# Relocating the American Dream

## *The America of the 1960s as Portrayed by the New Journalists Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Tom Wolfe*

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# 1. Introduction

> *Harmony and understanding/ Sympathy and trust abounding*
> *No more falsehoods or derisions/ Golden living dreams of visions*
> *Mystic crystal revelation/ And the mind's true liberation*
>
> (From the song *Aquarius* by The 5th Dimension)

Free love, psychedelic drugs, progressive rock... The sixties were a time of political and cultural turmoil in the United States: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the space race, the civil rights movement, the emergence of the hippies, the sexual revolution, the Vietnam War protests, and the formation of the New Left all happened in that eventful decade. The American Dream of the 1950s—home ownership, nuclear families, television sets, laundry machines, and cars—was challenged by a potent counterculture. In the words of John Hollowell, author of *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*:

> The dominant mood of America in the 1960's was apocalyptic. Perpetual crisis seemed in many ways the rule. Throughout the decade the events reported daily by newspapers and magazines documented the sweeping changes in every sector of our national life and often strained our imaginations to the point of disbelief. Increasingly, everyday "reality" became more fantastic than the fictional visions of even our best novelists. (3)

As Hollowell states, the phenomena of that era seemed nothing short of incredible to the average American reader. This inspired something interesting to take place in the literary field as well: alongside traditional journalism and fiction began to appear articles and reportages that seemed to be a strange mixture of both. Current events and changes in the society, such as protests, the flocking of hippies in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, and the surfacing of a psychedelic drug scene, were recorded in a way that borrowed stylistic and structural features from fiction, but documented real events

and characters: the sixties witnessed the birth of fictionalized accounts of nonfictional subject matter.

Hollowell describes the new form of writing in terms of form and the role of the author. Contrary to traditional journalism, its focus was not on the neutrality or objectivity of reporting, but the introspections and observations of the writer:

> One significant direction the new writing took was toward documentary forms, eyewitness reports, and personal and confessional narratives. The work of certain novelists, as well as that of certain journalists, reflects an unusual degree of self-consciousness about the writer's role in society, and the unique character of American life. (5)

These nonfiction narratives—either parts of them, or in full—were often initially published in magazines, such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The World Journal Tribune*, *Esquire Magazine*, and *Rolling Stone*, and later in book form. The new style of writing inspired many attempts to classify it: *creative nonfiction*, *the nonfiction novel*, *literary journalism*, *gonzo journalism*, and *(the) New Journalism* were some of the labels put on the movement. In this paper, I will be using the term *new journalism*, because it best captures the mode of the movement: at the time, combining journalist writing with conventions of literary fiction was exceptional and, indeed, new. Furthermore, the term was established by a new journalist shortly after the movement started to gain interest and it is used more frequently to refer to the genre than the other ones mentioned above.

In the frontline of the new journalists were three interesting writers: Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Tom Wolfe. All of them wrote several works in the 1960s and early 1970s that can be regarded as new journalism. For the purpose of my study, I have chosen one work from each author: *The Armies of the Night* (1968) by Mailer, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) by Thompson, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1967) by

Wolfe. The works vary a bit in form, but clearly utilize new journalist techniques and portray different aspects of the sixties counterculture, so I hold them as fitting examples of the genre. In my thesis, I discuss how Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe portray the American society of the 1960s, and how this view corresponds to the notion of the American Dream.

## *1.1 Aims and methods*

Many would agree that the sixties, with its countercultural movements and fresh ideas, was a fascinating decade. But why dig deeper into new journalism, the American Dream, and the American society of the sixties? The hippies have trimmed their beards, the radicals gotten real jobs, and the last traces of flower power withered away long ago—so why bother? Well, this is why: the sixties left a profound imprint on American culture. It was a time when people thought they could really change the world into a better place through political activism, spiritual experimenting, and artistic expression. They hoped and demanded that the abstraction of the American Dream would become reality; a reality that included those previously left out, such as minority groups and the poor, and a reality where there was space for solidarity and humanity. Furthermore, there was also an alternative American Dream for the first time in American history—one that was not defined by material success, but rather by spiritual values and self-fulfillment. The experience of living like a free spirit, embracing new ideas, and reaching out for a better world did not last long, but it left a significant footprint in history and culture. The new journalists captured this distinct and exceptional era in their works, and it is through their portrayal of the American society that we can better understand the revolutionary new ethos that surfaced for a short time in the sixties,

before sinking back into the depths of intellectual and spiritual apathy again. Because when the trip ended in the early seventies, something died with it.

To bury the whole American Dream with the sixties would be too much, but a great part of it certainly seems to have been lost with the assassinations of bright new leaders, the violent suffocation of protest movements, political scandals, and the long-drawn-out war in Vietnam. As it became evident that the movement had ultimately failed in its attempts to make a difference, the American Dream fled a little further from those who fought to put it into practice. My aim in this study is to produce understanding of this relocation of the American Dream in the popular imagination, and the role of new journalism as a part—and as a testimony—of the 1960s counterculture. By examining the American society of the sixties through Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe, I demonstrate that something changed permanently in the cultural atmosphere and in the conceptualization the American Dream during that era.

One of the reasons I decided to conduct my thesis on this particular topic was that there has not been a study thus far that examines multiple new journalist works in the conceptual framework of the American Dream. There are studies on how the American Dream has been perceived and what it has meant in different eras, such as *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* by Jim Cullen and *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* by Cal Jillson. There are also several studies on new journalism and counterculture, such as *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* by John Hollowell and *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* Terry H. Anderson. There is even a study about the psychedelic movement and the American Dream, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* by Jay Stevens, but no study has shed light on how the shift that the American Dream underwent in the

sixties is visible through new journalist writing. The three new journalist works I examine—alongside sociological, cultural, and historical records—function as a looking glass into the events and mentalities of the sixties; especially the disillusioning proceedings that caused the dreams and utopias of the sixties generation to shatter down. This study hopes to provide a valuable addition to the cultural history of the sixties and to the effort of conceptualizing the American Dream.

In order to do all the things I mention above, I have adopted a multidimensional approach. To begin with, works of new journalism are rather difficult to define in terms of genre: they are neither exactly fiction nor exactly journalism. The characters and events they depict are real, yet elements of exaggeration, altered reality, and artistic expression can be found in the texts. New journalism balances on the line between fact and fiction, which makes it a rather challenging subject to study. Most theories of literature focus on traditional forms of literature, such as novels, short stories, and poetry, while mass media research provides tools for analyzing primarily news journalism, television programs, and advertising. The fuzziness of my subject matter calls, thus, for a more interdisciplinary approach, which draws its inspiration from both literature studies and the social sciences.

Because new journalism is based on the idea that the events, places, and characters are real, my theoretical framework had to include social and historical knowledge of American society and politics. However, because new journalist works ultimately fall into the realm of literature, I found that some literary criticism is in order as well. In order to examine the cultural stance of the new journalists in relation to the American Dream, I have adopted a theoretical position that most resembles *New Historicism* (also known as *cultural poetics*). New Historicism is a branch of literary criticism that examines history through literature and literature through history.

Explained concisely by Mari Peepre and Nely Keinänen in *Reading our World: a Guide to Practical and Theoretical Criticism*, New Historicism examines "the historical and sociological events of an era and relates them to the literature that produced them. [---] New Historicism believes in referentiality: literature refers to and is referred to by things outside itself" (251). According to Charles E. Bressler in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, New Historicists—unlike New Critics—believe that a literary text cannot be interpreted isolated from its context. Deriving from a Marxist tradition, cultural studies, and the thinking of French philosopher Michel Foucault, New Historicism views texts as "culture in action" (183), which is to say that writing is perceived as an act of participating in one's society and culture. According to Bressler, New Historicists believe that "all texts are really social documents that reflect but also, and more importantly, respond to their historical situation" (187). The three areas of interest to a new historicist are therefore "the life of the author, the social rules and dictates found within a text, and a reflection of a work's historical situation as evidenced in the text" (189).

My primary focus is on the things that the texts refer to outside themselves and especially *how* they refer to these things, not the texts in themselves as autonomous objects of artistic expression. I believe that works of new journalism give us valuable information about the 1960s in America: they provide us with cultural information that is inevitably left out from strictly factual historical accounts of the era. Cultural and historical knowledge can only be pieced together from multiple sources: there is no such thing as objective history or a single truth about a certain era, so the subjective visions of the new journalists bring a valuable addition to the canonical sources of historical knowledge. My approach differs, however, from New Historicism as viewed by Bressler in at least one respect: I have not extensively researched the biographies of the

authors, since I find this information irrelevant to my study. I do not deem necessary to plough through shelves of books about the childhood events of Mailer, Thompson and Wolfe (although this could easily be done), or go through their original notes and recordings to catch the tiniest details of their working processes (although even this could be fairly easily done[1]). I believe that it is possible to examine works of literature in their historical context without having read the entire production of the author. For the purpose of my study, it has been sufficient to concentrate on the three new journalist works at hand and the historical events they portray.

The key concepts I use in my study are *theme* and *motif*. For the purpose of my study, I found it suitable to use very simple definitions of the concepts, commonly used at the very basic level of literature studies. I understand theme as the larger abstract entity of textual content that tells us what the text is about, and motifs as the components that construct and develop the theme(s). *A Theme* is the central subject matter of a text and *a motif* a reoccurring element that carries some sort of significance in relation to the theme. Although there can also be *free motifs* that do not necessarily tie into the main theme, I have chosen to discuss mainly the motifs that reveal something about the general themes of the three works. I have categorized the themes I found most important under the main chapters of this study: criticism of the American society, criticism of the Vietnam War and the search for the American Dream. It should be noted that thematic analysis is a highly subjective method of study: one critic might raise particular themes or motifs above others, while another critic might hold other themes and motifs more valuable. Here, I have chosen from each text the themes and

[1] For example, a box containing five compact discs of Hunter S. Thompson's taped recordings from 1965 to 1975 was released October 28th, 2008. Most of his correspondence with editors and friends has been published earlier between 1979 and 1994 in the four volumes of *The Gonzo Papers*.

motifs that are most relevant to the countercultural context and the relocation of the American Dream.

In addition to the concepts of theme and motif, I found useful to study the deeper cultural meanings associated to some of the motifs in the texts, that is, their *connotations*. Connotation and *denotation* are common terminology in linguistics, but here I will use a more culturally oriented definition, originally introduced by Roland Barthes in the 1970s. John Fiske summarizes this approach aptly in *Introduction to Communication Studies*. According to Barthes, there are two orders of signification, that is to say, the meaning making process. The first order is called denotation, which is the straightforward meaning of a sign. The second order, connotation, is used to express all the other meanings that are attached to a sign, in addition to the denotative meaning. According to Fiske, connotation "describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture" (86). Barthes himself used the example of photography to distinguish between the two terms: "Denotation is *what* is being photographed; connotation is *how* it is photographed" (86, emphases original). By examining also the connotative meanings relating to the themes and motifs, I try to get a firmer grip on the cultural notions behind *The Armies of the Night*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

From this contextual standpoint, I have analyzed in the three texts the themes, motifs, and connotations containing information about the sixties America. In order to make the most of my analysis, I have familiarized myself with relevant background reading. As the main sources of theoretical background for the socio-cultural framework, I have used several current social scientists and historians, such as Terry H. Anderson, Alexander Bloom, and Todd Gitlin, as well as contemporaries of the new journalists, such as Christopher Lasch, Theodore Roszak, Philip Slater, and Alvin Toffler—some of

which might be best classified as left-wing intellectuals. As the main sources of historical information and American politics, I have used such scholars as John Diggins, Paul Levine and Harry Papasotiriou, and John A. Moore and Myron Roberts. As theory on new journalism, I have used multiple approaches to the genre by different authors, such as Phyllis Frus, John Hellman, John Hollowell, and Tom Wolfe. Fully acknowledging that my approach is rather wide-ranging and multidimensional by nature, I nevertheless feel that it best suited my purpose in addressing the socio-cultural context as well as the textual features of the works.

Below, I first introduce the concept of new journalism, and briefly the author profiles of Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Tom Wolfe. I then proceed to discuss the concept of the American Dream, examining the origin of the concept as well as its role in popular culture. In the second chapter, I discuss how the writers' criticism of the American society is manifested in their attitudes towards ideology, politics, religion, capitalism, and the media. In the third chapter, I examine how the writers process the Vietnam War, and how these views relate to fundamental American values, such as liberty and patriotism. In the fourth chapter, I discuss how the authors depict the new visions of the American Dream that arose from the countercultural imagination, and also how some of those visions failed once it was attempted to actualize them. Finally, conclusions about the dislocation of the American Dream and ideas for further research are presented in chapter five.

## *1.2 Defining new journalism*

The term *new journalism*—sometimes also *the New Journalism*—started to circulate among the public in the mid-sixties. Nobody seems to know who exactly coined the term in the first place, but Tom Wolfe made it a household name by his book *The New*

*Journalism* (1973). He begins his pioneering account of the new movement by shamelessly boosting the new genre and intentionally (or possibly unintentionally) exaggerating its significance in the literary sphere:

> I doubt if many of the aces I will be extolling in this story went into journalism with the faintest notion of creating a "new" journalism, a "higher" journalism, or even a mildly improved variety. I know they never dreamed that anything they were going to write for newspapers or magazines would wreak such evil havoc in the literary world ... causing a panic, dethroning the novel as the number one literary genre, starting the first new direction in American literature in half a century. (3)

By aces, Wolf is referring to the authors he included in his anthology of new journalism: Gay Talese, Truman Capote, Terry Southern, George Plimpton, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and of course himself, just to mention the central ones. The book has a section on the beginnings of new journalism and over twenty excerpts from works that Wolfe considers fine examples of the genre. *The New Journalism* has been regarded as one of the most important works that theorize new journalism: it was the first effort to set the rules and define the ideology of the movement. It has to be mentioned, however, that not everyone agrees with Wolfe's classification and definition of new journalism. For example, George Plimpton thought of his work rather as *participatory journalism* (see Bill Beuttler) and Truman Capote preferred to call himself the inventor of the *nonfiction novel* (Hollowell, 59–60).

According to Wolfe, the literary atmosphere of the time was profoundly dominated by the novel, but despite its reign there began to emerge experiments combining traditional newspaper reporting with literary devices, such as dialogue, focalization, and onomatopoeia. The idea behind this new direction was, according to Wolfe, that "it just might be possible to write journalism that would ... read like a novel" (9). In his study of the genre *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, John Hollowell argues that the major reasons behind the rise of new journalism were both economical and cultural. Many magazines were struggling to make a profit

and hold on to their readers during the rise of the electronic media, which made the editors more favorable to experimenting with new styles. What is more, the emergence and growth of an underground press advocated imaginative writing and free form (38–39). Wolfe emphasizes, however, that new journalism was not entirely new: the central characteristics of the genre—"scene-by-scene construction," "realistic dialogue," "third-person point of view," and "recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving towards children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene"—emulate the techniques of the realist novel (31–33). The innovativeness of new journalism lies not, thus, in its literary techniques, but in the notion of reporting actual events in a fictionalized form—re-creating the experiences for the reader, if you will.

The discussion concerning the innovativeness of new journalism is by no means unanimous. According to Hollowell, sporadic works of earlier reporting and travel literature—some dating back all the way to the seventeenth century—bear much resemblance to the new journalism of the sixties. It was in that decade, however, that the genre truly flourished in newspapers and magazines after slowly picking up momentum during the forties and fifties (33–36). In Hollowell's opinion, writers of new journalism or nonfiction novels do not really constitute a movement, although he admits their works "reflect shared assumptions and techniques" (15). Instead, he defines new journalism against traditional news reporting: "The most important difference […] is the writer's changed relationship to the people and events he depicts" (22). Hollowell notes that style—"the use of fictional devices borrowed from short stories and novels"—was

the other main feature that set new journalism apart from conventional newspaper stories (22).

John Hellmann, on the other hand, argues that new journalism was indeed new in his study of new journalism, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*:

> First, it overcame the weaknesses of the traditional fictional contract, in which the author promised plausibility, by replacing it with a journalistic one promising factuality; second, it overcame the limitations of conventional journalism and realistic fiction by exploiting fully and frankly the power of shaping consciousness found in fabulist fiction. The result was a new form both wholly fictional and wholly journalistic through which the individual human consciousness could directly make or organize the seemingly chaotic world into a work embodying a meaningful engagement of the two. (19)

Consequently, Hellmann classifies new journalism as a genre of its own. He asserts that new journalists aimed to create an aesthetic experience, which is read because it contains not just factual information, but also—perhaps more importantly—the author's interpretations, impressions, and personal experiences of a certain subject matter (24–25). Hellmann explains that journalists confronted "subjects the significance of which lay in their experience, in their *consciousness*" (3, emphasis original), which made them seek alternatives to the rigid forms of traditional news reporting. So, instead of trying to describe these new phenomena through conventional methods, new journalists “sought new forms and frankly asserted their personal perspectives" (3).

Hollowell makes a very insightful observation concerning the nature of new journalist writing: instead of relying heavily on facts and quotations, "the writer tries to *reconstruct* the experience as it might have unfolded" (25, emphasis original). This, I think, is a key factor in understanding new journalism: although based on fact, new journalist narratives do not tell us merely what happened and why—they transmit impressions, insights, and visions of culturally important phenomena. Characterizing the genre further, Hollowell adds two more fictional devices to compliment the four listed earlier by Wolfe: "interior monologue" and "composite characterization," which

means compressing evidence of multiple real personalities into one fictional character (26). Another characteristic of new journalism both Wolfe and Hollowell identify, is the authors' intensive and time-consuming commitment to the topic at hand. For example, Hunter S. Thompson followed the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels around for over a year in order to write *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1966) and Truman Capote studied the events surrounding the murders of a Kansas farmer family for six years before writing *In Cold Blood* (1966).

One final aspect of trying to define new journalism is its relevance to the sixties counterculture. Hellmann points out that much of new journalism's potency as a countercultural force lay in its freedom from the constraints of objectivity: "Almost by definition, new journalism is a revolt by the individual against homogenized forms of experience, against monolithic versions of truth" (8). New journalists often aimed to present an alternative story, an option to the apparently objective and "monolithic" accounts of the established mass media. New journalism's relationship with the counterculture is of course most evident through its subject matter, which is, according to Hollowell, "intimately bound to the extreme experiences of the social and political climate of the decade" (40). He observes that the new journalists often wrote about personalities and phenomena unfamiliar to the average, middle-class American reader. The subject matter revolved around "emerging patterns of social organization that deviate from the mainstream culture," such as subcultures, gangs, artists, celebrities, and criminals (40). This is not to say that the mainstream media did not cover these subjects; only that new journalists made also the other side of the story, flavored with experience and sensation, available to the general public—readers could feel as if they were sitting in the middle of an anti-war protest instead of their living room couch. New journalism and alternative magazines were thus an essential aspect of the counterculture, as "their

freedom from journalist conventions helped to counteract the pervasive tradition of objective reporting" (Hollowell, 39).

### 1.2.1 Norman Mailer

Norman Mailer (1923–2007) was a prominent figure in the artistic scene of America: he wrote plays, novels, screenplays, and newspaper articles, and directed movies. His first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, was published in 1948, after which he wrote many fictional and nonfictional works. Mailer was a central countercultural figure, often sharply criticizing the American society in his writing and public speeches. In 1955 Mailer co-founded the magazine *Village Voice*, an alternative weekly newspaper featuring politics and arts. From 1952 to 1963 he was also the editor of *Dissent*, a magazine concerned with culture, society, and politics. He was a Democratic candidate for Mayor of New York in 1969, but failed to be elected (see author introduction in *The Armies of the Night*). Mailer won the Pulitzer Prize twice: in 1968 for *The Armies of the Night* and in 1979 for *The Executioner's Song*.

*The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (1968) depicts the events at the March on the Pentagon, an anti-Vietnam demonstration held in Washington D.C. in October 1967. Mailer participated in the protest as a public figure: he gave several speeches and intentionally got himself arrested. He assumes an omniscient narrator position, referring to himself often as "Mailer," and observing himself from the outside. The book is divided into two parts subtitled *History as a Novel* and *The Novel as History*. The first part, which is more than two thirds of the book, is a personal view on what happened on the weekend of the demonstration. It begins with Mailer giving a speech at the Ambassador Theater, moves on to depict the burning of draft cards at the Department of Justice, and finally the march to the Pentagon and Mailer's stay in jail. The second part is a more objective account of the

event, containing several excerpts from newspapers and eye witness reports. It functions as an overview of the demonstration and as an assessment of how it was treated in the mainstream media.

