

**Hunter S. Thompson, *Transmetropolitan*, and the Evolution from Author to  
Character**

**By**

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**A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature**

**Victoria University of Wellington**

**2014**

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank first and foremost my supervisor Nikki Hessel for her invaluable advice and support during the entire process of researching and writing this thesis.

My gratitude also to Hunter S. Thompson and Warren Ellis, for creating and developing such richly complex characters and worlds; I loved all of the time I spent immersed in their work.

## Abstract

This thesis examines American author Hunter S. Thompson, in the context of his own works – primarily *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Rum Diary*– as well as the representation of him as a character in the graphic text *Transmetropolitan* by Warren Ellis. The evolution of Thompson from author to character and the development of that character in his own works is examined, as well as how this development allowed for his character to be fully realised in a completely fictional world. In turn, the fully developed use of Thompson’s character is the starting point for my analysis of *Transmetropolitan* could potentially be read as a work of New Journalism, albeit a fictional one.

The first chapter examines how Thompson began writing himself as a character in his early fictional work *The Rum Diary*. Though largely overlooked by critics because of its long delayed publication and the focus on the more flashy and better known *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *The Rum Diary* is critical to Thompson’s development of himself as a character in his works in particular, and to his development as an author in general. Though *The Rum Diary* is ostensibly a purely fictional novel, this chapter examines how the character Paul Kemp is actually largely autobiographical, and how Kemp is an early version of the same character Thompson uses in his later nonfiction. I then analyse the development of that nonfiction version, Raoul Duke, in Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. As *The Rum Diary* is not actually purely fictional, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is not actually completely nonfictional. Thompson, as this chapter shows, did not believe in the divide between fact and fiction, and he uses the character he develops in Raoul Duke to write about himself while creatively embellishing the truth. I then look at how Thompson wrote himself so strongly into his character that he became inextricably viewed as actually being Raoul Duke, and how that character was in turn viewed and written about.

The second chapter examines the legacy of Thompson’s fully formed self-characterisation, as it is picked up by another author and written in the fully fictional context of the graphic novel series *Transmetropolitan*. I consider how *Transmetropolitan*’s main character Spider Jerusalem continues Thompson’s self-as-character through his characterisation, behaviour, and language. Furthermore I analyse

how, within the world of the series, Spider as a journalist continues Thompson's legacy as a writer.

The third and final chapter examines how Spider's characterisation as a continuation of Thompson is an important contextual factor for considering *Transmetropolitan* as a work of New Journalism. I consider the connection to Thompson, the content of Spider's articles, and the format in which the articles are depicted in the graphic novel.

## Introduction

Hunter Thompson was a prolific writer whose career as a journalist and an author spans over five decades, a multitude of newspapers and magazines, and over fifteen books, with collections of his articles and letters still being published posthumously. These works cover a vast array of subjects from politics, to drug use, to sports, to environmental concerns, to war correspondence, to personal fears and what the concept of mortality meant to him. He has written fiction, nonfiction, and many works that fall in-between and are neither strictly fiction nor strictly nonfiction. And yet despite the evolution that Thompson's writing has taken, and the different forms and styles he has written in, it is the style called "Gonzo", known as Thompson's own particular brand of New Journalism, that is the focal point of nearly all works about Thompson and criticism of his writing.

When used by others to describe Thompson's writing, Gonzo usually refers to the wildness, the uninhibitedness, and the urgency of his unique style of writing. It is even at times used to describe Thompson, rather than his style; for example, Bill Reynolds calls it Thompson's "excessive 'Gonzo' persona" (51). Jason Mosser notes that there are a variety of ways to apply Gonzo to Thompson and his writing, stating:

Seen from one perspective, Gonzo reflects Thompson's iconic, drug-slugging lifestyle, full of "fear and loathing" and "bad craziness." Gonzo is also a mode of perception in the sense that the deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol de-familiarizes reality, opening the door to paradoxically clearer perceptions, a twisted perspective evoked so perfectly by Steadman's grotesquely expressionistic caricatures. Gonzo is also a narrative technique, a form of subjective, participatory literary journalism that places the narrator in the center of the narrative while it spontaneously records a dark reality, often fabricated. Gonzo also describes Thompson's style, employing a verb-driven, "running" syntax, as well as digressions, metaphors, fragments, allusions, ellipses, abrupt transitions, and gaps, all of which model the narrator's feelings of desperation, degradation, and despair. (87-88)

Indeed criticism of Thompson seems to give a larger scope to the term "Gonzo" than Thompson did himself; as he states, "[i]t [Gonzo] was just a differentiation. Just sort of you know—a little fun, a little fear. I never expected it to last this long" (*Ancient Gonzo*

*Wisdom* 283)<sup>1</sup>. As William Stephenson notes of Thompson's adoption of the term and the subsequent application to his writing:

It allowed Thompson's quest for freedom to find expression not just in what he wrote, but in *how* he wrote it. He flouted the conventions of journalism and fiction and violated the rules of syntax in order not only to represent drugged consciousness, but also to subvert the premises of the state. (*Gonzo Republic* 17)<sup>2</sup>

Gonzo, as Thompson defines it, "is a style of 'reporting' based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this" (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106). It is how Thompson described his particular version of New Journalism, which was developed as a concept at much the same time as Gonzo. Indeed, as Thompson wrote that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was "a *failed experiment* in Gonzo Journalism", he also stated:

although it's not what I meant it to be, it's still so *complex* in its failure that I feel I can take the risk of defending it as a first, gimped effort in a direction that what Tom Wolfe calls "The New Journalism" has been flirting with for almost a decade. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106-108)

Gonzo journalism then is a type of New Journalism; however, not all New Journalism is Gonzo as it does not all live up to Thompson's ideals for the style.

Thompson's early works show flashes of the Gonzo style, but it was "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" where the label "Gonzo" was first used to describe it. According to Ralph Steadman, whose first job illustrating for Thompson was the Derby article:

a journalist friend from *The Boston Globe*, Bill Cardoso, wrote to him [Thompson] saying: 'Hey, man! That Derby piece was crazy!! It was pure GONZO!' And that was the very first time that Hunter, or I, had ever heard the word 'Gonzo'.

He picked it up immediately and made it his own ... (69)

Despite its serendipitous origin, Gonzo stuck and became inextricably associated with Thompson. The application of Gonzo to Thompson as a person seems incongruous with his goals for the term as a way of defining his writing, but is understandable when his Raoul Duke character from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is seen as being more or less an exact translation of Thompson into his writing, which he is most commonly

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* will be cited in parenthetical notations as AGW.

<sup>2</sup> All emphases in quoted material in this thesis is in the original, unless stated otherwise.



accepted to be. I illustrate in this thesis, however, that Duke is actually separate from Thompson, a character he based on himself and evolved over the course of his writing career, and who contains fictional elements. This character was not even created with Duke, but began long before with the character of Paul Kemp in the semiautobiographical novel *The Rum Diary*: a novel largely ignored by criticism possibly due to it being pre-Gonzo.

Not only is Thompson largely written about only in terms of his Gonzo journalism, but most commonly this analysis takes place in the context of discussing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Focussing the vast amount of criticism on only one text does not provide a well-rounded view of Thompson as a writer, and doesn't allow the framework necessary to understand the complexity of Thompson's relationship to Raoul Duke as his avatar in the text. Furthermore, criticism of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* usually examines it as a Gonzo and New Journalism text, despite the fact that it does not fit easily into the New Journalism canon or exactly into Thompson's ideal for Gonzo. As noted, Thompson himself called *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a "a failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism". As he explains:

My idea was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication -- without editing. That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera. The writing would be selective & necessarily interpretive -- but once the image was written, the words would be final; [...]

But this is a hard thing to do, and in the end I found myself imposing an essentially fictional framework on what began as a piece of straight/crazy journalism. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106)

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was not Gonzo journalism as Thompson imagined it to be, and he emphasises this clearly, stating "*Fear & Loathing* is not what I thought it would be" and "I failed at what I was trying to do. As true Gonzo Journalism, this doesn't work at all—and even if it did, I couldn't possibly admit it", describing it as "caught & finally crippled in that vain, academic limbo between 'journalism' & 'fiction'" (*The Great Shark Hunt* 108-109).

That criticism of Thompson focuses largely on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* then does not just give too narrow a picture of his overall career as a writer, but also does not give an accurate picture of Gonzo, as Thompson himself clearly does not consider it to be either successful Gonzo/New Journalism or fiction, but something in between. As I discuss in this thesis, examining *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* from

the space between fiction and nonfiction allows for a better understanding of how Thompson developed the character that he wrote in Raoul Duke from the way that he wrote himself as Paul Kemp in the more overtly fictional *The Rum Diary*. While Gonzo is certainly an important part of Thompson's oeuvre, it is not the entirety of his contribution to literature. To focus only on Gonzo is to ignore Thompson's many other important achievements as a writer. Not considering the entirety of his career fully is even detrimental to the understanding of his Gonzo works, as his style as a writer over the course of his career has grown and developed, which can only be seen when looking at the larger picture of his body of work.

This lack of diversity in the criticism about Thompson is why this thesis is important to the criticism of Thompson. In this thesis I examine Thompson's evolution from author to fully formed character in his texts, primarily by analysing the progression of that character from Thompson's early fictional work *The Rum Diary* to his most well known representation in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. By doing this, I both examine a severely under-analysed part of Thompson's body of work — *The Rum Diary* — and show a wider analysis of his development as a writer than focusing solely on his Gonzo style does.

I then consider the product of Thompson's fully formed character of himself by analysing how that character was continued by another author in the graphic novel *Transmetropolitan*. My analysis of the continuation of Thompson's character in the form of *Transmetropolitan* protagonist Spider Jerusalem explores how fully developed Thompson's self-as-character was. Even written by someone else in a completely fictional world, and in a format unused by Thompson (the graphic novel), Spider is still clearly recognizable as Thompson.

This also opens a critical space from which to analyse the methods that *Transmetropolitan* uses to portray journalism within the text in such a way that it becomes possible for the series to potentially be read as New Journalism despite being fully fictional. The graphic novel form is one that has been historically overlooked by serious criticism, much as New Journalism once was. And yet as my analysis of *Transmetropolitan* shows, it is a form that can push the boundaries of traditional ways of thinking about literature. *Transmetropolitan* takes the context of Spider Jerusalem as a continuation of Hunter Thompson as a Gonzo/New Journalist and rather than just have that be a characteristic of Spider, uses New Journalism as an integral part of the form and story of the series. William McKeen states of Gonzo journalism that

[o]ne of the characteristics of the style Hunter developed was his preoccupation with *getting the story*. In fact, *getting the story* became the story. His writing could be classified as metajournalism, journalism about the process of journalism. (*Outlaw Journalist* 73)

*Transmetropolitan* is a graphic novel containing fictional journalism about the process of journalism. As a work that is entirely fictional, to read it as New Journalism does cross the “reality boundary” idea that literary journalism needs to be grounded in content that is true to the world that we exist in (Sims 13-14). However this thesis will argue that *Transmetropolitan* connects to issues and concepts from our world to make the case for potentially reading it as fictional New Journalism despite the breaking of the reality boundary. Considering it as a possible New Journalism text breaks the rules of how we think of New Journalism, in much the same way that Thompson as a Gonzo journalist was an important part of changing how we thought of journalism. This thesis not only broadens the scope from which we read Thompson, but it also is an important step towards new ways of thinking about New Journalism.

## Chapter One: From Kemp to Duke – Two Versions of the Same Thompson

### Introduction:

While there is a great deal of biographical material written about Thompson, and many people who have written their own memoirs giving their perspective on him as a person, there is less critical work looking at his technique as a writer. What work there is focuses mostly on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and if not that then almost exclusively on the Gonzo journalism just before and just after it, namely “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*. Thompson’s earliest work, including his novel *The Rum Diary*, significant to his evolution as a writer as the first book where he mixed autobiography with fiction, is largely ignored. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is undoubtedly Thompson’s best-known work; William Stephenson, for instance, claims that Thompson begins building his persona and character from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* onward (*Gonzo Republic* 29). However, this claim disregards Paul Kemp, protagonist of *The Rum Diary* with whom Thompson began developing his character long before writing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Stephenson’s book *Gonzo Republic* is one of the lengthiest pieces of critical work on Thompson (at 171 pages including appendices) and even it focuses almost entirely on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the Gonzo persona and post-Gonzo writings, with the main mention of *The Rum Diary* being a summary of the plot of the book in an autobiographical context which is not in-depth. An entire issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* was devoted to Thompson in 2012, and it focuses on Thompson’s Gonzo character and the concept of Gonzo journalism in general.

Aside from these Thompson-specific works, he is most often mentioned in critical studies of literature as part of New Journalism; as in Tom Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* or John Hellmann’s *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*, which are both frequently cited in articles about Thompson but focus solely on the early Gonzo works: *Hell’s Angels* (not technically “Gonzo” but included in Wolfe’s book for its New Journalism qualities), “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. And while Thompson’s works are certainly an important aspect of the New Journalism canon, he was uneasy with being fitted into someone else’s concept; though he respected Wolfe as a writer, he was critical of New Journalism as a label. Of his inclusion in Wolfe’s *The New Journalism* Thompson wrote that it “didn’t tell me a hell of a lot except that I used to be a lot more coherent writer

than I seem to be now. Or maybe just hungrier. Or more vengeful” (*Fear and Loathing in America* 526)<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore he was frequently vocal about his misgivings about the label “New Journalism” as a whole such as when he wrote that “the whole concept of a ‘new journalism’ is bogus — unless we admit that honesty in a journalist is something new” (*FLA* 218). To only focus critical studies of his work on his texts that are seen as New Journalism, then, is to disregard Thompson’s own concept of literature and journalism that

all literature & even journalism should be taken on its own intrinsic merits – above & beyond (or even *below*) the confusing contexts of whatever reality surrounded the act of writing. (*FLA* 421)

Partly the focus on Thompson the Gonzo character rather than Thompson the writer seems to be because the larger than life character he created of himself with Raoul Duke became just that – larger than life. As it did for Thompson’s life as he experienced it, the spectacle of Duke overshadows writings about Thompson and causes scholarship about Thompson/Duke to pile up, while criticism about Thompson’s meticulous writing is in far smaller supply. As Stephenson notes, Thompson’s “name and the Gonzo brand are more famous than any of his works, with the possible exception of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*” (*Gonzo Republic* 21). This also seems to be the answer to why *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and those early Gonzo works are the most written about; they are Thompson’s most famous and most widely read. *The Rum Diary*, only published in 1998, seems to have been largely overlooked and is typically mentioned only as Thompson’s white whale – the book that he always sought to publish but failed to do for so long, or in passing biographical mention of the fact that he began it while living in San Juan. Even in interviews reporters seem to have ignored *The Rum Diary*; in Anita Thompson’s *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* collection of Hunter Thompson interviews, published in 2009 and including interviews from after *The Rum Diary* was finally published, *The Rum Diary* appears only a handful of times and only for the briefest of questions, and never are the characters, even Paul Kemp, mentioned. Thompson is more frequently asked about the Doonesbury character Uncle Duke as inspired by Raoul Duke than he is about *The Rum Diary*.

However, the character that Thompson writes of himself is actually far more complex than just the version that he found the most success with in the form of Raoul Duke and his Gonzo journalism. Though it was unpublished until much later, after the

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<sup>3</sup> Hereafter *Fear and Loathing in America* will be cited in parenthetical notations as *FLA*.

success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* gave Thompson the popularity and literary clout to finally do so, *The Rum Diary* and its main character Paul Kemp are actually where Thompson began the process of transcribing himself into a character in his works. Paul Kemp, and his predecessor Welburn Kemp in the still unpublished *Prince Jellyfish*, may reside in works that Thompson wrote with the idea of publishing them as fictional novels, but the same elements of Thompson's personality, character, and personal background that reside in his journalistic alter ego in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are present in Paul Kemp in *The Rum Diary*. As Raoul Duke and Hunter S. Thompson are both parts of the same man, so too are Paul Kemp and Raoul Duke both parts of the same character. And to Thompson, who was critical of trying to completely separate fiction and journalism, *The Rum Diary* was as important a part of his development as a writer as those Gonzo works that garner more success and attention. As he once wrote in 1965:

Honest journalism is enough to addle the sanest man, and if I've learned nothing else in five years of writing articles I think I've learned that. And that's why I want to get this cycle book out of the way and get back on my novel – or novels, because *The Rum Diary* is becoming two books. Fiction is a bridge to the truth that journalism can't reach. (*The Proud Highway* 529)

To ignore *The Rum Diary*, which Thompson spent over a decade editing and re-writing in an attempt to publish it before he found his niche with Gonzo journalism (as evidenced by his continual correspondence with potential publishers in *The Proud Highway*), is to ignore an integral part of Thompson's honing of his skills as a writer and of his in-text character.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first covers Thompson's earliest version of himself as a character in his fiction through Paul Kemp in *The Rum Diary*. The second examines how he developed his character into his nonfiction with Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The third section examines Raoul Duke through his evolution from Paul Kemp.

### ***The Rum Diary*: Thompson as Paul Kemp**

In 1959, long before he became known as the father of Gonzo journalism, Hunter S. Thompson began writing *The Rum Diary*, an ostensibly fictional novel about a journalist named Paul Kemp who travels to San Juan, Puerto Rico to work for a newspaper there. Though *The Rum Diary* is labelled fiction, the narrative details are

strikingly similar to Thompson's own history. Biographer William McKeen writes that the details of "*The Rum Diary* also paralleled his experiences" (*Outlaw Journalist* 59), and William Stephenson notes that one of Thompson's influences at the time was Ernest Hemingway and suggests that *The Rum Diary* and Kemp were influenced by the "autobiographical adventurers who populate Hemingway's travel novels" (*Gonzo Republic* 133). Just as Kemp did, Thompson too had moved to San Juan to work on a newspaper, and like Kemp he picked up side jobs writing for brochures and occasional articles on Puerto Rico for American newspapers (*Songs of the Doomed* 63). Kemp's personal history varies a little from Thompson's but not so much as to not be easily recognisable. Both are from the Midwest – Kemp from St. Louis, Missouri and Thompson from Louisville, Kentucky (*The Rum Diary* 59)<sup>4</sup>. Both wrote for military newspapers – Thompson for the Air Force, Kemp for the Army (*RD* 59). Kemp quit college before graduating and Thompson never graduated from High School (*RD* 50).

Even more than having essentially the same biography, Kemp and Thompson have the same attitudes. In trying to describe the restless wanderlust that caused him to leave university and St. Louis, Kemp, in an increasingly incoherent rant of the sort that Thompson often falls into when worked up in his articles, says:

I get The Fear... can you use that? St. Louis Gives Young Men The Fear [...] Goddamnit, man, I tell you it's fear of the sack! Tell them that this man Kemp is fleeing St. Louis because he suspects the sack is full of something ugly and he doesn't want to be put in with it. He senses this from afar. This man Kemp is not a model youth. He grew up with two toilets and a football, but somewhere along the line he got warped. Now all he wants is Out, Flee. He doesn't give a good shit for St. Louis or his friends or his family or anything else ... he just wants to find some place where he can breathe ... (*RD* 60)

Not only is Kemp's tone and attitude here the same as Thompson's, but the entire conversation is a theoretical one that takes place in Kemp's head; this is a technique Thompson frequently uses himself in his nonfiction, particularly in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where, as Duke, he often imagines conversations only to snap back to reality to find people staring at him concernedly<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the idea of "The Fear" that

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<sup>4</sup> Hereafter *The Rum Diary* will be cited in parenthetical notations as *RD*.

<sup>5</sup> A common experience for Duke's character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* from the very beginning where he worries about the hitchhiker he has picked up reporting him to the police and mentally debates decapitating him, only to return to reality to wonder "Jesus! Did I say that? Or just think it? Was I talking? Did they hear me?" (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 5).

Kemp mentions here in one of Thompson's earliest works is an idea that becomes central (along with the quest for the American Dream) to his later books and articles.

Kemp comes across as a toned-down version of the Thompson of his later works; a Thompson not yet fully "Gonzo" but still clearly recognizable as the same character seen in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. He rants drunkenly like Thompson – "'that's right!' I shouted. 'I'm drunk and nuts both – no hope for me, is there?'" (RD 186) – and shares the same dim view of the world and society, disdaining the other Americans in San Juan and describing them as "a loud, giddy whirl of thieves and pretentious hustlers, a dull sideshow full of quacks and clowns and philistines with gimp mentalities" (RD 70).

With *The Rum Diary* being one of Thompson's earliest works, Kemp is a forerunner of how Thompson would later characterise himself in his nonfiction works. Though *The Rum Diary* is published as fiction, and perhaps the exact details of the plot are fictional – Kemp's specific employment situation in San Juan differs slightly from Thompson's, and his relationship with Chenault is clearly fiction since in real life Thompson was joined in San Juan by his then girlfriend and later wife Sandy (*Songs of the Doomed* 63) – Kemp is nonetheless as much a pseudonym for Thompson as Raoul Duke or Dr. Gonzo are in his later nonfiction. In fact, similarly to how Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo are used in varying forms throughout Thompson's nonfiction, he uses the name "Kemp" as his alias in another "fictional" story, the unpublished novel *Prince Jellyfish*.

Written in 1959 before his move to San Juan, *Prince Jellyfish* is the tale of Welburn Kemp, a young journalist who moves from Kentucky to New York City where he struggles to get his break in journalism and has a habit of finding himself in intensely awkward social situations (*Songs of the Doomed* 35-60). Like Paul Kemp, Welburn Kemp's "fictional" story is nearly exactly the same as Hunter Thompson's actual life. William McKeen calls Welburn Kemp an "idealized Hunter", one who had "done no jail time and has finished college" (*Outlaw Journalist* 50). Paul and Welburn have different educational backstories, but both share Thompson's attitude towards writing and all three disdain the type of work Welburn Kemp is able to find in New York – "turning out an endless stream of senseless, unsigned articles" (*Songs of the Doomed* 45). Were it not for the differing first names, *Prince Jellyfish* could be a prequel to *The Rum Diary*. *Prince Jellyfish* even contains a section in which Welburn Kemp returns to Kentucky and is so utterly miserable surrounded by the people of his past and their expectations of him and disdain of how he does not fit in to their world that it is entirely



reminiscent in tone of the trapped “fear of the sack” that Paul Kemp cites as his reason for leaving in *The Rum Diary*:

Kemp pondered. Sooner or later I’ll have to go out. Why not get it over with? He wavered, feeling a mounting desire to get up and call Lee Pennington. But the whispering: Oh God, there’s Welburn Kemp .... Let’s get out of here ... gone all to pieces, I tell you ... New York does it every time ... gone straight to the dogs .... (*Songs of the Doomed* 53)

Thompson makes clear that Welburn Kemp is himself in a 1989 piece where he writes: “that is a true story, and so is the next one, which I wrote under an assumed name in an unpublished novel titled *Prince Jellyfish*” (*Songs of the Doomed* 310). And if Welburn Kemp is Thompson, and Welburn Kemp has the same characteristics and personal history as Paul Kemp, then Paul Kemp is also Thompson. McKeen notes that even in the earliest days of his writing, “whatever Hunter started out writing about, he ended up writing about himself” (*Outlaw Journalist* 50). At the time that he wrote *The Rum Diary*, Thompson believed that fiction and novels were a higher form of writing than journalism and that he could not do the type of writing that he wished to with journalism (*Songs of the Doomed* 114). He once wrote “the freedom of fiction is incredible, compared to journalism” (*FLA* 134). It is no wonder, therefore, that he couched his writing as fiction even though it was based on fact, having not yet discovered writing fact in the style of fiction. Paul Kemp is Thompson writing about himself, with only a name change and a few minor details to make him a “fictional” character. Kemp is the first stage in the development of the character Thompson would later write himself as in his nonfiction works such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The development of Thompson’s written avatar can be seen even from Welburn Kemp to Paul Kemp – Welburn Kemp is written in the third person while Paul Kemp narrates in the first person like Thompson’s non-fiction versions of himself.

