonist. The motivation of characters is to always complete the cycle’s revolution without really achieving anything substantial. The characters are motivated by temporal experience, always living in the present moment, and disregarding future consequences. This total lack of adhering to social norms and resisting authority creates a repetitive theme of nonconformity. Since the Gonzo form radically shifts forward and backwards in the timeline, the spheres of action help to understand the chronology of functions. These spheres mimic the cyclical form of Gonzo by always coming full circle and it is the functions of the protagonist within each scene that provides a map, the sequence of functions, for understanding the form of a text.

The outcomes gathered from the methodologies of these Russian formalist can be synthesized into a single body of results that explicitly describe the Gonzo form. The form is based upon the relationship of the following themes, techniques, motifs, and effects. Other genres may share some of these characteristics, but it is the coexistence of

the collective that is unique to Gonzo. First of all, the Gonzo form is cyclical in nature and mimics the drug cycle of narcotic usage. Although other texts, like *Requiem for a Dream* (Selby 1978) that was made into a film (2000), may use the drug cycle to structure its fictional narrative, the cycle is played out among the characters who struggle with addiction, rather than strictly using the cycle to influence that genre's form. Unlike the fictional accounts of narcotic users, Gonzo stories express a subjective version of the truth through the lens of narcotic usage by an unreliable narrator/journalist. The form always begins as an escape from the status quo and always ends with a return to normality. This technique of escape and return is not new to literature; it is actually common among many fictional texts. However, it is how this technique is combined with other elements (the drug cycle foundation, subjective interpretations of real events, and the vulgarity of the content) that creates the dominant defamiliarization that sets Gonzo apart. The cyclical concept of escape and return establishes the motivation of characters because they are always pushing the limits of each stage of the cycle in an effort to reach the next sphere, because eventually, the spheres of the form will progress through stages of intensity. And because the form creates its own content, Shklovsky would argue that the Gonzo content often includes displacements of time, character conversation techniques that utilize vulgar language as normal communication, gross depictions of secondary and background characters as the manner of character descriptions, and the motif of introducing environments in terms that create a sense of bizarreness. To illustrate further defamiliarization, devices of style should be noted, especially the removal of the fourth wall, by the narrator, which usually functions to separate the audience from the action. This creates a parody of other genres—like New Journalism, objective journalism,

and autobiography—that sets Gonzo apart. The parody is done not to explain what Gonzo is, but rather, to explain what it is not. Gonzo is a genre of opposition. It opposes convention, authority, standards, reliability, and objectivity.

Scholars have been trying for years to define Gonzo, leading to multiple definitions of the genre. The reason behind these multiple definitions is because researchers have yet to focus on the analysis of form. Instead, they have used their own subjective interpretations in an attempt to analyze a genre that is based on unreliable subjective interpretations. This brings to mind the analogies of fighting fire with fire or drowning a fish. A subjective interpretation of a subjective truth will never result in an honest evaluation. However, Eichenbaum describes formal literary analysis as a science of literature, independent and factual; “the question for the Formalist is not how to study literature, but what the subject matter of literary study actually is” (102). While so many scholars have implemented the usage of contemporary subjective theories that focus on one aspect of a text or another, it is the actual form, the concrete foundational element, that can provide the honest truth about a complexing literary body of texts.

Gonzo literature is not a form of New Journalism, an experiment in autobiography, or simply a form of fiction that is based on factual events of reality. Although Gonzo shares similarities with these other forms, it parodies these genres by mimicking them. Many scholars have argued that Gonzo literature is a sub-form of New Journalism that became popular in the 1960s and 70s, which focused on topics of the American counterculture community (McEneaney, 2016; Novae, 1979; Swingrover, 2004; Whitmer & Van Wyngarden, 1987). Others argue that Gonzo is actually a branch of many other genres; such as narrative journalism or creative autobiography

(Baumgartner, 2017; Hellman, 1979, 1981; Sinding, 2010; Stephenson, 2012). Finally, the majority of other interpretations conclude that Gonzo compositions stem from Hunter S. Thompson's life and that Gonzo is just the way in which Thompson wrote (Cowen, 2009; Jirón-King, 2008; Mosser, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Tamony, 1983). However, Gonzo is not simply the composition style of a single author. Gonzo is a form that can be utilized by any writer who has the motivation to embrace the grossly bizarre personalities and environments of the pro-narcotic American counterculture, and who has the authority to navigate the multiple stages of the drug cycle. This can be illustrated with a brief overview of *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) by Oscar Zeta Acosta.