### 1.2.2 Hunter S. Thompson

Hunter S. Thompson (1937–2005) began his literary career at the age of 18 as the editor of the Eglin Air Force Base newsletter, but was soon discharged on account of inappropriate behavior. Later, he worked for—and was fired from—several newspapers, located mainly on the East Coast of the United States (McKeen, 6). Eventually, Thompson drifted to California and to South America, from where he started contributing to *The Observer*. He returned to the United States at age 25, writing occasional articles for magazines and doing odd jobs here and there (McKeen, 7). Thompson's first new journalist work that gained public interest was *Hell's Angels*, partly published in *The Nation* in 1965 and as a book the following year. He did some political reporting, and in 1971, Thompson's most popular book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, was published.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* tells the eventful story of Thompson's (under the name of Raoul Duke) attempt to cover the Mint 400, a motorcycle race, and the National District Attorneys Conference on Drug Abuse with his attorney friend, Oscar Zeta Acosta (under the name of Dr. Gonzo). The objective of covering the events for *Sports Illustrated* and *Rolling Stone* turns into a wild quest for finding the American Dream somewhere in the decadent depths of Las Vegas, involving severe drug abuse and terrifying ordinary law-abiding citizens. Thompson's writing is a blatant blend of reportage, hallucinations, stream of consciousness, and dialogue. His style came to be known as *gonzo journalism*, a subgenre of new journalism that relies heavily on the subjective experiences and fantasies of the author, and the effect of narrating events

while under the influence of intoxicants (a state in which Thompson often admittedly was during the sixties and seventies).

### 1.2.3 Tom Wolfe

Tom Wolfe (born 1930) started writing for newspapers after receiving his doctorate in American Studies from Yale in the late 1950s. According to his own words in *The New Journalism*, Wolfe suffered from "an overwhelming urge to join the 'real world'" after spending five years in graduate school (4). He worked at several newspapers, such as *The Washington Post*, *Esquire* and *The Herald Tribune*, writing mostly feature pieces and articles for Sunday supplements (Wolfe, *Journalism*, 4–6). Wolfe's first attempt at new journalism was *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* in 1965. Since then, he has written several nonfictional and fictional works, the most famous of which are perhaps *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1967), which was partly published in the short-lived *World Journal Tribune*, and *The Bonfire of Vanities* (1987), which was initially serialized in *Rolling Stone*.

*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1967) reports the story of the Merry Pranksters, a group of hippies that started to gather around the American novelist Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), in the sixties California. The Merry Pranksters engaged in various forms of countercultural activity, such as public performances, anti-war rallies, and psychedelic experiments. The group became probably most legendary for its "acid tests," which were collective LSD trips, involving music, fluorescent props, performances, and plenty of "electric Kool-Aid," a mixture of LSD and juice. A large part of the novel concentrates on a road-trip the Merry Pranksters made on an old school bus across the United States in 1964. Wolfe recounts the Merry Pranksters' tale on the basis of his own personal observations, as well as tapes, film clips, and notes collected by the Pranksters and their friends. Wolfe describes his

mode of writing in the Author's Note of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*: "I have tried not only to tell what the Pranksters did but to re-create the mental atmosphere or subjective reality of it. I don't think their adventure can be understood without that" (367).

## *1.3 Defining the American Dream*

Some concepts have become so integrated into our everyday uses of language that we rarely stop to think of their definitions. The American Dream is such a concept: it has penetrated cultural texts and the popular imagination for decades, even centuries. Furthermore, it has done so not only in the United States but also around the world. The American Dream has come to symbolize the global yearning for freedom, success, and hopes of a better life. The sheer scope of the concept, not to mention its elusiveness, raises an important question from the vantage point of my study: how can such an amorphous term be examined? The American Dream is an abstraction, and can only be located and studied through concrete forms of embodiment, such as advertisements, literature, films, speeches, and plays. In this thesis, I discuss the American Dream in three works of new journalism, but first we must examine the origin and meaning of the concept, and the ways in which it has inspired American popular culture and the popular imagination.

### 1.3.1 Origins of the term

The intellectual foundations of the American Dream can be traced back to the very beginnings of the United States of America. In his book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen sketches out six different facets that have contributed to the notion of the American Dream: the religious purity of the Puritan settlers, the establishment of political freedom with the Declaration of

Independence, the dream of upward mobility, the dream of equality, the dream of home ownership, and the dream of easy living on the West coast. Political scientist Cal Jillson has also traced the evolution of the American Dream in his book *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries*. Jillson argues that although America is based on the American Creed ("liberty, equality, opportunity") that is guided by the American Dream, it has not been "a shimmering vision of a fruitful country open to all who come, learn, work, save, invest, and play by the rules" (7). Jillson follows, to some extent, the same evolutionary phases of the dream as Cullen, but constantly reminds his readers of the elusive and exclusive nature of the dream: despite good efforts, the values it embodies have never quite realized in the United States. From the Puritan legacy of self-improvement and emerging capitalism, the tripartite credo—"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—of the founding fathers, and Abraham Lincoln's journey from a lowly log cabin to the White House, to the civil rights movement, the suburbanization of America, and the Californian way of life, the dream has been around for centuries, evolving and transforming along the way.

As to the actual expression, it is not known who coined the phrase in the first place. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest appearances of the *American Dream*—"the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity though hard work, determination, and initiative"—date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. It was not, however, until the 1930s that the American Dream was more widely defined—or, according to Jillson, popularized (6)—as a concept by American historian James Truslow Adams. His interpretation of the dream in *The Epic of America* (1931) is commonly considered as the initial characterization of the concept:

> [T]hat dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. […] It is not a

> dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

Adams' definition of the American Dream relies heavily on the notion of equality and democracy. For him, an essential part of the dream is the freedom from the class structures and social order of the old continent, Europe, and the idea of self-government. He uses the Library of Congress as an emblem of American democracy: "Founded and built by the people, it is for the people" (414). Adams also sets out to define the values that should guide the American Dream: "It is easy to say a better and richer life for all men, but what *is* better and what *is* richer?" (407, emphases original). According to him, the realization of the American Dream depends ultimately on the people. He emphasizes individual as well as communal effort in constructing the "Great Society"[2], and building it "better" rather than "bigger" (411).

The American Dream, however, includes more than the dream of upward mobility, the notion of equality, and getting the good things in life. The ideas and values behind the American mentality and way of life are also key factors in understanding the dream. In *The Pursuit of Happiness: Government and Politics in America*, John A. Moore Jr. and Myron Roberts lay out a set of values and beliefs that in their opinion characterize what is essentially American. They start with the Puritan ideals, the frontier mentality, and the melting-pot thesis, and go on to explore the American set of mind through popular culture, violence, materialism, racism, women's role in society, mobility, the cult of youth, and education. They also declare what they consider to be

[2] Adams uses the Great Society in quotation marks, which indicates it might be a reference to English socialist and political scientist Graham Wallas (1858-1932), who published *The Great Society* in 1914. Wallas defines the Great Society as a modern, industrialized, and urbanized society that relies economically on global capitalism. The Great Society is more widely known as the set of political programs Lyndon B. Johnson initiated in the 1960s, but I will return to this later in chapter 2.1.

the most fundamental American values: democracy, justice, freedom, individualism, reason, accommodation, and progress (17–45). For example, according to Moore and Roberts, "America's duty to serve as an ideal for all humankind" derives from the Puritan ethos and idea of American being "a city upon a hill," whereas the frontier left Americans "with a heritage of individualism, equality, and respect for the 'common person'" (23). The melting-pot and salad bowl theories, on their part, explain the importance of the immigrant dimension of the dream, which entails visualizing America as a "land of opportunity" (25) and the efforts to "recognize and encourage diversity" while "maintaining social and political harmony" (27). According to Moore and Roberts, the idea of America and the national character consist of a mosaic of meanings and traditions.

These are the building blocks of the American Dream, some more potent than others. The concept cannot be understood fully without considering these elements that have shaped, and continue to shape, American culture. Moore and Roberts conclude their contemplation of the ideas and values that have shaped American culture and national identity with a summary of the unique context that has sculptured the American Dream:

> Happiness is a prime concern of democracy, and in its pursuit, Americans have created the world's first and richest consumer economy; have undertaken to mass produce education, entertainment, and goods on an unprecedented scale; and have sought to build a society in which most people would be free to follow the star of their own destiny in their own fashion. And if in the process, we have become a restless, troubled, and sometimes divided people, that is a price that had to be paid for having shifted the focus of politics from the grandeur of the few to the well-being of the many. (45)

This rather sententious review takes into consideration one final aspect of the dream: its exclusiveness. Adams, Cullen, Jillson, Moore, and Roberts all acknowledge that the American Dream has not been open for all: for long, pursuing the American Dream was the sole privilege of white males. The dream has been overshadowed by slavery,

segregation, racism, homophobia and insufficient women's rights, which has caused the people to feel "restless, troubled, and sometimes divided." Nevertheless, the American Dream is a concept that has left a unique mark on the nation. To quote former President Bill Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address, "America is far more than a place. It is an idea."

### 1.3.2 The American Dream in popular culture

The American Dream has been a prominent theme in popular culture ever since the dime novels—paperbacks produced for mass markets—of nineteenth century writer Horatio Alger, Jr. His successful stories of upward mobility, featuring protagonists rising from rags to riches, were an important part of creating the American myths of success and achieving the American Dream. The formula for achieving the American Dream in Alger's books was a combination of luck, virtue, and hard work. According to Richard Weiss, author of *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*, the myth of success actually goes back all the way to the life guides of the Puritans, but was widely popularized from the second third of the 19$^{th}$ century onwards (4). Weiss states that the myth of success—success meaning "virtue, money, happiness, or a combination of all three" (15)—"stands as one of the most enduring expressions of American popular ideals" (3). The myth of success is something that appeals to everyone regardless of age, status, or background, and this has made it the inexhaustible fuel for products of popular culture.

Since Alger, the American Dream has occurred in countless narratives of popular fact and fiction: books, magazine articles, advertisements, plays, and movies. It has penetrated the popular imagination through family sit-coms, self-help books, catalogues, and children's tales. The popular imagination is full of different versions of the dream. According to Moore and Roberts, the massive ideological machinery that

produces popular culture can be seen as both a victory or a defeat of the minds of America: "America's mass society and 'pop' culture have reached new heights of organization and technique and, depending on one's attitude or tastes, are still viewed as either a fulfillment or a travesty of the American Dream" (28). Cullen suggests, on a more positive note, that the dream lurks somewhere in the midst of cultural expression: "Amid the striving, some worthwhile and some appalling, the American Dream is most fully realized in works of art" (179). It is through these works of art and products of mass society that the notion of the American Dream has spread around the world and inspired the popular imagination globally.

Because the American Dream is by no means a fixed ideal, it is mirrored constantly in cultural discussion. The meaning of the concept varies in different eras and different contexts. Up until the sixties, the dream had been somewhat tightly associated with the ideal of material success, but in the sixties, the ideological arena was suddenly open for a re-evaluation. The countercultural movements challenged the idea of continuing in the footsteps of a conventional, conformist society, and started searching for new ways of pursuing happiness, justice, and self-fulfillment. This sudden shift in conceptualizing the dream and rethinking the structures of society sparked new kinds of popular culture: the new decade left a distinct mark in music, literature, journalism, and films. The expectations, hopes, and dreams of Americans, especially the vast generation of young people that wanted to change the course of their future, were recorded in these artifacts of popular culture and left for later generations to examine. The continuous relocation of the dream can therefore be traced only by looking at what people have produced and consumed in a certain era—what they have expressed of their hopes and dreams in the records of culture.

# 2. Life: criticism of the American society

The new journalists often had a critical stance towards the United States in their writing. Especially Mailer came to be known as one of the harshest critics of America, even though he considered himself something of a patriot. The countercultural context, in which the new journalists were operating, contained the idea of questioning the social order and ideological constructions of mainstream society. In *America Since 1945: The American Moment*, Levine and Papasotiriou label especially the years 1965–68 turbulent. During those years America saw many violent civic riots and anti-war demonstrations, the rise of countercultural movements, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. The turbulent times inspired many Americans to assess their country and policy makers with a critical eye. In this chapter, I discuss how Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe observe the society of their times by examining the themes and motifs in their works that relate to ideology, politics, religion, capitalism, and the media. Mailer is perhaps the most eager of the three to criticize the "totalitarian" and "technocratic" structures of American society, while Thompson focuses on the absurd dimensions of corporate capitalism, and Wolfe describes the alternative countercultural lifestyles that were breaking off mainstream America.

## *2.1 Ideology, politics and religion*

In all three works, the authors discuss ideological, political, and religious aspects of American culture. Although there is a strong anti-Establishment undercurrent in all three books, the authors do not seem to think that the American society is completely immoral and corrupt. Mailer approaches the subject matter through criticizing the technology-oriented mindset of 1960s America and the Establishment's devices of

disseminating its ideology, Thompson reflects the long arm of the law, and Wolfe considers the hierarchical structures that seem to naturally belong to all human communities and the ways in which power and authority manifest themselves.

### 2.1.1 Issues of authority, hierarchy, and control

Mailer's critical commentary about American society can be roughly divided into three thematic spheres: the technocratic and totalitarian mindset of the power elite ("technology land"), the rule of capitalism ("corporation land"), and the distorting media ("totalitarian communications"). According to Mailer, all of them are aspects of the Establishment. Mailer himself uses mostly the term "authority," but I use Establishment to refer to the ruling elite and the structures of society they control. For consistency, I use the same term also when discussing similar themes in Thompson and Wolfe. In this subchapter, I discuss the first of these themes: the technocratic and totalitarian mindset.

In *The Armies of the Night,* Mailer criticizes the blind technology faith of the sixties. He brings forth not only his own antipathies towards technology—"for periods when he was writing he looked on transactions via telephone like Arabs look upon pig" (14)—but also the broad-spectrum technology worship of the era. His criticism of technology worship intertwines with his views on totalitarianism and middle-class liberalism. Mailer uses terms like "liberal academic intelligentsia" and "liberal technologues" when discussing the prevailing ethos of the liberal power elite. His attitude towards the matter becomes very clear at a party of liberal academics, which he refers to as a "coven," a gathering of witches: "His deepest detestation was often reserved for the nicest of liberal academics" (25–26). Mailer accuses the liberals of allowing the Establishment to "convert the citizenry to a plastic mass, ready to be attached to any manipulative gung ho" (25), believing in the omnipotence of technology, and living in utopian dreams: "[Liberal academics] had built their hope of heaven on the

binary system and the computer, 1 and 0, Yes and No" (27). Mailer is clearly disappointed in the nation's leading intellectuals and accuses them of expecting technology to solve all the problems. This, in Mailer's mind, leads to a passive state of affairs: it is easier to make great speeches and paint utopian visions of a better America than to actually do something.

In his evaluation of American culture in the 1960s, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, Philip Slater shares with Mailer some of the fears and sentiments towards technology:

> We certainly treat technology as if it were a fierce patriarch—we're deferential, submissive, alert to its demands. We feel spasms of hatred toward it, and continually make fun of it, but do little to challenge its rule. Furthermore, since the technological environment that rules, frustrates, and manipulates us is a materialization of the wishes of our forefathers, it's quite reasonable to say that technology is the authoritarian father is our society. (51)

Here, Slater regards technology as an authority that controls its users, rather than the users controlling it. In the sixties, huge leaps were made in technology: man was sent to the moon, satellite broadcasting began, the first heart transplantation was made, the first computer video game was invented, and so on. These innovations surely prompted people's faith in technology as a cure-all, but at the same time, the techno-centric lifestyle raised questions and criticism. In another assessment of change in America, *Future Shock: A Study of Mass Bewilderment in the Face of Accelerating Change*, Alvin Toffler argues that the industrial society is turning into a super-industrial society. According to him, this revolution involves the idea of technology as the "great, growling engine of change" (25), fueled by knowledge (30). Toffler notes that "[i]mportant new machines do more than suggest or compel changes in other machines—they suggest novel solutions to social, philosophical, even personal problems" (29). Toffler's comment reflects technology's enormous sphere of influence that spread through the sixties society. Technological innovation seemed to provide

solutions to everything, from healthcare to housework. This is the assumption that Mailer opposes: not technology as such, but the notion of knowledge lagging behind technology. For Mailer, intellectual laziness is synonymous with the overly optimistic view of technological innovation as a solution and a quick fix to everything.

Theodore Roszak attributes the rise of the counterculture to the criticism of totalitarianism and technocratic thinking in his 1969 book *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. What Mailer identifies as the Establishment, or rather, what the Establishment has transformed America into—"technology land," "corporation land," and "the Great Society's supermachine"—Roszak discusses as "technocracy." He defines technocracy as a "society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts, who, in turn, justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge" (8). The technocracy is "ideologically invisible," "eludes all traditional political categories" (8), and is the product of capitalist profiteering and accelerating industrialism (19). Roszak's characterization suggests that the technocratic Establishment is nearly impossible to oppose since it is invisible and elusive. The technocracy is characterized by "the relentless quest for efficiency, for order, for even more extensive rational control" (21). Much like Mailer, Roszak views capitalist ideology as strongly connected to the Establishment. He argues that in a technocratic capitalist society, corporations take on the role of public authorities (18), appropriating thus an illegitimate amount of control. This kind of technocratic configuration inevitably resembles more a totalitarian society than a democracy, which is exactly the point Mailer wants to make about American society.

According to Mailer, the Establishment brainwashes members of the society through capitalism, technology, the media, and institutions, such as the Church and the

Ministry of Defense. In *The Armies of the Night*, the Pentagon becomes the main motif symbolizing totalitarianism. It represents everything Mailer is opposing: the decaying moral of the government, mass consumerism, oppression, and, above all, totalitarianism:

> [T]hey were going to face the symbol, the embodiment, no, call it the true and high church of the military-industrial complex, the Pentagon, blind five-sided eye of a subtle oppression which had come to America out of the very air of the century […] yes, Mailer felt a confirmation of the contests of his own life on this March to the eye of the oppressor, greedy stingy dumb valve of the worst Wasp heart, chalice and anus of corporation land, smug, enclosed, morally blind Pentagon, destroying the future of its own nation with each day it augmented in strength. (126)

The religious imagery in this passage is interesting: Mailer sees the Pentagon as a "true and high church" of military and industry, and as a chalice (a cup for communion wine) of "corporation land," i.e. capitalism. The pair "chalice and anus" on its part implies that Mailer sees the Pentagon as a massive, ideological digestive system: an individual, free thinking man goes in, and a brainwashed, warmongering "mass man" (188) comes out. Mailer identifies the Pentagon as the "morally blind" eye of the oppressive Establishment and as the "valve of the worst Wasp heart." It is worth noting that Mailer depicts the Pentagon through bodily metaphors: the digestive system, the sense of sight, and the center of blood circulation, the heart. These images portray America as a rotting corpse, which is decaying from the inside—because inside, at the very core of American society is the Establishment, consisting of "smug" White Anglo-Saxon Protestants ("Wasps") who are incapable of seeing other alternatives than sending more troops to Vietnam.