As a pre-Gonzo Thompson, Paul Kemp’s character is a milder version of him than the Thompson/Raoul Duke character of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. There is less rampant use of drugs and alcohol, and though Kemp keeps up a fairly steady intake of rum and beer he does so less wildly than later versions of Thompson, even noting that he is responsible for convincing the chef at the local bar, Al’s, to provide coffee for breakfast instead of beer and rum so that he can avoid being drunk by the time he gets to work (*RD* 55). As much as Kemp worries at first about avoiding being labelled as a drunkard or pervert by his boss, Lotterman, a fact which he sees as inevitable, calling himself “a pervert yet to be classified” (*RD* 27), it is his colleagues who are the wild and

uncertain element in this tale, and Kemp who provides a small measure of stability. Whereas in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson's character is a source of anxiety and confusion to others, in *The Rum Diary* he is the one fearing the volatile nature of associates like Yeamon. But the possibility of Kemp ending up like his colleagues is always there, just below the surface of his actions, something that he is conscious of when he sinks into introspection (another trait seen in Thompson's later versions of himself), noting that he has

the suspicion that my strange and ungovernable instincts might do me in before I had a chance to get rich. No matter how much I wanted all those things that I needed money to buy, there was some devilish current pushing me off in another direction – toward anarchy and poverty and craziness. (*RD* 134)

Kemp's suspicion of what he could become is the truth of what Thompson's self-characterisation does become. On the subject of writing, Thompson later wrote that

writing is a kind of therapy. One of the few ways I can almost be certain I'll understand something is by sitting down and writing about it. Because by forcing yourself to write about it and putting it down in words, you can't avoid having to come to grips with it. (*Songs of the Doomed* 115)

When Kemp, as a version of Thompson, has introspective moments, these are in a way Thompson examining himself. It is not that Kemp is an entirely different character from Thompson/Duke, but that Thompson had not yet found his ability to write as wildly as he wanted to, and the uninhibited wildness of the Duke version of Thompson would not have fitted with the pre-Gonzo writing style of *The Rum Diary*. Indeed, Kemp has many moments of self-deprecation which tone down his character and see him struggling to fit in to normality, as Thompson's style shows flashes of his later works but still leans more towards "straight and narrow" than "Gonzo", stylistically. This makes complete sense, given that he had yet to find his niche as a writer, vacillated between journalism and fiction, and saw writing *The Rum Diary* as "retreating from journalism to fiction, which is the exact opposite of the traditional American writer, where the noble novelist is continually forced by rejection and ignorance and money pressure to resort to journalism" (*Songs of the Doomed* 62).

In a way, even as he became famous for his work as a journalist rather than a novelist, he would never stop "retreating" to fiction. In 1964, early on in his journalism career, he wrote: "I have discovered the secret of writing fiction, calling it impressionistic journalism, and selling it to people who want 'something fresh'" (*The Proud Highway* 450). Even *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is widely

considered his most successful piece of Gonzo journalism, still found Thompson retreating to fiction, writing in the original jacket copy for the book that even as he sought to write it as an unedited piece of journalism “in the end I found myself imposing an essentially fictional framework on what began as a piece of straight/crazy journalism” (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106). His habit of “retreating” to fiction eventually caused journalism and fiction to become so blurred to him and his works that he wrote that he considered there to be a “false distinction between journalism & fiction – I can jangle the rules even further by claiming to have made a 180 degree turn, quitting journalism and going back to The Novel, while in fact making no turn at all” (*FLA* 723).

Thompson had not yet come to this conclusion while writing *The Rum Diary*, and Kemp worries that he will have to play it safe as a writer in order to survive, because as he puts it:

I had learned that some things were bigger than they looked from a distance, and now I was not so sure anymore just what I was going to get or even what I deserved. I was not proud of what I had learned but I never doubted it was worth knowing. (*RD* 74)

If this was what Thompson believed of his own writing, then he would surely not have believed that a characterisation of himself as wild as he later develops in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* would have been accepted.

In addition to moments of self-reflection, Kemp, in the style of Thompson’s journalism and nonfiction books, also has monologues of social commentary where he examines with contempt the state of the world and his contribution to it as a journalist:

I was being paid twenty-five dollars a day to ruin the only place I’d seen in ten years where I’d felt a sense of peace. Paid to piss in my own bed, as it were, and I was only here because I’d got drunk and been arrested and had thereby become a pawn in some high-level face-saving bullshit. (*RD* 134)

This particular passage also voices Kemp and Thompson’s disdain for soulless commercial writing which both did some of while in San Juan. Later on in *The Rum Diary*, when Kemp’s ability to try to align with the status quo is at its end, and the more volatile voice Thompson becomes comfortable with later on begins to emerge, he voices this disdain more viciously:

Suddenly I was tired of Lotterman; he was a phony and he didn’t even know it. He was forever yapping about Freedom of the Press and Keeping the Paper Going but if he’d had a million dollars and all the freedom in the world he’d still put out a worthless newspaper because he wasn’t smart enough to put out a good one. He

was just another noisy little punk in the great legion of punks who march between the banners of bigger and better men. Freedom, Truth, Honor – you could rattle off a hundred such words and behind every one of them would gather a thousand punks, pompous little fats, waving the banner with one hand and reaching under the table with the other. (*RD* 182)

Thompson, who often critiques the state of journalism in his other works, wrote of his view of journalism at the time that he went to San Juan:

I had said I won't keep being fucked over like I have in the past with these pigs in journalism. I told him it was time for me to get serious, that I wasn't going to come and cover City Hall, that kind of crap. I said I didn't want to be just any reporter. (*Songs of the Doomed* 62)

His voice and beliefs are so clearly being spoken through Kemp in his critique of Lotterman, the paper, and “punk” journalists that it is in these monologues that the line between fiction and fact is most obviously blurred and that Thompson's attempt to create a fictional version of himself in Kemp is at its most thinly veiled. It is clear that not yet believing that he could write the way that he wanted to and have it be accepted as journalism, Thompson wrote his reality into a fictional version but included these pieces of introspection and other monologues of social commentary that are at the heart of the kind of writing that he wanted to do, and that are part of what he became known for in his journalism.

The monologues of social commentary are not the only aspect of Thompson's journalism that he began developing in *The Rum Diary*. Like “The Fear” that Kemp cites as his reason for fleeing Kentucky (*RD* 60), and that Thompson would later return to in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, there is at times a sense in *The Rum Diary* of Kemp, and therefore Thompson, grappling with his own mortality, which he also revisits in his later works. At the beginning of the novel when Kemp has only just arrived in San Juan, he thinks to himself:

I realized how long it had been since I'd felt like I had the world by the balls, how many quick birthdays had gone by since that first year in Europe when I was so ignorant and so confident that every splinter of luck made me feel like a roaring champion.

I hadn't felt that way in a long time. Perhaps, in the ambush of those years, the idea that I was a champion had been shot out from under me. But I remembered it now and it made me feel old and slightly nervous that I had done so little in so long a time. (*RD* 23)

Kemp is only thirty-one when he says this, and Thompson was only twenty-two when he wrote it, but, as seen in the passage where he describes fleeing “The Fear” (*RD* 60), his mind was clearly occupied by such thoughts early on, which only developed over the course of his life and his writing till “The Fear” and the concept of “the American Dream” that are so prevalent in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* became recurring themes in his writing. In *The Rum Diary* the concept of mortality introduced at the beginning of the novel is mirrored at the end in a conversation between Kemp and his colleague Sala:

“How old are you?” I said. “Thirty? Thirty-one?”

“Thirty,” he said quickly. “I was just thirty last month.”

“Hell,” I replied. “Imagine how old I feel – I’m almost thirty-two.”

He shook his head. “I never thought I’d live to see thirty. I don’t know why, but for some reason I just didn’t.”

I smiled. “I don’t know if I did or not – I never gave it much thought.”

“Well,” he said. “I hope to God I never make forty – I wouldn’t know what to do with myself.”

“You might,” I said. “We’re over the hump, Robert. The ride gets pretty ugly from here on in.” (*RD* 204)

Despite Kemp’s claim to Sala here that he hadn’t given much thought to whether he’d live to see thirty, it is clear that he is very aware of his own mortality and his words “the ride gets pretty ugly from here on in” make it clear that if he hadn’t thought of aging before thirty he certainly does now (*RD* 204). This is significant to Thompson’s frame of mind as a twenty-two year old writer; by the dim outlook given to Kemp’s prospects, it seems clear that Thompson does not want to end up with as ugly a view of his career when he is thirty-one. Moreover these worries are given prominent placement in the novel as the last ideas the reader is given, with Kemp and Sala’s conversation occurring on the last page of *The Rum Diary*. The novel then ends with this line:

Sounds of a San Juan night, drifting across the city through layers of humid air; sounds of life and movement, people getting ready and people giving up, the sound of hope and the sound of hanging on, and behind them all, the quiet deadly ticking of a thousand hungry clocks, the lonely sound of time passing in the long Caribbean night. (204)

This is an ending that conveys a sense of the futility of life in the face of the continual passage of time, which seems to be part of The Fear that plagues Thompson and his characters.

With Thompson pre-occupied with such thoughts at a young age, it is no wonder that his written version of himself goes on in later books to be increasingly preoccupied with avoiding The Fear first mentioned here, as it encompasses both an obstacle to having a satisfying life and a concept of failing to make something of himself as a writer. Kemp's worries about aging and the idea that "the ride gets pretty ugly from here on in" are most certainly Thompson's own; only six years after writing *The Rum Diary* he described a photo of himself as "drunk, old + ugly"<sup>6</sup>, and these thoughts continued the rest of his life and were much later echoed in his suicide note "67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted" (qtd. in Brinkley, "Football Season Is Over" 68). The fear of time passing echoed at the end of *The Rum Diary* and in Thompson's actual suicide note seems to have been a constant for him; even in 1977, not long after publishing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and at the height of his authorial success, Thompson introduced *The Great Shark Hunt* by writing a potential suicide note stating that he had already written his life's work and that "nobody could follow that act. Not even me ..." (*The Great Shark Hunt* 17). McKeen claims that Thompson was "obsessed with death and wrote about it all of his life" (*Outlaw Journalist* 96). When he began creating his fictional self with Kemp in *The Rum Diary* Thompson was a young, unsuccessful writer fearing that he would not achieve the authorial career he sought, facing that "deadly ticking of a thousand hungry clocks" (*RD* 204); after finding the style of translating himself from author to character that allowed him popular success with Duke and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he had achieved a type of immortality in a character that became his identity. As William Stephenson notes, "Thompson's first and most important fictional creation was himself" (*Gonzo Republic* 8). By creating this characterisation of himself that spans not just one "fictional" book, but many articles and nonfiction books from then on, Thompson created the ability to remain in the minds of his readers the man that he wanted to be seen as, long after he stopped seeing himself that way.

Not that Thompson idealises his self-descriptions, even in the ostensibly fictional version of Paul Kemp. As he later does not shy away from harshly describing himself during and after wild episodes of drug use in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in *The Rum Diary* whenever he characterises Kemp it is with stark reality and a note of

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<sup>6</sup> The photo and Thompson's description of it can be found on the inside cover of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas Forty Years Later: A Special Issue*, ed. John C. Hartsock, *Literary Journalism Studies* 4.1 (2012).

criticism, as in the passage where he worries about his boss discovering him to be an unsavoury character:

here I was, a new face in the snakepit, a pervert yet to be classified, sporting a paisley tie and a button-down shirt, no longer young but not quite over the hump – a man on the brink, as it were. (27)

In this example, his tone of self-deprecation is paired with his worries about mortality. His characterisation of himself as Paul Kemp, and the more wild and uninhibited Thompson/Duke of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are born from this mixture of desire for immortality and a critical view of himself.

Nor is it only himself that he sees and describes with a critical eye, but humanity in general; his description of the investor Zimburger is particularly foretelling of how he will go on to typically describe people with exaggerated effect in his nonfiction – “Zimburger was more beast than human – tall, paunchy and bald, with a face out of some fiendish comic strip” (RD 48). Thompson-as-Kemp gives us a reason for his harsh descriptions in one of his inner monologues:

“Happy,” I muttered, trying to pin the word down. But it is one of those words, like Love, that I have never quite understood. Most people who deal in words don’t have much faith in them and I am no exception – especially the big ones like Happy and Love and Honest and Strong. They are too elusive and far too relative when you compare them to sharp, mean little words like Punk and Cheap and Phony. I feel at home with these, because they’re scrawny and easy to pin, but the big ones are tough and it takes either a priest or a fool to use them with any confidence. (RD 55-56)

*The Rum Diary* introduces us to this man who does not believe in his ability to use words like “Happy and Love and Honest and Strong” (55), while Thompson uses the safety net of fiction to first write with himself as a character in the action (a trait of New Journalism in general and his Gonzo journalism in particular), before realising his ability to write himself as a character without fully “retreating” to fiction (*Songs of the Doomed* 62). *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is the man-as-character in nonfiction fully realised.

### ***Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: Thompson as Raoul Duke***

By the time he wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Hunter Thompson had discovered several important things that contributed to the evolving exaggerated version

of himself that he used as a character in his writing. The first of these discoveries was his own ability to write nonfiction creatively, which he realised while writing his acclaimed New Journalism book *Hell's Angels*. It was *Hell's Angels* that made Thompson realise that he could write nonfiction journalism and still write the strange and wild characters that he wanted to without having to "retreat" to fiction. Of this discovery Thompson writes:

this subject was so strange that for the first time in any kind of journalism, I could have the kind of fun with writing that I had had in the past with fiction. I could bring the same kind of intensity and have the same kind of involvement with what I was writing about, because there were characters so weird that I couldn't even make them up. I had never seen people this strange. In a way it was like having a novel handed to you with the characters already developed. (*Songs of the Doomed* 114)

Thompson's statement shows that the way he thought of people when he wrote them, even in his nonfiction after *Hell's Angels*, was as characters; real-life people were characters waiting to be written about who were already developed for him to work with. From the way he characterises the written version of himself in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and later works, and the way he writes about himself in his reflections on his writing, he saw himself as no different – a strange man, waiting to be a character.

Another discovery made between *The Rum Diary* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that contributed to the way Thompson thought of and portrayed himself and others as characters was that of Ralph Steadman, the illustrator who throughout his life Thompson used to give cartoon representations to the strange characters he wrote about. Steadman began working with Thompson when Thompson wrote "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" in 1970 (*The Great Shark Hunt* 11-24). Before writing the article Thompson had asked his editor for an illustrator to accompany him instead of a photographer, believing that an illustrator would "catch the madness of things, and the weird humor, better than any photographer" (*Songs of the Doomed* 147). This is interesting because it suggests that Thompson's "characters" are not exact copies of their real-life counterparts, and that, having passed through Thompson as a filter, their essence is captured better by a cartoon. By choosing to use an artist's drawings to illustrate his writing rather than a photographer, Thompson could have illustrations that matched the spirit of the strange and depraved characters and world that he saw and described.



“The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” was also the inception of Thompson’s signature “Gonzo” style of journalism, where Thompson is both author and character and writes his wild tales from within the action of whatever he is writing about, as he does in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. At the time, despite the success of *Hell’s Angels*, Thompson, in a state of insecurity reminiscent of the self he wrote in Paul Kemp, believed that he “was finished as a writer” when he sat down to write “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (*Songs of the Doomed* 148), and afterwards wrote to Ralph Steadman that he thought the article itself was “useless, except for the flashes of style & tone it captures” (Steadman 38). The success of the article and of Gonzo were as he saw it “an almost accidental breakthrough – a whole new style of journalism which now passes for whatever Gonzo is ... accident and desperation” (*Songs of the Doomed* 148). Thompson, it seems, saw himself as fortunate in the developments that happened to create his successful style of writing, but was insecure enough that he did not feel wholly comfortable taking complete credit for his successes, calling them “accidents”. Before the success of “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” he went so far as to call it “a shitty article, a classic of irresponsible journalism” (*FLA* 295). The Thompson character that we see in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* who is often full of confident bravado, while paranoid because of whatever cocktail of drugs he happens to be on, is as much a version of Thompson that he wanted the public to see as the toned-down version of Paul Kemp was when Thompson wrote him.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* takes the Gonzo style begun in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” to a further level. It was Thompson’s first opportunity after the success of “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” to write a full-length book without completely “retreating” to fiction, and allowed him to expand the concepts and characters from his earlier works, including *The Rum Diary*. However, just as *The Rum Diary* was not straightforward fiction, with Paul Kemp created from Thompson’s personal history and character, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was not purely nonfictional, and the Thompson seen in Raoul Duke, though in many respects autobiographical, is not an exact copy from man to page. Much like the illustrations in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (and many of Thompson’s subsequent works) by Ralph Steadman, which provide context through the filter of Steadman’s art rather than photographic evidence, the story of the book and the character of Raoul Duke are filtered through Thompson’s intentions for the work. As Robert Alexander notes, Duke is a representation of Thompson, through which he can reflect on himself

(19). This is not so different from the way that Thompson used Kemp in *The Rum Diary* to reflect on his role as a journalist and his fears about his future career. He is concerned less with the “facts” of his character than with the narrative of the book, writing when planning the book that by calling his character Raoul Duke he could

play the lead role in scenes I couldn’t even use otherwise, because in the context of non-fiction I couldn’t “prove” them. Duke is only semi-fictional, but just hazy enough so I can let him say and do things that wouldn’t work in first person. (*FLA* 267-268)

He furthermore admitted in correspondence to his Random House editor Jim Silberman after writing the book that he had not, in fact, been on drugs during the Vegas trip in the way that Duke had, but intended people to believe that it was true because “it makes it all the more astounding, that I could emerge from that heinous experience with a story” (*FLA* 406). As Thompson’s long-time friend Timothy Ferris writes, though Thompson the author and Duke the character were both parts of the same man, one was a character as “spectacular and unpredictable as a bolt of lightning” and the other “an owl-like, oracular author” (xviii). In a sense, Thompson was still “retreating” into fiction by using elements of it in his journalism – he didn’t stop writing fiction so much as that he stopped making a distinction between fiction and nonfiction. The level of truth in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* need not be much more than that in *The Rum Diary*, for after “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and the success of his Gonzo style, Thompson had discovered the method of, as William Kennedy states, “writing what seemed to be journalism, while actually you were developing your fictional oeuvre” (xix).

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, as the first large work of Gonzo journalism that Thompson wrote, is where he cements the characterisation of himself that he will continue to use throughout the rest of his career. The book and the character version of himself are how he is most often thought of and written about even after his death; William McKeen notes: “Thompson’s greatest literary creation was probably that exaggerated version of himself” (“The Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson” 7)<sup>7</sup>. As much as Thompson seemed to hold back when writing the Kemp version of himself, to be concerned with not appearing too depraved or perverted, and to write in a more normal, straightforward fashion with few imagined conversations, ranting inner

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<sup>7</sup> Raoul Duke is consistently accepted by critics to be an aspect of Thompson. Bill Reynolds calls him Thompson’s “alter ego” (73), and Stephenson notes that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is at least on one level an “autobiography” (“Thompson, Hunter S.”).

monologues, or wild and fervour-filled descriptions, the version of himself that he turns to in his nonfiction has no limits to his actions, words, or characterisation and the writing is an intense cocktail of actions and conversations that occur only in Thompson's head or through a drug-induced filter mixed with colourful descriptions of actual events. It is a character so wild that he almost seems less real than Paul Kemp, despite the fact that Kemp is the character meant to be fictional and Duke the ostensibly nonfictional version, and at times, as William Stephenson notes of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*: "its protagonists are cartoon-like characters, rather than realistic figures" ("Thompson, Hunter S."). Thompson, however, disdained the question of how real Duke was, and wrote:

Raoul Duke is pushing the frontiers of "new journalism" ... the main thing is to find some sort of academic-type justification for the Photo/Mind-Warp approach. Otherwise, the grey little cocksuckers who run things will keep drawing that line between Journalism and Fiction. (*FLA* 375-376)

William McKeen, biographer and friend of Thompson, suggests that the character Thompson created for himself was "an enhanced version of reality" (*Outlaw Journalist* xviii), just as John Hellmann noted that Thompson "has purposely emphasized and exaggerated certain of his traits in order to create a fictive version of himself which is essentially a self-caricature" (72). Much as Kemp was a way for Thompson to write about himself from within the safety net of fiction that he had initially retreated to, in the early stages of developing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Raoul Duke was Thompson's safety net for writing about himself in journalism. Thompson saw Duke as a way to have "far more leeway to improvise on reality, without distorting it" (*FLA* 267) and moreover as a "sort of 'cover' & safety valve" (268). Duke was, however, as Stephenson notes, a "very thin disguise" (*Gonzo Republic* 96), and Thompson later decided that the semi-nonfiction status of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and his obvious involvement meant that there wasn't "any real point in trying to pass the Vegas thing off as the work of 'Raoul Duke'" (*FLA* 407).

Thompson makes stylistic choices throughout the book that emphasize the semi-fictional character status of Raoul Duke as a version of himself, even while ostensibly writing nonfiction journalism. Though the book is told from a first-person narrative viewpoint, Thompson occasionally takes a step back from himself in the text to view himself from a different perspective:

...the brain continues to function more or less normally ... you can actually *watch* yourself behaving in this terrible way, but you can't control it.

You approach the turnstiles leading into the Circus-Circus and you know that when you get there, you have to give the man two dollars or he won't let you inside ... but when you get there, everything goes wrong" (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* 45)<sup>8</sup>

With this change of his own perspective he changes how the reader views him as well, allowing the reader to more fully observe the oddness of his actions without being entirely in his head. Thompson uses other techniques to emphasize his status as character, such as his allusion to the idea that he is the hero of a fictional tale – "I felt like Othello. Here I'd only been in town a few hours, and we'd already laid the groundwork for a classic tragedy. The hero was doomed; he had already sown the seed of his own downfall ..." (*FLLV* 122).

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson's status as a "fictional" character is further emphasized by his ascription of semi-fictional status to the other people in the book. As Thompson himself spends much of the book in a drug-induced paranoia about the motives of the people around him, and the view that is given of all secondary characters is filtered through his perspective, most people in the book are strange or even slightly grotesque in their description, as cartoonlike to the reader as they are to Thompson in the book: "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*" (*FLLV* 57). He is also as flexible with the identity of others as he is with his own; just as Thompson becomes Raoul Duke, his attorney and companion Oscar Acosta becomes "Doctor Gonzo" (*FLLV* 77). The inclusion of Acosta, in a character development and narrative sense, serves, as Jason Mosser notes, as a "comic foil" for Thompson's Duke character (86). Thompson gives the best summary of how he chooses to portray others and himself as characters that represent their strangeness and quirks, the madness and humour rather than the straight fact-for-fact truth, when he says "[t]he important thing is to cover this story on its own terms; leave the other stuff to *Life* and *Look*" (*FLLV* 57). The story, the truth, and the people who have become his characters including himself are all written on his own terms in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. What is exactly truth and what is partially fiction are not important to Thompson, who called the difference between the imposition of a "novelistic form on journalistic content" and the writing of a "journalistic novel" "bullshit" (*Songs of the Doomed* 202). As he saw it, "the only real difference between 'journalism' and 'fiction' in my own mind is

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<sup>8</sup> Hereafter *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* will be cited in parenthetical notations as *FLLV*.