The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo has a form that is very similar to the Gonzo texts discussed in this examination. The similarities in form are obvious when Propp's method of "sequence of action" is applied: The protagonist leaves his normal routine in Los Angeles for other opportunities—intensity escalates as he involves himself with vices (sex, alcohol, drugs, and violence)—minor digressions in the timeline appear via flashbacks—hostility arises in the surrounding environments—he drifts (escapes) from place to place—the protagonist doesn't really achieve anything substantial—He then returns to Los Angeles for a new opportunity. As the form shows, the narrative comes full-circle, exposing the cyclical form that is based on the drug cycle. Also, the narrative is presented as factual accounts; however, it is told by an unreliable narrator who provides a subjective account of the truth, about Mexican and American culture as he sees it, through the lens of narcotic and alcohol usage. The boundary of a fourth wall is erased as readers are invited into the action because the protagonist talks to his hallucinations, and himself, in the first-person and readers are treated as another

hallucination that is present within the scene. Acosta's environments, and the people found within, are highly defamiliarized, where people are described in terms commonly associated with the beastly and grotesque, and the environments are described in ways that resemble themes of South American *carnival*. Since this text abides by the same formal elements that the Gonzo form is based upon, many of the counterarguments can now be addressed.

First, the idea that Gonzo literature is just a branch of New Journalism is inaccurate. Gonzo is much more unstable and unreliable, it subjects notions of truth to drug-ridden subjective interpretation. Tom Wolfe, founder of the New Journalism, describes New Journalism as a style of journalism that "reads like a novel" because it utilizes four techniques: 1) It sets the story in a specific scene rather than placing it in terms of historicity; 2) Realistic dialogue; 3) Point of view narration of other characters; 4) Noting the social status of 'characters' (Wolfe 1973). Gonzo literature includes all of these characteristics as well, however, the main difference is a matter of narrator perspective and action. Unlike the New Journalist who uses a narrative style to report stories about the American counterculture from the edge of the action without ever becoming a participant themselves, the Gonzo protagonist is positioned as the key participant in the action, providing their own point of view rather than relying on those of other characters. Furthermore, Gonzo challenges the attempts to be categorized within the boundaries of other genres. By nature, Gonzo resists authority and consumes itself with its own autonomy. Any attempt to assign parameters from other genres would contradict the purpose and goal of Gonzo, which is to create its own version of the truth. Therefore, Gonzo must be constructed as its own version of a genre. Finally, although Hunter S.

Thompson pioneered the Gonzo genre, it is a mistake to think that only he can compose a Gonzo text. Oscar Zeta Acosta's book, *The Autobiography of the Brown Buffalo*, proves that other writers have the ability to contribute to the genre and can do so without having the same biography as Thompson.

The results of this investigation support the fact that the term *Gonzo* requires a redefinition. The definition of Gonzo in the Oxford English Dictionary was first referenced in 1971 by Hunter S. Thompson in an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine* and stands as follows:

gonzo, *adj.* and *n.*

slang (orig. and chiefly *U.S.*).

A. *adj.*

1. *spec.* Designating a type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style.
2. Bizarre, crazy; far-fetched

B. *n.*

1. 'Gonzo' journalism; a person who writes in this style.
2. A crazy person, a fool. (*oed.com*)

Although some of the definition is relevant in terms of accuracy, the following definition should be considered:

Gonzo: *n.*

A literary genre that follows a cyclical form that mirrors the drug cycle, is based upon subjective interpretations of a truth, and is delivered by a caricature of the author. The content is highly defamiliarized, characters and environments are

described in terms of vulgarity that create a sense of bizarreness, and the interpretations are delivered through a distortive lens that is usually linked to alcohol and narcotic usage. (Kilpatrick)

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My hometown is Louisville, Kentucky. I was born September 13, 1984 and was raised in the city of Louisville. I attended Marion C. Moore High School, beginning in 1998, was a member of the football team, then transferred to Seneca High School and earned my diploma in 2003 from Jefferson County, Kentucky. Nearly a decade later, in 2012, I began my academic journey at the University of Louisville.

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THESES

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Directed by Dr. Frances McDonald, University of Louisville

Researched the history of Lewis and Clark for the museum's exhibit, developed and led tour of the exhibit, and created a hands-on history station that told the story of blacksmith John Shields.

WEBSITE

2016-Present *Beau Knows: A Cardinal Sports Editorial*

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This public website displays some of my previous writing in the genre of sports journalism. Links to published articles that I wrote for *The Louisville Cardinal* newspaper can be found by clicking the "Published Articles" tab.

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