The image of the Pentagon as the Establishment's digestive system and as a homogenizing machine is further strengthened later in the text:

> Floods of totalitarian architecture, totalitarian superhighways, totalitarian smog, totalitarian food (yes, frozen), totalitarian communications—the terror to a man so conservative as Mailer, was that nihilism might be the only answer to totalitarianism. The machine would work, grinding out mass man and his surrealistic wars until the machine was broken. (188)

Here Mailer identifies more specifically what comes out of the Establishment's machine: "mass man and his surrealistic wars." He also identifies the channels through which the Establishment is promulgating its ideology: architecture, infrastructure, food, and the media—all things that belong to everyday life. There is thus no escaping the Establishment: it has infiltrated everything. Mailer fears that America is turning into a monotone society full of zombie-like citizens impotent to resist the Establishment: "High church of the corporation, the Pentagon spoke exclusively of mass man and his civilization; every aspect of the building was anonymous, monotonous, massive, interchangeable" (240–41). Hollowell points out that Mailer is sincerely worried about the direction the American society is heading: "At the heart of *Armies* lies his deep concern for the individual in a society increasingly governed by bureaucratic and totalitarian impulses that threaten personal responsibility" (96). It is interesting that Mailer has such a gloomy perception of people's capability to resist the Establishment, when he is actually in the middle of one of the biggest anti-war demonstrations of the sixties, where thousands of citizens fiercely protested against the autocratic government. Perhaps his critique is intended for those who did not participate in the demonstration, namely, conformist mainstream Americans still stuck in the values of the previous decade: "Narrowness, propriety, goodwill, and that infernal American innocence which could not question one's leaders, for madness and the boils of a frustrated life resided beneath" (180). For Mailer, the ethos of a conformist mass man is the ultimate abhorrence and plague that afflicts the American civil society.

These passages show the Pentagon as a personification of the omnipresent and omnipotent Establishment. Mailer identifies also other instances he considers working under the Establishment:

> The authority had operated on their brain with commercials, and washed their brain with packaged education, packaged politics. The authority had presented itself as

> honorable, and it was corrupt [---] It lied through the teeth of corporation executives and Cabinet officials and police enforcement officers and newspaper editors and advertising agencies, and in its mass magazines, where the subtlest apologies for the disasters of the authority were […] grafted in the best possible style into the ever-open mind of the American lobotomy: the corporation office worker and his high-school son. (98–99)

This passage reflects again Mailer's notion of Americans as a nation of involuntary marionettes controlled by the Establishment. According to Mailer, Americans have undergone a mass lobotomy and brainwash, which further intensifies the notion of a people incapable of thinking for themselves and resisting the status quo. Mailer suggests that the Establishment has spread its tentacles to practically every sector of society: it operates on the brains of Americans through "corporation executives," "Cabinet officials," "police officers," "newspaper editors," and "advertising agencies." Mailer accuses the Establishment of being corrupt and covering up its "disasters" in a way that preserves the hegemony. His critique is aimed at the Establishment, but also, and more importantly, at his passive fellow citizens, even leftists, who let themselves be fooled.

Wolfe examines matters of authority, hierarchy, and control through the Pranksters' attitudes towards the conventional structures of society and the power relations that are evident inside the group. Even though the hippie communities of the sixties were all about cutting loose from conventional societal structures, such as traditional family models and work communities, Wolfe notes that the Merry Pranksters are, in fact, organized around one leader figure and that they have a specific ranking order, which he calls "the Prankster hierarchy" (151). Newcomers have to earn their place in the group and their status is determined by their behavior, appearance, and athletic abilities, among other things—just as in any other youthful reference group of the times. Wolfe observes that Kesey is referred to as "the Chief" when spoken about "as the leader or teacher of the whole group" (21) and that the Pranksters hold "briefings" to organize their activities. Briefing is an expression that connotes military

discipline and orderly conduct, things that are the total opposite of the Pranksters' way of life. Although the group might have used the term in an ironic sense[3], it nevertheless reveals that the Pranksters had not moved quite so far from the straight world and the Establishment as they thought they had.

According to Wolfe, in conflict situations group members "take it to Kesey", who functions as a mediator (145). Kesey is therefore the authority and decides on several occasions what the others should do, and also on many occasions, what to think. For example, when the group is on the road, Kesey decides when and who can have LSD from the communal reserve: "Sandy feels his first twinge of—what? Like ... there is going to be Authorized Acid only. And like ... they are going to be separated into performers and workers, stars and backstage (71). This sense of having a division of labor and social status underlines the fact that the group dynamic was not as egalitarian as they intended. They also play a game called "Power" on several occasions: "Thirty minutes of absolute power in which your word was the law and everyone had to do whatever you wanted" (106). These observations about the group dynamic and power games indicate that hierarchy and the division of labor inherently belong to the Western civilization—a tradition, in which even the most anarchistic countercultural group of the sixties had its roots. At the level of ideas and ideals, it might be possible to leap into a state of free-flowing anarchy, but in practice, many must have discovered that the internalized norms and structures of order were not easy to replace.

Wolfe makes an interesting observation about the group's reluctance to acknowledge the power relations present among them. Kesey, while clearly the chief and authority in the group, is also called the "non-navigator" and the "non-teacher"

[3] Wolfe notes that the Pranksters used the term inside the group, so it was not something he came up with. It was brought to use by Ken Babbs, who had served in the U.S. military during Vietnam (131).

(115), as if to downplay the hierarchical structures that penetrate even the Pranksters. The group has enveloped itself in a bubble, where they have created their own games and their own rules. They seem to imagine that once transcended into their own little community, they can remain completely unaffected by mainstream society and its "games". Wolfe describes the dynamic between the group and the law enforcers as "the cop game" (137) and the "justice game" (273). Wolfe also uses phrases, such as "cop-game cops" and "cop-and-jailhouse-and-judge-and-lawyer game" (137–138), to convey the group's attitudes towards the Establishment. To the Pranksters, everything is a game. For example, when the police raid the Prankster residence, Wolfe observes that "the Pranksters played it like they saw it: namely, as a high farce, an *opéra bouffe* [---] it was just the most wacked-out cop game anybody had seen any cops play (137–138, emphasis original)[4]. In addition to the law, also other structures, institutions, and norms of the Establishment are seen as games: going to work regularly and aspiring to climb the career ladder is the "occupation game" (123) and even other countercultural elements, such as student movement and the New Left were, according to the Pranksters, playing old, political games.

Wolfe also notes that the Pranksters shift between the mainstream and the marginal, and they alternate their stance towards the Establishment according to their needs. They attempt to control people and events by drawing them into what is their counterpart to the Establishment's games: the "movies." Most of the time they try to pull authorities into their movie, under their sphere of influence and control, but when it is in their interest, they take refuge in the straight world and even play along with the "cop game" or the "cop movie". For example, when the Pranksters make a stop at New

[4] According to Wikipedia, Opéra bouffe is a genre of 19th century French operetta, which is characterized by comedy, satire, and parody.

Orleans on their bus trip and wander into a black neighborhood, they are happy to see the police intervene before the racial tension amounted to action: "for once they don't pile out and try to break up the Cop Movie. They go with the Cop Movie and get their movie out of there" (85). So on some occasions, the Pranksters play it straight for the straight world, to get what they want—be it protection, media coverage or avoiding legal punishment.

### 2.1.2 Encounters with God

The traditional notions of religious sentiment and Christianity experienced a momentary inflation in the sixties, along with many other conformist and conventional values of the previous decades. Spirituality, on the other hand, increased its appeal: finding new ways of being in harmony with the universe and searching for new dimensions in ones relationship with God were prominent reasons behind experimenting with psychedelic drugs. Wolfe concentrates on describing the spiritual seeking of countercultural movements, while Thompson observes the theme of religion on a more personal note. Mailer, on his part, contrasts religion, and particularly Christianity, with the clashing values of technocratic society.

Wolfe describes the LSD experience as fundamentally religious. He notes that there is "something so ... *religious*" about the atmosphere around the Merry Pranksters which he later identifies as "the *experience*" (116, emphases original). Wolfe compares the experience to the birth of a new religion:

> What they all saw in ... a flash was the solution to the basic predicament of being *human*, the personal *I*, *Me*, trapped mortal and helpless, in a vast impersonal *It*, the world around me. Suddenly! – All-in-one – flowing together, *I* into *It*, and *It* into *Me*, and in that flow I perceive a power, so near and so clear, that the whole world is blind to. (117, emphases original)

The essence of this new religion was the experience of a cosmic unity and the group mind, which Wolfe describes above. He elaborates the comparison by examining the

Pranksters against Joachim Wach's theory on how religious communities are founded. He observes that Wach's description matches exactly the way in which the Pranksters formed around a charismatic leader (Kesey) and a new experience (LSD). According to Wolfe, the experience involved tuning in on "a higher level of reality," "a perception of the cosmic unity," and "a feeling of timelessness" (130). The religious allusions of the LSD experience are strengthened by Wolfe's characterization of Timothy Leary's and other LSD gurus' efforts to promote drug experimenting as a "messianic conviction" (123). Wolfe also describes in detail the Pranksters' interest in oriental religions and gods. For example, they look for spiritual guidance from the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese text (130) and incorporate religious practices like meditation, which is usually associated with Eastern philosophies, to their everyday routine. They experiment with different modes of expression, many of which, like taking large quantities of LSD followed by "talking in Tongues" (174), resemble religious experiences.

Wolfe notes that Merry Pranksters were seen as a sort of religious community not just by themselves, but also by outsiders:

> Somehow Norman got the idea the people at Kesey's were like, you know, monks, novitiates; a lot of meditating with your legs crossed, chanting, eating rice, feeling vibrations, walking softly over the forest floor and thinking big. Why else would they be out in the woods in the middle of nowhere? (140)

The lifestyle of the Pranksters imitates indeed that of a religious community. Spirituality is sought through renouncing materialism, reconnecting with nature, and experimenting with the religious practices of other cultures. According to Wolfe, people came to Kesey's place to perform spiritual quests, to do "the Tibetan thing," for example (140). So in a way, the Prankster headquarter was a pilgrimage destination. In a section that describes the Pranksters' visit to a California Unitarian Church conference, the religious aspects of the Prankster experience are discussed in relation to a mainstream religious community. Kesey is described as "a prophetic figure" (172) who created an experience

through which some of the younger Unitarians "*experienced* mystic brotherhood, albeit ever so bizarre … a miracle in seven days" (172, emphasis original). In fact, it is implied that he profoundly influenced the other religious community: "for a week Kesey had mystified […] and taken over the whole Unitarian Church of California. They would never be the same again" (178). The remark of creating "a miracle in seven days" parallels Kesey to a god or a prophet, which is intensified by portraying the other Pranksters as his disciples. Wolfe also describes a scene in which Kesey envisions himself as god while hallucinating from drugs: "YOU ARE GOD [---] he knows with absolute certainty he has … all the Power in the world" (176). Wolfe's observations show that the religious and spiritual elements of the Prankster experience were essentially drug-induced hallucinations and that the "god" who possessed all the control was not actually Kesey, or any of the other Pranksters, but LSD.

Thompson approaches the subject of god and religion from a more personal standpoint. He examines sin, guilt, and the idea of a savior with a humoristic undertone as he is fleeing from Vegas after having committed all sorts of illegal activities:

> Jesus Creeping God! Is there a priest in this tavern? I want to confess! I'm a fucking *sinner*! Venal, mortal, carnal, major, minor—however you want to call it, Lord … I'm guilty.
>
> But do me this one last favor: just give me five more high-speed hours before you bring the hammer down; just let me get rid of this goddamn car and off of this horrible desert.
>
> Which is not really a hell of a lot to ask, Lord, because the final incredible truth is that I am not guilty. All I did was take your gibberish *seriously* … and you see where it got me? My primitive Christian instincts have made me a criminal. [---]
>
> And now look at me: half-crazy with fear, driving 120 miles an hour across Death Valley in some car I never even wanted. You evil bastard! This is *your* work! You'd better take care of me, Lord … because if you don't you're going to have me *on your hands*. (86–87, emphases original)

Thompson's schizophrenic monologue explores the notions of guilt, sin, and redemption. The main character, Raoul Duke (who is Thompson himself), is continuously testing to see how much he can get away with before he gets caught. Here, the authority he is trying to outrun is not the police or any other instance of the Establishment, but God

himself, the ultimate judge of one's sins. His mad confession turns into a threat, as he states that "I'm a fucking sinner [...] I'm guilty" and almost in the next sentence that "the final incredible truth is that I am not guilty" after which he blames God for being on this strange trip in the first place. There is a good deal of irony in stating that the thought of him not being guilty is an "*incredible* truth": he knows he is guilty, but tries to bargain and negotiate, and ultimately threaten God. This observation introduces Thompson's idea of the modern hero, whose primary method of survival is self-reliance. He questions heavily the notion of there being a savior up there to redeem us all—to him, this religious construct is ultimately a fallacy and taking God seriously is something that belongs to the past. Thompson's idea of the modern hero, who relies on no one but himself is a theme I will come back to in chapter 4.

Mailer discusses religion and Christianity in terms of the values they represent to Americans. He contrasts religion with the modern, technologically oriented society:

> Any man or woman who was devoutly Christian and worked for the American Corporation, had been caught in an unseen vise whose pressure could split their mind from their soul. For the center of Christianity was a mystery, a son of God, and the center of the Corporation was a detestation of mystery, a worship of technology. Nothing was more intrinsically opposed to technology than the bleeding heart of Christ. (200)

Here, Mailer contrasts corporate capitalism with religion by stating that the essence of Christianity is "a mystery," while the essence of industry and commerce is "a worship of technology." This passage highlights the conflict of values that many people had to confront after the Second World War as the United States became the wealthiest and most industrially and militarily advanced nation in the world. According to Alvin Toffler, the American society of the sixties was in the grip of "future-shock" caused by the "super-normal rates of change" that developed societies were experiencing (20). Toffler argues that Americans were "simultaneously experiencing a youth revolution, a sexual revolution, a racial revolution, a colonial revolution, an economic revolution, and

the most rapid and deep-going technological revolution in history" (166). These revolutions, their rapidness and concurrence, have led to the average American's situation, which Mailer titles "schizophrenia" (200). He also observes in the passage that this development was dividing the mind and the soul, separating experiences into spheres of rationality and spirituality. Having to balance one's faith in God and in technology produced thus a polarization that had never before presented itself.

Mailer continues to ponder the conflicting values of his society by portraying the Vietnam War as an outlet for the confusion and suppressed anxiety of Christian Americans:

> The love of the Mystery of Christ, however, and the love of no mystery whatsoever, had brought the country to a state of suppressed schizophrenia so deep that the foul brutalities of the war in Vietnam were the only temporary cure possible for the condition—since the expression of brutality offers a definite if temporary relief to the schizophrenic. So the average good Christian American secretly loved the war in Vietnam. It opened his emotions. He felt compassion for the hardships and the sufferings of the American boys in Vietnam, even the Vietnamese orphans. […] America needed the war. It would need a war so long as technology expanded on every road of communication, and the cities and corporations spread like cancer; the good Christian Americans needed the war or they would lose their Christ. (200–201)

Mailer's observation of America being in a state of "suppressed schizophrenia" connotes disease, mental sickness. This collective qualm, which has resulted from the profound changes discussed in the previous paragraph, needs an outlet (a "cure," a "relief"), which, according to Mailer, is the war in Vietnam. It is serves as a ventilator for the urge to commit an "expression of brutality." Mailer employs images of sickness also in portraying the advance of technological progress ("cities and corporations spread like cancer"). The sickness of the American society can be cured and Christ salvaged through projecting violent outbursts on the war fought on the other side of the world. Mailer seems to suggest that in a society that values technology and rationality above all, the war has replaced religion—at least temporarily—as the communal spiritual and emotional experience.

The war inspires Mailer to utilize other religious metaphors as well. He gives a statement to the public after being released from jail: "You see, dear fellow Americans, it is Sunday, and we are burning the body and blood of Christ in Vietnam. Yes, we are burning him there, and as we do, we destroy the foundation of this Republic, which is its love and trust in Christ" (226). Mailer decides to appeal to the public on behalf of the anti-war demonstrators by deliberately using a Christian approach: even though he is not a Christian himself, he thinks this is the best way to reach as many average Americans as possible. Mailer turns the act of Holy Communion (commemorating the body and blood of Christ) into an act of desecrating the body and blood of Christ: the nation is destroying itself in Vietnam. The crumbling foundation of America—"its love and trust in Christ"—could only be stopped by retreating from Vietnam, even though "the average good Christian American secretly loved the war."

## *2.2 Capitalism and the American way of life*

A large part of the criticism that the new journalists aimed at the American society focuses on capitalism and the ideology of pursuing profit at the expense of everything else. Many of the countercultural movements of the sixties broke away from corporate America and the accelerating competitiveness of free enterprise. Experiments with collective ownership, communal spaces, and the distribution of free food[5] were statements against a society dictated by commerce. For Mailer, capitalism ties into the monstrous military-industrial complex (the Establishment) I discussed in chapter 2.1.1.

[5] In San Francisco, a street performance and activist group called The Diggers distributed free food on a daily basis in the Haight-Ashbury region. According to Digger member Peter Berg interviewed in the WGBH documentary film *Summer of Love* (2007), by giving out free food right in front of ordinary citizens the group wanted to show that an alternative lifestyle was possible; one where you would not have to work for a living, use money, or belong to capitalist society. This, of course, proved to be an unsustainable solution. The Diggers food drive is mentioned also in Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties* (170).

Mailer's "corporation land" pictures America as a cold, technocratic machine that moulds people and nature for its own benefit. Thompson approaches capitalism through what he regards as its grotesque by-products: Las Vegas, the commercialization of the American Dream to milk middle-class consumers, and the surreal aspects of free enterprise in a market economy. Wolfe touches on the theme through examining the leap from middle class to counterculture and contrasting the lifestyle of the Merry Pranksters to the suburban living arrangements of the mainstream.

### 2.2.1 Corporate capitalism as the new creed

There is a reoccurring motif in *The Armies of the Night*, which is "corporation land." It is mentioned several times, and it seems to be a critique of capitalism as well as the government. There are several passages in which Mailer underscores the divide between the capitalist, suburbanized society and nature. To him, a capitalist mass society signifies the very opposite, or even travesty, of the natural order of things:

> [N]ow corporation land, here named Government, took over state preserves, straightened crooked narrow roads […] and corporation land would succeed, if it hadn't yet, in making nature look like an outdoor hospital, and the streets of U.S. cities, grace of Urban Renewal, would be difficult to distinguish when drunk from pyramids of packaged foods in the aisles of a supermarket. (129)

Mailer accuses the government of turning nature into "an outdoor hospital" and streets into supermarket isles in the pursuit of economic expansion. The connotative meanings attached to a hospital is that it is sterile, antiseptic, and very clean—all contrasts with nature, which is wild, unpredictable, and ultimately beyond the control of human beings. These connotations also apply to the notion of a supermarket: what could be more sterile, in a cultural sense, than an artificial construct full of synthetic and processed foods? The accusation goes even further: American corporations are in Mailer's opinion "more guilty than the communists at polluting the air, fields, and streams, debasing the value of manufactured products, transmuting faith into science, technology, and

medicine, while all embarked on scandalous foreign adventures with their eminently practical methods" (82). Mailer's allegation is heavy: capitalist profiteering has led to the contamination of the environment, the emergence of a throw-away culture, substituting spiritual values with technology-faith, and most abhorrently, the involvement in war that benefits the military-industrial machinery.

As discussed earlier, Mailer links all the appalling aspects of American society ultimately to the totalitarian ideology of the Establishment. He continues his line of thought on the modern way of life that is completely alienated from nature:

> For years he had been writing about the nature of totalitarianism, its need to render populations apathetic, its instrument—the destruction of mood. […] totalitarianism was a deodorant to nature […] the Pentagon looked like the five-sided tip of on the spout of a spray can to be used under the arm, yes, the Pentagon was spraying the deodorant of its presence all over the fields of Virginia. (129)

Here too, authority is presented as something that interferes with nature by deodorizing it, making it sanitary and sterile. Comparing the Pentagon to a can of deodorant is to say it is controlling its environment by spraying ideology around in order to "render populations apathetic"—deodorant is after all something we use to control our natural bodily functions, an artificial substance to make us odorless and neutral. As a side remark, a group of demonstrators had rented an airplane to drop daisies on the Pentagon during the march. The plane was never permitted to take off, but the flowers were then distributed to the protesters who put them into the gun barrels of the soldiers guarding the Pentagon[6]. This is interesting from the vantage point of Mailer's idea of Pentagon as "a deodorant to nature." In attempting to cover the building in flowers, the

[6] The daisy incident, as told by Ed Sanders (member of folk/rock band The Fugs), appeared in Charles M. Young's article "March on the Pentagon" in Rolling Stone's web-version (July 12, 2007).

demonstrators acted as a counterforce to the Establishment, bringing back nature—in the form of fragrant daisies—to a place that was the source of the deodorizing process.