*legalistic*” (*Songs of the Doomed* 203). Whether or not *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is “fact” then is not as important as that it tells the story Thompson wants to tell, and regardless of whether the Thompson that we see in the book is entirely accurate, it is who he wants to be seen as.

Thompson’s decision to have Ralph Steadman illustrate the book further emphasizes his deliberate choices and control of the image that he created with his character. The illustrations provide an uncertainty about the status of what is purely fact and what is potentially fictitious about his character and the events by having illustrations that support the feel of the text and not photographs that prove whether or not events actually transpired exactly as he describes them. Thompson had very strong opinions on the nature of illustrations and of how they influenced the perception of his work, once demanding “that any ‘cartoon/illustration’ by Jim Nutt will not be allowed within 15 pages on either side of my byline” because he felt they detracted from his work (*FLA* 283)<sup>9</sup>. He would not have settled for merely having any illustrator for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* but instead:

insisted on Steadman, because he’s the only illustrator I know of who understands the Gonzo journalism concept; he has lived thru it twice, and he’ll catch the style & tone of this Vegas thing instantly. (*FLA* 388)

Such was Thompson’s control of how his characters were portrayed that he even went so far as to nearly get into a legal battle with Oscar Acosta over the publication of the book that was in part because of a dispute over Acosta’s desired inclusion of a photo of himself and Thompson that Thompson felt “would clash with Steadman’s drawings” (*FLA* 449). As much as Gonzo journalism was uniquely Thompson’s, he saw Steadman’s type of illustration as uniquely fitting for it: “that kind of graphic journalism is a completely un-tapped vein in Amerika [*sic*]” (*FLA* 306). And as McKeen notes, Steadman’s art fits Thompson’s style so well that “whatever *Gonzo* is, when it’s dissected Ralph Steadman’s art is part of its core DNA” (“Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson” 15).

The first illustration, originally used on the first two pages of the *Rolling Stone* article where *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was serialised before it was printed as a book, and in the book used as the illustration to “Part One”, shows Thompson in a car with Oscar Acosta, his mouth open wide, one hand on the wheel the other throwing

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<sup>9</sup> Nutt was an illustrator used by *Scanlan*’s magazine prior to the beginning of Thompson’s discovery of Ralph Steadman as the perfect accompaniment to his text (*FLA* 283).

away a can on which the word “Budweiser” can just be read (*FLLV* 1; “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” 36-37). The illustration is cartoonish rather than lifelike, and yet it captures the essence of the character that Thompson has created of himself; the wildness, the reckless drinking of beer while driving, the gusto with which he appears to be conversing with Acosta. The next illustration of Thompson further emphasizes this: still in the car with Acosta, once again mouth gaping open, he is now shown with bubbles floating away from mouth in head, in what seems to be a drug-and-alcohol intoxicated state (*FLLV* 14). He later appears sneaking away from his first hotel, cigarette in one hand, a bulging suitcase leaking liquid and scattering pills in the other (*FLLV* 79). Steadman has emphasized in these illustrations the traits of Thompson that he himself emphasizes in the way he characterizes himself in his text, giving a visual presence to “Raoul Duke” that shows the version of Thompson that he wanted to be seen and more firmly establishing the character of himself that he continued to use in his writing.

### **Kemp and Duke – Two Aspects of the Same Thompson**

Despite the fact that Raoul Duke is a wilder version of Thompson than even the man himself, let alone the more toned-down version of himself that he wrote in *The Rum Diary* with Paul Kemp, there are certainly aspects of Duke that he shares with the version of Thompson seen in Kemp. There is still the sense in Duke, as there is in Kemp, that he is fleeing an indescribable fear of being trapped, of being boxed-in by normality in any one place. Thompson even credits that fear as being part of the impetus behind the trip to Las Vegas, stating that “every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas” (*FLLV* 14). And, as Kemp was never content with just having fled the States for San Juan, always contemplating leaving for new journeys, Duke is never content with just his wild trip. Even at the beginning of the book, with the trip barely started and Las Vegas not yet reached he is contemplating changing his plans and fleeing further, musing:

use the credit card to zap off on a jet to some place like Miami and rent another huge fireapple-red convertible for a drug-addled, top-speed run across the water all the way out to the last stop in Key West ... and then trade the car off for a boat. Keep moving. (*FLLV* 17)

“Keep moving” – the driving force behind Kemp, Duke, and Thompson alike. So we see Thompson and all the character versions of himself struggling against being trapped in one place, the fear and loathing building if he is not able to escape. He even describes that urge to flee in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* the same way Kemp did in *The Rum Diary*, as The Fear – musing a little later about his situation as being “on the Run, in the grip of a serious Fear” (*FLLV* 84). Keep moving, fleeing The Fear – the shared motivation behind all versions of Thompson.

Indeed, The Fear is a central factor in the motivation behind the actions of both Kemp and Duke, and as much as “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” was the accidental beginning of Gonzo, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was the beginning of Thompson expanding the idea of “The Fear” that he first touched on in *The Rum Diary* into “fear and loathing”: “It started when I left Vegas that first time, skipping the hotel bill, driving off in that red convertible all alone, drunk and crazy, back to L.A. That’s exactly what I felt. Fear and loathing” (*Songs of the Doomed* 153). This was clearly an important concept to Thompson, as after *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he used it in many of his later works; such that, as Nick Nuttall writes, “fear was central to the projected persona of Hunter S. Thompson” (103). The concept actually even appeared earlier in his writing when he used “fear and loathing” to describe how the Hell’s Angels were seen by the press (*Hell’s Angels* 56); which when combined with the even earlier use of “The Fear” in *The Rum Diary* points to it being a concept that Thompson held at least at a subconscious level long before he became aware of it in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The Fear is important as a reoccurring theme in Thompson’s works because it is one of the driving forces behind the actions of himself and all of his written versions of himself, both the fictional Kemp version of *The Rum Diary* and *Prince Jellyfish* and the non-fiction Thompson/Duke of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the rest of his non-fiction. As Paul Kemp suggested in his imagined interview with a reporter, “The Fear” was the reason he had fled St. Louis (*RD* 60); as one of the many things about Kemp that seems true also for Thompson, “The Fear” also appears to drive his wild actions chasing highs with drugs on his quest for the ever-elusive “American Dream” in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Moreover part of “The Fear” as Kemp described it was the sense that he did not fit in with normal society, that “somewhere along the line he got warped” (*RD* 60); if Kemp is a toned-down version of Thompson even as he sees himself as warped and even he flees The Fear and normal society, then the even stranger and more depraved version of Thompson in Raoul Duke has even more to “fear”.

There are other aspects of Thompson that connect the Kemp version to the Duke version. Both share an inherent desire for “good” to triumph over “evil”, and a sense that it inevitably will not. As Kemp muses on his contempt for the state of the world in his monologue about “being paid twenty-five dollars a day to ruin the only place I’d seen in ten years where I’d felt a sense of peace” (*RD* 134), Duke/Thompson frequently voices his disdain for the state of the world at the time, such as in one of the frequent monologues in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

A very painful experience in every way, a proper end to the sixties: Tim Leary a prisoner of Eldridge Cleaver in Algeria, Bob Dylan clipping coupons in Greenwich Village, both Kennedys murdered by mutants, Owsley folding napkins on Terminal Island, and finally Cassius/Ali belted incredibly off his pedestal by a human hamburger, a man on the verge of death. Joe Frazier, like Nixon, had finally prevailed for reasons that people like me refused to understand – at least not out loud. (*FLLV* 22-23)

The state of the world that Thompson-as-Kemp feared when he wrote *The Rum Diary* seems to have come true for Thompson-as-Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and he has responded in turn by more openly railing against it in his writing. Moreover, what Thompson saw as the deteriorating state of the world was a factor in the continuation of his journalism rather than returning to fiction:

I’ve always had and still do have an ambition to write fiction. I’ve never had any real ambition within journalism, but events and fate and my own sense of fun keep taking me back for money, political reasons, and because I am a warrior. (*Kingdom of Fear* 189)

His relationship with this type of journalism is a continually mixed one, as he claims throughout his career that he debates whether or not he should “quit political journalism altogether and get seriously to work on a novel – which is something I’ve been planning to do ever since I finished my ill-fated *Rum Diary* almost 15 years ago” (*FLA* 719). This continual desire to return to his fiction seems to be a factor in the style of semi-fictional journalism that he writes in, a way of writing in the style and form of the fiction that he desired to write, while still being able to retain the “dependable meal-ticket and a valid passport to the cockpit(s) of whatever action, crisis, movement or instant of history I wanted to be a part of” afforded by being a journalist (*FLA* 719).

Another trait that Thompson carries over into his nonfiction version of himself from his fictional Kemp self, which is important to understanding how he writes his



character, is that he is very self-deprecating in his descriptions. The first description of Kemp is of a strange, wild man:

I saw myself in a mirror, looking dirty and disreputable, a pale vagrant with red eyes.

On top of my slovenly appearance, I stank of ale. It hung in my stomach like a lump of rancid milk. (*RD* 10)

This is a description that he never refutes as being uncharacteristic, which perhaps could have been thought of as merely being what Thompson feared becoming, as he feared Kemp's dim career prospects at the end of the novel (*RD* 204), except that Thompson is every bit as critical and harsh in his descriptions of his thirty-three year old nonfictional self in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Admittedly the descriptions of himself in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* occur amidst "three or four days of booze, drugs, sun, no sleep and burned out adrenalin reserves" (*FLLV* 85) but nonetheless the way that Kemp is described is clearly seen in Thompson's description of himself here:

I looked pretty bad: wearing old Levis and white Chuck Taylor All-Star basketball sneakers ... and my ten-peso Acapulco shirt had long since come apart at the shoulder seams from all that road-wind. My beard was about three days old, bordering on standard wino trim, and my eyes were totally hidden by Sandy Bull's Saigon-mirror shades. (*FLLV* 108)

Later, while posing as Duke in an attempt to deny that a photograph of himself is actually him, Thompson says "That's a guy named Thompson. He works for Rolling Stone ... a really vicious, crazy kind of person" (*FLLV* 195). Even taking into account that the descriptions of his appearance take place while he is intoxicated on drugs and alcohol, or that the description of himself as a "vicious, crazy kind of person" was given while trying to deny who he was, the fact that Thompson chooses to describe himself in these ways means that this is the way that he wants his character to be read – as "jaded, over-thirty drug dilettantes – like me, and my attorney" (*FLLV* 201). Furthermore, as Brian J. Bowe suggests, Thompson's critical description of himself as a depraved drug abuser makes his character more believable and real – we can believe what Thompson tells us about himself because he is frank about his negative qualities and less than perfect behaviour (94).

Thompson was clearly very aware of how other people saw him, and the way people's perceptions affected the way he was treated – for instance, when returning his car to the rental agency, he notes that the massive damage would normally have gotten him arrested but that he gets away with it because "I was, after all, a 'VIP'" (*FLLV*

197), or when he attempts to buy amyls at a drugstore and is denied until he presents himself as a doctor (*FLLV* 203). Throughout the book he changes his identity based on the people around him and how he needs them to perceive him in order to do what he wants. The persona of Raoul Duke is a tool in this sense, used to separate himself from his “true” identity when the situation necessitates it, much in the same way that Paul Kemp was a tool for Thompson as a writer to separate his identity as a character in his novel from his “true” identity as the author. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson uses the identity of Raoul Duke interchangeably with that of Hunter Thompson, registering at the hotel as Raoul Duke (*FLLV* 23) and then receiving telegrams for Hunter Thompson “*care of Raoul Duke*” and claiming that Thompson is part of his team when questioned about the tangle of names (76-77). Using Raoul Duke as a sometime pseudonym in his nonfiction gives him a flexible identity, able to run amok in Las Vegas as Duke, then write the story as Thompson, and to deny either identity depending on how he needs to be seen in any given situation – he calls himself “Bob Zimmerman” at one point while getting harassed in a bar for instance (*FLLV* 192), even more so a twist of identities by Thompson because Bob Zimmerman is the real name of musician Bob Dylan. Further emphasizing the entanglement of Thompson’s use of Duke as an identity is that while the book version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is published with “Hunter S. Thompson” as the author, the original article in *Rolling Stone* was printed with a byline that credited “Raoul Duke” (“Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” 36). This use of Duke is reminiscent of his use of Kemp in his earlier works as stepping slightly out of himself to write a version of himself as a fictional character. Thompson’s understanding of the way others perceived him, and his deftness at manipulating that perception show that he was very clearly aware of how he would be perceived by his readers when he described himself as a wild, drug-addled man frequently in the grip of “The Fear”; the jaded drug dilettante, “just sick enough to be totally confident” (*FLLV* 204) is then how he wants his character to be seen. Nonetheless, when talking about *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson reinforces the concept that Raoul Duke’s wild behaviour was as much a way to hide who he really was as Paul Kemp’s more consciously mild behaviour was, a way to “stay anonymous, to carry on with what I consider my normal behaviour” (*AGW* 81). Kemp was less wild than Thompson, but Duke was perhaps wilder, with the real Thompson falling somewhere in-between.

## Conclusion:

It is telling that Thompson never wrote an autobiography – one was never necessary, for his books and articles are together an autobiography in and of themselves. As his former editor Jann Wenner wrote of him, “if there was a way to take his collected work and edit it properly, there would emerge a narrative of Hunter’s great and wild life, a story about himself, who was, after all, his own greatest character” (xi). I would argue that Thompson, who frequently hated the changes made to his work by what he saw as hackneyed editors, does not need his work edited. As fellow journalist David Halberstam put it, “no one created Hunter other than Hunter” (xii). His life from a young journalist in San Juan to a “drug-addled dilettante” to a scathing political reporter is already laid out, as long as the reader is prepared to accept that he does not always go by the same name, and that there are, as Thompson writes, “a lot of *levels of truth*” (*FLA* 643).

With the version of himself that he wrote in Paul Kemp, Thompson had decades from the time that the book was first begun in 1959 to when it was first published in 1998 to re-write and fine-tune the text and his character, which up until the success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* featured prominently in his correspondence as a source of constant re-working in an effort to get it published, for instance citing in a 1970 letter to editor Jim Silberman “the problem harks back to *The Rum Diary*—which I’ve always wanted to publish, but I’m beginning to wonder now if I might not have killed the book entirely by brooding and haggling over it for so long” (*FLA* 262). Paul Kemp, therefore, existed for many years unedited and exactly as Thompson set him down on the page. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson was also in control of his character and how he was portrayed through Raoul Duke, going so far as to publish both the *Rolling Stone* article and the book unedited by anyone other than himself, stating that “I refuse to let you or anybody else edit the fucker ... this is *my* book. There is no editor on it” (*FLA* 449). He was, as McKeen notes, “fairly meticulous when it came to his writing and didn’t like it when editors began recklessly slashing his paragraphs” (*Outlaw Journalist* 122), to the extent that Douglas Brinkley says his “uncompromising perfectionism overwhelmed his editors” (Editor’s Note, *FLA* xxi). After the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, however, his character was no longer wholly within his control. The character of himself that he wrote was on the whole accepted as the truth of who he was by the media and became his identity in a way that he did not always like or feel was accurate:

It hasn't helped a lot to be a savage comic-book character for the last fifteen years – a drunken screwball who should've been castrated a long time ago. The smart people in the media knew it was a weird exaggeration. The dumb ones took it seriously and warned their children to stay away from me at all costs. The *really* smart ones understood it was only a censored, kind of toned-down, children's-book version of the real thing. (*Kingdom of Fear* 188)

*The Rum Diary* having not yet been published, the only version of Thompson that was widely read for most of his life was the wild Gonzo character. In a way, once he created the Raoul Duke character and became famous and accepted as that character, that was who he had to become. William Stephenson notes that Thompson “found the Raoul Duke persona at first a benefit and then a burden” (*Gonzo Republic* 39). The man created the character, but the character directly influenced the man, to the extent that Thompson the character is better known than Thompson the author. As Brinkley writes, “his mythological persona sometimes garners more attention than his eight published books” (Editor's Note, *The Proud Highway* xxv). The world was left with, as McKeen observes, “at least two Hunter S. Thompsons”, the caricature and the serious writer (“The Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson” 7), and Thompson was left “never sure which one people expect me to be. Often, they conflict” (qtd. in *Outlaw Journalist* 202).

His character became real to such an extent that he appeared as a character in the works of others – notably as the “Uncle Duke” character in the newspaper comic strip *Doonesbury* by Gary Trudeau. Thompson hated the way that he was portrayed in *Doonesbury*, going so far as to seek legal counsel about possibly levelling a libel suit against Trudeau and writing “there might also be a very real possibility of *malice* in this comic strip stuff, though I'm damned if I could point you to any tangible reasons, since I've never seen the cartoonist and don't know him at all...” (*FLA* 657-658). McKeen claims that Thompson “blamed Trudeau for ruining his life” by perpetuating the unserious image of him in Uncle Duke (*Outlaw Journalist* xviii). The problem with Uncle Duke was that he was a parody that only took on the surface level of Thompson's character that most of the media accepted; portraying, as Alan Rinzler remarks, the “brain-addled, angry, deeply depressed, self-destructive lout” and ignoring the “ground-breaking prose artist and investigative journalist” (v). The Uncle Duke character did not continue Thompson's characterisation of himself as he wrote it, but instead took the worst aspects and exaggerated and mocked them, labelling him at one point a “hack writer” (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 246).

For Thompson, who was so painstaking with his constant attempts at re-writing *The Rum Diary*, and his conscientious choices in creating his character as Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and who hated being misrepresented or misquoted – writing during the flurry of media attention following *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* that he was “extremely tired of being drastically misquoted by all these ‘straight journalists’ who keep calling me” (FLA 636) – having his character portrayed in a way that did not reflect how he wrote it was a serious transgression. This applied both to fictional representations of him in the form of Uncle Duke, and to the spate of unauthorized biographies that began appearing about him after he became famous, which he also hated and called “cheap, soon-to-be-buried gossip books” (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 317). It wasn’t that he objected to being written about – William McKeen, who wrote a biography of Thompson in 1991, states that Thompson not only fully cooperated while he was working on the book, but gave it his approval afterwards (*Outlaw Journalist* xvi). Or that he objected to his character being used in other media – he was present during filming of *Where the Buffalo Roam*, allowing Bill Murray to study his character and behaviour in person (Steadman 176), and famously was so accommodating of Johnny Depp’s study of his character for the film version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that he allowed him to move into his basement and follow him around to portray an accurate version of him (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 336-337). Thompson’s anger was at his character and his work being misrepresented or mocked and cheapened – even with the film of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he fought any changes to his vision of his work that he thought didn’t fit (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 337). At the same time as he railed against the misrepresentations of him in the unauthorised works of others, Thompson did not change how he wrote his character, and McKeen notes that he “was his own worst enemy because he fed that caricature” (*Outlaw Journalist* xvi). Completely accurate or not, as Stephenson writes, “Thompson became Duke, the man melded into the persona: the writing became as real as, or more real than, the original experience” (*Gonzo Republic* 156). In this way Thompson’s character became reality and outlives Thompson the author; after Thompson’s death, his character lives on, both in his works which continue to be widely read, and in the way that he is interpreted and written by others.

## Chapter Two: Thompson as Spider Jerusalem – a New Evolution for a New Form

### Introduction:

Raoul Duke was an evolution of the character version of Hunter Thompson that he began in Paul Kemp; the more restrained Kemp, concerned with appearances, would not have fitted in the Gonzo world of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* any more than the Thompson who first wrote *The Rum Diary* would have been able to write *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* without first evolving as a writer. After Thompson became famous for the way he wrote himself in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the Duke version of him was the one that was accepted by the public as the truth, to the extent that it was parodied and even mocked in texts like Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip, in which Thompson's character was represented by "Uncle Duke" but only in a shallow derisive way that Thompson stated was "a horrible piece of shit" (AGW 358). Thompson hated Uncle Duke because he wasn't a true representation of Thompson either as an author or a character; the static, surface level characterisation of Thompson written in Uncle Duke was even damaging to the way Thompson wrote himself because as he stated it "robs me of a very valuable human part of my life, which is, the progress" (AGW 98). The Uncle Duke role did not take the character that Thompson had developed and continue it as it was written or grow it further, but merely aped some of the characteristics of Thompson for comedic effect, and as such was not a true inheritance of Raoul Duke.

Raoul Duke was not, however, the last serious evolution that the textual Thompson would undergo. The far more important legacy that Thompson created for the character version of himself by setting him up as "real" and fleshing him out through so many different works was that he could also then exist in other, more serious versions that are actual developments of his character rather than surface-level parodies or copies. Twenty-six years after *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the character underwent its third major progression: into Spider Jerusalem, the main character of the ten-volume graphic novel series *Transmetropolitan* (1997-2002). As Paul Kemp was a toned-down version of Thompson in a work accepted as fictional, though in fact based on Thompson's actual experiences, and Raoul Duke was a wilder and more uninhibited version of Thompson in a work accepted as non-fiction, while in fact often exaggerated and containing wholly fictional elements, Spider Jerusalem is a version of Thompson possibly even more uninhibited and wilder than Duke in a work that is completely

fictional in plot details and setting and yet contains elements of truth and is told through a New Journalism style that blurs the fact versus fiction line as much as Thompson's own works.

*Transmetropolitan* began as a comic book in 1997, under the Vertigo imprint of DC (*Transmetropolitan* 1:2). A publisher traditionally known for its superhero comics, DC began the Vertigo imprint to publish works that told more serious and thought-provoking stories through the graphic medium ("About DC"). Vertigo editor Karen Berger states that Vertigo has "broken out from the dark fantasy to books that are more contemporary statements about the world in which we live", and *Transmetropolitan* is cited as one of the imprint's successes in this regard (qtd. in Duncan and Smith 259). The series ran until 2002 and comprised 60 issues plus two special issues, and was collected into ten graphic novels (*Transmetropolitan* 10:4). This is typical of graphic novel publications, as Charles Hatfield notes: "by and large, graphic novels are created serially [...] the graphic novel usually appears as successive installments, published periodically in anticipation of the completed work" (*Alternative Comics* 153). *Transmetropolitan* was written by Warren Ellis and illustrated by Darick Robertson, and it is both Ellis' words and Robertson's art that contribute to the series' continuation and adaptation of Thompson's character of himself.

Though *Transmetropolitan* received many positive reviews, almost no critical work has been done on the series, and, despite the occasional mention of Thompson's influence on the series in reviews, there has been no in-depth examination of his role as the genesis for Spider Jerusalem. There are a few brief comments made on Thompson's role as inspiration for the series and Spider Jerusalem's character in online articles by Steen Christiansen and Daniel Gullotta, and in a brief piece by an author known only as Travis titled "Transmetropolitan". But these are only short surface-level comparisons of Thompson and Spider, and do not examine the connection between Thompson's self-as-character and Spider as a continuation of this role. After this thesis was begun, a book of essays on *Transmetropolitan* called *Shot in the Face: A Savage Journey to the Heart of Transmetropolitan* was published but the essays are not scholarly and the book is more a collection of fan commentaries on the series than a critical examination of it from a literary standpoint. Moreover the one essay in the collection that deals with the connection between Spider and Thompson overall maintains the opinion that Thompson is not the genesis for Spider, a viewpoint that is taken without examining the larger context of Thompson's multi-work-spanning development of his character as both a fictional and nonfictional creation. It seems likely that *Transmetropolitan* has been

overlooked for critical study of its link to Thompson largely due to the fact that studies of graphic novels have historically been an overlooked aspect of literature, particularly alternative ones like *Transmetropolitan* which, as Charles Hatfield observes, often exist “below critical radar [*sic*]” (*Alterative Comics* xii). As Gardner and Herman note, until recently comics studies “has been defined by a defensive relationship to the academy at large” which has resulted in “a field long dominated by formal and historical research” and not “larger theoretical issues” (6); the examination of *Transmetropolitan* (a relatively recent publication) and its cross-media link to Thompson’s works is one of these larger theoretical issues that have been missed. By not studying the role of Spider Jerusalem as a continuation of Thompson’s character, an important facet is being ignored in a character that has evolved and continued over not just multiple genres, but through *Transmetropolitan* actually continued with a new writer. Spider Jerusalem’s connection to Thompson both continues the legacy that Thompson began when he made himself into a character in his own works and links *Transmetropolitan* to serious journalism even though it is a graphic series set in a science-fiction dystopian future.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first examines how the character of Spider Jerusalem is established within *Transmetropolitan* as a continuation of Thompson’s character, and how it develops him as a true inheritor of the character rather than a shallow parody. The second section builds on this by analysing the connection between the writing of Thompson and of Spider as a journalist. The third section examines why Thompson was especially suited to becoming a character in a graphic novel and considers critical studies on comics theory as well as comments by *Transmetropolitan* writer Warren Ellis.

### **Up a Goddam Mountain: Establishing Spider as a Continuation of Thompson**

*Transmetropolitan* introduces the reader to the character of Spider Jerusalem in such a way that where he is and how he has been living for the past few years is a completely logical explanation of what Thompson’s character could have been doing since the last book that they read by him. Spider is, as the very first words of his narration in volume one state, “up a goddam mountain” (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5). The words “up a goddam mountain” and the visual in the first panel and subsequent six pages showing a house, covered in snow and surrounded by evergreen trees, are a description and illustration that easily fit Hunter Thompson’s beloved home Owl Farm in the Rocky Mountains of Aspen, Colorado where he first moved in 1966 (McKeen,



*Outlaw Journalist* 115) and returned to whenever he was not required to be elsewhere to write. In fact the first scene of volume one introduces the reader to Spider's character in such a way that for seven pages all that is shown is him in his mountain home, and, despite the fact that *Transmetropolitan* is set in a dystopian future rather than the present, these first pages could easily have been set any time within Thompson's life – even Spider's car has a sixties aesthetic (see Fig.1; *Transmetropolitan* 1:10).

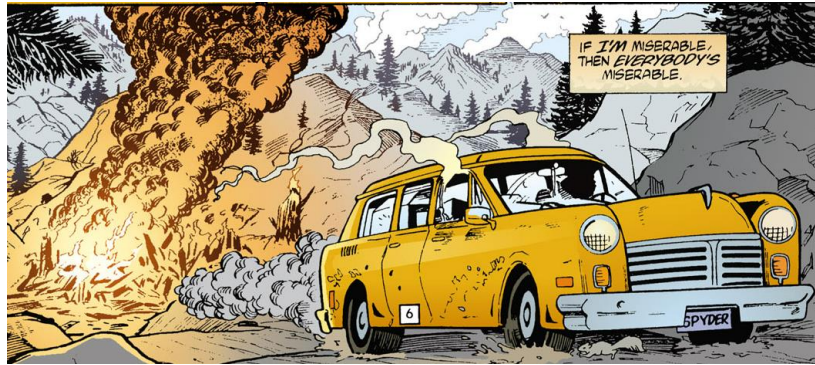


Fig. 1.

By easing the reader into the dystopian setting of the series, Ellis creates the sense that this could actually be a real version of Thompson, and it is not until he is forced off the mountain and into the futuristic City that the true difference between Spider's world and Thompson's is revealed.

Hunter Thompson wrote in 2003 that “[m]oving down the mountain has always been dangerous for me, because of the Space problem” (*Kingdom of Fear* 131) and so too does Spider write when forced off the mountain, in words that could just as easily be Thompson's at any time that he was forced to leave Owl Farm:

Five years of shooting at fans and neighbors, eating what I kill and bombing the unwary.

Five years of being *alone*.

I can't begin to describe the ways I'll miss the mountain.

[...]I'll be back, I worked for too long to buy five years of peace and I'm not giving it *up*. (*Transmetropolitan* 1:9)

Spider is being forced down from the mountain for the same reasons that Thompson frequently was – his editor has him under contract to write, and he has blown through his advances and needs more money (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5-6).<sup>10</sup> Even the conversation Spider has with his editor is laid out in such a way that it could easily have

<sup>10</sup> This is reminiscent of the circumstances in which Thompson found himself directly prior to writing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, under contract to write a book about “The Death of the American Dream” for Random House and having made no progress on it for years (*FLA* 257-258).

been one of the imagined conversations that Thompson frequently wrote in his works. Although *Transmetropolitan* is produced in a partly visual medium and the illustrations of the graphic novel show the conversation happening, it is still couched by the text of Spider's narration; throughout the series the perspective and understanding of the reader is guided and influenced by Spider's narration and by his articles. Therefore, as Thompson's imaginary conversations are filtered through his distinct perspective and narration, so too is Spider's conversation with his editor filtered through Spider's Thompson-esque thoughts:

So that ignorant, thick-lipped, evil whorehopping editor phones me up and *says*,  
 “Does the word **contract** mean anything to you, Jerusalem?”

I was having a mildly paranoid day, mostly due to the fact that the mad priest lady from over the river had taken to nailing weasels to my front door again.

“**Contract?** You’ll never get a **city** hitman up the mountain to me -- you bastards **die** if there’s actual **oxygen** in the air.” (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5)

As this passage also illustrates, these first seven pages which establish Spider's character are written in such a style that if the text was removed from the comic panels it could read very easily as if it was taken from the beginning of a work by Thompson; narrated in the first person by Spider, using a similar vocabulary to Thompson's.<sup>11</sup> In particular, Ellis saw this passage as indicative of the intended style, as he writes that the lines “[s]o that ignorant, thick-lipped, swinish whorehopping editor phones me up and says, ‘Does the word **contract** mean anything to you, Jerusalem?’” were the first paragraph of his proposal when developing *Transmetropolitan* (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 22). As examined in the following section, Spider and Thompson's shared vocabulary is one of the ways that Spider is shown to be a true heir to Thompson through their similar writings as journalists.

These early visual and textual cues are important in establishing the role of Spider as a new version of Thompson, and there are a great deal of them in the first volume of the series. When Spider is first introduced within the text, he bears little physical resemblance to Thompson, having grown his hair and beard long living in the isolation of his mountain sanctuary (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5). However, as the cover of the volume shows, Spider's visual representation throughout the vast majority of the series,

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<sup>11</sup> See for example his conversation with the clerk at the Mint Hotel in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, wherein the scene is presented to the reader from Thompson's heavily drugged perspective and yet is the only view of the scene given to the reader (*FLLV* 23-24).

beginning on page 23 of Volume One, is extremely similar to that of Thompson (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2.

Like both photographs of Thompson and illustrations of him by Ralph Steadman, Spider is almost always pictured smoking or with a cigarette in hand and wearing his trademark sunglasses. An accident with an over-zealous cleaning unit leaves him with a shaved head for most of the series (*Transmetropolitan* 1:23); Thompson also frequently sported a shaved head in the later half of his life after famously shaving his head during his election campaign for Sheriff of Aspen (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 139). There is even a panel on page 28 of the first volume where Spider blows smoke rings from his mouth in a style that is strikingly similar to the style that Steadman uses to illustrate Thompson in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (see Fig. 3; *Transmetropolitan* 1:28; *FLLV* 14).

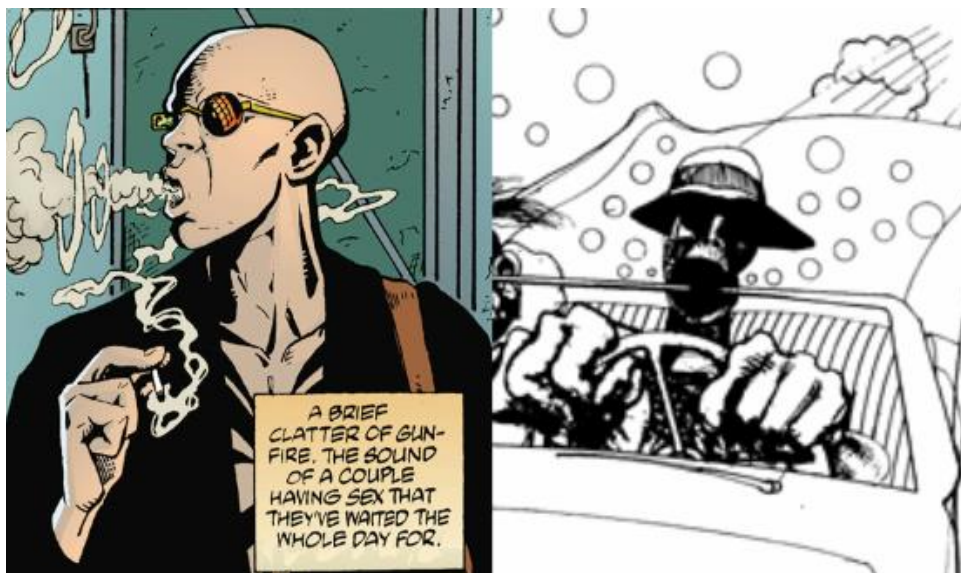


Fig. 3.

Altogether the bald-headed, sunglasses-wearing, constantly-smoking image of Spider Jerusalem when placed side by side with photographs of Thompson is a clear rendering of the man into this new graphic novel form. Establishing visual links between Spider

and Thompson is particularly important in *Transmetropolitan* because, as Hatfield notes, in comics “the written text can function like images, and images like written text. Comics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image dichotomy” (*Alternative Comics* 36), and therefore it is not enough for Spider to be connected to Thompson in the words of the series, he must be a visual inheritor of Thompson’s character as well.

Another interesting visual connection between Spider and Thompson is that both have a symbol that becomes attached to their persona and famously recognizable as representing them. For Thompson this was the two-thumbed fist first used in his campaign to be the Sheriff of Aspen (Benton), which later became associated with him as the “Gonzo fist” to the extent that the cannon that shot his ashes at his funeral was in the shape of it (McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* 364-365). For Spider, the symbol is the three-eyed smiley face; originally used by the Transients in the Angels 8 district, it becomes linked so strongly to Spider after his article on the riot in the district becomes his famous “return to journalism” in Volume One, that in Volume Ten protestors in support of Spider plaster stickers of the symbol onto riot police (*Transmetropolitan* 10:48). Ellis even writes that in his proposal to Vertigo for *Transmetropolitan*, the three-eyed smiley was the only thing he put on the first page, which illustrates how significant the symbol is to the narrative of the series (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 22).

While the visual connections between Spider and Thompson are important in immediately establishing Spider as a version of Thompson, it is only the beginning of the link between the two. In much the same way that Kemp’s personal and professional backgrounds mirror Thompson’s in *The Rum Diary*, so too do Spider Jerusalem’s in *Transmetropolitan*. Spider’s journalistic process, and his ability to completely immerse himself in what he is writing about, like Thompson’s, is supported and influenced by his interpersonal relationships. As evidenced in Thompson’s books of his collected correspondence, *The Proud Highway* and *Fear and Loathing in America*, he maintained close working relationships and even friendships with many of his editors over the years; likewise, Spider has an enduring, if somewhat odd, friendship and working relationship with his editor Mitchell Royce. Interestingly, given Spider’s visual similarities to Thompson and the way he was drawn by Ralph Steadman, Royce bears a striking resemblance to an older Jann Wenner, who was Thompson’s editor at *Rolling Stone* (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4.

As Thompson's relationships with his editors were important to his writing process – his correspondence shows that he shaped the ideas of his writing in his letters, such as a letter from January 13<sup>th</sup> 1970 to his editor Jim Silberman in which the use of Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was being formed (*FLA* 258-269) – so too is Spider's. In both instances it is less about the editor functioning in the traditional sense of editing the work of the writer as both Thompson and Spider eschewed having their work altered by anyone other than themselves. Rather Royce, and in Thompson's case a host of editors throughout the years, functions more as a manager for Spider's life so that he can be focused on his writing. It is Royce who secures Spider journalism insurance, an apartment, and assistants with whom Spider also has a complex relationship.

Spider's assistants are not just professional associates but two of his closest personal relationships as well. Like Thompson's, Spider's first marriage ended in what was not an amicable divorce (*Transmetropolitan* 2:79). When *Transmetropolitan* begins, Spider is divorced and single, as was Thompson in 1997 when the first issue of the series was published. When he is forced into the city to write, Royce sets him up with his first assistant, Channon Yarrow, a tall, blond, ex-stripper, journalism student (*Transmetropolitan* 1:80). She is essentially exactly what Hunter Thompson once demanded his editor Jann Wenner procure for him, “a bright & hopefully decorative *girl* assistant .... to some extent I'm a bit of a public figure – but I also have to work, and that means I need a human buffer to keep well-meaning people from driving me fucking nuts” (*FLA* 455). As Thompson had multiple assistants over the course of his career, so too does Spider find himself with a new assistant after Channon temporarily leaves him (*Transmetropolitan* 3:32). Spider ends up sleeping with his new assistant, Yelena Rossini (*Transmetropolitan* 3:101), and over the course of the series clearly falls into a

relationship with her as shown subtly in the tender moments between the two.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the series their relationship is cemented, and, as Yelena says, “I get worried about him when I’m not around. He needs me around” (*Transmetropolitan* 10:130). This progression from assistant to romantic partner mirrors Thompson’s own with his second wife Anita, who began working as Thompson’s assistant in 1999 and whom he fell in love with and eventually married (“Anita Thompson”).

In his writing Spider occasionally gives glimpses into his childhood in the city, in the way that Thompson rarely but occasionally writes of his childhood in Kentucky; as Thompson’s past built for him “The Fear” that all versions of him spend their lives running from, so too does Spider write of where he grew up:

It took me a lot of years to work up the escape velocity to launch out of here, and I’ve never been back. Never wanted to risk tumbling back down into that gravity well; never wanted to risk not being able to claw my way out again.  
(*Transmetropolitan* 10:184)

Though the words “The Fear” are not used explicitly here, it is nonetheless reminiscent of the same force that drives Thompson to be successful lest he sink back into nothingness and obscurity, the “gravity well” as Spider describes it. Spider’s fear of the past and drive to escape the mediocrity of it are part of what motivate his need to be a successful journalist, and have been for most of his life as he gives glimpses to the reader in his articles:

I grew up here, during its worst years ... Spending days and nights sitting out on the sidewalk with the other kids, listening to all our parents spouting uneducated hate-filled bullshit over cheap beers and thinking, is this it? and is that me in twenty years? and planning our escapes, from eight years old planning our grand escapes from our lives.

Whenever I come back here, I wonder who got out. (*Transmetropolitan* 5:42)

These words are reminiscent of Kemp’s in *The Rum Diary* that “all he wants is Out, Flee. He doesn’t give a good shit for St. Louis or his friends or his family or anything else ... he just wants to find some place where he can breathe ...” (*RD* 60), and show that the deep rooted need to “keep moving” as Raoul Duke wrote in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (*FLLV* 17) is as present in Spider as it ever has been in Thompson’s characters.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, see Volume Eight wherein Yelena writes an article under Spider’s name and sends it in to be published while he is comatose, an action which would have got anyone else shot with his bowel disrupter gun, but which only results in a tender moment between her and Spider (*Transmetropolitan* 8:92-93).



The darkness and seriousness inherent in *The Fear* and the need to flee that are seen in flashes in Kemp and Duke are likewise seen in Spider. To the outer world Spider is all bravado and wildness, but there are pages where the reader sees him alone and more vulnerable, as in volume four, where after contemplating the overly rapid passage of time and his inability to write as fast as he'd like, we see him slump against the wall, head in his hand, tears leaking from his eyes (*Transmetropolitan* 4:20). Later when talking about the city in a Thompsonesque soliloquy he says:

This area has had, for ninety-nine years, the highest suicide rate in the city.

In fact, this block skews the overall suicide figures for the city so hard that this city has the highest suicide rate of all cities on earth, except Calcutta ...

This place just breaks your fucking heart. (*Transmetropolitan* 7:135)

This passage also illustrates that, like Thompson, who occasionally wrote things like the introduction to *The Great Shark Hunt* that seem to show a propensity for taking his own life (*The Great Shark Hunt* 17-18), Spider's sense of his own mortality plays on him and influences his actions and his writing. When faced with the prospect that he will eventually not be able to write anymore, Spider has a conversation with one of his assistants, Channon, that shows that, like Thompson, if he can't function the way he wants that he might as well not be alive:

Channon: Spider, you're not dying.

Spider: Yes I am. In all the ways that count.

Spider: In about a year, I'm going to be a complete vegetable. Odds are that my long-term memory will go away, my short-term memory will embarrass a goldfish, and I'll never write another word again.

Spider: I won't be able to retain or process information.

Spider: Sounds like dying to me. (*Transmetropolitan* 8:124)

Like Kemp, who at the end of *The Rum Diary* is worried about the passage of time and aging, and Thompson, who described himself at the relatively young age of 28 as "drunk, old + ugly",<sup>13</sup> there are moments where Spider's wild and confident exterior slips and we see a darker part of what drives him: a clipping from one of his articles reads: "sometimes I want to be someone else so much it hurts" (*Transmetropolitan* 10:237); he describes himself in another article despairingly: "now I am Old. Pieces of my body are moving around. I am no longer Pretty" (*Transmetropolitan* 10: 166); and in the very first volume he implores Channon: "oh, Christ ... *never* tell me I'm old" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:86). As it does with the Kemp and Duke versions of Thompson,

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<sup>13</sup> See footnote 6

and with Thompson himself, Spider's sense of mortality and despair over aging drive a need for success as a writer with the sense that this is what will give him immortality:

"They're all talking about me. I am gone and yet I exercise more power over their lives than ever before. I cannot be destroyed. Moo hoo ha ha" ...

"You bastards. You stupid, stupid bastards. All you've done is taken the restraints off me."

"And you can't take away what I've already said. All my work is in the stores and on the feeds, and you can't make it all unhappy."

"I cannot be destroyed."

"You can't kill me." (*Transmetropolitan* 7:14-15)

This particular scene illustrates how even while his mortality weighs heavily on him as the glimpses of the occasionally despondent Spider show, journalistic success provides the internal boost for him that it did for Thompson, contributing towards occasionally maniacal behaviour. And as Duke was in many ways a wilder and less restrained version of Kemp, Spider Jerusalem, with the even looser social mores of the dystopian future that he exists in, is even less restrained than Raoul Duke, in a natural progression of a character that Thompson used in his post-Gonzo works to push boundaries. And even as the boundaries for what is acceptable are looser in Spider's world than they were in Thompson's, he still manages to go beyond them with his actions. One of the first things Spider does upon being forced to leave his mountain sanctuary is to blow up a bar with a rocket launcher (*Transmetropolitan* 1:10), though even this seemingly extreme action is not entirely without precedent from Thompson who in his 1986 article "Orgy of the Dead" details his experience blowing up a jeep for fun (*Generation of Swine* 191-194). Like Thompson, whose love of firearms was well known, Spider is also clearly a firearms enthusiast<sup>14</sup>. He is known to carry a "bowel disrupter" gun, which he threatens to use frequently and is not hesitant to do so – even going so far as to use it on the President primarily known as "The Beast" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:96). He usually seems to care very little about how his actions are taken by others, frequently running on top of the roofs of cars when it suits him as the most convenient or speediest way to get where he is going, shouting at a motorist who protests this once: "Silence vermin! I am in command here! Who did you vote for,

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<sup>14</sup> Thompson's love of firearms is commented on in both his own works and frequently in interviews, such as his comment in an interview with Tim Russert in 2003 that his view of guns was that "I—I just enjoy them. Like motorcycles, I enjoy the precision, the – how they work. I don't consider them weapons or, as much as tools, or toys" (AGW 335).



vermin woman? *Did* you vote? Can you *read*? Have you got *thumbs*? *Show me your fucking thumbs! **Thumbs!***" (*Transmetropolitan* 9:20-21)<sup>15</sup>.

Indeed, public, sometimes incoherent, sometimes drunken, wild ranting and shouting is a trait developed in Raoul Duke's drug-fuelled public outbursts that Spider continues with gusto. Sometimes, as it was with Duke's tirades, this is bolstered by drugs or alcohol, such as when a semi-intoxicated Spider leaps upon a table in a restaurant after he has been drinking, shouting:

I want to see humans talking about human life, personally. I *want* to see people who give a shit about the world. I want ... I want to see *possessed* journalists! *Yes!* I want to see people like *me*, rising up with hate, laying about them with fiery eyes and steaming genitalia ---(*Transmetropolitan* 5:69)

But even this speech, given as it is while Spider throws his wine glass, scattering dishes and food from a table top and has to be pulled down by his assistants, at its heart contains a serious message about the troubling apathy of the society around him and the downfall of journalism. Spider is not just being written for laughs, or just to shock. He still delivers the social commentary that was at the heart of Thompson's writing and this is one of the many ways that he is a true continuation of Thompson's character rather than just a parody like Uncle Duke. When Spider begins yelling in the middle of the city "I hate you! I fucking *hate* you! And you! ***You're all fucking killing me!***" (*Transmetropolitan* 4:43), it may seem to be for no reason to the average passer-by, but is in fact in response to his anger at the state of the world, which the reader is privy to via a monologue in a Thompson-style article shown in text boxes used to represent his writing interspersed with images of Spider's view of the city:

They don't care. The billboards, the TV pitches every five minutes, the flyers and the canvassers and all that; and they don't care. They're not thinking about the election. They don't even notice. They're thinking about going to the movies and stoning people and reinventing the street and having a quick smoke during their lunch hour. They're thinking about themselves. That's all. I've let myself get locked away and sucked into this goddamn election. I let myself make friends with Vita. Look where that got us. (Parasitic little bastard.) And look. I'm the only one who's remotely fucking interested. (see Fig. 5; *Transmetropolitan* 4:40-42)

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<sup>15</sup> See *Transmetropolitan* 1:17-18, 7:45, and 9:20-23 for instances of Spider running on top of cars.



Fig. 5.

Spider's method of delivering his verbal rants even directly mirrors Thompson's at times, such as when he delivers a passionate speech by shouting at the city from the balcony of his apartment in Volume Four (*Transmetropolitan* 4:148). Spider's mode of conveying speeches from his balcony to the unsuspecting general public is reminiscent of Thompson's article "Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl" where he describes a "sermon I delivered off the twentieth-floor balcony of the Hyatt Regence in Houston" (*Fear and Loathing at Rolling Stone* 294).

These shared characteristics of using wild language and style, and unconventional methods of communication, are a large part of the outward personality presented to the public by both Spider and Thompson, and was how both wrote themselves in their books and articles. This is as much a conscious decision to create a public face for Spider as it was for Thompson, shown in the seriousness that both at times return to in their articles. The ability to be both "Gonzo" and articulate intelligently on serious issues is an important facet of Thompson as a writer, and Spider

as a continuation of Thompson, and can be seen by examining the connection between their writing.