Mailer examines finally the ideological shift that living in an exceedingly money-centric society has created: "American Civilization had moved from the existential sanction of the frontier to the abstract ubiquitous sanction of the dollar bill" (169). This statement indicates that the very basis of the American Dream has moved towards a more material definition. While previously success might have equaled individualism and hard work (the frontier mentality) it was now measured against wealth and the growth rate of the economy. Mailer uses phrases like "cold majesty of the Corporation" (201) to intensify the notion of the "ubiquitous sanction of the dollar bill." By juxtaposing a corporate authority with the ruling power Mailer implies that Americans are truly governed by a capitalist elite. This relates closely to another interesting juxtaposition discussed in chapter 2.1: Mailer portrayed the Pentagon as the "high church" of both the military-industrial complex and the corporation. In discussing the military-industrial, technocratic, and totalitarian Establishment in terms of religion and monarchy, Mailer implies that it operates enabled by a mandate of people's faith: the majority of citizens blindly believe in their government, without questioning the premises of its logic. This observation is a critique of the state of democracy in the United States: the idea of participatory democracy had become a joke to Mailer, as he watched mass man obediently going along with the Establishment's capitalist plot.

Thompson comments on corporate capitalism and the free market economy by examining the logic that guides these systems:

> I wondered what he would say if I asked for $22 worth of Romilar and a tank of nitrous oxide. Probably he would have sold it to me. Why not? Free enterprise…. Give the public what it needs—especially this bad-sweaty, nervous-talkin' fella with tape all over his legs and this terrible cough, along with angina pectoris and these godawful Aneuristic flashes every time he gets in the sun. *I mean this fella was in bad shape,*

> *officer. How the hell was I to know he'd walk straight out to his car and start abusing those drugs?* (101, emphasis original)

This passage conveys, rather humorously, the basic concept of free enterprise: you can sell anything to anyone as long as they want to buy it. Thompson suggests that although making a living according to the law of supply and demand might be legally justifiable, it is not always morally valid. The mentality of "I'm-just-giving-people-what-they-want" functions like a disclaimer from all moral responsibilities to fellow man: fast food corporations sell as much unhealthy treats as they can, because there is a profitable market for it. Liquor and tobacco companies create youthful commercial campaigns, because while underage drinkers and smokers seriously damage their health and are a major social concern, they are also a target group for the company's products. Responsibility is imposed on the consumer, as the profiteer is free to do whatever they want—"*How the hell was I to know*"?

### 2.2.2 The *squares* and the *straights*: The American middle class

The countercultural activists of the sixties—as significant as they culturally were—belonged to the margins of American society. The mainstream went about their business as usual: climbed the career ladder, drove their kids to school, ate dinner together at the same time every evening, and so on, living the American Dream of home ownership, the nuclear family, and social prestige. This was not, however, the dream everyone wanted to pursue. There was a window of opportunity for change and rebellion: in the sixties, there were more young people than ever in the United States—nearly half of the population consisted of teenagers or young adults in that decade, as the post-war baby-boomers had become youths. Those who turned to the counterculture for alternative life experiences often distinguished themselves visibly from the mainstream by letting their hair grow long, dressing in colorful and deviant clothes, and experimenting with drugs.

These were signs in themselves, setting hippies, motorcycle outlaws, and other countercultural figures apart from the "squares" and the "straights" of middle class America. Countercultural phenomena were often perceived as a threat by the mainstream, but at the same time there was a sincere curiosity and fascination about it[7].

The blatant contrast between counterculture and mainstream is perhaps most colorfully portrayed in Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*: the Merry Pranksters dress in flags and gas masks, experiment with psychedelic drugs, live in a communal log house, give public performances, and drive around in a psychedelically decorated school bus. Their main mission is to "muddle people's minds" (66) and stir up "consternation and vague befuddling resentment among the citizens" (68). Heckling ordinary law-abiding citizens for their own amusement is also what Raoul Duke and Doctor Gonzo do in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson has great fun depicting the prejudiced, narrow, and conservative middle-class minds that crowd Las Vegas. Mailer, on the other hand, belongs more to the mainstream than the margin, but is nevertheless a part of the anti-war movement, and thus, the counterculture. His take on the countercultural forces at play is perhaps more generational than anything else: he compares his own stance of a grumpy, intellectual, middle-aged man against the various youth cultures present at the demonstration. In this subchapter, I discuss how the elements of mainstream America appear from a countercultural context.

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[7] The counterculture—especially the motorcycle outlaws and the hippie movement—attracted lots of attention from the mainstream. In *Hell's Angels*, Hunter S. Thompson describes how ordinary people flocked to see the infamous motorcycle gang wherever it stopped. The hippies in Haight-Ashbury were another so called tourist attraction: the documentary film *Summer of Love* (2007) shows busloads of middle-class Americans from across the country driving around San Francisco, gawking out the windows and browsing their hippie vocabulary. According to Anderson, the Gray Line Bus Company instituted the "Hippie Hop" tour, the "only foreign tour within the continental limits of the United States" (174).

Both Mailer and Wolfe touch on the theme of making the leap from middle-class to countercultural activist, and they observe the deep divide between the so called normal way of life and the alternative way of life. Wolfe portrays the hippie lifestyle as drifting in the margins of mainstream America:

> This is the way they live. Men, women, boys, girls, most from middle-class upbringings, men and women and boys and girls and children and babies, this is the way they have been living for months, for years some of them, across America and back, on the bus, down to the Rat lands of Mexico and back, sailing like gypsies along the Servicenter fringes, copping urinations, fencing with rotten looks—it even turns out that they have films and tapes of their duels with service-station managers in the American heartland trying to keep their concrete bathrooms and empty Dispense-Towels safe from the Day-Glo crazies ... (21)

In this passage, Wolfe contrasts the hippies with gypsies to illustrate their nomadic and irregular lifestyle and the resentment and prejudice they often received from the mainstream. Wolfe describes the clash between the mainstream and the counterculture as a battle, even a war: hippies have to *fence* with "rotten looks" and *duel* with gas station owners. The fact that Wolfe contrasts the deviant lifestyle of the hippies with that of the mainstream in a service station setting highlights the divide between these two dimensions of experience—though it is also a natural setting for the clash of cultures, as every layer of society stops at a service station every now and again. He depicts the scene as a place "where the Credit Card elite are tanking up and stretching their legs and tweezing their undershorts out of the aging waxy folds of their scrota" (20–21). This image purposefully visualizes the aging, conformist, rigid American middle class as a repulsive "elite," which is exactly what the countercultural movements wanted to break away from.

Wolfe examines the transition from middle class to counterculture through what he calls the "Beautiful People letter:" "Actually, there were a lot of kids in the early 1960s who were … yes; *attuned*. I used to think of them as the Beautiful People because of the Beautiful People letters they used to write their parents. [---] Most of them were

from middle-class backgrounds, but not upper bourgeois, more petit bourgeois" (122). Wolfe examines here the shared background of many that pursued the hippie lifestyle. He observes that they were most often average American teenagers that came from average families—the basic units of the American society. He gives then a prototype of the letter:

> Mothers all over California, all over America, I guess, got to know the Beautiful People letter by heart. It went:
>
> 'Dear Mother,
>
> 'I meant to write to you before this and I hope you haven't been worried. I am in [San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Arizona, a Hopi Indian Reservation!!!! New York, Ajijic, San Miguel de Allende, Mazatlán, Mexico!!!!] and it is really beautiful here. It is a beautiful scene. We've been here a week. I won't bore you with the whole thing, how it happened, but I really tried, because I knew you wanted me to, but it just didn't work out with [school, college, my job, me and Danny] and so I have come here and it is a really beautiful scene. I don't want you to worry about me. I have met some BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE and …'
>
> … and in the heart of even the most unhip mamma in all the U.S. of A. instinctively goes up the adrenalin shriek: beatniks, bums, spades—*dope*. (123–24)

The "Beautiful People letter" Wolfe reconstructs here shows the instinctive reaction of the middle-class American to the counterculture: "beatniks, bums, spades [referring to African Americans [8] ]—*dope*." These are all things that represent a threat to the conventional conformist American lifestyle. Beatniks abandoned the social conventions of the fifties society and went on a quest to find an alternative way of being; bums belong to the outskirts of society, occasionally hollering at by-passers, asking for money they have not earned; Black Panthers in the streets, demanding their rights by fair means or foul; and finally the worst of them all, drugs. Mind-altering, unpredictable behavior inducing drugs that made ordinary people go out of their minds. No wonder that getting the "Beautiful People letter" produced an "adrenalin shriek" in the white, middle-class parent. The passage describing the letter also names the things the counterculture,

[8] See Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 15 and Terry H. Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee*, 248

especially the hippie movement, wanted to renounce: education, the career-oriented mindset, and the traditional notion of coupling and starting a nuclear family, which Wolfe often refers to with the phrase "Mom&Dad&Buddy&Sis."

Wolfe continues to describe the "Beautiful People" phenomenon by emulating the experience of being young in that era:

> Us! and people our age!–it was... *beautiful*, it was a ... *whole* feeling, and the straight world never understood it, this thing of one's status sphere and how one was only nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two or so and not starting out helpless at the bottom of the ladder, at all, because the hell with the ladder itself–one was already up on a ... level that the straight world was freaking *baffled* by! (123)

Breaking loose from the hierarchical structure of mainstream society was one of the key experiences of the sixties generation. They had created their own way of being, which set them radically apart from their parents lifestyle. Thousands of young adults wanted to escape "occupation-game labels," such as "clerk" or "executive trainee" (123) and create an alternative way of being. Wolfe further contrasts the very different lifestyles of "the Beautiful People" and mainstream citizens through a character that belongs to both spheres. He describes a young man whose life alternates between "stretches of good straight computer programming, during which he wore a necktie and an iridescent teal-green suit of Zirconpolyesterethylene and was a formidable fellow in the straight world" and "stretches of life with … Speed, the Great God Rotor, during which he wore his Importancy Coat," a jacket covered by a collage of "ribbons," "slogan buttons," and "reflectors" (147). Wolfe describes thus the concepts and status symbols attributed to straight society (work, neckties, suits) and to the counterculture (drugs, peculiar clothing). The transition between the two cultures is signified by substituting the conventional office uniform, the suit and necktie made out of synthetic materials, for a jacket with attitude. Symbolically, it is a transformation of a mass man—or an

Organization Man, to use William H. Whyte's definition from the 1950s—into a free individual.

Thompson approaches the American middle-class straight society by contrasting it with its worst fears. He portrays the attitudes of "the squares" towards marginal elements of the society, such as the drug scene:

> We were idling at a stoplight in front of the Silver Slipper beside a big blue Ford with Oklahoma plates ... two hoggish-looking couples in the car, probably cops from Muskogee using the Drug Conference to give their wives a look at Vegas. They looked like they'd just beaten Caesar's Palace for about $33 at the blackjack tables, and now they were headed for the Circus-Circus to whoop it up....
>
> ... but suddenly, they found themselves next to a white Cadillac convertible all covered with vomit and a 300-pound Samoan in a yellow fishnet T-shirt yelling at them: "Hey there! You folks want to buy some heroin?"
>
> No reply. No sign of recognition. They'd been warned about this kind of crap: Just ignore it....
>
> "Hey, honkies!" my attorney screamed. "Goddamnit, I'm serious! I want to sell you some pure fuckin' smack!" He was leaning out of the car, very close to them. But still nobody answered. I glanced over, very briefly, and saw four middle-American faces frozen with shock, staring straight ahead. (151)

Thompson's portrayal of typical "middle-Americans" is not very complimentary: "hoggish-looking" individuals who come to Vegas for cheap thrills. Like in the previous passage by Wolfe, appearance is of importance also here: a "300-pound Samoan in a yellow fishnet T-shirt" and a "Cadillac convertible all covered with vomit" are certainly sights that would alarm members of the mainstream. This passage reveals the tension between the mainstream and the marginal: decent, law-abiding Americans wanted to stay at arm's length from the deviant characters that came with the counterculture. By suggesting that the couples are from Muskogee Thompson is probably alluding to a popular 1969 song by Merle Haggard, *Okie from Muskogee,* which could be described

as a kind of theme song for straight society[9]. The horrified Oklahomans, or Okies, manage to escape Duke and Gonzo, and Duke is left wondering whether they will inform the police about the incident: "The idea that two heroin pushers in a white Cadillac convertible dragging up and down the Strip, abusing total strangers at stoplights, was prima facie absurd" (153). The appearance and behavior of the two are so extreme that Duke concludes nobody would believe such a twosome ever existed, even in the furthest margins of society.

Thompson gets to the core of mainstream America and its backward attitudes towards the counterculture when Duke and Gonzo go to the Drug conference:

> Dr. Bloomqvist's book is a compendium of state bullshit. On page 49 he explains the "four states of being" in the cannabis society: "Cool, Groovy, Hip & Square"—in that descending order. "The square is seldom if ever cool," says Bloomqvist. "He is 'not with it,' that is, he doesn't know 'what's happening.' But if he manages to figure it out, he moves up a notch to 'hip.' And if he can bring himself to approve of what's happening, he becomes 'groovy.' And after that, with much luck and perseverance, he can rise to the rank of cool.'" (139)

This passage conveys the incredibly distorted logic of the nation's leading narcotics expert who is completely out of touch with reality. As a self-taught narcotics expert of sorts and also as a journalist who records the phenomena of the real world, Thompson deems the official outlook on the drug scene as "dangerous gibberish" (139) that can lead to excessive measures in dealing with the problem. The passage shows how gullible officials and "experts" can be when confronted with subjects they are prejudiced towards. Thompson suspects that some of these so called truths about drug culture were probably put in Dr. Bloomqvist's mind by someone like Timothy Leary,

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[9] Haggard's lyrics celebrate the "square" way of life, as this excerpt demonstrates: "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee; We don't take our trips on LSD; We don't burn our draft cards down on Main Street; We like livin' right, and bein' free; I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee; A place where even squares can have a ball. (http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/haggard-merle/okie-from-muskogee-497.html)

"with a straight face" (139). To make his point, Thompson concludes: "These poor bastards didn't know mescaline from macaroni" (143). He comes to the conclusion that the convention is a joke, a "prehistoric gathering" (138) that was put together by "people who had been in a seconal stupor since 1964" (144). The authorities and officials of the mainstream were helplessly behind their times.

Thompson keeps exploring the values of straight society in the context of the drug conference. He notes that most of the police officers resemble stereotypical conformist remnants of some previous era: "for every urban-hipster, there were about twenty crude-looking rednecks who could have passed for assistant football coaches at Mississippi State. [---] Here was the cop-cream of Middle America … and, Jesus, they looked and talked like a gang of drunken pig farmers" (140). Thompson associates the police with pigs on several occasions: he suspected the Oklahomans at the traffic lights to be police because they were "hoggish-looking" and compares the police at the conference to "drunken pig farmers." This, in my opinion, has more to do with issues of appearance than the fact that police were often called pigs by members of the sixties counterculture. The "hoggish" mainstream middle-American was the yardstick against which all the "urban-hipsters," "freaks," and other countercultural elements could be measured. Thompson refers to Middle America as "the Outback" and explores the geo-sociological divide through a remark made by Doctor Gonzo: "I saw these bastards in *Easy Rider*, but I didn't believe they were real" (140). This illuminates the point that the social scenery of California was very different from that of Middle America, and the lack of real life encounters with the counterculture was undoubtedly a crucial factor in the rigid and retarded views of the guests at the police conference. It was an encounter of prejudices, where a "freak" from California and a police from Middle America met for the first time.

It is interesting to note that the various phenomena that deviated from mainstream America in the sixties were made accessible to the larger public by the media, and especially the new journalists. In *Future Shock,* Alvin Toffler argued that American society was disintegrating into subcultures that diverged considerably from the norms of the mainstream middle class. According to Toffler, the gap between these social groups would soon be so wide, there would have to be "transcultural translators" to interpret one group to another. John Hollowell applies this idea to Wolfe: "Wolfe might be called such a translator for the Kesey group since he interprets and explains their deviant life-style to middle-class readers." He parallels Wolfe with a tour guide who "introduces to the reader exotic manners and values quite alien to his own"(134) and a "wonder-struck anthropologist just discovering some new exotic lore" (138). This characterization can also be applied to Hunter S. Thompson when he observed the Hell's Angels, although instead of a tour guide he was more like a researcher or scientist observing a pack of wild animals, relating their manners and habits to the curious middle-class American tucked away in the safety of their suburban home. The new journalists made the countercultural phenomena accessible to the mainstream; after all, the deviancies (hippies, acid heads, motorcycle gangs, and activists advocating minority rights and protesting war) concentrated in certain places, such as California and the upper East Coast, so someone living in the previously mentioned town of Muskogee, Oklahoma, for example, may have gone through the sixties without seeing a single hippie—except for encountering them in magazines and television.

### 2.2.3 The American lifestyle

In all of the three books, there are reoccurring motifs that mirror the American lifestyle and its dependency on capitalist culture. Thompson reflects the American lifestyle especially through two motifs: the convertible car and Las Vegas. The convertible car is

seen as a vehicle to achieve the American Dream, and as an emblem of mobility, youth, and the American way of life. The vehicle idea is presented at the very beginning of the story: "'I want you to know that we're on our way to Los Angeles to find the American Dream.' I smiled. 'That's why we rented this car [referring to the Chevrolet they are driving]. It was the only way to do it. Can you grasp that?" (6). A similar allusion can be found in another passage:

> We're looking for the American Dream, and we were told it was somewhere in this area ... Well, we're here looking for it, 'cause they sent us out here all the way from San Francisco to look for it. That's why they gave us this white Cadillac, they figure we could catch up with it in that... (164)

The idea of achieving the American Dream with the help of a car, and not just any car, is quite fascinating. The car has to be a large, American-made convertible that has a certain status: a Chevrolet or a Cadillac. This resonates strongly with the American Dream of the 1950s, when having a home, a nuclear family, and a proper domestic car was the ultimate ideal. The car appears in a similar context—although not as an actual motif—also in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, where it is linked specifically with middle-class values and the nuclear family model: "[the] electro-pastel world of Mom&Dad&Buddy&Sis in the suburbs. There they go, in the family car, a white Pontiac Bonneville sedan—*the family car!*" (40, emphasis original). This image is still common in popular culture—largely due to the imagery of various movies and family sit-coms—and the association between a car and the American Dream is very strong. In fact, General Motors recently launched a campaign for Cadillac with the slogan "Life. Liberty. And the Pursuit," using the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, which is considered one of the main foundations for the American Dream.

The idea of the convertible as a symbol of the American lifestyle and the culture of youth and mobility is discussed in the following passages, in which the car is an

emblem of the superiority of the American auto industry, but at the same time a critique of the auto-oriented culture in America:

> "Do I look like a goddamn Nazi?" I said. "I'll have a natural American car, or nothing at all!"
>
> They called up the white Coupe de Ville at once. Everything was automatic. I could sit in the red-leather driver's seat and make every inch of the car jump, by touching the proper buttons. It was a wonderful machine: Ten grand worth of gimmicks and high-priced Special Effects. [...] there was no doubt in my mind that I was into a superior machine. (104)

> Old elephants limp off to the hills to die; old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars.
>
> But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country—but only for those with true grit. (18)

In the first passage, there are certain patriotic undertones to be discovered. The car has to be American, as opposed to German, as indicated by the Nazi reference. The Cadillac Coupe de Ville is presented as the absolute height of achievement—"a superior machine"—in the automobile industry. There is a passage in the story where Raoul Duke wants the take the car to its limits: he pumps the tires so full of air they are almost ready to explode, but the "whale" can handle it. Thus, it really is a superior machine. The second passage has allusions of mobility (the trip as manifestation of "the fantastic possibilities of life in this country") as a part of the national character: to be able to leave and pursue ones dream is what is "right and true and decent." Mobility plays a strong tradition in American culture, and the ideas of being on the road and drifting from one place to another like a hobo have their special place in the national tradition. The beat mentality and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* certainly inspired many to seek the freedom of the mobile lifestyle.

On the other hand, the passage also seems to convey negative connotations related to cars and the passive, car-centric lifestyle of Americans ("old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars"). The passivity aspect is further emphasized by the notion in the first passage that "everything was automatic":

nothing needs to be done manually. Only in America could you at the time enjoy a full meal and see a movie while never leaving the car—drive-ins can be seen as the product of an extremely passive lifestyle. In *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Philip Slater criticizes the car-centric lifestyle of early 1970s America in similar tones: "Some people can't afford to heat their homes because we all want to ride expensive vehicles on crowded roads at high speeds, killing one another and polluting the atmosphere" (2). Slater links the auto-oriented culture to larger problems of the American society, such as the middle-class phenomenon of keeping up with the Joneses at the expense of the environment: driving big cars to show ones status.

The convertible car motif evokes notions of not only mobility, but also youth. The protagonists of the story set out on a wild adventure in a convertible car, which suits their mission well, since the convertible is often seen as a representation of freedom. In this respective, it has a special role in American popular culture, especially in films. Road movies are a specific genre, in which the vehicle—usually a convertible—has a liberating function: for example, Thelma and Louise make their escape from conventional and patriarchal restraints in a convertible in the 1991 hit film *Thelma & Louise*, and Wyatt and Billy fight the system in the classic road movie *Easy Rider* (1969)—although the vehicle of choice in this story is not a convertible, but a motorcycle. The theme of *Easy Rider* resembles that of Thompson's story: the quest to find America and to outsmart the Establishment. The film is considered a countercultural classic, much like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Mobility has been an important aspect of the American lifestyle ever since cars became a mass commodity, and the idea of individual transportation is essential in the United States. The possibility of hitting the road whenever you feel like it gives a sense of personal freedom, which can be seen to relate to the individualistic mentalities of the American lifestyle.

The car, and especially the convertible, can thus be seen as a motif that carries many connotations: a vehicle to achieve the American Dream, an emblem of mobility and youth, a status symbol, and a symptom of a motorized society. French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has made interesting remarks about the car-centric culture of the United States in his book *America*: "All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behaviour. […] Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together" (54-55). He also states that for Americans, "the only truly pleasure" is "keeping on the move" (53), which I think is a very apt remark. His view of the American mindset is essentially connected to the notion of mobility. Mailer too touches on this notion in *The Armies of the Night*: "the fever to travel was in the American blood" (163) and "may be [sic] it was only when they were on the move that Americans could feel anchored in their memories" (186). Mailer seems to suggest that the mere possibility of traveling is an essential part of the American Dream: mobility ensures the escape from small towns and limited opportunities, always having the possibility of exploring the frontier further.

In addition to the convertible, Thompson discusses Las Vegas as a manifestation of consumerist American society and lifestyle. It appears as an exaggerated miniature model of the consumerist society, and as an indicator of the changing mentalities of the late 1960s and early 1970s: "any freak with $1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head. No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted" (47). Here, I found interesting the idea that in Vegas, one could purchase the freedom of speech for just two dollars, so to speak. Vegas is traditionally known for its bargain offers—all-you-can-eat lobster buffets for $4,99 on

every corner—which lure tourists to go overboard in every imaginable way. The connotative meanings associated with Vegas often relate to money (gambling, winning, spending) and exaggerated consumerism (neon signs, bargains, countless experiences to be bought), which could be seen to relate to American culture in general. For quite a while, Las Vegas has represented an idea of commercialism gone wild in the popular imagination; perhaps even more so in the early seventies.

Another passage draws attention to the connotations of Las Vegas as a place where an ordinary person has a chance to achieve the American Dream by winning big.

> Now off the escalator and into the casino, big crowds still tight around the crap tables. Who are these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're real. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a lot of them—still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. (57)

The phrase "still humping the American Dream" seems to say that the myth of getting rich in an instant is indeed a myth in its negative sense: the whole concept of the dream is a deception. Desperation could be thus seen as one of the connotations of Las Vegas. This idea relates to the idea of chasing something you can never really catch: the dream keeps you going until you discover it is only a myth—and, as Thompson states, some people never reach this discovery. There is a passage in *Armies of the Night* that plays on the same connotations, only Mailer goes even further in his evaluation of the American small-town mindset and the quest for achieving a sense of victory:

> If one could find the irredeemable madness of America […] it was in those late afternoon race track faces coming into the neon lights of the parimutuel windows, or those early morning hollows in the eye of the soul in places like Vegas where the fevers of America go livid in the hum of the night, and Grandmother, the church-goer, orange hair burning bright now crooned over the One-Arm Bandit, pocketbook open, driving those half-dollars home, home to the slot. (162)

Mailer calls the desire and hope to hit the jackpot and instantly achieve the American Dream "the irredeemable madness of America" and "the fevers of America," which

ultimately has the same tone than Thompson's vision of the desperate souls that go to Vegas to "hump" the American Dream. Gambling is a means to get the good life with minimal effort, and it is perhaps the most relevant undercurrent of the modern version of the Dream. Mailer, however, takes the Vegas reference even further than Thompson, in a sense, as he suggests that even Vegas could no longer satisfy the urge to win big: According to Mailer, insanity could previously be located in places where "fever, force, and machines could come together", such as Vegas, but now "one had to find it in Vietnam; that was where the small town had gone to get its kicks" (164). Mailer's vision of these urges of small-town America portray the need to feel victorious, to emerge as a winner—be it from Vietnam or a casino. The descriptions by Mailer and Thompson show that the myth of the easy win appeals to every layer of the American society, but especially to kinds of people that go to Vegas for thrills.

Thompson describes Las Vegas as a place of degradation and regression in several passages:

> A week in Vegas is like stumbling into a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties. Which is wholly understandable when you see the people who come here, the Big Spenders from places like Denver and Dallas. Along with National Elks Club conventions (no niggers allowed) and the All-West Volunteer Sheepherders' Rally. These are people who go absolutely crazy at the sight of an old hooker stripping down to her pasties and prancing out on the runway to the big-beat sound of a dozen 50-year-old junkies kicking out the jams on "September Song." (156)

> No mercy for a criminal freak in Las Vegas. This place is like the army: the shark ethic prevails—eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody's guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity. (72)

> When you bring an act into this town, you want to bring it in heavy. Don't waste any time with cheap shucks and misdemeanors. Go straight for the jugular. Get right into felonies. The mentality of Las Vegas is so grossly atavistic that a really massive crime often slips unrecognized. (173)

The cultural meanings that are attached to Vegas in these passages seem to echo mentalities of the past, but also the emerging, egocentric values of the early seventies. Thompson implies that Vegas is a meeting place for conservative and rigid people that

still firmly hang onto the values and norms—such as racial segregation and heterosexuality—of past times. The two latter passages, on the other hand, present Vegas as a merciless environment, which is more characteristic of the individual and capitalist ideals that came after the sixties hippie era. The excerpts also imply that Las Vegas is a place where law and order receive absurd dimensions. According to Thompson, people can get arrested for petty crimes or for just looking suspicious in Las Vegas, while major obscenities, such as the ones the main characters of the story orchestrate, do not attract any attention from the officials. This curious observation is further highlighted by the fact that Duke and Gonzo go about their questionable business right in the middle of a district attorneys conference without any trouble. The secret to surviving in Vegas, according to Thompson, is to look confident, tip big, and to go to such excess in everything you do that nobody can believe it.

One final aspect of the Las Vegas motif, is that it is associated with the Nazis on more than one occasion: "The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on a Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich" (46). Comparing a bar-casino-complex with a Nazi empire from an alternate dimension brings out the absurdity of the Las Vegas scene, especially since Thompson refers twice to the Circus-Circus also as the main nerve of the American Dream. Perhaps what Thompson is trying to imply here, is that the people who come to Vegas share the rigid mind-set of fanatics and conservatives, making them thus parallel to Nazis. What is more interesting, however, is that Thompson associates the Nazi ideology also with the counterculture and the hippies: "Jesus Christ. I could see myself lying in bed in the Mint Hotel, half-asleep and staring idly out the window, when suddenly a vicious nazi drunkard appears two hundred feet tall in the midnight sky, screaming gibberish at the world: '*Woodstock Über Alles!*'" (47). Traditionally, the hippies are seen as peaceful,

anti-hierarchical, loosely organized, and easy-going, but here one of the most prominent symbols of the hippie movement, Woodstock, is associated with the Nazi ideology. Maybe the purpose of this connection is to show that every subculture or movement, no matter how well-intentioned its purposes, can turn into a dogmatic actor that imposes its values and ideology on others.

All in all, Las Vegas seems to symbolize the vortex in which the old and the new currents of American culture meet: the fanatic and narrow-minded ideas of the past and present, the absurdity of the law enforcement system, and the individual and egomaniacal aspirations of the early seventies. These connotations are very interesting, keeping in mind the plot: the main characters are looking for the American Dream in Las Vegas—perhaps precisely the change in the cultural atmosphere has dislocated the Dream in the first place, and in a symbolical sense, it is nowhere to be found. It is equally interesting, however, that in some sense Duke seems to have found the Dream at the end of the story, precisely by exploiting these fantastic possibilities of Vegas. This is something I discuss in further detail in chapter 4, however.

## *2.3 The media*

Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe discuss the media in differing tone and depth. Mailer has the most to say about the subject, as he considers the media to be a part of the Establishment, which is one of the main themes in *Armies of the Night*. Thompson uses real clips from newspapers and magazines to highlight the absurd dimensions of real life events (which I discuss in further detail in the next chapter because it has more to do with the topic of war) and comments on the journalistic profession. Wolfe views the mainstream media as another instance of straight society the Pranksters' try to control and pull into their "movie." The observations Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe make on

the media and journalism are especially interesting, since they are reporters themselves. On many occasions they clearly separate themselves as new journalists from the conventional media, but on other occasions acknowledge their roles with self-irony and insight.

### 2.3.1 The mass media as a misrepresenting mirror

Mailer discusses the mass media with the same contempt he shows for the military-industrial Establishment. In fact, Mailer regards the media as a part of the same ideological machinery—as a collaborator in the great scheme of the invisible Establishment: the brainwashing of America is done by "Hollywood, TV, and *Time*" (169), in other words films, television, and the press. He also uses phrases like "totalitarian communications" and accuses the authority of lying through the teeth of newspaper editors (98–99). In Mailer's view, the media is systematically altering people's conception of reality: "ten thousand hours of television, ten million words of newsprint added up to one thundering misapprehension of all the little details of institutional life" (172). The thought comes to him when he considers the reality of being processed as a criminal after his arrest, as opposed to the precognitions he had had about how the government functions. Due to what he had seen, heard, and read in the media, he imagined that the process would be "pleasantly efficient," which, of course, it was not.

In addition to considering the mass media as an apparatus telling the nation what to think, he also deems it a dictator of consumer behavior. When he sees a group of teenagers on the street dressed like "high school kids in Hollywood and TV," he realizes how much impact the media has on the preferences of its consumers:

> A part of him had always tried to believe that the America he saw in family television dramas did not exist, had no power—as of course he knew it did—to direct the styles

> and the manners and therefore the ideas of America […] ideas like conformity, cleanliness, America-is-always-right. (167)

Just as Mailer noted that the ideology of the authority is seeping through everyday commodities, he notes it does so even more powerfully through the media. By guiding the "styles and manners" of Americans through the media, the Establishment is promulgating its conservative and patriotic values that ultimately belong to the previous decade. Family dramas and sit-coms had a prominent role in conceptualizing the traditional American Dream in the popular imagination, and the "ideas of America" Mailer mentions above clearly represent the traditional dream. This exemplifies the abstractness of the dream, but also its potency: the values, ideas, and ways of viewing the world presented in seemingly harmless television shows have the power to affect actions and decisions in real life.

Mailer was writing his critique at a time when most Americans had entered television's sphere of influence. According to J. Hoberman in *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties*, television had by the 1960s become an everyday commodity in homes and public spaces, such as bars (38). Media-manufactured experiences (or, what historian Daniel Boorstin calls "pseudo-events") became a part of social reality and people's perceptions of the world were more and more shaped by commercial mass media: "As corporate culture Coca-colonized ever more space, selling a bottled American identity back to America, so the media tended toward an increasingly self-conscious reflexivity. […] In this new totality, the images themselves were shadows cast by shadows and mirrors of mirrors" (39). The entertainment industry is often seen as a part of the hegemonic machinery, and this is a view that also Mailer employs in his assessment of media's influence. He calls television "the corporations land's whip" (265) and notes that most average Americans were reluctant to question the Vietnam War and the Establishment, because "the

Corporation was what brought him his television set and his security" and "the unspoken promise that on Judgment Day he would not be judged" (201). The media then, in Mailer's view, is an essential tool in maintaining the hegemony: as long as people were satisfied with the "bottled American identity" the Establishment was selling them, the power structures remained as they were.

In addition to discussing the media and the entertainment industry as guides for America's tastes and preferences, Mailer focuses on the misrepresentative nature of traditional news reporting. When giving a speech at the steps of the Department of Justice, Mailer scolds "the press for their lies, and their misrepresentations, for their guilt in creating a psychology in the last twenty years in the average American which made wars like Vietnam possible" (90). This accusation continues the idea of the media telling people what to think, only on a more serious note: the press tells Americans not only what to wear, but it also feeds them the Establishment's view of foreign relations and military operations. When Mailer reads the newspaper reports covering the protest at the Pentagon, he wonders if America was "the first great power to be built on bullshit" (214), and when summing up the aftermath of the demonstrations, he states that "the press would be naturally on the side of the authority" (279). He calls reporters "the silent assassins of the Republic", who "alone have done more to destroy this nation than any force in it" (61). Mailer's remarks reveal that he considers the media to be an appendix of the Establishment, promulgating Establishment views and versions of reality to the Americans. Mailer's views on the mainstream media can be contrasted to his own report on the events, which celebrates the nuances and ideas that the mainstream media failed to present its pursuit of objectivity, quoting official sources and relying solely on Establishment views.

Wolfe's discussion of the mainstream media is fairly brief, but he observes that the Pranksters play with the media much like they play with the police: the press is eager to print anything the Pranksters cook up and portray Kesey as "a hipster Christ," "a modern mystic," and "a visionary" (139). The mainstream media was eager to sell stories by making the most of the countercultural phenomena: the hippies and freaks, their unusual appearance, and weird habits. This in mind, Kesey was the perfect target to aim the limelight at, and as Wolfe notes: "Kesey is all over TV, radio, and the newspapers. He's a celebrity, the perfect celebrity, the Good-Bad Guy, reeking all the Zea-lot delights of sin but promising to do good" (338). Kesey uses the media to play his "fugitive game" after returning from Mexico: he is wanted for several drug-related offences, but he decides to tantalize the Establishment by pulling off the ultimate prank: giving interviews to the press and appearing on television to talk about his mission to graduate from LSD and move on to the next level—all this in the middle of the hottest pursuit. Kesey plays the media game to his own advantage, and the media is pleased. Wolfe also notes that the Pranksters respond to the "media game" by making their own movies, sometimes even emulating the form of television news or other formats as a way of mocking them. This is just a side remark though, as the Pranksters mainly film to document their countless experimentations and journeys.

### 2.3.2 Self-reflections of a journalist

Since all of the three writers are journalists themselves, their observations on the media, the conventions of reporting, and the freedom of speech are often self-reflexive. Mailer, for example, discusses the theme of the freedom of speech with mischievous humor:

> He has once had a correspondence with Lillian Ross who asked him why he did not do a piece for *The New Yorker*. 'Because they would not let me use the words "shit,"' he had written back. Miss Ross suggested that all liberty was his if only he understood where liberty resided. True liberty, Mailer had responded, consisted of his right to say shit in *The New Yorker*. (36)

Mailer's insistency to curse in print relates to his remark on obscenity: he feels that obscenity is essential to the American character. He also notes that obscenity is a true manifestation of anarchy: the fact that *Liberation* would not print his piece in 1959 because it contained the word "cunt" is rather comic in its context. Mailer observes that "these editorial anarchists were decorous; they were ready to overthrow society and replace it with a communion of pacifistic men free of all laws, but they were not ready to print cunt (115). Mailers states, thus, that words and actions do not always go hand in hand. He also comments on the change in times and attitudes: in the latter half of the sixties, "a Left Wing editor who would not print **** or **** was in danger of being beaten to death at Berkeley with stones on which was painted: Fuck!" (115). Mailer's comments reflect the changed attitudes of the sixties concerning the freedom of speech. In the earlier, more conventional and conformist days, printing a curse word was considered an abomination. In the sixties, however, the public arena was open for experiments and the counterculture strived to shake the boundaries of what was considered printable. In fact, as Mailer states, attitudes changed so much that a marginal publication was regarded as a failure if it did not experiment with the freedom of expression.

As previously discussed, Mailer criticizes the conventional newspaper journalism quite sternly. In doing so, he is also assessing himself as a writer to some degree. He goes deep into the subject when describing a scene where he has just read the news about his public speech at the Ambassador the night before: "The papers distorted one's actions, and that was painful enough, but they wrenched and garbled and twisted and broke one's words and sentences until a good author always sounded like an incoherent overcharged idiot in newsprint" (76). According to Mailer, journalists always

misrepresent what has actually been said and done. He is especially worried that good writers—such as himself—and their use of language are mangled by the press:

> So a great wall of total miscomprehension was built over the years between a writer, and the audience reached by a newspaper—which meant eventually most of America. So a particular sadness slipped sooner or later into every good writer—they were kept further removed from uneducated readers by the general horrors of journalistic mistranscription than by the difficulty of their work. (76)

He holds himself to be a good author and fears his public image and distorted citations is alienating his readers, especially uneducated ones. He considers himself to be a truth-teller and laments the fact that the American public is so strongly guided by "the general horrors of journalistic mistranscription." Mailer seems to resent the notion of ideas being chewed to bite-sized mouthfuls for the average American, because this means that the public is being told what to think. The image of thoughts being digested for the reader is strengthened by Mailer's statement that "Nuances were forever being munched like peanuts" (73). This is interesting from the vantage point of Mailer himself being a journalist as well as an author: he assesses the media from above, bypassing the fact that he is a reporter himself. Perhaps this sense of superiority stems from his perception of being something more than a journalist—a historian as well. After all, he divided *Armies of the Night* into two books: *History as a Novel* and *Novel as History*, which together form a means to provide such nuances and insight to the demonstration that were lost on the reporters of mass media.

Thompson deals with journalists and the press with the same depreciating, but humorous tone than he does with the middle class and representatives of the Establishment. When observing a bunch of drunken reporters at the motorcycle race he notes that covering the story in a conventional sense is not far from a charade, as the race track is impossible to even see from all the dust flying in the air and most of the reporters are forced to kill time in the beer tents and bars: "I turned away. It was too

horrible. We were, after all, the absolute cream of the national sporting press" (37). He has titled the chapter, in which these events occur as "Covering the Story … A Glimpse of the Press in Action … Ugliness & Failure" (35), which indicates how he feels about the whole scene. As he later watches a reporter from Life "chanting his wisdom" to the magazine's office by telephone, he decides to deviate from the original assignment: "The important thing is to cover this story on its own terms; leave the other stuff to *Life* and *Look*" (57). From these remarks, it is evident that Thompson has a mild detestation of the conventional newspaper and magazine journalism that stays in the safe zone and reports the same narratives over and over again. He decides to go on a crusade against conventional journalism, and tell the real story, which is to "cover the main story of our generation", as Duke states on his way to Vegas. As to emphasize his mission, Thompson often refers to Duke, i.e. himself, as a Doctor of Journalism. This is a phony title, as Thompson was not a doctor of anything. Or actually, he did have a degree of Doctor of Divinity from the Universal Life Church, a religious organization that freely ordains anyone as an ULC minister. So calling himself a doctor is also a satirical commentary on the different titles that people use to make themselves feel important.

## 3. Liberty: criticism of war

The Vietnam War (1959–1975) has often been identified as the main event that fired up the sixties and opened people's eyes to the flaws of their government. The war became "the engine of the sixties" that radicalized the decade, as Terry Anderson states in *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (135). According to Christian G. Appy and Alexander Bloom in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now* more than fifty-eight thousand Americans and at least two million Vietnamese were killed during the military intervention in 1961–73. The main reason behind the war was America's fear of the spreading of global communism. The Cold War had created a strong confrontation between China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, and potential communist countries on the one side, and Western democracies like the United States on the other. Appy and Bloom call this "the Cold War orthodoxy" that was fueled by "imperial arrogance," by which they mean the "arrogant confidence in American power" (50–51).