### **The Journalist Within the Character - The Connection Between Thompson's Writing and Spider's:**

Thompson's language was an important part of his iconic Gonzo style of writing and Spider as an evolution of his character has also inherited his style of language, a significant factor in continuing Thompson's legacy as a journalist in the fictionalised articles of Spider as well as maintaining Spider as a progression of Thompson's character. Both Thompson and Spider have a propensity for using chaotically aggressive language both in their writing and in their conversations with people. The vocabulary of Spider frequently mirrors that of Thompson; Spider favours the word "whorehopper", particularly in reference to the editor who forces him to leave his mountain sanctuary to fulfil his contract to write more books<sup>16</sup>. Likewise, Thompson for a lengthy period in his writing favoured the word "pigfucker" to describe people<sup>17</sup>, which Spider even uses once when speaking to The Beast: "I couldn't *resist* being locked in a room with you you pigfucker" (*Transmetropolitan* 4:65). Spider famously begins referring to the people of the city as "the new scum" in his articles after the presidential candidate The Smiler uses this phrase derogatorily to describe the voters (*Transmetropolitan* 3:50-51) and this is even the title of Volume Four of the series. The new scum becomes a key part of the way that Spider writes about politics and the people of the city:

Just a little reminder: when I talk about the doomed, the scum, the people who no longer give a shit, the people who look away from the pain in the streets, the people who don't care who runs the country...

... when I talk about the filth of the city...

... I'm talking about **you**. (*Transmetropolitan* 10:242)

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<sup>16</sup> See Volume One, page five "that ignorant, thick-lipped, evil whorehopping editor" as the first instance, from page 6 of Volume One on Spider uses the name "the whorehopper" to refer to his editor throughout the series (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5-6).

<sup>17</sup> See for example his correspondence in *Fear and Loathing in America* for frequent use of the words, including a statement that applies the word to most people that "[i]t's clear to me – and has been since the age of 10 or so – that most people are bastards, thieves and yes – even pigfuckers" (185); an attitude shared by Spider who declares that "all people are scum. No matter what they look like." (*Transmetropolitan* 1:84).

This theme of his writing is very much a continuation of Thompson's; Thompson wrote on the "the swine" as a generation of the 80s, and even titled the second "Gonzo Papers" book *Generation of Swine*, writing in the introduction to it a description of that generation that is similar to what Spider writes of the New Scum:

What do you say, for instance, about a generation that has been taught that *rain is poison* and *sex is death*? If making love might be fatal and if a cool spring rain on any summer afternoon can turn a crystal blue lake into a puddle of black poison scum right in from of your eyes, there is not much left except TV and relentless masturbation.

It's a strange world. Some people get rich and others eat shit and die. (10-11)

Thompson also once used the phrase "the New Dumb" to refer to "gibberish" political writing (*Better than Sex* 233), and wrote an article on the pardoning of Richard Nixon titled "Fear and Loathing in Limbo: The Scum Also Rises" (*Fear and Loathing at Rolling Stone* 319-344).

The link between Spider's vocabulary and writing style and Thompson's is one of the strongest ways that Ellis establishes Spider not just as a shallow parody of Thompson's character but as an actual continuation of his literary legacy. The articles written by Spider mirror Thompson both in style and in attitude and content so strongly that they could believably have been written by him. There are frequent monologues by Spider, as well as imaginary conversations (both techniques commonly used by Thompson), such as a scene in volume five where we see Spider hold an ostensibly remembered conversation between him and his mother where the change in the speaker is shown visually by changing the angle at which Spider is viewed and which switches suddenly from imaginary conversation to a Thompionesque rant (see Fig. 6; *Transmetropolitan* 5:12-14).

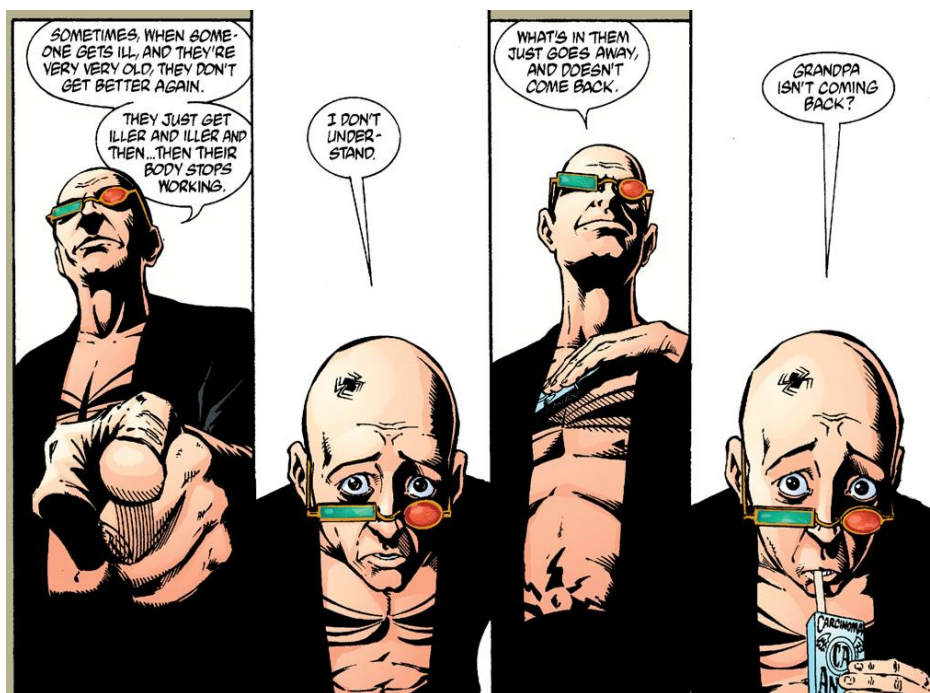


Fig. 6.

It is not just the language and tone of Spider's articles that establish his work as a continuation of Thompson's, but also his methods of writing, the style and content of his work, and his attitude towards what good journalism should be. Spider is a continuation of everything that Thompson established with his unique style of Gonzo journalism. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson wrote:

No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the ticket, take the ride ... and if it occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well ... maybe chalk it off to forced *consciousness expansion*: Tune in, freak out, get beaten. (FLLV 89)

The phrase "buy the ticket, take the ride" became symbolic of the all-in, completely submersed in the subject, Gonzo journalism that he wrote, and one of the recurring phrases typical of his work; used for instance in the introduction to *Generation of Swine* to describe the role of a journalist where he writes:

It is always bad business to try to explain yourself on paper – at least not all at once – but when you work as a journalist and sign your name in black ink on white paper above everything you write, that is the business you're in, good or bad. Buy the ticket, take the ride. I have said that before and I have found, to my horror, that it's true. (10)

In *Transmetropolitan*, Spider begins an article about his intentions to expose the heart of the foulness of President Callahan's administration by writing:

Brothers and sisters, I have a scheme. Journalism is a ticket to ride, to travel deep into the dark heart of the pictures you see on your TV and feeds. And I'm going to take you on a ride with me. A short weird ride to the heart of darkness. You and me, we're going into the White House. (*Transmetropolitan* 6:98)

The language here and the meaning behind it undeniably echoes Thompson's, so much so that it could believably have been written by Thompson himself. The bulk of *Transmetropolitan*, in fact, is either articles by Spider that read like articles by Thompson, or is about Spider's process of journalism which reads very like Thompson writing about his own process. It is the context of the fictional world and the dystopian future that most differentiate the journalism in *Transmetropolitan* from Thompson; taken without context the journalism could have been from any post-Gonzo period of Thompson's career.

Spider's work even mirrors the mechanics of Thompson's writing; like Thompson who was wont to capitalise words in the middle of sentences for emphasis (such as "The Fear", which is always capitalised), so too does Spider in his articles: "The sudden feeling that this place is Not On Your Side" (*Transmetropolitan* 2:111), for instance. And, like Thompson, who wrote of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* that "I refuse to let you or anybody else edit the fucker ... this is *my* book. There is *no* editor on it" (*FLA* 449), so too is Spider in full control of his work, writing in an article that "No fucker rewrites *me*" (*Transmetropolitan* 10:158). As previously mentioned Thompson believed that true Gonzo journalism ought to be to "buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication – without editing", and that "the writer *must* be a participant in the scene, while he's writing it –"; Thompson considered *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* a "*failed experiment* in Gonzo Journalism" because he had been required to edit it somewhat for print in *Rolling Stone* (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106). He believed that "the American print media are not ready for this kind of thing, yet" (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106).

Many years later in a fictional future, Spider is able to fulfil Thompson's vision of exactly what true Gonzo journalism should be. In his first piece of journalism upon his return to the city, Spider ends up in the middle of a riot in the Angels 8 Transient District, where he makes his way to the vantage point of the rooftop of a strip club so that he can see everything from the middle of it as it happens, and writes an article from the middle of the riot, streaming it directly from his typewriter to his editor

(*Transmetropolitan* 1:51-71)<sup>18</sup>. In doing so, Spider defines true journalism as he sees it, and succeeds in fulfilling Thompson's expectations and definition of what true Gonzo journalism is:

[Spider] "Y'see, they say journalism is the art of controlling your environment but that's all wrong. I can't control *anything* with this typewriter. All this *is*, is a *gun*."

[Royce] "Where's my fucking column?"

[Spider] "Royce, *listen* to me. I'm on top of a stripclub on the corner of Cranberry and Nixon, in the middle of this riot. I'm going to start writing now -- I'm going to beam the column through to you as I write, okay?"

[Royce] "That leaves us no time for polishing or rewriting..."

[Spider] "*Screw* polish! You're getting this raw, as I see it. You want it or not?"

... "*Right*. As I was *saying*. Journalism is just a *gun*. It's only got one bullet in it, but if you *aim* right, that's all you *need*. Aim it right, and you can blow a kneecap off the world." (*Transmetropolitan* 1:62)

The article accomplishes both Thompson's desire for true Gonzo journalism by being written from the middle of what Spider is writing about, as he is actually involved in the events, and being uploaded and published as he writes it, and Spider's desire to "blow a kneecap off the world" by effectively causing the police to back down due to social awareness caused by his article's immediacy. It also interestingly links an important part of Thompson's journalistic history with Spider's; one of Thompson's famous early pieces of political writing was an article about his experiences caught up in the midst of the riot at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968 (*FLA* 113-118). Though Thompson lived through the riot without being beaten or jailed, he was nonetheless deeply affected by the experience and later wrote that "[n]ow, years later, I still have trouble when I think about Chicago. That week at the Convention changed everything I'd ever taken for granted about this country and my place in it" (*Kingdom of Fear* 78), and that it was then that he discovered that "the police arm of the United States government was capable of hiring vengeful thugs to break the very rules we all thought we were operating under" (*Kingdom of Fear* 82). So too does Spider's experience in the

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, despite the advances in technology in Spider's world from that of Thompson's lifetime, the machine that Spider uses to write on he calls a typewriter and is essentially an electronic typewriter with a screen (see Volume 1, page 63, panels 2 and 5 for visuals). With its ability to stream Spider's article directly to his editor, it is reminiscent of Thompson's "Mojo Wire" typewriter and fax that features notably in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (see *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, page 211, for example).

Angels 8 riot deeply affect him and reinforce his attitudes towards the government and the police, as he writes during the riot:

You see, here's how it works; Civic Center and the cops do what the fuck they like, and you sit still.

[...]This "riot" here, this terrible shit-rain visited upon a bunch of naïve and uppity fetishists; you paid for it. Lap it up.

You must like it when people in authority they never earned lie to you.  
(*Transmetropolitan* 1:67)

Spider, unlike Thompson, does not make it out of his experience physically unscathed, and is brutally beaten by the police upon return to his apartment, warned by one "you fuck with us *ever again*, you go home in a *bag*" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:72-73). This experience only motivates Spider's rebellion further, as he laughs, bleeding and bruised after the police leave: "*I'm here to stay! Shoot me and I'll spit your goddamn bullets back in your face! I'm Spider Jerusalem, and fuck all of you! Ha!*" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:74). As Thompson's experience in the riot of '68 stuck with him, so too does Spider never forget his experiences in the Angels 8 riot, later telling Yelena and Channon:

I, on the other hand, do *not* have respect for the law, especially since they publicly beat me in the middle of the fucking street the last time I pointed out they do not do their jobs well.

The cops are not to be trusted. It is *our* very very important job to watch people like cops and ensure that they are working in our interest and defense.  
(*Transmetropolitan* 5:107)

Spider's Angels 8 article and his experiences in actually living the events that he wrote about is clearly as important a part of the events that shape him as a journalist as Thompson's experience in the Democratic Convention riot was. That *Transmetropolitan* shows us not just Spider's process for writing, but also the content of the articles themselves, and a characterisation that builds from the experiences he has while writing his articles, is part of what makes Spider a convincing living version of Thompson instead of just a flat parody.

As a fully developed character, Spider establishes his mission in *Transmetropolitan* to write true journalism and expose the heart of the corruption that has settled into the White House. That mission begins as a direct result of Spider's history and fame as a political writer, and his relationship with the men who at the start of the series are running for the Presidency – the incumbent, "The Beast", and the newcomer Gary Callahan, "The Smiler". Spider's past relationship with The Beast is



alluded to as part of the disenchantment and burnout as a political writer that led him to leave the city and retreat to his mountain solitude – Royce notes early on: “I still remember that essay you wrote when The Beast got elected. I do *not* want to see the word ‘fuck’ typed eight thousand times again” (*Transmetropolitan* 1:21). And yet when Spider sees that The Beast is in town, he immediately gets a look of sinister glee on his face and insists that he and Channon go to interview him (*Transmetropolitan* 1:86-87). Like Thompson, Spider is incapable of staying away from political journalism. Spider is, as Thompson describes himself, a political junkie, and, for both of them, “there is no such thing as an ex-junkie” (*Better Than Sex* 15). The Beast is, in many ways, an adaptation of Richard Nixon, and is even visually similar to him (see Fig. 7); and Spider’s attitude towards and relationship with The Beast is akin to Thompson’s with Nixon.



Fig. 7.

Spider was the most famous journalist adversary of The Beast and the one to coin the nickname that stuck so firmly that it is the only way the President is ever referred to. As The Beast says to Spider:

Oh, I remember *your* name, you *fuck*. I remember the things you *wrote* about me. It’s because of *you* that everyone calls me The *Beast*. *Everyone*. The *press*, the *cabinet*, my *children* ... (*Transmetropolitan* 1:93)

In an interesting parallel, Thompson writes of Nixon as a beast:

He had the fighting instincts of a badger trapped by hounds. [...] It is a beast that fights best on its back: rolling under the throat of the enemy and seizing it by the head with all four claws. (*Better Than Sex* 240)

When Spider is asked by The Beast why he started calling him that, Spider answers:

It's how I think of you. A big black animal squatting in the heart of America, shitting huge steaming green turds into the country. [...] You're the ... *thing* in us that votes to fuck other people in the gall bladder, the lizard brain that says nothing but eat-kill-hump-shit ... The Beast. (*Transmetropolitan* 4:63-64)

Spider's relationship with The Beast is clearly hate-filled and at times even physically violent; he shoots The Beast with his bowel disrupter gun on their first meeting after Spider's return to the city (*Transmetropolitan* 1:96), chokes him with his necktie in a later interview (*Transmetropolitan* 4:65), and drugs him with a neurotransmitter in order to listen in on his conversation (*Transmetropolitan* 4:73). As a journalist he writes about him with pure hatred and disgust in his articles: "And now you know what it's like to have you as President; what it's like to be constantly fucked by someone who stinks of shit" (*Transmetropolitan* 4:73). Nevertheless, Spider is frequently given access to personal one-on-one interviews with The Beast due to the very political clout as a journalist that he uses against him; as was Thompson famously granted one-on-one conversations with Nixon over other more conventional journalists (*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* 54-55). Though The Beast could put out press with his own team, Spider is in the world of *Transmetropolitan* as unique as Thompson is in his world. As he says to The Beast:

Why me? You've got an entire tame White House Press Corps to crank out your - - o-oh, I get it. *I'm not* tame. I'm the hard man of American letters, and you gain credibility simply by being interviewed by me ... (*Transmetropolitan* 4:58)

It is an interesting adaptation of the relationship between Thompson and Nixon, with the relationship of Spider to The Beast going far beyond that of a dispassionate observer, to someone passionately and personally involved, as was Thompson's relationship with Nixon:

I have had my own blood relationship with Nixon for many years, but I am not worried about it landing me in hell with him. I have already been there with that bastard, and I am a better person for it. [...] My mother hates Nixon, my son hates Nixon, I hate Nixon, and this hatred has brought us together.

Nixon laughed when I told him this. "Don't worry," he said. "I, too, am a family man, and we feel the same way about you." (*Better than Sex* 239-240)

Spider's relationship with The Beast as it is seen in the present in *Transmetropolitan*, however, is mainly motivated by a desire to get The Beast removed from his role as President (though this desire changes once he realises that Callahan is an even worse candidate for the office); once Callahan wins the election Spider turns his attention and

his journalistic talents to exposing the evil and corruption at the heart of the new regime.

Spider's relationship with Gary Callahan, whom he early on nicknames "The Smiler", is the most prominent motivator and focus of his journalism for most of the series. Like the parallels between The Beast and Richard Nixon, and Spider and Thompson's respective relationships with them, Callahan and his relationship with Spider is initially strikingly similar to that of Thompson and Bill Clinton. There are a number of noticeable similarities between Spider's first meeting with Callahan and Thompson's first meeting with Clinton. Even the motivation behind both Thompson and Spider that led to these meetings was much the same. Spider is pushed into meeting with Callahan by Royce who insists that Spider needs to cover the election for the sake of his career as a journalist despite Spider's initial insistence that political journalism is driving him mad:

Royce: Listen, my friend -- these days you are *working* for a living. Everyone wants to read Spider Jerusalem's take on the election. People have been waiting for it since you came back. As your editor, I have to advise you: cover the convention. If you don't, you're running the risk of making your audience feel betrayed. And a betrayed audience stops reading. (*Transmetropolitan* 3:17)

Ultimately Spider decides to cover Callahan because of his hatred for The Beast, when he is told by ex-political consultant and current drug dealer Kristen that Callahan is the best chance of ousting The Beast from office (*Transmetropolitan* 3:25). Likewise Thompson had gone into his first meeting with Clinton for similar reasons:

I knew I had no choice but to be a part of the 1992 election. Even though I realized it was not going to be much fun, win or lose ...The only other sector of the electorate who would feel any joy on election night were the junkies like me, who understood in their hearts that the only real priority in 1992 was beating George Bush. Nothing else mattered. (*Better than Sex* 14)

Thompson later describes his first meeting with Clinton as not leaving the best impression on him, noting that from the first "he behaved in a queer, distracted manner, and crushed my knuckles together when we shook hands" (*Better than Sex* 102). The encounter only deteriorates from there:

The creepy bastard quickly sat down *right next to me*, about two feet away, and fixed me with a sleepy-looking stare that made me feel uneasy. His eyes narrowed to slits, and at first I thought he was dozing off .... But he appeared to be very alert, very tense, as if he were ready to pounce. (*Better than Sex* 102-103)

This observation is followed by a passage that, though Thompson is writing as “himself” and not using Raoul Duke as he is typically thought to do when blurring the line between fact and fiction, is nonetheless surely at least somewhat fictitious due to its sheer absurdity:

He seemed unhappy, almost angry—as he fondled the reed distractedly and rolled it around in his fingers, saying nothing .... Then he rolled his eyes back in his head and uttered a wild quavering cry that made my blood run cold.

...Then the governor dropped the reed on the table like it was just another half-eaten potato scrap, brushing it blankly aside and smiling warmly at all of us – as if he had just emerged from a pod and was happy to be among friends. (*Better than Sex* 104)

Spider’s first meeting with Callahan is strikingly similar to Thompson’s strange encounter with Clinton. Upon entering Callahan’s room, Spider finds him sitting silently with a large smile plastered on his face (see Fig. 8).

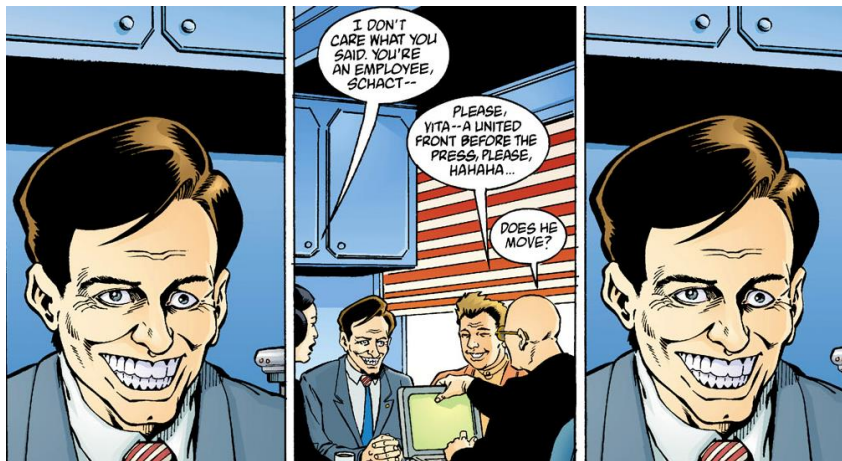


Fig. 8.

Spider speaks with Callahan’s political director Vita Severn and political consultant Alan Schact, and Callahan is absolutely still and silent until Spider asks, “Does he move?” at which point Callahan remains silent for a panel of the comic before saying, while not moving or changing his facial expression from its manic grin at all:

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks: the long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep moans round with many voices. Come, my friends, ‘tis not too late to seek a newer world. “Ulysses.” Tennyson. My favorite poem. A new world. New opposition. New campaign. New politics. New President. (*Transmetropolitan* 3:45)

Whereupon he is silent and still (always with the manic grin) for a panel before throwing a hand out for Spider to shake, clearly startling and unnerving him. It is up

until this point that the mirroring of Callahan to Clinton lasts in *Transmetropolitan*; after their respective meetings Thompson and Spider veer off dramatically in their opinions of the candidates, with Thompson maintaining that Clinton is still the best option in the election (*Better than Sex* 106). Spider, on the other hand, comes away from his meeting with Callahan believing that he is no better than The Beast and writing in his column that “it seems the convention is merely going to decide the face of the guy who’ll be fucking us next” (*Transmetropolitan* 3:51). Though Spider’s opinion of Callahan seems briefly to temper based on his esteem for Callahan’s political consultant Vita, his relationship with Callahan deteriorates quickly into outright hatred and violent animosity after Vita is assassinated and Spider uncovers that it was a political move by Callahan in order to gain sympathy votes. From the end of the third volume to the end of the series, Callahan is the driving force behind most of Spider’s journalism, and for his part Callahan does his best to have Spider discredited, banned from writing, and eventually even attempts to have him assassinated.

Therefore, though Callahan initially seemed to be as clear an adaptation of Clinton as The Beast was of Nixon, from the end of the third volume on he is no longer being written based on Thompson’s experiences. Though Thompson seemed to become progressively more disheartened by politics, writing in *Better than Sex* “no wonder the poor bastards from Generation X have lost their sense of humor about politics. Some things are not funny to the doomed” (5), he certainly never had an enemy on the level that Spider has with Callahan. It is an important distinction, because it is indicative of Spider’s role not as a straightforward copy of Thompson, his relationships, and his articles; instead Ellis uses the richly developed character that Thompson created and developed in his works and continues to evolve him. As Thompson’s character changes and grows from Paul Kemp to Raoul Duke, so too does he evolve from Raoul Duke to Spider Jerusalem. He is never just a static character; by his continual use and evolution he is seemingly as real as Thompson himself, which is why the flat parodies and the standard practice of mainly critiquing him only for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* do not do justice to the complexity of a character that continues to live and change throughout decades of work. Thompson’s background as a political writer, the richness and continually evolving character he created, his established belief in using illustrators to capture the true essence of people and events rather than photographs and the concrete imagery this linked to his character are all part of why he was uniquely suited to have a graphic novel series like *Transmetropolitan* created from the character he began, as the next section will explore.

## The Quasi-Fictional Serious Journalist: Why Hunter Thompson was Singularly Suited to Becoming Spider Jerusalem

Often when comics are thought of it is either in terms of superheroes like Batman and Superman, or in regards to the often frivolous short-form comic strips like the Thompson-hated *Doonesbury*, a fact which, as Randy Duncan and Matthew Smith note, does “not accurately represent the variety or potential of the medium” (1). As Thierry Groensteen writes, “comic art suffers from an extraordinarily narrow image, given the richness and diversity of its manifestations” (3). For decades now, however, alternative press graphic novels have been tackling serious content and themes, and a gradual shift in the perception of graphic narratives has occurred (Heer and Worcester xi). Particularly, the graphic novel form has allowed comics to be taken seriously as a form of literature (Hatfield, *Alternative Comics* ix). *Transmetropolitan* is a prime example of this, and Ellis himself notes that he is “writing at a time when comics are finally becoming a credible, adult art” (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 32). By covering and engaging with complex socio-political issues, *Transmetropolitan* exists as a serious literary work despite the prejudices against its form.

Thompson’s legacy as a significant political journalist is an important facet of the space that *Transmetropolitan* inhabits as a complex and meaningful series. That *Transmetropolitan* thoroughly develops the continuation of Thompson’s character and engages with Thompson’s full background as a New Journalist, rather than just focusing on the often-parodied version of Raoul Duke in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and allows for a strong connection to his political journalism. Interestingly, Ellis writes of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* that it “is the best book Hunter Thompson ever wrote, and it’s unfairly overshadowed by the others” which supports the idea that it was Thompson’s political writing that was an important factor in Ellis’ evolution of Thompson’s character to Spider (“Warren Ellis: Chronofile-Minimal”). The overarching storyline of the ten volumes of *Transmetropolitan* is centred around a plot that covers ideas about the abuse of political power, government and police corruption, poverty and the mistreatment of the poor, the mind-numbing superficiality of mass media, and the responsibility of journalists to present the truth to their readers. By writing Spider Jerusalem as the continuation of a journalist with an established background of serious political writing there is a history and weight immediately given to Spider’s credentials as a journalist, and a credibility and level of gravitas granted to

the series that gives it a basis to tackle serious ideas. Furthermore, Thompson believed in the fluidity of “truth”:

[...] not to say that Fiction is necessarily “more true” than Journalism – or vice versa – but that both “fiction” and “journalism” are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106)

Therefore though Spider, and his journalism, are both technically “fiction”, inherent in the idea of Thompson is the idea that the artificial distinction between fact and fiction means that the fundamental ideas in Spider’s journalism have the possibility to be as “true” as actual journalism. As television reporter Robert McX states about Spider, Channon, and Yelena: “Their work is unconventional, but it is increasingly backed by evidence that, at the very least, asks awkward questions” (*Transmetropolitan* 10:78). In a way this statement also describes *Transmetropolitan*; it is an unconventional series, but is backed by ideas that apply to the real world, linked by a character made more real by his development from an actual established journalist who frequently wrote on the same socio-political subject matter.

What made Thompson uniquely suited to being the basis for a graphic novel series was not just the subject matter of his journalism and his demonstrated perspective that fiction could be as equally “true” as nonfiction, but that he had already begun the process of creating a character of himself that bridged his own fiction and nonfiction, a character that existed so strongly in Thompson’s works that he became “real” to the extent that he was even separate from Thompson himself in a way. Thompson was already Paul Kemp and Raoul Duke, so there were precedents for him being a semi-fictional character who was still believable and whose journalism was still taken seriously. Spider Jerusalem as a wholly fictional character can be more easily accepted as the continuation of another character than of an actual man. In the book of fan commentaries on *Transmetropolitan* published after this thesis was begun, there is one essay on Thompson which claims that “Spider Jerusalem is not Hunter Thompson. Nor would we want him to be” (Nevett 71). The basis of the essay seems to come partly from a dislike of Thompson’s later writing (Nevett 61), with the main argument being that Spider cannot be Thompson because Spider is not an exact biographical copy of Thompson (71). The essay however does not consider that Thompson as a character in his work is different from Thompson the man, and furthermore does not engage with his entire body of work as there is only one passing mention to the publication of *The Rum Diary*. Spider Jerusalem is not exactly the same as Thompson, any more than Paul

Kemp or Raoul Duke were exactly the same as Thompson. Spider is a continuation of Thompson's character, not the man himself.

Not only did Thompson already exist as a character, but he stressed the importance of being illustrated instead of represented with photographs of himself. Thompson developed the link between his character and being represented with cartoons early on when he insisted that he wanted an illustrator for his Kentucky Derby article because he didn't "want to work with photographers" (AGW 103); this led to "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" being illustrated by Ralph Steadman, beginning a lasting relationship between Steadman's art and Thompson's writing. *Transmetropolitan* therefore already has an illustrated basis on which to build the character of Spider Jerusalem, which it does by visually referencing Steadman's character design for Thompson in the way that Robertson draws Spider. It is furthermore interesting given how important Ralph Steadman's art was to Thompson's later works and branding of his character that the style of *Transmetropolitan* depends heavily on Robertson's art melding with Ellis' text. Though having a separate writer and illustrator is common for graphic novels— as Scott McCloud notes, "writing and drawing are seen as separate disciplines, writers and artists as separate breeds" (47)—it nonetheless is a fitting continuation of the Thompson-Steadman dynamic. Author Warren Ellis clearly cared as much about how his writing was illustrated as Thompson did, stating in general about his comics:

I always prefer to know who the artist is in advance, so I can study their work, divine what their strengths and weaknesses are, so that, you know, they can produce the best possible, and certainly most comfortable, job they can. (*Warren Ellis: Captured Ghosts*)

He also writes that, like Thompson's specific requirements for how his work was represented by Steadman's art, he scripts his comics out in full with directions about the art:

The author who requires specific effects in pacing, layout, visuals or composition can do nothing else. It is the form used by writers who want or need to project their voice. I like to keep a handle on my own pacing and storytelling. (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 24)

Talking specifically about the Ellis-Robertson dynamic in *Transmetropolitan*, Robertson says: "In the beginning it was very hands-on between the two of us, and as we got more comfortable with one another he gave me more freedom" (*Warren Ellis: Captured Ghosts*), which is again reminiscent of the Thompson-Steadman dynamic.



*Transmetropolitan* further builds on the imagery link with ideas about visuality in the text that are similar to Thompson's. Thompson once wrote, for instance, about the importance of not believing all political media because "remember that the camera, too, can lie – especially in the wrong hands" (*FLA* 121). In *Transmetropolitan* this same idea is represented in a conversation between Spider and Vita Severn:

Spider: You changed your hair.

Vita: What?

Spider: You changed your hair. Tell me why.

Vita: That haircut was all cultural buttonpushing, semiotic terrorism. Schact's idea. Made me look tough and smart, but also the underdog, fighting an evil empire as best I can ... (*Transmetropolitan* 3:71)

Ideas such as this, as well as the recurring iconography of the three-eyed smiley face that appears throughout the series as it becomes in a way Spider's version of Thompson's Gonzo fist, show that Ellis and Robertson are aware that by referencing Steadman's art and Thompson's symbols they are subtly reinforcing the link between Spider and Thompson. This would not be possible with a writer who did not already have the rich history of illustrations and imagery that Thompson does.

In addition to the visual cues that link Spider as a continuation of Thompson's character, *Transmetropolitan* also includes several subtle direct references to Thompson as a separate author, accomplished through the use of what Duncan and Smith call "intertextual images" (161). This is interesting as it draws attention to the way that Thompson the author was separate from the character that he had written of himself, and points to *Transmetropolitan* recognizing this rather than just accepting the wildness of Thompson's Raoul Duke at a surface level as being Thompson, without recognizing Thompson's more serious talents as a writer. These references are particularly present in Volume One where the connection between Thompson and Spider is initially established. On the very first page, inside Spider's mountain home, there is a book on his floor bearing the title "*Fear and Loathing*" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:5). In later volumes this trend continues with a volume on the bookshelf of Spider's editor Mitchell Royce in Volume Two bearing the title "*Fear in the...*" and a book on Spider's table in Volume Three with the author's name visible as "Hunter S. Thomps" before being obscured by a bottle of wine (*Transmetropolitan* 2:98, 3:10). However, these references to Thompson as existing separately from Spider Jerusalem do not preclude Spider from being thought of as the same character that Thompson created in Paul Kemp and Raoul Duke. Thompson himself was at the same time the author and the character, and even

occasionally wrote articles where he and Duke existed in the same piece as two separate characters.<sup>19</sup> Spider Jerusalem, as *Transmetropolitan* establishes, is not Thompson himself, but a continuation of the separately existing Thompson character.

Nor does *Transmetropolitan* ignore the fact that previous graphic representations of Thompson by sources other than himself have largely been disrespectful parodies like *Doonesbury*. Instead, the series further emphasises its place as a serious continuation of Thompson's character by having its own versions of the parodies that plagued Thompson become a source of misery for Spider. In an illustration accompanying one of Spider's articles, the three-eyed smiley is shown plastered on a number of t-shirts and mugs, one of which Spider attempts to shove down the throat of his media rep (*Transmetropolitan* 5:39). An entire issue is devoted to the parodies that are made without his approval as a result of Spider's success as a journalist, including a cartoon called "Magical Truthsaying Bastard Spidey!", an overly dramatized TV movie "From the Mountain to the City", and a porno "I Hump it Here" (*Transmetropolitan* 6:6-19). As Thompson wrote of his role as a journalist after becoming famous:

It was one thing to slip into Texas as an anonymous young journalist with a subsistence-level book contract, and quite another to boom into a state full of boomers with a national reputation as some kind of lunatic felon, a journalistic Billy the Kid and a cartoon-character that appeared every day in newspapers all over Texas. (*FLA* 719)

He saw being a famous as a cartoon character as detrimental to his ability to write effectively; so too does Spider observe on discovering the parodies of him:

What they've done -- \*chopf\* -- What they've *done*, the unbelievable fuckers -- \*slop\* -- is made me *safe*. They've made me their fucking pet. Defanged me -- \*chomp\* -- sucked out my goddamn venom -- They didn't have to goddamn kill me, or hunt me down. All they had to do is make me part of the game. Who's going to be scared of someone who's been turned into a fucking porno movie? Who's going to *listen* to someone like that? (*Transmetropolitan* 6:19)

By addressing the issue of parodies head-on like this, *Transmetropolitan* acknowledges the history of detrimental surface level copies of Thompson's character and separates

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<sup>19</sup> See for example his article on the 1968 Democratic National Convention, narrated in the first person, in which towards the end he writes "it suddenly occurred to me -- I had promised to meet Duke at midnight" (*FLA* 117). Later in conversation with Duke and a woman, Duke describes himself and Thompson as "we're just a couple of rude journalists" and Thompson assures the woman that he is "just as uptight" as Duke, characterising the two as similar but separate identities (*FLA* 118).

itself from them, further emphasising the series as serious continuation of Thompson's character, and guiding the reader to think of *Transmetropolitan* not just as a cartoon but as a medium through which substantial issues can be written about.

### **Conclusion:**

Continuing Hunter Thompson's already established character of himself gave *Transmetropolitan* a basis from which to create a series that dealt with serious, real world issues in the fictional world of a graphic novel. That link to Thompson's history as a journalist allowed *Transmetropolitan* to develop as a serious work that can potentially be read as an example of New Journalism itself, as I will discuss in the next chapter. For Thompson, it also continued his legacy in a way that no other representation of him truly had. Though he approved of some recreations of his works, such as the film version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, these only replicated what he had already created rather than adding anything new to the life of his character. For a man who seemed plagued in his writing by time and aging, who wrote early on in his career while still quite young about facing the "deadly ticking of a thousand hungry clocks" (*RD* 204), having his character continued in a serious way in a dystopian future gives a sense of immortality to him.

The connection between Spider Jerusalem and Thompson is so strong, and shows such a deep level of understanding of Thompson's character that there is even a point where Spider's words and diction strikingly match those of Thompson's suicide note; Thompson's note began "No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50" (qtd. in Brinkley, "Football Season Is Over" 68), while Spider, in a moment of anger and desolation, says to a reporter: "Fuck off. No family. No girlfriend. No friends. No love. No hope. No point" (*Transmetropolitan* 4: 149-150). This similarity in style and tone is even more interesting because *Transmetropolitan* was written before Thompson killed himself, therefore the similarities here are not just a matter of Ellis copying a specific instance of Thompson's style but of truly inhabiting it through Spider.

### Chapter Three: Spider Jerusalem, Journalist – the Case for Reading *Transmetropolitan* as New Journalism

#### Introduction:

By using Hunter S. Thompson as the basis for Spider Jerusalem, *Transmetropolitan* gains not just the literary history of Thompson's cross-text character, but also a connection to Thompson's particularly reality-bending style of New Journalism. New Journalism is a label for a style of writing journalism using techniques that had previously been used only in fictional literature, a definition and term which were popularised by Tom Wolfe in his 1972 articles on the subject and further articulated in his seminal anthology *The New Journalism*. As Wolfe describes New Journalism's inception in the 60s, "this discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would ... read like a novel. *Like* a novel, if you get the picture" (21-22). He goes on to write that it then evolved to be "a form that is not merely *like a novel*. It consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose" (48-49).

Thompson, who didn't believe in distinguishing fact from fiction, often eschewed the label "New Journalism", both as it pertained to his work and as a concept in general, writing in 1971 that New Journalism was

a term that Tom Wolfe has been trying to explain, on the lecture-stump, for more than five years ... and the reason he's never been able to properly define "the new journalism" is that it never actually existed, except maybe in the minds of people with a vested personal interest in the "old journalism" – editors, professors and book reviewers who refused to understand that some of the best of the country's young writers no longer recognized "the line" between fiction and journalism. (FLA 420)

Thompson preferred to refer to his particular style of writing as "Gonzo journalism" rather than "New Journalism" as this allowed him to talk about his works in terms of their style rather than the issue of fiction vs. reality that he saw New Journalism as being pointlessly entrenched in. He stated in response to the question about whether there was any difference between Gonzo journalism and New Journalism:

Yeah, I think so. Unlike Tom Wolfe or Gay Talese, for instance, I almost never try to reconstruct a story. They're both much better reporters than I am, but then I

don't really think of myself as a reporter. Gonzo is just a word I picked up because I liked the sound of it – which is not to say there isn't a basic difference between the kind of writing I do and the Wolfe/Talese style. They tend to go back and re-create stories that have already happened, while I like to get right in the middle of whatever I'm writing about—as personally involved as possible. There's a lot more to it than that, but if we have to make a distinction, I suppose that's a pretty safe way to start. (AGW 47)

Moreover Thompson saw the essential qualities of New Journalism as not being aspects that were new so much as traits that had been removed from journalism for academic or commercial reasons, writing in the jacket copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

The only reason Wolfe seems “new” is because William Randolph Hearst bent the spine of American journalism very badly when it was just getting started. All Tom Wolfe did—after he couldn't make it on the *Washington Post* and couldn't even get hired by the *National Observer* – was to figure out that there was really not much percentage in playing the old *Colliers'* game, and that if he was ever going to make it in “journalism,” his only hope was to make it on his own terms: By being *good* in the classical – rather than the contemporary – sense, and by being the kind of journalist that the American print media honor mainly in the breach. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 108)

These comments suggest that though Thompson found the label New Journalism to be somewhat fatuous, and did not apply it to his own works, he understood why Wolfe chose to push it as a concept in order to gain critical legitimacy. Moreover later in life he seemed to soften his opinion on the label; in a 1997 interview answering a question as to whether he saw Gonzo journalism and New Journalism as separate or intertwined, he stated that they were “[i]ntertwined, in that it is no accident that Gonzo is in Tom Wolfe's book *The New Journalism*” (AGW 238).

Regardless of Thompson's opinion of the application of the New Journalism title to his works, they have frequently been labelled as such by reviewers and academics. Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* includes both “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and an excerpt from *Hell's Angels*, making Thompson the only author in the anthology other than Wolfe to be featured twice. This early ascription of Thompson as a defining example of New Journalism stuck; as Robert Boynton notes in *The New New Journalism* (2005), Thompson is one of the six writers most frequently focused on in studies of New Journalism (xviii-xix).

This chapter examines how, through its use of Spider Jerusalem's Thompsonesque style in his writing, his methods of investigative journalism, and the way that the formatting and style of the art and text in the series is utilised in a method that gives *Transmetropolitan* a visual context as a collection of journalism, the series could be read as a work of New Journalism.

### **Spider as a New Journalist**

If we accept that because of the style and method of his journalism Thompson is a New Journalist despite his distaste for the label, and we accept that Spider Jerusalem is a continuation of the character that Thompson created of himself, Spider therefore inherits a context of not just being a journalist but of being a "New Journalist". While New Journalism as a style has a fluctuating definition, it has traditionally been applied to journalism that, however made to read like fiction, is in the basic sense nonfiction. As Mark Weingarten writes:

There's no fixed definition for New Journalism, granted, and its critics have often pointed to its maddeningly indeterminate meaning as a major shortcoming. How can you have a movement when no one knows what that movement represents? .... The answer is that it's journalism that reads like fiction and rings with the truth of reported fact. It is, to borrow the title of a 1997 anthology of literary journalism, the art of fact. (7)

Thompson's legacy does not in and of itself inherently make *Transmetropolitan* a work of New Journalism, but rather sets up Spider Jerusalem as a fictional character who is a New Journalist in the world of the series. As an evolution of Thompson, Spider displays the qualities as a writer valued by the New Journalists while eschewing the labels that groups of the media would seek to place on him.

As a continuation of Thompson's character, Spider's writing style as a journalist is clearly inherited from Thompson, and he in many ways fulfils Thompson's beliefs of how true Gonzo journalism should be written. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Gonzo journalism is a style thought of as a subgenre of New Journalism though not all New Journalism is Gonzo. New Journalists could be more detached than Thompson's ideal for Gonzo. According to Thompson the epitome of Gonzo requires complete involvement:

True Gonzo reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor. Because the writer *must* be a

participant in the scene, while he's writing it – or at least taping it, or even sketching it. Or all three. Probably the closest analogy to the ideal would be a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least a main character. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 106)

Spider accomplishes this by being a participant in his research process, a character in his articles, and even his own photographer through the use of his “live shades” which are glasses that record still photography and are keyed to his optic nerves (*Transmetropolitan* 1:24). Spider practises journalism that seems to live up to Thompson's ideals of what successful Gonzo journalism entails. He throws himself completely into experiencing the subjects of his articles fully, as when he visits The City's reservations; over the course of researching the article Spider is stripped naked, injected with a multitude of very large needles full of “medical loads” of immunisations and has a temporary communicator inserted in his body, all in order to experience a variety of reservations (including the Farsight community where he inhales “Information Pollen” which later has serious repercussions on his health). He does this so that he can write about the reservations first-hand because he thinks it is an important story that needs to be given a narrative, and as a New Journalist this means experiencing what he is writing (*Transmetropolitan* 2:61-74). Spider's unconventional methods as a journalist in his world follow both Thompson's ideals for Gonzo journalism and the qualities that Wolfe and others valued in Thompson as they applied the label New Journalism to him. In keeping with Thompson's legacy, while Spider's style in his articles is clearly that of New Journalism, using unconventional literary techniques rather than straightforward factual reporting, his methods are clearly more like Thompson's Gonzo brand of participatory journalism than Wolfe's more removed writing style.

This method of journalism is consistently evident in Spider's journalism throughout the series. As William McKeen describes Thompson's role as a New Journalist, so too does Spider use “the technique of making the process of getting the story into the meat of the story” (*Outlaw Journalist* 79). Thompson's wild and uninhibited depiction of his use of drugs in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is well known, and he remained consistently open about the use of drugs in his writing, stating in one of his last interviews before his suicide in 2005 that “most drugs have been very good to me. I use drugs, and if I abuse them, well, show me where” (AGW 381). Spider likewise calls his drugs “journalist's equipment” (*Transmetropolitan* 1:124), and is seen

throughout the series swallowing pills or injecting himself with needles before and while writing his articles. In true New Journalist/Gonzo fashion this makes its way into the content of his articles as unapologetically as it does into Thompson's. In one for example he writes:

You and I need to sit down and have a little chat about drugs. Yes.

You're complaining about my column again, you see. You're complaining that I'm discussing horrific drug abuse (my own) and describing it in less than "responsible" ways. "Responsible," it seems, means I must condemn my own actions. My columns are attacked for discussing drugs in a "celebratory," "greedy" and "horrid unGodly dopesucking" way.

[...]Your kids are not drooling because they're kids. They're drooling because, put bluntly, they're all fucked up on drugs.

And thank God for that. (*Transmetropolitan* 10:154)

To Spider, who writes openly about anything and everything, his drug use is a source for his journalism because it is an experience he can write about: "it was, therefore, in the spirit of honest investigation that I internalized a heroic dose of Space, the new social drug enjoyed by the young folk of today" (*Transmetropolitan* 10:165). His reporting is not abstract and removed, but like the most celebrated New Journalism, a narrative of an involved story.

His personal accounts of drug use are just one of many ways that Spider includes himself as a character in his journalism. Spider takes the New Journalism concept of writing about experiences in a way that involves the reader a step further by having almost his entire life as a source for his journalism. This is illustrated poignantly at the end of volume two, during which Spider spends the day being hunted by assassins, and still composes an article while on the run, writing:

Mucus and soundbites. I remember this feeling now, from the last days before I went to the mountain.

The sudden feeling that this place is Not On Your Side.

I'm hiding now.

And writing. I can't stop, even now.

This goddamned city makes me write even when it wants me dead.

(*Transmetropolitan* 2:111)

When the threat is finally over, Spider, exhausted, slumps against a wall head in his hands and says "so tired ... Tell you what, though, there's going to be a column in this"



to which his editor Royce answers “uh-huh. There always is” (*Transmetropolitan* 2:142).

Like the struggle to be taken seriously by literary critics that New Journalism initially faced, and the way that Thompson’s articles were often deemed too strange for traditional publications, so too is Spider’s journalism seen as dramatically and outrageously pushing the boundaries of journalism in the world of *Transmetropolitan*.<sup>20</sup> Spider’s blatantly honest and open political journalism even gets him fired from *The Word* and banned from the established media, resulting in him publishing his work for free on the underground feedsite *The Hole*. Publishing in an alternative source that is not constrained by the conventions of traditional media allows Spider, just as New Journalism developed in alternative media, to broaden the scope of his writing and his message even further. As he writes:

They all know me. Familiarity breeding amiable contempt. Celebrity hack. Merchandise line. Column that everyone pretends to read, après the inevitable backlash. Column that’s been made meaningless by the quiet censorship apparatus turned on it. [...]

...The Hole.

Channon’s subscribed to that. We talked about it a couple of years ago ...

I wonder.

What I’m going to do now changes everything

Just like that. No going back.

Get the city under my feet.

Become alive again.