Uncovering common myths used to justify the Vietnam War, Appy and Bloom argue that communist paranoia and the fear of losing prestige as a superpower led to the war against North Vietnam, which Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon entered and prolonged under false pretences. For example, such reasons as unprovoked attacks by the North Vietnamese and providing well-intentioned military assistance to save Vietnam were fabricated by the power elite to rationalize U.S. involvement. Contrary to the popular belief that America got entangled in a bad situation despite its good intentions, Appy and Bloom argue, "[t]he United States did not inadvertently slip into a quagmire; it dug the pit, filled it with mud, and dove in headfirst" (57).

Anderson notes that the majority of the population supported the war and LBJ's foreign policy for the most part of the sixties. Anti-war protesters were a marginal—albeit loud and visible—phenomenon and they were often regarded as "beatniks, subversives, even Communists" by the mainstream (150). Towards the end of the decade and the early seventies the public opinion turned, however. According to Anderson, opinion polls revealed that the majority supported immediate withdrawal in 1971 (147). When people found out that the public portrayal of the situation had been distorted by officials, they felt betrayed by their policy makers. This "credibility gap," as all Anderson, Appy and Bloom call it, gradually escalated into massive civic unrest and anti-war demonstrations, such as the march to Pentagon in 1967, which Mailer describes in *Armies of the Night*. The deep distrust in the government and other military, political, and economical authorities is a theme that was already partly covered in chapter 2.1, but I continue the discussion here for further focus on ideas of freedom and patriotism. The war theme is most evident in Mailer's writing, but also Thompson makes a few interesting observations about Vietnam, especially how it was presented to the public through media. Wolfe, on his part, covers the topic by discussing the protest movement from the Pranksters' point of view.

## *3.1 The Dream in crisis: The Vietnam War*

For many, the Vietnam War meant a crisis of faith in the American Dream. As Americans started to piece together the big picture and understand the realities of the war, the noble quest of defending democracy and fighting for freedom turned into a brutal military expedition taking the lives of many civilians and innocent bystanders. It was felt that many had given their lives for nothing—all that destruction and suffering had happened because political leaders refused to admit that the intervention was a bad

idea in the first place. By the end of the war, Americans were divided over the issue, and a considerable part of the nation felt disappointed and betrayed by their leaders. Appy and Bloom cite Gloria Emerson's book *Winners and Losers*, in which a frustrated interviewee sums up the prevalent mood in the early seventies: "There's no way I'll buy the American dream again" (62).

Thompson does not address the war theme extensively, but does comment on the matter through news reports. He draws attention to the absurdity of the situation by inserting war coverage material from television and the press. Thompson highlights, for example, the contrast between the news footage and the Establishment's effort to explain their actions: "The TV news was about the Laos invasion—a series of horrifying disasters: explosions and twisted wreckage, men fleeing in terror, Pentagon generals babbling insane lies" (29). Here, the contradiction between the images of war and the attempts to explain them is clearly noticeable, as Thompson observes. In another example, Raoul Duke picks up a copy of the *Las Vegas Sun* and reads about the atrocities that the American troops had committed in Vietnam:

> WASHINGTON—Volunteer witnesses told an informal congressional panel yesterday that while serving as military interrogators they routinely used electrical telephone hookups and helicopter drops to torture and kill Vietnamese prisoners. One Army intelligence specialist said the pistol slaying of his Chinese interpreter was defended by a superior who said, "She was just a slope, anyway," meaning she was an Asiatic. (73)

The extract Thompson selected from the *Las Vegas Sun* shows that in 1971, the atrocities of the war and the truth about the U.S. military policies had begun to unfold to the general public. The secret operations in Cambodia and Laos were among the worst failures of the Unites States during the war. The Pentagon Papers, in which these operations and other misrepresentations of the war were revealed, were leaked to the

press at the time Thompson was writing his account. Thompson often used clips from newspapers and magazines to accompany his new journalist narratives[10]. On many occasions they seem to intensify the notion of reality being more absurd than anything he could come up with: there is no need to exaggerate anything when real events are so incredible—like in the news clipping above, which reveals that American troops did not hesitate killing anyone who was considered Asiatic.

Appy and Bloom note that the success of military operations in Vietnam were measured mainly by body count, to which any oriental-looking person, militant or civilian, was considered a suitable addition. The massive slaughter got a large amount of its steam from "a potent and widespread strain of racism that viewed the Vietnamese, at best, as children in need of tutoring, and, at worst, as savage, subhuman 'gooks'" (52). According to Appy and Bloom, arriving troops were taught by the men already positioned there that all Vietnamese were essentially untrustworthy, and they routinely referred to the native inhabitants as "slopes," "dinks," "zipperheads," and "gooks" (52). Thompson's passage conveys, thus, the racist element of the war, and how this dehumanizing approach was used to distance any humane and moral values concerning the annihilation of what was considered the enemy.

He continues with another newspaper clipping of the war to point out the perverse logic guiding the Establishment:

> I turned to the sports page and saw a small item about Muhammed Ali; his case was before the Supreme Court, the final appeal. He'd been sentenced to five years in prison for *refusing* to kill "slopes."

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[10] Newspaper extracts play a significant role in *Hell's Angels*, for example. Thompson uses a wide variety of sources to spice his works, ranging from smaller local newspapers to national magazines. The extracts function as historical landmarks on one hand, situating and authenticating the narrated events, but also as ironical commentary on mainstream reporting on the other, often pointing out the prejudices and biases of the counterculture-fearing straight society.

> "I ain't got nothin' against them Viet Congs," he said. Five years. (74, emphasis original)

Here, Thompson again points out the absurdity of the situation: a criminal could possibly face a shorter sentence than someone who refuses to serve in the military and kill enemy troops. Giving up one's freedom is the price to pay for publicly going against the government's policy. There are a couple more news extracts Thompson refers to in his account, which further emphasize the catastrophic nature of the war and its side-effects: one "grim notice" concerning the drug problems of the American army in Vietnam and a report on a confrontation between the police and anti-war demonstrators (73). Thompson's use of the news clippings function as elements in setting the tone for his vision of the gloomy era that followed the hopeful sixties. To him, the early seventies marked a time of disillusion and disappointment, especially politically, which he exemplifies through a metaphor concerning drug trends: "Uppers are no longer stylish. […] 'Consciousness Expansion' went out with LBJ … and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon" (202). Of course, it was not only Thompson that saw the early seventies as gloomy: according to Appy and Bloom, the public trust in the government went from 76 percent in 1964 all the way down to 37 percent after the war had ended (62).

Wolfe touches upon the theme of war by examining the Pranksters' attitudes towards anti-war protesters. Viewing outside institutions and actors as players in a game—which I discussed in chapter 2.1.1—applies even to their own sphere, the counterculture: just as the Pranksters saw their interaction with the police as a "cop game" and participating in working life as an "occupation game," they deem the Vietnam Day Committee a "charade" (193). Kesey, who has been asked to speak at the rally, and the Pranksters decide to play a prank, a "cosmic joke" on the protesters. They masquerade their bus as a military vehicle equipped with weapons made out of wood

and cardboard (194) and dress up in "crazed military costumes" (195). According to Phyllis Frus in *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative*, the Pranksters' attitude is a manifestation of their efforts to differentiate themselves from the mainstream: "to avoid co-optation by the 'straight' world, even serious political action has to be mocked and 'shucked'" (152). My interpretation of the Pranksters' tactics is a little different. I consider these pranks and games to be a part of the larger strategy the group utilized: they created their own little world, in which they simply invented their own rules and played by them. Their solution to societal and political problems—if ever intended as such—was to explore one's own mind and leave the "serious political action" to those who were ready to play the games of the Establishment:

> The next jar is Kesey's voice, it is so non-forensic. He comes on soft, in the Oregon drawl, like he's just having a conversation with 15,000 people: *You know, you're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching … That's what they do … They hold rallies and they march … They've been having war for ten thousand years and you're not gonna stop it this way … Ten thousand years, and this is the game they play to do it … holding rallies and having marches … and that's the game you're playing … their game …* (198, emphases original)

The word *forensic* connotes the manner of speaking to an audience in a structured and calculated way, in an official manner. Wolfe describes the other speakers at the rally as being forensic, one speaker's tone and gestures he even compares to those of Mussolini, the fascist dictator. Kesey, on the other hand, plays the harmonica and talks about the anti-war protesting as playing the game of the instances they are protesting against. As the final remark, Kesey states: "*There's only one thing to do … there's only one thing's gonna do any good at all … And that's everybody just look at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say … Fuck it …*" (200). He is making fun of the whole concept of the demonstration, and his solution to the problem is to just walk away and not care. Wolfe observes that the prank is too much for the crowd: "It's the only thing the martial spirit can't stand—a put-on, a prank, a shuck, a goose in the anus" (199). Using the phrase "martial" to

characterize the mentality of the protesters, Wolfe highlights the parallel between the protesters and soldiers. These observations about the similarities of the opposing sides comes down to the idea of games: Wolfe surely was not against the idea of protesting, but the short-sightedness of the execution of it through various organizations clearly bothered him: "The main trouble with the Vietnam Day Committee was that they couldn't see beyond the marvelous political whoopee they had cooked up" (192).

According to Frus, contrasting the anti-war protesters and the Left with fascism and anarchism allows Wolfe to make his own "polarities between aesthetics and politics":

> This style cobbles together an antiestablishment stance—in the Prankster view the "establishment" includes not only the war machine but the antiwar position, which has been deauthenticated by being institutionalized and naturalized—by taking apart conventional codes (military insignia and paraphernalia) and reassembling them to signify their opposite, or perhaps merely to render them meaningless by parodying their style. (153)

This part of Frus' analysis, I think, is more to the point: the countercultural spirit is manifested through carnivalizing the institutions that were established to carry out political protest. And, as Frus states, the Pranksters considered almost everyone but themselves as a part of the Establishment. To them, the idea of making a difference through organizing in a conventional manner in order to resist the authority was ultimately ridiculous. Kesey's solution of just ignoring the on-going war in Vietnam did not obviously please the protesters, and his approach is undeniably very egocentric. The Pranksters had created their own little world, in which the answer to anything could be found by experimenting and searching the unconscious. Anderson makes an important point in *The Movement and the Sixties*, which sums up the path that the Pranksters chose. He quotes the lead singer of the psychedelic rock group Country Joe & the Fish: "You take drugs, you turn up the music very loud, you dance around, you build yourself a fantasy world where everything's beautiful" (247). The Pranksters tuned out the rest of

the world and concentrated on their own thing, played by their own rules, and turned everything into a prank or a spectacle. It obviously did not stop the war, but neither did the protesting, at least in their opinion.

Mailer discusses the war theme through the contending ideologies in America and explores the moral stances of those who were for the war and those who were against it:

> All the healthy Marines, state troopers, professional athletes, movie stars, rednecks, sensuous life-loving Mafia, cops, mill workers, city officials, nice healthy-looking easy-grafting politicians full of the light (from marijuana?) in their eye of a life they enjoy—yes, they would be for the war in Vietnam. Arrayed against the as hard-core troops: an elite! the Freud-ridden embers of Marxism, good old American anxiety strata—the urban middle-class with their proliferated monumental adenoidal resentments, their secret slavish love for the oncoming hegemony of the computer and the suburb, yes, they and their children, by the sheer ironies, the sheer ineptitude, the *kinks* of history, were now being compressed into more and more militant stands, their resistance to the war some hopeless melange, somehow firmed, of Pacifism and closet Communism. And their children—on a freak-out from the suburbs to a love-in on the Pentagon wall.
>
> [---] Yes, these were the troops: middle-class cancer-pushers and drug-gutted flower children. (44–45, emphasis original)

Mailer describes here the different social and professional groups that he thinks would be in support of the war as people who are content with their lives, whether the good things in life had come by hard work or fiddling, emphasized by the phrases "healthy", "life-loving", and "easy-grafting." On this side he groups the working class, rednecks, criminals, army officials, and other members of the Establishment—but also actors and athletes. On the other side, Mailer situates the urban middle class, particularly the leftists and communists, and the new generation. Mailer's antipathy towards the liberal elite, which was discussed in the beginning of 2.1.1, is evident again in this passage. By calling the older generation of protesters a technology-loving "hopeless melange" that is driven by communism, he implies that they are stuck on past ideas and methods of protest. Furthermore, by portraying the younger generation as "drug-gutted flower children", Mailer implies that the protest movement is fragmented into a group of older

moderates and a group of children on "a freak-out". The irony that Mailer refers to here, is in the fact that the impotency of the older generation of pacifists has forced their children to assume a more militant approach.

Mailer identifies thus the urban middle class as the central constellation opposing the war in addition to the younger generation of countercultural activists. He attributes this to the fact that "it is the urban middle class in America who always feel most uprooted, most alienated from America itself, and so instinctively most critical of America" (270). Mailer describes the split in the nation as the divide between the "middle class condemnation" and the "working class affirmation" of the war (270). The working class, according to Mailer is "loyal to friends, not ideas" (270). Mailer describes the situation and the mentalities of the opposing forces through their different modes of seeing the world: to the urban middle class, everything is complicated and must be dealt on an intellectual level, to the working class, and especially the small-town minds, everything was simpler, and that was the reason they were for the war: "Vietnam was the secret hope of a bigger war, and that bigger war might yet clear the air of races, faces, in fact—technologies—all that alienation they could not try to comprehend". (165). To Mailer, the thought that "the true war party of America was in all the small towns" (165) is a frightening, as a very large part of the nation is built on small towns; the peace-loving middle class resided mostly on both coasts of America. Just as Thompson noticed a clear geo-sociological divide as he described the marginal and the mainstream, Mailer sees two distinct groups in terms of attitudes towards the war.

After having established the contending ideological forces at play in terms of the war, Mailer gives an array of personal reasons for opposing the war in the chapter "Why are we in Vietnam?" According to Mailer, the ideological forces behind the war were

formed, when a "consensus of the most powerful middle-aged and elderly Wasps in America—statesmen, corporation executives, generals, admirals, newspaper editors, and legislators—had pledged an intellectual troth: they had sworn with a faith worthy of medieval knights that Communism was the deadly foe of Christian culture" (193). In Mailer's view, the war was brought on by the Cold War mentality and a fear that the values that America rests upon would perish. Mailer's interpretation portrays the military-industrial power elite almost as a board of directors that had a meeting in which they decided that a war must be waged in order to preserve the valuable brand of America. This implies that the country is run like a corporation, which corresponds well to Mailer's idea of America as "corporation land." Using the phrases like "troth" and "medieval knights," on the other hand, connote a secret society of powerful old men, which I think is also a legitimate visualization of the Establishment. These notions again contradict the promise of participatory democracy: if a country could be exclusively ruled by a secret society or a board of directors—an elite, in any case—what was left for Americans to claim of their country that was supposed to be built by the people and for the people?

Mailer condemns the war also because American military operations "burned and bombed a large numbers of women and children," "relocated populations," "took some of the bravest young men of a nation and sent them into combat with outrageous superiority and outrageous arguments," and "required an inability to reason as the price of retaining one's patriotism." Mailer's reasons are ultimately very practical, as he considers the disastrous effects on both nations. To destroy a whole country by imposing superior military force, only because a league of Wasps "had whispered to each other that the next war was going to be Christianity versus Communism" (197), is to Mailer simply incomprehensible. He would rather adopt a view verging on

isolationism: "Asia was best left to the Asians" (199), because "the only force which could ever defeat Communism, was Communism itself" (199). This suggests that Mailer does not think of communism as a threat to America, but as a system that will ultimately destroy itself—consequently, the war in Vietnam is unnecessary. To the modern reader, the idea of communism as an eventually self-destructing ideology is axiomatic, but it must be remembered that the late sixties had not yet seen the collapse of the Soviet Union, the slowly developing impoverishment of Cuba, and the accelerating capitalization of China.

## *3.2 Patriotic sentiments*

Despite the fact that Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe are often very critical of their country and its politics, there are several passages that reveal that they have not given up on America completely. They still have faith their country and lament that it's spirit has been crushed by either the war (Mailer), drugs (Wolfe), or the reactionary political mindset (Thompson). Since the patriotic undertones relating to the Vietnam War are most evident in Mailer's writing, I discuss only his work in this subchapter. I explore Thompson's and Wolfe's considerations on the matter in the next, and final analytical chapter.

As Mailer is speaking to the audience at the Ambassador, he comes to consider his relationship with America through the shameless exploitation of free speech. He describes his love of America in terms of participatory democracy, the ideal that the Establishment keeps trampling upon:

> There was no villainy in obscenity for him, just—paradoxically, characteristically—his love for America: he had first come to love America when he served in the U.S. Army, not the America of course of the flag, the patriotic unendurable fix of the television programs and the newspapers, no, long before he was ever aware of the institutional oleo of the most suffocating American ideas he had come to love what editorial writers were fond of calling the democratic principle with its faith in the

> common man. [---] Mailer never felt more like an American than when he was naturally obscene. (57–58)

Mailer's love for his country is in the "democratic principle:" the rights of the common man to participate in the affairs of his nation. Most efficiently, the common man could express his concerns by being obscene, because in Mailer's view, obscenity and humor are what saves the common man (58). There is a hint of anarchy in Mailer's patriotism: obscenity and humor have always been the means to resist authority, they are weapons everyone can afford regardless of class or social status. Mailer demonstrates how obscenity works at its best: "the American corporation executive, who was after all the foremost representative of Man in the world today, was perfectly capable of burning unseen women and children in the Vietnamese jungles, yet felt a large displeasure and fairly final disapproval at the generous use of obscenity in literature and in public" (59–60). Mailer comments thus on the power of cultural anarchy to expose hypocrisy. Supporters of the war, who claim to be patriots, will stand atrocity, especially if it takes place far away from then, but will take condemn obscenity, especially if it occurs close enough.

When Mailer is marching to the Pentagon, he comes to consider his patriotic sensations in metaphorical terms:

> [T]he sense of America divided on this day now liberated some undiscovered patriotism in Mailer so that he felt a sharp searing love for his country in this moment and on this day, crossing some divide in his own mind wider than the Potomac, a love so lacerated he felt as if a marriage were being torn and children lost. (125)

The use of the image of a torn apart family to describe the difficult relationship between a citizen and their warmongering country is a very powerful one: Mailer's love for America is "sharp," "searing," and "lacerated," which indicates that his patriotism has also painful undertones in contrast to his appreciation of American humor and obscenity. This figure of speech implies that his relationship with his country is very personal,

even intimate. It is a pleasant pain, however, since it reminds him how much he cares for his country. While Mailer is physically marching across the river, he feels like he is also crossing a divide in his mind as well as in a historical continuum: "he felt as if he stepped through some crossing in the reaches of space between this moment, the French Revolution, and the Civil War, as if the ghosts of the Union Dead accompanied them now to the Bastille" (125). This metaphorical remark connotes great moments in history, and more specifically moments, in which social and political turmoil have led to the formation of a new democratic politics, allowing citizens to have more leverage in how they are governed. Mailer draws an analogy between the Bastille, which was considered to be the manifestation of the tyrannical monarchy the French revolutionaries wanted to overthrow, and the Pentagon, which Mailer calls the "five-sided eye of a subtle oppression." Furthermore, the fact that they are accompanied by "the ghosts of Union Dead" to siege the embodiment of oppression suggests victory. This is a very elevated moment for Mailer and perhaps the most patriotic sentiment he expresses during the course of events. He feels as though he is entering American history right there and then as he is marching in the ranks of an army of citizens, entering a symbolic war, participating as the common man, and making democracy happen—this is Mailer's America.

# 4. The pursuit of happiness: In search of the Dream

It has now been established in the previous chapters that the new journalists and the countercultural activists found much to be improved in the American society of the sixties. Their harsh criticism of the Establishment, the American way of life, and the war in Vietnam beg the inevitable question: what do they offer instead? In this chapter I examine how Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe discuss the visions of a better America that emerged in the countercultural turmoil of the sixties. I also examine how the hopeful visions of a new dream did not always meet reality and turned, in some cases, into a nightmare. Through penetrating the imagination of the sixties generation—their ideals, aspirations, fallacies, and fears—the new journalists traced an important phase in American thought and culture: the relocation of the American Dream.

## *4.1 The vision of a better America*

The window of opportunity for an alternative vision of life opened with the emergence of the activists and the hippies, as I have already established in the previous chapters. A prominent factor in conceptualizing the new American Dream was drugs, which I will now examine in further detail. According to Jay Stevens in *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream*, psychologists had been experimenting with psychedelic compounds from the forties. In the fifties and early sixties psychedelic and behavior modifying drugs started to get more publicity and soon became an issue of public debate. A Harvard psychologist, Timothy Leary, was one of the key figures in the project of expanding the American mind, so to speak. His vision of a better America entailed a society where everyone—from inmates to the members of the Supreme Court—would expand their consciousness and enhance their spiritual growth through

psychedelic drugs. Leary was one of the more extreme advocates of the psychedelic experience, while others, such as Albert Hofmann (who was the first to synthesize and discover the psychedelic effects of LSD) and Humphrey Osmond, favored a more scientific and controlled approach. From this initial scientific phase, psychedelic experimenting and LSD evolved to what Stevens calls the second and third phases, namely, the religious experience and a cultural revolt (390). This last phase is the one I am interested in: how a drug gave such impetus to a whole movement.

The theme of the psychedelic vision, or exploring the world through mind-altering substances to put it more broadly, is most prominent in Wolfe's work, but it is an important topic also in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Wolfe shows Ken Kesey as a psychedelic prophet, much like Leary, and the Pranksters' experiments and journey through America function as a miniature model of the sixties psychedelic experience. Thompson, on his part, explores the psychedelic vision on a personal level, but also as a cultural phenomenon that has just passed. Mailer discusses the theme through observations of the sixties generation and its search of spirituality and mystery, all the while embracing technological progress. All three writers offer their interpretation of the countercultural quest for a better America, but also acknowledge the limitations and drawbacks of this vision. I will explore these darker aspects of the dream in the next, and final, subchapter of this study.

The stepping stone for the new dream was the revolt against the old dream, which is to say, the American Dream of the fifties. Wolfe explores the ideas considered to underlie the dream of the 1950s in contrast to the ideas that emerged in the following decade through Kesey's character. Before he got involved with the psychedelic scene, Kesey was an "All-American Boy": he was voted most likely to succeed at high school, and he was into sports, fraternities and acting in college (36). Wolfe describes the

drastic shift between the two decades by reflecting on the cultural atmosphere of Kesey's childhood and that of his youth:

> The incredible postwar American electro-pastel surge into the suburbs!—it was sweeping the Valley, with superhighways, dreamboat cars, shopping centers, soaring thirty-foot Federal Sign & Signal Company electric supersculptures—Eight New Plexiglas Display Features!—a surge of freedom and mobility, of cars and the money to pay for them and the time to enjoy them and a home where you can laze in a rich pool of pale wall-to-wall or roar through the technological wonderworld in motor launches and […] private planes (38)

Wolfe's choice of words in this passage reflects the rapidness of America's postwar development: the change is *surging*, *sweeping*, *soaring*, and *roaring*. Due to these giant leaps in development America had become a "technological wonderworld" by the beginning of the 1960s. Wolfe's excessive style imitates the amazement with which Americans must have welcomed these innovations. One might think that the economic growth leading up to the late fifties, and in its current, the increase of affluence and leisure, would have produced a generation of content, conformist youths that would meet the great corporate machine, move into the suburbs, and raise nuclear families with good grace. For some, sure enough, this seemed a perfectly reasonable future, but for others, something felt profoundly wrong with the Establishment-controlled, predestined careers laid out for them. The traditional notion of the American Dream was about to be rivaled by a new one.

The sixties generation that grew up in the Cold War era seemed to have a longing for something magical in a world stripped of all mysticism in the name of technological efficiency and rationality. According to Jay Stevens, this manifested in three trends during the fifties: the popularity of comic books featuring nonconformist "surreal superheroes", the emergence of rock music as "a kinetic joy that bypassed the rational mind", and finally, the success of rebellious role models—played for instance by James Dean and Marlon Brando—who turned their backs on mainstream society

(145–148). Stevens considers these three factors to be crucial to the sociology of the movement that arose from this particular generation. The longing for mythical figures is also picked up by Wolfe as he continues to trace the shift from the fifties to the sixties, drawing a line between the experiences of the new generation and their parents:

> One's parents remembered the sloughing common order, War & Depression—but Superkids knew only the emotional surge of the great payoff, when nothing was common any longer—The Life! A glorious place, a glorious age, I tell you! A very Neon Renaissance—And the myths that actually touched you at that time—not Hercules, Orpheus, Ulysses, and Aeneas—but Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, The Human Torch, The Sub-Mariner, Captain America, Plastic Man, The Flash. (40)

Wolfe notes that the mythic figures that appealed to American youths at the time were totally new—as was the youth culture itself. Not classical heroes of the past, but new fantastic "surreal superheroes" that dealt with problems closer to the mind of an American teenager. Never before had there been a cultural space for young people to express themselves in, like there was in post-war America. The United States was the birth place of youth culture, and movement were an essential part of it. Wolfe describes the new generation growing up in the late 1940s and early 1950s as "the first wave of the most extraordinary kids in the history of the world [---] very Superkids! (39–40). The youth culture that had emerged in the fifties really bloomed the following decade, as the baby boom generation reached the teens: there were over 45 million youths turning 18 in the United States during 1960–1972[11]. This demographical detail is important in understanding the factors enabling such a massive movement and the dissemination of youth culture.

[11] According to Anderson in *The Movement and the Sixties*, the baby boom after World War II resulted in the largest generation in the United States' history: 70 million. Anderson states that the "sixties generation" changed the middle-aged America of the fifties suddenly into a young nation (89–90).

The superhero cult is relevant especially to the story of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, as it was their mission to turn life into art and follow in the footsteps of "honest American superheroes" (40). Kesey is constantly referred to as some popular superhero of the times, such as Captain Marvel or Captain America. Wolfe also refers to other Pranksters as superheroes or mythical beings every once in a while; one resembles Prince Valiant and another The Spirit. Wolfe refers to the Prankster mission as a journey to "Edge city" or "the current fantasy," and the atmosphere of the Prankster experience, and especially Kesey's charismatic influence, as the "mysto steam." These motifs pop up throughout the story, and they work to shed light on the Prankster endeavor, which embodied the hippie urge to live in the present and go with the flow. Wolfe makes an interesting side remark about how some of the LSD was packaged: "The most famous, among the heads, were the 'Owsley blues'–with a picture of Batman on them, 500 micrograms worth of Superhero inside your skull" (189). The superhero mythology was everywhere.

The games that the Pranksters play are a recurring motif in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and Wolfe uses them to explore aspects of their superhero quest. As previously discussed in chapter 2.1, the Pranksters saw the Establishment-controlled mainstream society as different games, such as the "justice game" and "the cop game." The group also initiated games of their own, which Wolfe often refers to as "movies." The Pranksters lived in their own fantasy world, in which they had created their own superhero movie, complete with super hero names, such as "Swashbuckler" and "Speed Limit" (74). As Wolfe notes: "They were all now characters in their own movies or the Big Movie" (74). The Prankster's superhero quest was ultimately an attempt to take control of their own lives and turn the tables on the Establishment: in the conformist fifties, people were forced to play games they could not control, but the counterculture

that emerged in the following decade inspired a counterstrike. The Pranksters, along with other experimental groups, created then games of their own, and pulled pranks on the Establishment. Their countercultural vision was, thus, not only to embark upon a mythic journey to the unknown "Edge city" through psychedelic drugs, but also to strip the Establishment of at least some of its power. And for a while they became the superheroes of their own universe.

Mailer describes the sixties youth movement as a platform of different, even paradoxical ideas. He has a lengthy discussion about the new generation and its beliefs in the chapter titled "The Next Step":

> A generation of the American young had come along different from five previous generations of the middle class. The new generation believed in technology more than any before it, but the generation also believed in LSD, in witches, in tribal knowledge, in orgy, and revolution. [...] Their radicalism was in their hate for authority—the authority was the manifest of evil to this generation. It was the authority who had covered the land with those suburbs where they stifled as children while watching the adventures of the West in the movies, while looking at the guardians of dull genial celebrity on television; they had had their minds jabbed and poked and twitched and probed and finally galvanized into to surrealistic modes of response by commercials cutting into dramatic narratives. (98)

In this passage, Mailer demonstrates how living in the suburbs might have been an American Dream in the fifties, but turned into a nightmare in the following decade—at least for the hippie generation. The distinction between this new generation and the previous ones is emphasized in the first sentence: the belief in technology, drugs, mysticism, free love, and rebellion. According to Jay Stevens, Leary's vision about the use of psychedelics entailed reaching another level of consciousness; a kind of enlightened state of being that resembled a religious experience. But the means to this religious experience was LSD, which was the product of the newest scientific This idea is interesting especially from the vantage point of Mailer's views on the clash between science and religion that afflicted especially middle-aged Americans. The modern way of life relies heavily on the notion of moving forward, which in turn relies heavily on

the notion of scientific progress. Religion and spirituality, although prominent aspects of the American Dream, belong outside the realm of reason, no-nonsense and rationality. Thus, the idea of expanding the mind and breaking free from the limitations of consciousness that has integrated society's norms, values and expectations, and exploring the unconscious, seemed for many mainstream Americans an attack on middle-class morality. A psychic revolution was in progress, and Mailer expresses a hope, that with this new generation, "politics had again become mysterious" (97).

The new generation, in its hate against the authority and its yearning for revolution, was a central ingredient of Mailer's vision of a better America. He was hoping to see an intellectual revolution take place in the March on the Pentagon, and this could only happen if the new ideologists were in the frontline. Mailer sees the new vision arising from "incalculable acts of revolution" as opposed to the mild performances of organized dissent that the middle-class political organizations could provide. Mailer's problem with these "mediocre middle-class middle-aged masses of the Left" was that they had internalized the Establishment mentality, and "they could not conceive of a revolution without hospitals, lawyers, mass meetings, and leaflets to pass out at the polls" (107). Mailer's hope was thus in the new generation that had faith in mystery and an appetite for adventure. They were, according to Mailer, "coming upon the opening intimations of a new style of revolution—revolution by theater and without a script" (235). On another, more personal level, Mailer's vision of the intellectual revolution and symbolic war was to tell the story of the demonstration. His ruminative and penetrating analysis of the event functions as an anarchistic counterblast to the official reports of the mass demonstration. His personal quest was, thus, to distribute his version of the truth and the message of these seeds of revolution to contemporary and future fellow Americans.

Thompson's vision—or version—of the new dream is also radically different from the fifties ideal, but also from the sixties ideal. According to Marcus Boon in *The Road of Excess: a History of Writers on Drugs*, Thompson's idea of personal success is based on living in an alternate reality: "Dealing or taking drugs, as Hunter Thompson most famously claimed, is another version of the American dream" (213). Boon also states that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* "takes the Horatio Alger vision of the American Dream as the mythological basis for a psychedelic rampage through Las Vegas. [---] The neon-saturated night of Las Vegas is just as much hallucination, a myth, a product of the imagination, as any vision triggered by LSD" (268). Thompson's vision of the new dream is a modern Horatio Alger, a new version of the self-made man, whose rite of passage was to survive in the "neon-saturated night of Las Vegas." Thompson's vision echoes in some respects that of Wolfe's (or perhaps I should call it the Prankster's vision, since Wolfe was only the mediator of it), as it draws much of its inspiration from characters of the American mythology and popular lore.

Thompson often refers to the sixties as an era of love, hope, and potential, but the beginning of the following decade is already characterized by Nixon, the Manson murders and the survival of the fittest. In the early seventies there seems to have been a shift from communality to a more individual and self-indulging, even narcissistic culture. Christopher Lasch has examined this shift in his 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, in which he argues that the American myth of the self-made man had changed dramatically in the postmodern era. Lasch writes:

> The self-made man, archetypical embodiment of the American dream, owed his advancement to habits of industry, sobriety, moderation, self-discipline, and avoidance of debt. He lived for the future, shunning self-indulgence in favor of patient, painstaking accumulation; [---] In an age of diminishing expectations, the Protestant virtues no longer excite enthusiasm. Inflation erodes investments and savings. Advertising undermines the horror of indebtedness, exhorting the consumer to buy

> now and pay later. As the future becomes menacing and uncertain, only fools put off until tomorrow the fun they can have today. (53)

Lasch goes on to define what has replaced the myth of the past: the main goal of self-improvement has become self-preservation, and to survive a man must use his wits and know the ways of the underworld (53). Lasch argues that "the happy hooker stands in place of Horatio Alger as the prototype of personal success" (53). He considers this shift a long-term development brought on by structural changes in society, such as "the shifting emphasis from capitalist production to consumption," "the growth of large organizations and bureaucracies," and "the increasingly dangerous and warlike conditions of social life" (63). Against this description, Thompson's modern Horatio Alger is the opposite of the traditional self-made man; he resembles much more the self-indulging, desire-driven "happy hooker" in constant pursuit of pleasure that Lasch has laid out.

Thompson's Alger is a survivor character in the "age of diminishing expectations": "Free enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism" (12, emphasis original). He sets out on a quest, which maps the survival methods of the modern self-made man. The first step, as Lasch points out, is to assume the carpe diem attitude: "Do it *now*", not tomorrow, because by then the American Dream might have already moved on. The second step is to have total confidence, or at least the impression of it, while executing the mission. Raoul Duke convinces himself he can pull off infiltrating the Drugs and Narcotics conference, if he just remembers the lessons of the Horatio Alger myth: "me and a thousand pigs. Why not? Move confidently into their midst. Register at the Flamingo and have the White Caddy sent over at once. Do it right; remember Horatio Alger…." (95). This second lesson is an important one, as Thompson explores in great detail all the things you can get away with as long as it seems like you know what you

are doing. He suggests that nearly anything is possible as long as you have an explanation. The other alternative is to go to such proportions of excess that nobody will believe you even if you tell them the truth. These survival methods apply only for Las Vegas though, keeping in mind that its "mentality […] is so grossly atavistic that a really massive crime often slips unrecognized" (173).

Duke, the modern Alger, keeps constantly testing how far he can take this act and how much he can get away with without being caught. He keeps gambling with his destiny—which is a very appropriate metaphor for the Las Vegas setting—in order to see if there is anything too bizarre for this place and era. For example, when a maid walks unexpectedly in their heinous mess of a hotel room full of drugs, Gonzo and Duke salvage the situation by convincing the maid they are undercover cops on a secret mission (181–185). They even recruit her to be a spy for them at the hotel. In another instance, Duke returns the horribly mistreated Cadillac to the rental agency, explaining that it was attacked by a bunch of crazy junkies—which happens to be the very truth, only the gang of junkies was actually a pair: Gonzo and Duke. Duke wonders if there will be consequences: "There was no way to explain the massive damage. It was finished, a wreck, totaled out." But then again, who would suspect anything: he had parked the car in the VIP lot and was covered against all damages (196–197). Yet again the modern Horatio Alger walks away, confident and triumphant.

Thompson's modern hero has now completed his rite of passage: "I took another big hit off the amyl, and by the time I got to the bar my heart was full of joy. I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger ... a Man on the Move, and just sick enough to be totally confident" (204). Here, his journey is complete: the author has found an alternative, even a bit absurd American Dream featuring as its protagonist a modern, beastly, seventies Horatio Alger, a man of his own destiny. The modern hero, according

to Thompson, is a mobile semi-savage, who does not conform to society's conventions—except to shamelessly exploit them—and lives life at full speed. One can achieve personal success by pushing the envelope as far as it goes and by exploiting the absurdness of modern life, but it is also a short term success, an ironical statement proving one has to become a beast to survive. As Jeremy Klinkowitz notes in *American 1960s: Imaginative Acts in a Decade of Change*, "Hunter Thompson cast himself as a guerilla fighter inside the bastions of state capitalism, living within the enemy's stronghold and actually prospering by his improvisation with his own rules, but undermining them all the same" (74). On the other hand, being on an endless survival trip induces notions of the darker aspects of the new dream, such as paranoia, the fear of losing control, and self-destructive elements. These I discuss in the next chapter.

The appeal of mythical elements, figures, and superheroes that characterize each of the new visions of the dream can on some level be attributed to the unconscious. The rebellion of the unconscious, unexplained, and irrational emerged from the conformist and rigid ranks of the previous generation. According to Harold Schechter in "The Myth of the Eternal Child in Sixties America" (*The Popular Culture Reader*), the counterculture of the sixties was living out the myth of "the Eternal Child," i.e. the Jungian "puer aeternus" (85). Schechter argues that the eternal child became the dominant myth, because American society had become "militaristic, increasingly mechanized and technologized, which prizes competitiveness and masculine aggression, defines sex roles very rigidly, and so forth" (93). During the sixties, then, "the counterculture was given shape and direction by unconscious forces operating on a collective scale and with a particular purpose because the unconscious, according to Jung, *is* purposive [---] forcing the culture at large into an awareness of those values which it had been denying to its detriment (93, emphasis original). In other words, the

flower children of the sixties emerged as a counterforce to "war, aggression, competition, death-machinery" (93); it was a "compensatory reaction" to salvage those values that seemed to have been destroyed among the mainstream culture.

Schechter argues that "the counterculture was a symptom of a cultural sickness, but it was also the living symbol of the cure, a push towards a new synthesis—an attempt ironically enough to set American society straight" (94). This revolt of the unconscious made visible the culture's need for something mysterious and mythical to balance the technocratic reality of the era. It was the only way to relocate the spontaneous and unpredictable dimensions of life, as even the counterculture had internalized the structures and hierarchies of the Establishment. Schechter's assessment of the counterculture's impact is rather upbeat, however, keeping in mind that change was hardly perceptible in the era that followed the countercultural movements of the sixties. It was a corrective attempt, perhaps, and important as such, but it did not trigger permanent change to the direction that society was heading. Schechter's interpretation also leaves out the problems that plagued the counterculture from inside: the "eternal child" never quite grew up to face reality, which ultimately made it a prisoner of its own playpen.

## *4.2 The dark side of the Dream*

The ideas that arose as an alternative to the traditional notion of the American Dream in the sixties did not actualize without problems. In fact, the hype around the new dream was very short-lived, as the downsides of the countercultural ideals started to become visible even before the decade ended. The experimentations with psychedelic drugs paved the way for other narcotics to enter the street market and gave rise to drug-related crime. Many who had dropped out of school and working life, perhaps even ran away

from home inspired by the hippie lifestyle, felt lost when the movement had passed. Free love was a liberating thought in theory, but in practice many were left with sexually transmitted diseases and unexpected pregnancies. According to Terry Anderson in *The Movement and the Sixties*, "the myth of innocence exploded" after violent outbursts were associated with the counterculture, such as the disorder at the Altamont rock festival and the Manson murders (281). There were problems inside the counterculture as well as outside it: when citizens were asked to name the most harmful groups in America in the late sixties, the response was communists, prostitutes, and hippies (283).

Thompson discusses the theme in relation to the beginning of the seventies, when the hangover from the sixties uprising was already noticeable and the times had clearly changed, as his portrayal of the modern Horatio Alger figure confirms. The beautiful, hopeful moment that emerged in the sixties had passed: "Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of" (66). Thompson reflects here the quick change in the mood and atmosphere that gradually occurred after the extraordinary "peak." He compares the countercultural movement to a wave that washed ashore, swept over the nation, and rolled back into the ocean:

> There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down the 101 to Los Altos or La Honda … You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning.…
>
> And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave….
>
> So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (67–68, emphases original)

Thompson's contemplation of the collective ethos of those hopeful days of the sixties sets the tone for his coming to terms with the collapse of the counterculture and the disappointment following it. Thompson digresses briefly from his gloomy meditations on the early seventies and considers the atmosphere that penetrated the decade with gentle nostalgia. He captures here the essence of what the countercultural movement wanted to achieve, which was the "inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil." The vision of overpowering the Establishment was, however, a utopia that had now been replaced by a dystopia. Thompson gives his diagnosis of what ultimately put an end to the hopeful visions: "The orgy of violence at Altamont merely *dramatized* the problem. The realities were already fixed; the illness was understood to be terminal, and the energies of The Movement were long since aggressively dissipated by the rush to self-preservation" (180, emphasis original). He presents the violence that occurred at the Altamont rock concert as merely a symptom of the "illness" that took the wind out of the sixties countercultural revolution. What transformed the "fantastic universal sense" of saving the world together into a "rush to self-preservation" was the realization that there was no-one to funnel all that energy and potential into some concrete form of action.