Alive and angry and directed. (*Transmetropolitan* 6:30-46)

Spider becomes, as he describes himself, an “outlaw journalist” who doesn’t “need to follow rules” (*Transmetropolitan* 9:49).<sup>21</sup> It is the quality of being an “outlaw” who is not constrained either by the standards of his fellow journalists or by social mores that frees Spider to write the kind of journalism that he wants to write, that grips his readers and shows them a larger truth about the world in which they live. These are all the qualities of a New Journalist, and though Spider’s world may be a dystopian future

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<sup>20</sup> *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, for example, was originally intended as an article for *Sports Illustrated* but was “aggressively rejected” and instead found a home in the less traditional publication *Rolling Stone* (FLA 376-377).

<sup>21</sup> This mirrors Thompson’s description of himself in a 1997 interview with Marianne MacDonald where he states: “that’s where we get the “outlaw.” I’ve never been approved by any majority... There’s just a general feeling that I shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it” (cited in McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist* xi).

version of the real world, the essential truths remain the same in both. It is these essential truths that are at the heart of Spider as a New Journalist. The fictional setting of *Transmetropolitan* and the world about which Spider writes do not automatically separate the truth of what is said from applying to our own world; as Patrick Stewart writes in the introduction to Volume Five:

I can safely say this: I know this City, I have read The Word, I have listened to these politicians, I have smelt the stink of greed, I have thrown stuff at the TV, I have wondered what future there is for Truth and Beauty. I have wanted to go and live on the top of a Yorkshire moor. (6)

It is clear by that Spider's methods of experiencing what he is writing about, the style in which he writes, and the context of the essential truths about the world in his journalism, that Spider is a fictional exemplar of the characteristics of a New Journalist.

Within the world of *Transmetropolitan*, Spider's articles, from which the reader of *Transmetropolitan* is shown a plentiful selection of excerpts over the course of the series, have the characteristics of New Journalism. For example, when he writes the aforementioned column about the City's Reservations, he does so by visiting the Reservations, immersing himself in their cultures, and writing a first-hand narrative of what he experiences that paints a picture of those worlds:

I went to the "special, different" Reservation StExupery recommended to my attention.

I don't know if it quite qualifies as a Reservation. A Reservation preserves past cultures.

The Farsight Community is a culture yet to happen.

They talk to each other using neutrino senders where their large intestines should be. They seal themselves against vacuum and have sex via bacteria.

They try to learn the lessons of the future before it arrives. (*Transmetropolitan* 2:72-74)

He writes the article so that it paints a picture of his fully immersed experience, because he wants his audience to truly know what the Reservations are like. As he says to Royce when questioned about why he is writing the article:

[t]he story, you incredible asshole, is that the city's full of reservations and nobody bothers *going* to them!

Christ, people give up their *lives* to make the reservations run! (*Transmetropolitan* 2:65)

He echoes this in the article itself when he writes “[p]eople die to teach us lessons about religion and environment. We keep history close to make damned sure we learn from it” (*Transmetropolitan* 2:70). By writing in the New Journalism style that so vividly paints a picture of his experience, he brings the reality of the Reservations to his readers.

Additionally, though the world of the series is fictional, being factual in his writing is a key part of Spider’s beliefs as a journalist: as he states “[t]he *truth*, Yelena. No matter *what*” (*Transmetropolitan* 3:129). Spider presents the reader with expectations of what good journalism is and should be based on the views that Thompson himself presented in his own work. In this way *Transmetropolitan* has some influence on how it is read, both because it teaches the reader subtly without stating outright “Spider is a journalist, this is what journalism is, you are reading Spider’s journalism” and because it reinforces the connection to Thompson and his stance on journalism. Spider writes in an article:

People keep saying to me, you’re doing a good job, Spider, you’re really changing things, Spider. And it’s all bullshit. I’m not changing a fucking thing. I’m a writer. A journalist. I can’t change shit.

What I do is give you the tools to understand the world so that you can change things. (*Transmetropolitan* 10:177)

Thompson similarly wrote of the importance of Spider’s type of journalism in 1971, fearing that it was a dying breed:

The real horror, to me, lies in the fact that there is absolutely no vehicle in American journalism for the kind of “sensitive” and “intellectual” and essentially moral/merciless reporting that we all understand is necessary—not only for the survival of good journalism in the country, but also for the dying idea that you can walk up to a newsstand (or a mag-rack in Missoula) and find something that will tell you what’s really happening ... (*FLA* 412)

Spider then becomes an avatar of Thompson’s belief that good journalism should serve a purpose, as he says “I can say what I want, when I want, now. So I have to make even more certain than before -- I have to make sure I’m saying something worth saying. Otherwise I’m just jerking off” (*Transmetropolitan* 7:93).

Spider also shares Thompson’s criticism of other journalists; Thompson was sceptical of Wolfe’s pushing of “New Journalism” as a label, and later critical of Wolfe’s abilities to fulfil the ethics he espoused:

Wolfe’s problem is that he’s too crusty to *participate* in his stories. The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to

fascinate him as a writer are so weird that they make him nervous. (*The Great Shark Hunt* 108)

Spider interestingly echoes these sentiments; early on in the first volume of *Transmetropolitan*, Spider has a conversation with his assistant Channon that expresses the same thoughts:

Spider: ...The point *is*, the only real tools we have are our *eyes* and our *heads*. It's not the act of seeing with our own eyes *alone*; it's *correctly comprehending* what we see.

Channon: Treating life as an autopsy.

Spider: *Got* it. Laying open the guts of the world and sniffing the entrails, *that's* what we do.

Channon: Not quite how the Wolfit school of journalism has it.

Spider: *Fuck* Wolfit. We used to work the city desk together at Dayfax, back when it was a *real* newspaper. Him and his "plain old observation" had him covering Goddamn *flower shows*. How he had the balls to found a journalism school ... Anyway. You don't learn journalism in a school. You learn it by *writing fucking journalism*. You teach yourself to wire up your own brain and gut and reproductive organs into one frightening machine that you aim at the planet like a meat gun--" (*Transmetropolitan* 1:83)

This conversation serves several important functions for the context in which *Transmetropolitan* is read. It gives a very clear statement, right from the beginning of the series, of the type of journalism that Spider practises and sees as important. It also very strongly connects to Thompson's own words on the subject, with the interesting connection to Wolfe by naming "Wolfit" as a colleague of Spider's who is too detached from his journalism in the same way that Thompson says Wolfe is detached from his own journalism. This furthermore serves to broaden the context from which *Transmetropolitan* can be viewed as a New Journalism text, by talking about the concepts of journalistic theory and practice as they pertain to real-world journalism, even though the world in which the discussion takes place is fictional. That *Transmetropolitan* has an element of real-world context to its fictional setting and that "New Journalism" itself has a nebulous definition of being between fact and fiction both place *Transmetropolitan* in a unique position to be potentially considered a New Journalism text.

## Transmetropolitan as Fictional New Journalism

At first glance *Transmetropolitan* as a work that is completely fictional would seem to fall outside the nebulous definitions of New Journalism, for the fact that it is not actually journalism. However, developing Spider as a character who is a New Journalist, with the literary background associated with Thompson as context, allows Ellis and Robertson a unique vantage point from which to present *Transmetropolitan* in a way that it can credibly be read as a work of New Journalism even though it is wholly fictional. With the context of Hunter Thompson and New Journalism in place in *Transmetropolitan*, Ellis and Robertson, as evidenced by the serious socio-political storyline that makes up the bulk of the series, are able to take *Transmetropolitan* to a different literary level than just a comic book to be read for entertainment, and examine politics, society, and the way media and journalism deal with and present issues pertaining to them. As Garth Ennis writes, it can be difficult for comics writers to be in the position to be allowed to write serious material, as it was for “Mr. Ellis, forced to filter his own poison through the dubious medium of the super-hero story. The work’s been great, but at the end of the day it’s still about grown men in tights ... TRANSMETROPOLITAN changed all that” (*Transmetropolitan* 1:3). It is an interesting parallel that as Thompson believed Wolfe used the New Journalism movement to obtain critical legitimacy for the style in which he wanted to write, the application of the style of New Journalism and of Thompson’s background as a critically appreciated journalist to *Transmetropolitan* lend the series gravitas both as a work of speculative political fiction and as a work to potentially be read as New Journalism.

Tom Wolfe, in his attempt at defining the New Journalism movement in his anthology *The New Journalism*, makes clear that the heart of New Journalism is a style of realism which can be applied to either journalistic nonfiction or literary fiction:

it depends upon the writer’s experience and intellect, his insights, the quality of his emotions, his ability to see into others, his ‘genius,’ to use the customary word – and this remains so whether he is working in fiction or in journalism. My argument is that the genius of any writer – again, in fiction or in nonfiction – will be severely handicapped if he cannot master, or if he abandons, the techniques of realism. (49)

Wolfe’s viewpoint therefore suggests that *Transmetropolitan* can be evaluated as a work of New Journalism based on the elements of realism that are evident in it and in

Spider's journalism. Furthermore Spider's journalism can be evaluated on Wolfe's terms for its technique and ability to convey the characters he writes about, his emotions and his insights into the world. *Transmetropolitan* has a wealth of examples of the insightful and emotional kind of articles that Wolfe is talking about, such as Spider's piece on the Revivals whom society has forgotten and discarded, where he writes:

The Revivals are thrown out of the Hostels during daylight hours on to the streets.

Many Revivals go into light catatonia on the streets. The tougher ones traditionally round them up and drag them back home at mealtimes.

Mary sticks to the alleyways, where the light and noise of the City is screened out a little.

And she talks, to anyone who will listen.

She tells of how she was Revived; tells it in cold, quiet, terrible detail. She has a photographer's eye. She's made a documentary of her new life, up in her chilled head.

And she tells stories of the past.

Great rich warm human stories of Stephen Hawking mapping the universe from a wheelchair, of dancing with children in Zimbabwe dust and walking through Moscow snow with Mikhail Gorbachev ... John Kennedy playing grab-ass in the White House, Nelson Mandela laughing at dirty jokes on a Jo'Burg street, a kid walking in front of a Chinese tank ...

The stories that make us great.

Mary will live for maybe another century. But her story's over.

Because you wouldn't have it any other way. (*Transmetropolitan* 2:49-50)

Spider doesn't just connect the reader to a sense of overall truth in his articles even though they are technically fiction; he connects them to his "genius" as Wolfe says through his technique of conveying insight and emotion. Though Mary and Spider are both fictional, the idea that society could forget the great lessons of the past, cast aside any social responsibility for the easier road, and the aching melancholy reminiscence that the article evokes are all as applicable to the real world of the reader as they are of Spider's fictional world. The line of fiction is further blurred as it often is in *Transmetropolitan* by the connection of the past events of the world of the series to real events and people like Gorbachev, Kennedy, Mandela, and the reference to the Tiananmen Square protest. Without the context of Mary being a Revival who had been essentially reborn from a cryogenically frozen head, Spider's article could almost have existed as an actual article in a real publication.

Furthermore there is critical commentary from sources without Wolfe and Thompson's vested interest in how New Journalism and Gonzo journalism were perceived that supports the idea that a wholly fictional work like *Transmetropolitan* could be read as a New Journalism text. Eric Heyne for instance argues that though "literary nonfiction and fiction are fundamentally different despite their resemblances in structure or technique", this is because of the actual status of "fact" and the claims that a work makes to its factual status and factual adequacy rather than the nature of its style (480). Heyne concludes that his theory of literary nonfiction:

[s]trives for a shared understanding of the nature of texts that serve multiple functions in society. I do not wish to suggest chauvinistically that more of the world can be saved by nonfiction than by fiction, merely that the problems of finding a communal truth make the study of literary nonfiction particularly exciting. As technology gathers information from farther and farther afield, we will continue to look for authors who can find striking, enduring patterns for that unwashed mass of facts. (489)

*Transmetropolitan* as a text makes no claims to the status of nonfiction, but at the same time includes articles on political and social issues that do pertain to our society so clearly that they read as if they could be from an actual newspaper. For example in one article Spider examines the development of the monoculture, in what could very easily be a glimpse into the future of the real world:

We live in a monoculture.

What does that mean? Well, go out to your street corner. You'll probably see a Long Pig stand, SPKF on a screen somewhere, an Angry Boy Dylan's Gun Store. You'll go into a record store and see new recordings by the usual suspects, maybe a special Space Culture display rack.

Go out onto a streetcorner in London and you'll see the same thing. Same in Prague. Same in São Paulo. Same in Osaka, and Grozny, and Tehran, and Jo'Burg, and Hobart.

That's what a monoculture is. It's everywhere, and it's all the same. And it takes up alien cultures and digests them and shits them out in a homogenous building-block shape that fits seamlessly into the vast blank wall of the monoculture.

This is the future. This is what we built. This is what we wanted. It must have been. Because we all had the fucking *choice*, didn't we? It is only our money that allows commercial culture to flower. If we didn't want to live like this, we could have changed it any time, by *not fucking paying for it*.

So let's celebrate by all going out and buying the same burger.  
(*Transmetropolitan* 10:163)

Again, as with most of Spider's articles, with a few changes of the names of specific companies this could easily apply to our own society and the idea that global corporations are wiping out individual cultures. It maintains, despite the fictional setting, an overall sense of truth about the state of the world, which is one of the important characteristics of New Journalism. Additionally, within the world of the series, the manner through which media and information is presented is a prime example of Heyne's comment on the progression of technology as an information gathering source and the search for writers who can make sense of the increasing wave of facts caused by this progression; Spider as a journalist in a world where media is constant and all-pervasive is one of the few writers seeking to determine the actual truth rather than merely regurgitate the surface level message presented to him. In fact, Spider's desire for the truth is one of the core elements of his position as a journalist and a message that he reinforces throughout the series. He refuses to stop seeking the truth even when it threatens his career, as he writes in an article on the alternative publication site *The Hole*:

But, you know, enough of filthy politics and the unbounded fuckery of our President (fuckery that I, of course, was fired from a major metropolitan newspaper for discussing) ... Enough of that. Let me tell you how it's going to be.

I am free to write what I want, when I want.

[...]And I will tell you things that will make you laugh and I will tell you things that make you uncomfortable and I will tell you things that will make you really fucking angry and I will tell you things that no one else is telling you.

What I won't do is bullshit you.

I'm here for the same thing you are.

The Truth. (*Transmetropolitan* 7:66-68)

*Transmetropolitan* then, could be read as a theoretical work of literary nonfiction, not claiming to be nonfiction but being an idea of what literary nonfiction could become in a dystopian future.

### **Formatting of the Graphic Novel as Newspaper Journalism**

What *Transmetropolitan* does that takes it from just being a graphic novel about a New Journalist and instead makes it possible for it to be considered a fictional work of



New Journalism itself is its presentation of Spider's articles as if they are clippings of actual journalism. Warren Ellis had a conscious recognition of how combining traditional forms of writing with the graphic novel medium could translate to readers, writing in 1996 before *Transmetropolitan* was published about the work of fellow graphic novelist Frank Miller:

here's caption work, shoved off next to the picture so that it looks like what it is – a piece of related text narrative, which you recognize and comprehend because you've read a book. What's so difficult about that?

In making the prose element actually look like prose, he seems to make ground towards making an instinctual comprehension of the comics form for a non-comic-reader somewhat easier. (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 17)

Ellis also had a clear idea of how his words should be represented visually, as he states of his process in general:

[i]n writing a script – which, for me, is much like a long letter to the artist – I'm emptying my head of every idea I have regarding the work at hand. The artist must be presented with as much information as possible. (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 53)

This seems to have been particularly true in the case of *Transmetropolitan*, of which he writes “[p]robably the densest, longest script I’ve written in the last couple of years was that for *Transmetropolitan #1*” (*From the Desk of Warren Ellis* 48). Altogether Ellis's understanding of the importance of the visual way his words were presented to and understood by readers combined with his involvement in the artistic representation of his work supports the idea that the choices made in *Transmetropolitan* about how Spider's journalism is portrayed as deliberately used to influence how the work is read. As Karin Kukkonen writes, comics are already inherently a “multimodal medium”, meaning that “the constellation of modes in comics—i.e. the ‘choices’ made in a particular graphic narrative—has a considerable impact on the storytelling possibilities supported by the medium” (35). In *Transmetropolitan* the interspersing of articles by Spider as if they were actual articles, and the artistic style used to do so, are important choices that help create the sense that the reader is viewing a selection of real journalism.

In some instances this takes the form of the article interspersed with the action and speech of the main narrative, such as the first column that Spider writes upon his return to the city: the previously discussed article on the Angels 8 riot. The article is shown in text boxes which use a different font from that used for the speech and narration, and

the text is interspersed with illustrations of the action that Spider is writing about and with occasional “verbal” comments by Spider, the strippers, and Royce (see for example Fig. 9).



Fig. 9.

This gives the article a sense of immediacy, which is appropriate as within the context of the story it is being streamed live to the newsfeeds. The reader of *Transmetropolitan* is apparently reading the article while it is being written, just as a reader within the story would be reading it as it was published while Spider was writing it.

Another method of including Spider’s articles is to interweave them with the action of the plot of the story in such a way that the action is not Spider writing the article like it is with the Angels 8 riot, but that the article is commentary on the action.

For example, in Volume Three an issue begins with text from one of Spider's articles juxtaposed with feed coverage about Spider's column (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10.

Spider is then shown writing a different article before the comic switches to feed clips, one of The Smiler giving a press conference, one of Yelena being interviewed, before changing again to Spider, who is shown attending a rally for Bob Heller, a candidate in the primary elections running against The Smiler (*Transmetropolitan* 3:59-66).

Spider's experience at the rally includes text boxes of the article that he will later write about it, which begins "Column: notes on a Rally" and is a narration of his experience at the rally. The text boxes that are strictly Spider's article are differentiated from the speech and narration of the action by using a different font and different style and colour of text box (see for example Fig. 11).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The style of the text of speech remains static throughout the series, but Spider's articles vary in font depending on whether they are being shown to the reader as Spider writes them or after they are published, and even depending on which medium they are published, whether it be in *The Word* or on *The Hole*. As Scott McCloud notes, the style of text and of text boxes used is an important tool for conveying context and meaning in comics (134).





Fig. 11.

These article text boxes are interspersed with the verbal speech boxes of Bob Heller which are stylistically different from the text boxes of Spider's article but which nonetheless seem to be at least partly included in his article because the text of the article is interwoven with the speech. Spider notes at one point in the article "Christ, the NOISE... the mass of hating, hard-on voices degenerates into a weird animal mix" and writes "I swear I didn't make a word of that up" after Heller's speech, implying that the speech has been included in the article as well (*Transmetropolitan* 3:61-66). The issue ends with Spider writing as he was at the beginning:

Dr. Vita Severn is bright, funny, acid, caring, brutal and passionate. She's the only actual human being I've met in politics to date, and the fact that she's also a campaign director would make me laugh if it weren't such a waste.

As far as I can see, her employment by the Smiler is the only sign of actual taste I've seen him show. And she is the only reason to vote for him.

Spider Jerusalem, "I Hate It Here," from THE WORD. (*Transmetropolitan* 3:74)

As the first article was, this is also juxtaposed with news Feed coverage about Spider's column. Clips from at least four different articles by Spider are included in this issue, all relating both to each other and to the action that takes place. Throughout the series this style is used to directly intertwine the action of the story with Spider's articles.

This technique of juxtaposing the text of Spider's articles with action that is not merely a direct illustration of the text is part of what makes a graphic novel series like *Transmetropolitan* in a unique position to be considered a fictional rendering of New Journalism because it can display Spider's articles as artefacts while playing with the perspective from which they are viewed. As Charles Hatfield notes, in comparison with a standard novel, "perhaps more obviously, long-form comics can exploit both design

and material qualities to communicate or underscore the meaning(s) in the text” (“An Art of Tensions” 144). This style emphasizes the importance of the articles to the series as a whole. It allows the reader to read Spider’s articles as pieces of journalism themselves as they are presented as actual clippings, while also giving the reader the same context of events that they would have reading the articles if they lived in the world of *Transmetropolitan*. This is critical when considering *Transmetropolitan* a fictional work of New Journalism, because it is Spider’s articles that truly make the series able to be considered not just as a work about New Journalism but a fictional work of New Journalism itself. By blending Spider’s articles fully with the plot of the series, the articles are shown to be an integral aspect that could not be separated from the series without drastically changing it.

Another technique used which is particularly interesting in considering *Transmetropolitan*’s status as a fictional work of New Journalism is that of showing Spider in the process of researching an article, and then including parts or the entirety of the article. One instance of this is an article in Volume Seven on the insane homeless of the City. The issue begins with a series of eight different homeless people telling their story to Spider on the street, with a page devoted to each person as they talk to Spider (see for example Fig. 12).



Fig. 12.

The style of the pages then switches to a different font of text juxtaposed with illustrations of the homeless of the City to show that this is now the article itself, where Spider writes about what he has seen and experienced on the street:

[...]I first noticed how deep the transitioning of mental patients from institutions to the street had become when I saw a bunch of Revival-bashers working over a guy outside a drugstore.

Except it wasn't a Revival they were beating up. It was some poor bastard with a head full of busted wiring who started jabbering about God and the Devil. (see Fig. 13; *Transmetropolitan* 7:108-109)

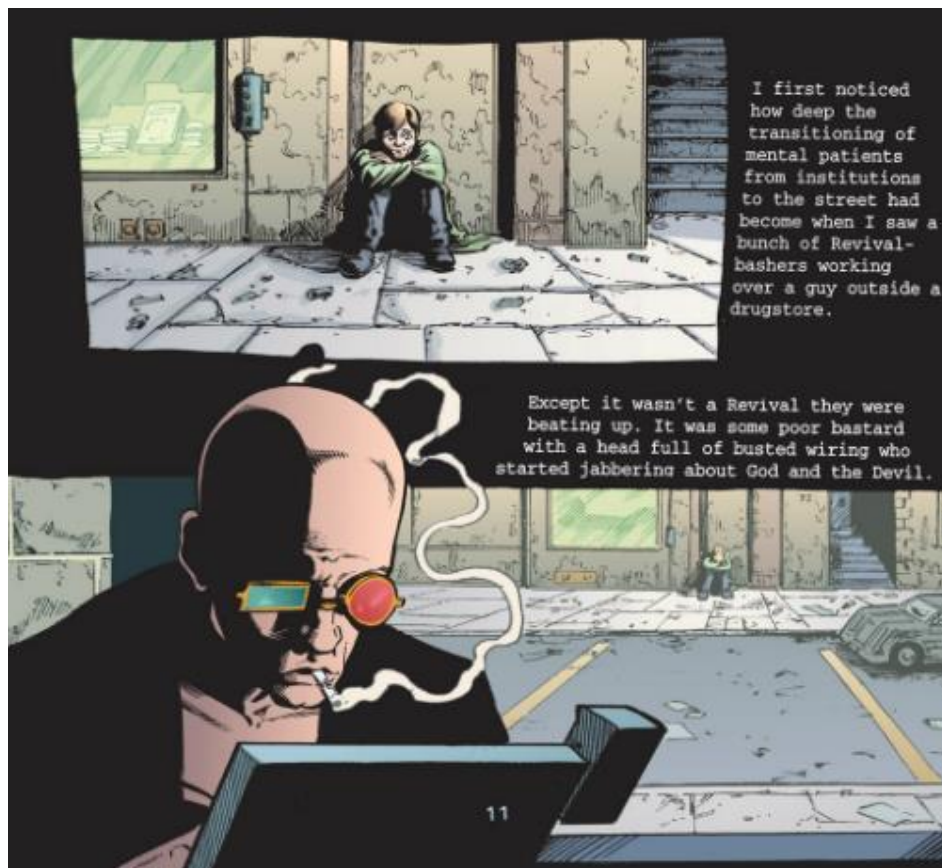


Fig. 13.