Thompson examines the directionless drug-oriented existence further in terms of its legacy. He argues that the psychedelic revolution fell apart, leaderless, and left behind a whole generation of "failed seekers:"

> Indeed. But what is sane? Especially here in "our own country"—in this doomstruck era of Nixon. We are all wired into a *survival* trip now. No more of the speed that fueled the Sixties. Uppers are going out of style. This was the fatal flaw of Tim Leary's trip. He crashed around America selling "consciousness expansion" without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people that took him too seriously. After West Point and the Priesthood, LSD must have seemed entirely logical to him ... but there is not much satisfaction in knowing that he blew it very badly for himself, because he took too many others down with him.
>
> Not that they didn't deserve it: No doubt they all Got What Was Coming To Them. All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and

> Understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours, too. What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped to create ... a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or at least some *force*—is tending that light at the end of the tunnel. (178–179, emphases original)

Assessing the phenomenon from a few years distance, Thompson states that the psychedelic movement came in some ways to a self-inflicted and rightful conclusion. Although being partial to mind-altering substances himself, Thompson condemns the idea of using them as a basis for a mass movement and as the single catalyst for social change. He sees Timothy Leary as false prophet, telling kids to "turn on, tune in, and drop out,"[12] who gladly embraced his role as a prophet of mind expansion, but did not really care what happened to all the young people that took his advice. Leary was a self-appointed guru and one of the most visible advocates of LSD, but as Thompson suggests, he was also an eccentric and a show-man, whose prophesies were best taken as entertainment. Thompson labels the sixties LSD generation as "permanent cripples" and "failed seekers," who thought they were on an authorized mission and that there was someone to lead the way. A considerable factor behind the breakdown of the movement was then the realization that there was no-one to take the responsibility of "tending that light at the end of the tunnel;" Leary, Kesey, and other so called spiritual leaders and gurus were ultimately more interested in their personal experimentations than guiding a whole movement.

Thompson also addresses the downsides of drug culture on a personal level. On an empirical note, he associates the constant consuming of drugs with "bad waves of paranoia, madness, fear and loathing" (85). The "dope fiend" experience is characterized by a fluctuating, even schizophrenic, sense of guilt and sin on the other hand, and a mad

[12] See Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties* (172).

sense of triumph, on the other. The fear of getting caught is ever-present, as is the fear of your drug-crazed friend stabbing you in the middle of the night. The paranoia, fear, and loathing all crystallize in the notion of a bad trip or a bummer, which was, according to Wolfe, a popular term for this unpleasant experience. When the trip was good, one could perhaps reach some sort of higher perceptions of reality, see deeper into things, but correspondingly, when the trip was bad, all of one's terrors and suppressed phobias rose to the surface. One could never be quite sure if the doors of perception[13] would open to beautiful visions of cosmic unity or a roomful of blood-thirsty reptiles. Emotionally, this was bound to be extremely straining, at least if one pursued the lifestyle for year after year. This is a notion also Thompson touches upon, as he wonders how much longer he can take the endless mental rollercoaster of highs and lows: "How many more nights and weird mornings can this terrible shit go on? How long can the body and the brain *tolerate* this doom-struck craziness?" (85, emphasis original). Not forever, obviously, because eventually "the darkness closes in" (85).

Wolfe discusses the downsides of the countercultural dream through the journey of the Pranksters, and in many ways it is like an allegory of the whole decade and the psychedelic movement. He even points it out on several occasions: "The bus trip was already becoming an allegory of life" (70) and "The Movie!—many allegories of life" (73). When it was time to face reality, however, the movie was not always fun. For instance, when the Pranksters went to Mexico to locate fugitive-Kesey and to avoid the psychedelic scene that had already gotten out of hand and become a mass movement in Haight-Ashbury, the reality they faced there was not what they had expected. The dream of a natural, free, primitive, and beautiful lifestyle was sought in Mexico—far

[13] *The Doors of Perception* (1954) is a book by Aldous Huxley. In it, he describes his experiences under the influence of mescaline, which is a psychedelic drug.

away from the "square hip" and "Boy Scout bohemians" (317) that were taking over in San Francisco—but the reality there had already turned into a similar scene than in America:

> It is as if the Rat things of all the Rat lands of America, all the drive-ins, mobile-home parks, Dairy Queens, superettes, Sunset Strips, auto-accessory stores, septic-tank developments, souvenir shops, snack bars, lay-away furniture stores, Daveniter living rooms, hot-plate hotels, bus-station paperback racks, luncheonette in-the-booth jukebox slots, raw-concrete service-station toilets with a head of urine in the bowl, Greyhound bus toilettes with paper towels and vomit hanging over the hockey-puckblack rim, Army-Navy stores with Bikini Kodpiece Briefs for men, Super giant racks with matching green twill shirts and balloon-bottom pants for honest toilers, $8,000 bungalows with plastic accordion-folding partitions and the baby asleep in there in a foldaway crib of plastic net, picnic tables with the benches built onto them used in the dining room, Jonni-Trot Bar-B-Q sandwiches with a carbonated fruit drink, aluminum slat swings, aluminum sidings, lukewarm coffee-'with' in a china mug with a pale brown pool in the saucer and a few ashes, a spade counter chef scraping a short-order grill with a chalky Kitchy-Brik and he won't take your order till he's through, a first-come-first-serve doctor's waiting room with modest charwomen with their dresses stuck on the seats of shiny vinyl chairs and they won't move to get loose for fear you'll look up their dress, plaid car coats from Sears and a canvas cap with a bill, synthetic dresses for waitresses looking like milky cellophane, rat cones, Rat sodas, Rat meat-salad sandwiches, Rat cheezies, ratburgers—its as if the Rat things in all the Rat lands of America had been looking for their country, their Cannan, their Is-ra-el, and they found it in Mexico. It has its own Rat aesthetic. It's hulking beautiful... (260)

The above mentioned "Rat lands" are a contrast to the "picture-book Mexico" the Pranksters expected to find. According to Rachel Adams in her essay "Hipsters and jipitecas: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of the Border," Wolfe's Rat lands speech describes the culture of disposable commodities (68). Adams discusses Wolfe's portrayal of Mexico as an obverse of "the consumerist language of American tourism": "The space across the border, even at its best, is little more than a vacation resort where voracious Westerners feed on its 'fabulous junk' and then return to life as usual" (68). Mexico might have appeared as a natural paradise in Jack Kerouac's beat classic *On the Road,* a book that probably inspired many in the counterculture, but it had become a wasteland—a Rat land—of modern consumer commodities in Wolfe's book. What is more, these commodities are symbols of the old dream, the American Dream of the fifties, when the post-war affluence with its affordable consumer products made the

dream available to the masses. The Pranksters had thus time-traveled to a strange place, the fifties America in Mexico, and this trip was too strange for even them.

Wolfe occasionally comments subtly on the fact that the Pranksters' vision resembles a house of cards. He does this mainly by foreshadowing. For example, when one of the newer Pranksters slowly but surely develops a mental disorder and finally goes "stark raving mad" (81) on their bus trip, the other Pranksters ignore the fact that the breakdown is a consequence of drug abuse: "That this or a couple of crackups in the experience of the Pranksters had anything to do with that goofy buffoon, Dope, was something that didn't cross the minds of the Pranksters at that point. *Craziness* was not an absolute" (82, emphasis original). Wolfe uses the phrase "goofy buffoon" to indicate that that the Pranksters saw—or chose to see—only the fun side of the psychedelic experience. Since they were already considered crazy by the mainstream world, they just let everyone "do their thing" without interfering too much in each other's experiences. They felt untouchable, as Wolfe notes in another foreshadowing comment: "The Pranksters felt more immune than ever. [---] but it's a momentary high, and the bus would be gone, and all the Fab foam in their heads would settle back down into their brain pans" (68). Wolfe's remark occurs in the very beginning of the Pranksters' journey sequence, and it becomes relevant towards the end of their trip, as the mystic journey turns into a bad movie. Although the Pranksters saw the law as just another rule in the Establishment's game, they could not escape the various drug-related charges against them. Time was up for the "Probation Generation," as Wolfe called it.

Not everyone, however, saw just the fun side of the experience. There is voice of dissent inside the Prankster community, which Wolfe utilizes to reveal the downsides of the free-flowing psychedelic lifestyle. Sandy Lehman-Haupt feels that he belongs to the group, but at the same time he feels like an outsider. He struggles at times with the idea

of Kesey as the chief and the "organizer." Sandy is the one that takes "unauthorized acid" and steals the Ampex—a "Four-hundred-dollar tape machine" and "Prankster salvation machine" (203) that he has brought into the community—away from the Pranksters, which Kesey has previously denied him from taking. He is thus defying the ideology of communal ownership and also pulling a prank on the Pranksters—perhaps as a final revenge before reverting to a normal life. Sandy is important also in another respect: he keeps re-evaluating whether he wants to be "on the bus," i.e. attuned to the psychedelic Prankster experience, or "off the bus," i.e. a part of mainstream society: according to Wolfe, he has a "subliminal urge to get off the bus, and yet be *on the bus*" (83, emphasis original). He resolves this emotional conflict by staying with the Pranksters, but occasionally diverting to normal life by, for example, going for a "square meal" at a "square American stake house" (83). This tendency earns him the Prankster name "Dismount." It is through Sandy that Wolfe also examines the paranoia that eventually seeped into the Prankster community. For instance, Sandy often suffers from severe attacks of paranoia, and constantly fears that the other Pranksters are going to pull a "Monstrous Prank" on him. Sandy's twinges of discomfort towards the Prankster ideology are a consistent motif through Wolfe's story. The motif functions, in my opinion, as a balancing element to the Prankster vision: by inserting passages of Sandy feeling paranoid, suffering from insomnia, needing aspects of the straight society, and questioning Kesey's authority, Wolfe shows that the psychedelic experience had its problems.

One central theme in the Prankster experience was the LSD-induced notion of cosmic unity and the group mind. Wolfe has a passage in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, in which he explores in an allegorical sense how this notion turns into a nightmare. It is discussed in a scene where the group goes to see a Beatles concert. Wolfe describes

the dynamic between the band and its teenage fans through the acid visions of the Pranksters: looking from above, the crowd has transformed into one massive "being," a "mass of pink arms […] like a single colonial animal with a thousand waving pink tentacles […] It dawns on Kesey: it is *one being*. They have all been transformed into one being" (183, emphasis original). The Beatles are described as an entity that governs that "colonial animal:" "*Control*—it is perfectly obvious—they have brought this whole mass of human beings to the point where they are one, out of their skulls, one psyche, and they have utter control over them—but they don't know what in the hell to do with it […] and they will lose it" (183, emphasis original). This is a clear reference to the psychedelic scene turning into a nightmare: Wolfe is foreshadowing the end of the sixties and the so called psychic revolution. Kesey, Timothy Leary, and all the other self-acclaimed mystic gurus and leaders have drawn a whole generation into their vision, their movie, but now do not know—or care—what to do with this power. Through this metaphor, Wolfe is stating that the loss of control is inevitable as there is no-one to lead the way, and the whole scene will soon disintegrate.

As predicted above, the crowd starts to get out of hand and Wolfe visualizes what happens after the band has lost their control: "CANCER […] the teeny freaks and the Beatles, are one creature, caught in a state of sheer poison mad cancer. The teeny freaks are the body. The Beatles are the creature's head. But the head has lost control of the body and the body rebels and goes amok and that is what cancer is" (184). Wolfe parallels the dynamic between the band and its audience with a disease. The once spectacular notion of cosmic unity has now turned into a horrifying image of mass hysteria—much like the psychedelic movement itself. What was once a harmonious gathering of beautiful people thinking as one mind became an uncontrollable "creature," growing into a mass movement and attracting problems with drugs, violence, and

general chaos. This is a metaphor for the sixties movement, especially the psychedelic scene, in which thousands of young people sought to be a part of something bigger and better, but were misguided by the "creature's head," referring to the likes of Kesey and Leary. Total anarchy and an uncontrollable freedom to experiment with consciousness, sexuality, and spirituality must have seemed like a dream come true for those who had grown up with the Cold War culture, conformist institutions and rigid social conventions, but anything in excess—even freedom—can be destructive. Once the rules were broken and borders crossed, after every fancy was fulfilled, what was left? In the end, the Pranksters, as well as many others in the psychedelic movement and other countercultural groupings discovered that the world had not stopped for them—it had moved on, progressed, and the Establishment, along with other elements of the straight society, was still there. Not untouched, but definitely not defeated either. It was time to merge into the mainstream again.

Mailer's meditations on the darker sides of the dream crystallize in his final metaphorical prophecy of what will happen after the demonstration. He would like to see Americans take interest in their country and their future, but fears that the nation will sink back into political and intellectual apathy after the "symbolic war," i.e. the demonstration:

> Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with a leprous skin. She is heavy with child—no one knows if legitimate—and languishes in dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin—it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. […] she will probably give birth, and to what?—the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild? Rush to the locks. God writhes in his bonds. Rush to the locks. Deliver us from our curse. For we must end on the road to that mystery where courage, death, and the dream of love promise of sleep. (300)

In this passage, Mailer urges Americans to carefully consider the state of the nation. He traces the transformation of America from a magnificent country that once belonged to

the people to a society with "leprous skin," which suggests that it is full of sickness. The country is contained by the invisible structures of the Establishment, but can be free again if people rush to the locks of that "dungeon." If people remain politically passive, they will be the midwives of a "fearsome totalitarianism," but if they claim their roles as members of a participatory democracy, the nation will be born again as "brave and tender, artful and wild." Mailer expresses his concerns very elaborately through this metaphor, and it brings forth the central themes of his book. His vision of a better America entails the restitution of participatory democracy, in which it would be the people instead of the Establishment that decides the nation's trajectory. Respectively, his nightmare is that the Establishment continues to thrive, as Americans sit paralyzed in front of their television sets and succumb to the hegemony of "technology land" and "corporation land." Mailer delivers his metaphor after having seen at the demonstration that there is potential in the new generation, but ultimately he could do nothing more than hope that the seeds of dissent would disperse through the whole country.

# 5. Conclusions

It is nearly an impossible task to summarize the significance of the sixties and its legacy, but one thing can be said for sure: the decade and its countercultural revolt proved that the concept of the American Dream is open to negotiation and re-evaluation. The possibility for change has, thus, become one popular interpretation of the era. According to Alexander Bloom in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*, we tend to see certain eras as mythologized visions (4). Unlike other decades, however, the sixties left several legacies and interpretations instead of a unified vision. Some of these images might even contradict one another, but still coexist in the popular imagination. This, I believe, is also true about the American Dream—for some, the sixties opened up new possibilities to pursue it, for others it was threatened by the counterculture, and yet for others, the decade brought no significant change to the ideals of the good life.

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the notion of the American Dream underwent a dramatic process of redefinition during the sixties. The dream that had come to equal material success and a well-balanced combination of work, family life, and leisure in post-war America was challenged by the rebellious visions of the counterculture. I have examined these visions of the new American Dream by discussing how they are represented by Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe. I found the most prominent themes and motifs in relation to relocating the American Dream to be similar in some respects, different in others. The main themes in *Armies of the Night* relate to the idea of regaining democracy and defeating the omnipotent Establishment. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the focus is on the symbols of the post-sixties era and the emergence of the modern Horatio Alger figure that relies on drugs as a survival method in this new, absurd reality. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the psychedelic journey

of the Pranksters is like an allegory for the whole decade and the "Probation Generation."

Each writer has a specific, metaphorical interpretation of the phenomenon they hold essential and characteristic to the countercultural experience and the relocation of the dream. Wolfe portrays the wildly expanding hippie movement as a headless monster in the Beatles concert scene, which is symbolic of the loss of control, if there ever was any to begin with. Thompson depicts the brief emergence of the countercultural vision of a better America as a wave that rolled back, leaving only a high-water mark to stare upon while struggling to survive in a "doom-struck" era. Mailer envisions America as a pregnant woman who will either give birth to "the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known" or "a new world brave and tender, artful and wild," depending on the willingness of Establishment-brainwashed Americans to take matters into their own hands.

These examinations of the ideas, hopes, and visions that flourished in the counterculture are important in understanding the ways in which the dream was conceptualized. Undoubtedly, the diversity of the new versions of the American Dream that emerged in the sixties was even greater than the selection presented here, but these three aspects form a pretty comprehensive platform for understanding the magnitude of the shift that the dream underwent in the popular imagination. New journalist works had a significant role in locating the American Dream in the cultural discussions concerning the direction that the American society was heading towards. They examine the same cultural phenomena sociologists and historians do, but deal with the issues with the kind of humor, irony and exaggeration that only art allows. The significance of these works is that they paint a picture of their time and situate their view of the American society in

the sixties in cultural history. Through them, it is possible to trace the migration of the American Dream in popular imagination.

It is fair to say, I think, that the new journalists did not just interpret these countercultural phenomena; their works are also political statements in themselves, culture in action, as was stated in the introduction. The visions of a better America that the three works portray—Wolfe and the psychedelic revolution, Mailer and the intellectual revolution, and Thompson and the revised version of the self-made man—tell us how people thought, acted, and felt during that specific time and place in history. The significance of these new journalist accounts is that they force us to remember what really happened, because events and phenomena are often reconstructed in popular mythology. The Vietnam War, for example, was molded from a sore defeat to a smoldering victory in the Reaganite political rhetoric of the eighties[14]. This rhetoric concretized as real actions: the loss of Vietnam had to be compensated for in the eighties by executing military interventions in Nicaragua and other communist countries. These evaluations keep on constructing our perceptions of current events and it is vital we have a multidimensional perception of what really went on—and this is precisely the material that can be found outside official and canonical histories in new journalist works, such as Mailer's account of the March on the Pentagon. It is by no means irrelevant how certain historical events are depicted.

The relevance of my study lies, thus, in its effort to review the new journalist accounts against their context, as important sources of cultural history. I hope my work will contribute to future endeavors of tracking down the movements of the American Dream in the popular imagination, and help, on its part, to understand the intellectual

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[14] See Appy and Bloom, 65

foundations of the dream, new journalism, and the countercultural aspirations in the sixties. Situating the works of Mailer, Thompson, and Wolfe in the line of social commentary and tracing the American Dream in the public imagination produces understanding of the way the dream is discussed today. The threat of mega-corporations, the faceless omnipotent Establishment, and political apathy, for example, are still public concerns now, more than forty years later. Also poverty, inequality, and racism have unfortunately prevailed in our societies. The American Dream continues to be discussed in popular culture, intellectual discussion, and political rhetoric, and it remains to be seen where the dream will shift next.

So, what to finally make of this relocation of the American Dream in the sixties? It would be unfair to state that the countercultural movement failed, because their visions of a better America did not actualize. For some and for a brief moment they did, for others they did not. The American Dream has never fully actualized in any era, and never fully will, because then it would not be a dream anymore. People always need ideals in order to strive for something better. The sixties was a time, when people were not afraid to set the bar higher than before; the problem was that some really expected the utopias to become reality. But to acknowledge that the American Dream is an abstraction and can never fully be realized, is not to say that it is irrelevant. Every culture needs its heroes, myths, and ideals in order to survive. As Madonna Marsden states in "The American Myth of Success: Visions and Revisions" (*The Popular Culture Reader*): "a culture's mythology is a mirror of its hopes and aspirations. Without a mythology, a nation loses its sense of historical continuity, forgets why it is operating, and ceases to function at all because it lacks understanding of why it came into being" (80). The notion of the American Dream is the central myth of America: it has not only shaped the nation's past, but it is also the guiding ideal of the nation's future.

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