The last image at the end of the article is of Spider writing it, and the series then switches to Spider telling Yelena and Channon about his experience on the street researching the article, giving the reader of *Transmetropolitan* the perspective of Spider while he researches the article on the street, the article itself, and Spider's thoughts on the experience afterwards. Through this style the reader gets an in-depth sense of Spider as both writer and protagonist, an illustration of Thompson's ideal version of Gonzo journalism, as Spider participates fully in his journalism and records his experiences as they happen. This view of Spider's articles also emphasises them as having meaning and depth as works in and of themselves outside of merely being devices to drive the plot or shallow tools to illustrate that Spider is a journalist. Articles like the one about the homeless of the City are not immediately a part of the political war going on between Spider and The Smiler. They are often used to examine the harshness of the world and the tendencies of the human condition in a way that though the specifics of the articles do not on the surface apply to our world, the deeper considerations that they bring up do. This style shows the reality (within the context of *Transmetropolitan*) behind Spider's articles, while giving them an opportunity to impact the reader of the series in a way that Wolfe and Thompson have suggested is vital to both New Journalism and Gonzo.



Perhaps the technique that most clearly makes *Transmetropolitan* able to be considered a fictional work of New Journalism is seen in the instances in which Spider's articles are not used to support or in conjunction with the action of the story, but are themselves the entirety of the content of that issue of the comic. It is in these instances that, though the subject matter of the articles is fictional, they are nonetheless articles of journalism and that is clearly how they are intended to be read from the context of how they are depicted. One of the longest early instances of this in the series is an issue in Volume Five called "21 Days In The City", wherein there are 21 pages and each page is an article by Spider with a single, one page illustration (see for example Fig. 14).

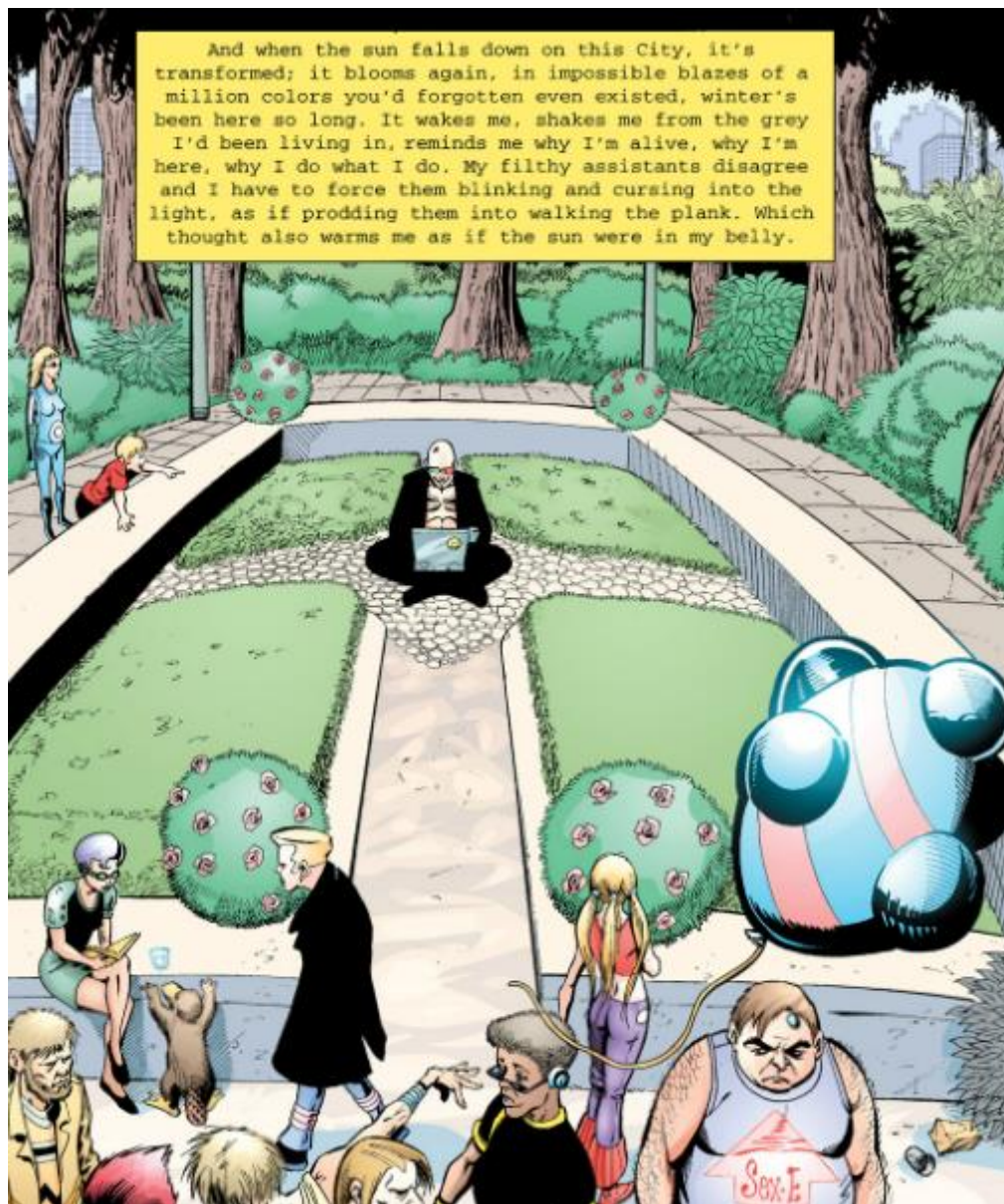


Fig. 14.



The only text in this issue is that of Spider's articles; there is no verbal dialogue or narration. The focus is solely on the articles, emphasised further by the first article in this issue, which is about Spider's column itself:

My name's Spider Jerusalem. I am the most beloved man in this City. I am a journalist. I write a column for a newspaper called THE WORD entitled I HATE IT HERE. Because I do. I hate it and I hate you. And you love me for it. That's the way it works. And if you argue with the way it works, I'll kick off the top of your head and shit on your living brain. And you will love me for it.

Thank God for me. (*Transmetropolitan* 5:32)

The rest of the articles are on a diverse range of subjects, from a political one on The Smiler, to social issues like the one on the "Right Love" movement that promotes child abuse and the need to get facts from the real world rather than relying on the bias of the media, to personal articles about Spider's childhood growing up in the City and ones about his experiences as he lives his life now, and articles like this one that are written with an aching beauty of language and emotion that truly fit the ideals of New Journalism:

He met God in the night, walking to his hotel in the rain, like he was written by Hemingway, stepping slowly through a place where nurses die if you kiss them and syphilis steals your friends the minute you look away. God stopped and talked to him for a while, quiet solemn words in the heart of the dark. And then by Essential Street Station God sat down and wept. He – the kid who told me this – suffers from the naïveté trait that parents thought were [*sic*] cute twenty years ago. He has a pre-civilization neural connectivity. Where we have the instinct that, no, you shouldn't cross the road, he hallucinates God telling him not to cross the road. I've heard that naïveté trait is getting trendy again. If you're thinking about it, think about the boy weeping uncontrollably as God cries for him not to cross the street. (*Transmetropolitan* 5:48)

These articles deal with the greater truths of life and society, and presented as they are in this issue stand alone as journalism.

This format of the articles being the sole focus is taken a step further in Volume Ten, where Spider's articles are published in two collections, *I Hate It Here* and *Filth of the City*, printed in the world of *Transmetropolitan* as book collections of his articles from *The Word*. These two collections are presented as if they are actual publications in and of themselves, not a part of the plot of the series. This is not to say that they are removed from the story – there are echoes of Spider's progression in the series

throughout the articles, mentions of his return to the City, the evolution of the public perception of his journalism, the acquiring of his assistants – but they enrich the world of the series rather than being just a plot device. While there are a handful of articles in both that deal with the political issues that are at the forefront of the main story of *Transmetropolitan*, there are many more about a range of subjects, from the culture of the City, the homeless, drugs, religion, Spider's process, his experience of being famous again, the past, the future, and many more. There is even an article by Yelena in *I Hate It Here* where she is meant to have substituted for Spider in that particular issue of *The Word*, which begins:

This isn't Spider Jerusalem. I'm Yelena Rossini, and I'm writing Mr. Jerusalem's column in his stead today, at his express invitation. Well. More like an order. He called it a "proclamation," in actual fact. This was during the afternoon he spent dressed as a pharaoh. Some of you may have seen that. (*Transmetropolitan* 10:190)

The pharaoh incident mentioned is not one that takes place in the pages of *Transmetropolitan*, and this article is a good example of the way that the articles are presented as if they are real articles from a real news publication rather than only existing in the world of the series. They are as well-rounded and self-contained as could be expected from an actual published collection of journalism. Moreover the formatting treats them as such. The first collection, *I Hate It Here*, begins with an introduction by Spider Jerusalem wherein he comments on the process of the collection and the introduction itself, noting that:

Here we are at the hour before the book's shot down the wire to the printer -- and I mean we, I've got two editors, three assistants and a VP publishing standing behind me as I write this -- and I'm having to write my own fucking introduction to what is essentially an excerpt from two and a half years of unremitting pain and horror. (*Transmetropolitan* 10:147)

Immediately this gives *I Hate It Here* a sense that it is an actual publication, and that the articles in it are, as Spider notes, excerpts from his body of work.

The idea that this is a real collection of journalism is supported by the breadth of the subjects and content of the articles themselves, which are not just selections of journalism but of articles that exemplify the characteristics of New Journalism. For example, Spider writes of his experiences learning the ways of different cultures by experiencing them, and the very real marks these experiences have left him with:

They drink blood and milk, down on Ao Street. They say the blood's nutritious as hell, if you can learn to keep it down. That was the week of the Integument Pogrom. I didn't trust the Ao Street people, but I could see they didn't deserve to be skinned by a bunch of midtown body purists. So I took up arms on Ao Street, got my head cracked open and my leg infected by a homemade fasciitis grenade; but it didn't matter. It was Right.

They tattooed me after, on their highest rooftop, under a big sky. I had stomped with them, and now I had a home on Ao Street whenever I needed it.  
(*Transmetropolitan* 10:180-181)

Completing the collection as if it was a real publication, *I Hate It Here* ends with an afterword by Spider's editor Mitchell Royce and a page of advertisements from a news magazine that features an advertisement for *I Hate It Here* (see Fig. 15).

**Tonight on:**  
**LONELY CITY**

"NEXT WEEK'S DRUGS:"  
Following the FDA loophole that stops drugs being made illegal until they are actually discovered, our crack team of narcotic-munching investigative reporters tests a spread of fixes invented only hours previous to filming. Includes scenes of FDA troops capturing and taking stomach samples from our staff.

**8:00//78** (comedy)  
**GOTCHA!** Home videos of horribly bloody and deeply disturbing domestic accidents.

**8:30//13.6** (children)  
**SEX PUPPETS:** Delightfully lighthearted educational show. Today, Darleen must decide which Puppet will live and which will die.

**9:30//45** (noisure)  
**SLIDE:** Mildly psychoactive visual weave effects combine with Koda drum patterns and classified subliminal signals to gently chew holes in your frontal lobe.

**10:00//1002** (infomercial)  
**GERIATRICIDE:** Killing poverty stricken old people for fun and profit. This week: arranging a good hard winter to thin the old toads out a bit.

**11:00//383** (news)  
**SPKF:** Patching to the Print District offices of the city's prime feedlots for a late-night news and event summary.

**11:30//78.4** (music)  
**LOST:** Featuring CFC performing pieces from their new disc, "Dirty Rain." Select interactive subchannel to have holographic simulations of dead, oil-drenched sea gulls tossed at you.

**12:00//3** (drama)  
**CRIMINAL NATION:** Adventures of City Police Department detectives. This week — a revived Ernest Hemingway in Sniper Alley! Captain Gacy eats a suspect!

It's never too soon to start planning your holiday!  
Hit the Peak at  
*the Airy Aerie*  
Shoot and kill your own food and neighbors!  
Weekend getaways available now!  
TV • TELEPHONE • MAKERS IN EVERY ROOM  
Paradise awaits you—just one hour from the City!

"...They've cleared all the non-transients out of Angels 8. Incredible tension, like they're all living in the second before the bullet hits the bone..."  
MEMOIRS FROM THE BACKSIDE OF THE WORLD:  
Spider Jerusalem's column continues in the Word & Beauty monthlies...  
**"I Hate It Here"**  
**TRANSMETROPOLITAN**

Fig. 15.

The advertisement page is insignificant from a story perspective, but is noteworthy in that it further visually supports the sense that this is an actual published collection of journalism.

Likewise, the second collection *Filth of the City* is also presented in the format of an actual book, this time with an introduction by Royce and a sense that time has passed in the world of *Transmetropolitan* since the publication of *I Hate It Here*, as Royce notes that “Spider Jerusalem is no longer a columnist with *The Word*. We find, however, that we still have the right to produce a further collection of his columns” (*Transmetropolitan* 10:199). There is even an article in *Filth of the City* that references the previous collection, wherein Spider writes “I have recently obtained a copy of *I HATE IT HERE*, a cheap and dubiously legal collection of these columns for *The Word*” (*Transmetropolitan* 10:223).

Together these two collections of articles are presented as if they were actual artefacts of journalism, and it is this unique formatting that creates a sense of realism about Spider’s journalism even though it is fictional. The exact details of his journalism are not true, but the heart of the subjects he writes about are often applicable to the real world, and by separating and highlighting his articles in this way, *Transmetropolitan* emphasises their significance. This significant and tangible role that Spider’s articles play in the series is what ultimately allows the series to be elevated from merely being about New Journalism to be reasonably considered fictional New Journalism itself.

The unique style used in *Transmetropolitan* to weave journalism into the story series is a fitting combination of two styles that have both struggled to be accepted critically. As New Journalism once fought to be taken seriously, so too do comics presently. Tom Wolfe wrote his manifesto on the New Journalism to legitimise the way that he wrote and the style that he appreciated in other writers, in an era when literary journalism had fallen out of fashion; and, as Marc Weingarten notes, Wolfe and his contemporaries faced instant criticism for writing against the accepted style of serious journalism (7). It is interesting, then, that New Journalism is now accepted as a literary style, and that reading *Transmetropolitan* as a work of New Journalism gives it a more serious context than it might have been afforded on face value as a graphic novel. Graphic novels, or comics, have had to face the same struggle for legitimacy in the literary community that New Journalism once did, with the result that as Gardner and Herman note:

Until quite recently, comics studies in the U.S. has been defined by a defensive relationship to the academy at large—the need to define and defend the object of study from negative assumptions about its cultural and aesthetic value. The result has been a field long dominated by formal and historical research—that is by defining the object of study formally and defending its importance historically.

Only in the last decade or so have U.S. scholars of graphic narrative begun to feel confident enough to move on to larger theoretical issues. (6)

*Transmetropolitan*, written and published mainly before this recent surge in serious studies of graphic novels as a form of literature, was not given the critical attention that its unique application of the New Journalism style to fiction deserved. Furthermore, as Kukkonen notes, “A long-standing prejudice about comics is that they tell their stories in words and images, but in a way that does not fully do justice to either mode” but this is an untrue assumption and comics instead “provide a key test case for constructing a transmedial narrative theory” (40). *Transmetropolitan* as a series that is both obviously a comic and potentially read as New Journalism is a prime example of a transmedial narrative that fully utilises both the written and the visual medium to convey meaning. The series uses the Thompson/Spider New Journalist style of writing as part of its own text by interspersing Spider’s articles with the action of the series, and further builds on this melding of comics and journalism through the art which displays not just the text of the articles, but the articles themselves as if they were actual newspaper clippings, to create an authentic rendering of New Journalism through graphic fiction.

### **Conclusion:**

To deny the possibility that an entirely fictional work could be a work of New Journalism simply because it is fiction seems to fly in the face of the rule-breaking, nothing held back, no boundaries spirit from which the style was born. Thompson denied the label in part because he believed it served as a marketing tool to perpetuate what he saw as a “false distinction between journalism & fiction” (*FLA* 723). Even Wolfe as he sought to define New Journalism in order to give it critical legitimacy balked at the idea that it could have rigid criteria that rejected fiction out of hand, writing:

I think there is a tremendous future for a sort of novel that will be called the journalistic novel or perhaps documentary novel, novels of intense social realism based upon the painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism. [...] There are certain areas of life that journalism still cannot move into easily, particularly for reasons of invasion of privacy, and it is in this margin that the novel will be able to grow in the future.

[...] The status of the New Journalism is not secured by any means. In some quarters the contempt for it is boundless ... even breathtaking ... With any luck at

all the new genre will never be sanctified, never be exalted, never given a theology. (50-51)

The only real way in which *Transmetropolitan* does not fit what Wolfe is describing when he writes of “novels of intense social realism based upon the painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism” is that it is a graphic novel rather than the more traditional novel form. At the same time, the visual depiction of Spider’s journalism as clippings from an actual news publication gives it a similar look to an artefact of actual journalism. *Transmetropolitan* could be considered a hybrid within a hybrid – not exactly a novel, not really journalism, technically completely fictional, but with an element of societal truths that are relevant in our world. Ellis himself suggests that comics incorporate a variety of other modes of writing, stating that “a full script for a comic incorporates prose, the stage play, graphic design and slogan writing. The comic is a bastard form, a multimedia art all its own, a twentieth-century hybrid grown from half a dozen other arts” (*From the Desk Of Warren Ellis* 31). As New Journalism developed from old styles of writing, both fictional and journalistic, and struggled for critical legitimacy, comics have developed from being seen as only frivolous entertainment to works that can tackle heavy and intellectual subjects and themes. By utilising the journalistic background of Thompson as a point of context for Spider Jerusalem as a New Journalist, writing Spider’s articles in the style of New Journalism, and playing with the visual medium of the graphic novel to portray fictional works of journalism as if they were real articles, *Transmetropolitan* exists in a unique position to be considered fictional New Journalism. For a style that was built on the idea of breaking all of the rules, it is a fitting evolution.

## Conclusion

Hunter S. Thompson did not merely create an interesting fictional character, nor did he depict himself exactly in nonfiction. The character that he wrote based on himself in his novel *The Rum Diary* blurred the lines between fiction and fact a decade before Tom Wolfe's New Journalism manifesto popularised the idea of blending journalism and literature. Moreover, though Raoul Duke is the most renowned version of Thompson, he exists as an evolution of Paul Kemp. Literary criticism of Thompson needs to be expanded to consider *The Rum Diary* more fully as it is in *The Rum Diary* that Thompson began the character that would become Raoul Duke. The way that Thompson writes himself as Duke cannot be fully understood without considering how that evolved from the way that he wrote himself as Kemp. To not fully consider Paul Kemp as the earliest version of Thompson's character is to drastically simplify the character of Raoul Duke.

Simplifying Raoul Duke simplifies Thompson as an author, and is perhaps why so often Raoul Duke is viewed as an exact translation of Thompson to text. Thompson, however, was not exactly Raoul Duke, despite the ostensibly nonfictional context of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. That Raoul Duke became accepted in the eyes of the media and literary critics as being exactly Thompson meant that neither the character nor the author was fully understood.

Examining Raoul Duke as a separate character from Thompson allows the evolution from Paul Kemp to Raoul Duke to be examined. This gives us a greater understanding of Thompson's involvement of himself in his writing as a character and how that character changed as Thompson's writing style changed, from the more straight-laced but potentially strange Paul Kemp in the more conventionally written *The Rum Diary* to the wilder and more crazed Raoul Duke in the more uninhibitedly written *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. It is not that either Kemp or Duke is more like Thompson, but that they are illustrations of how Thompson evolved his style of writing and how the character that he wrote himself as in his works evolved along with it.

Understanding the way that Thompson developed the character of himself from his fictional Paul Kemp persona in *The Rum Diary* to his nonfictional Raoul Duke persona in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has further implications for how the rest of his works are read, and for how he himself is viewed as an author. The Gonzo works that have largely been accepted as purely nonfiction can be analysed from the

perspective that he was not writing about himself exactly but about the character that he wanted to portray himself as. His early work *Prince Jellyfish*, as excerpted in *Songs of the Doomed*, along with *The Rum Diary*, should not be accepted as completely fictional but as Thompson's earliest semi-autobiographical writing. His fiction and nonfiction are not two separate things, but a progression of both character and style as he evolved as a writer. As an author, rather than be seen as the same wild character that he wrote in Raoul Duke, Thompson instead can be separated from his "nonfiction" self and instead examined as someone who pushed the boundaries of accepted style, those of fact and fiction, and created a character of himself so vividly real and lasting that it could be continued in a fictional work by another author and still as Spider Jerusalem be recognisable as the same man seen in Paul Kemp and Raoul Duke.

That Thompson's character could be picked up by a different author and written into an entirely fictional world and yet still be clearly recognizable as another evolution of the same character that he wrote in Paul Kemp and Raoul Duke shows us both how completely developed a character he wrote as well as the impact his writing had on New Journalism and the way fiction and nonfiction are viewed and understood. Spider Jerusalem as an evolution of Kemp and Duke owes his characterisation and the legacy of the context of being a New Journalist to Thompson's development of himself as a character that could be written fictionally but be read as inherently truthful. Furthermore it is the context of Thompson as a New Journalist and of Spider's writing style and journalism as inherited from Thompson that contributed to *Transmetropolitan's* potential to be read as a fictional New Journalism text. Thompson's character, both in his own works and as he was adapted in *Transmetropolitan*, twists and blurs the line between fiction and fact. This comprehension of the lack of clear distinction between fact and fiction in Thompson's works has further implications for how we read other works of New Journalism and other works of fiction with elements of truth like *Transmetropolitan*, and brings us closer to understanding his belief that "[f]iction is dead" (*The Proud Highway* 421).

Examining *Transmetropolitan* and Spider Jerusalem as a continuation of Thompson's character is important in pushing criticism to question the traditional views of style and truth that Thompson fought against. *Transmetropolitan's* context as a fully fictional work whose main character is a continuation of a nonfictional character is an opening for it to push the understood definition and boundaries of New Journalism. *Transmetropolitan* develops this possibility through its depiction of Spider's journalism, both in the text of the articles themselves and the style in which the articles are



portrayed to the reader as actual artefacts of “real” journalism. For New Journalism, a style developed on the concept of breaking the rules of established styles and genres, the fact that *Transmetropolitan* can be analysed as a new way of writing New Journalism is a fresh continuation of the spirit on which the style was founded. It also has implications for the link between graphic novels and other forms of literature in the study of comics, a field which has largely been overlooked by serious literary criticism until recently, in much the same way that New Journalism was once overlooked.

Following on from this thesis, further research could be done regarding Thompson’s depiction of himself in his character in his works, and the level of truth contained in his Gonzo journalism that has been historically accepted as factual. There are further implications for truths that have been accepted by readers based on his journalism that may not actually be accurate, in the same way that the depiction of himself as Raoul Duke was accepted as the truth even though the reality of Thompson was different from the character of Duke. Additionally his fictional works such as *The Rum Diary* that have largely been overlooked clearly deserve more critical attention as this thesis has shown their inextricable part in the development of Thompson’s character and his writing style. Finally, more broadly this thesis has demonstrated that the graphic novel form should continue to be further analysed from a critical literary perspective, as works such as *Transmetropolitan* can be new ways of looking at established styles and genres.

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