Las Vegas and the Cinema of American Excess

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“our energy would simply prevail”

In the 1998 film *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* – directed by Terry Gilliam – the city itself barely appears, present instead mostly as a concept. The film is an adaptation of the book by Hunter S. Thompson, known for his unique brand of left-wing investigative writing which he called “Gonzo” journalism. The story typically mixed his real-life trip to Las Vegas, in the aftermath of his investigation into the shooting of Mexican-American television journalist Rubén Salazar, with fictional elements. Gilliam’s adaptation stars Johnny Depp as Thompson’s alter ego Raoul Duke, alternately consuming endless quantities of mind-altering substances and writing feverishly on his beat-up old typewriter.

Las Vegas does appear of course, now and again, as Duke and his companion Gonzo drive through the main drag, or arrive at various hotels waiting to be trashed in their drug-hazed binges. But as a concept it is the target of Thompson’s “fear and loathing” – it represents what he hates most in American society, the free enterprise system, which he saw as the “single greatest evil in the history of human savagery.” In dramatic terms however we encounter fear and loathing mostly as a result of Duke’s drug trips, visualised by Gilliam in quasi-Python style.

In my book *The American Cinema of Excess* I introduced the film merely as an exercise in nihilism, and an illustration of Allan Bloom’s dictum that American nihilism is a “mood, a mood of moodiness, a vague disquiet. It is nihilism without the abyss.” Bloom thinks that without Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Sartre Americans just can’t do nihilism, and so it degenerates into a kind of empty excess. For sure, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* demonstrates that excess at every turn, in a city devoted to an excess of free enterprise gambling and good-time profligacy. But I would suggest that something more is going on in both the city and the film which have to do with the inverse of fear and the inverse of loathing. A more positive reading of the film – and of the American national character – arises from the observation that the principal characters are in fact fearless and expansive. They don’t fear the law, they don’t fear the consequences of drugs, and they don’t fear excess in everything. Neither does loathing really enter into their world – other than a general rejection of fascism, injustice and hypocrisy – rather they pursue a Whitmanesque expansiveness and openness.

The context is a moment in history where Duke is remembering what he calls the “high water mark” of the hippy era. With the release in August 2011 of the film *Magic Trip* we are all invited to look back to that same period, through the voyage of Ken Kesey’s famous magic bus Further. Kesey – made famous for his novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* – was, with the other “Merry Pranksters,” a key part of that era, and, in 2005, his son Zane made a 40th anniversary trip in Further to – Las Vegas.

To my mind the key moment in *Fear and Loathing* takes place nearly an hour into the film when Duke is reminiscing about the heady days of 1965, days of student protest
against the war, days of free love, drugs, and the Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. Duke is in his trashed hotel room, while Gonzo suffers the nightmares of a bad trip in the bathroom. Duke relives his own early drug taking, and then the stop-the-war rallies, intercut with footage of the period. “It was madness in any direction,” – Johnny Depp’s voice perfectly suited to the narration – “you could strike sparks anywhere.” There was a fantastic universal sense, he reminisces, that whatever they were doing was right. “That we were winning…that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of old and evil, not in any mean or military sense – we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply prevail.” They were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave. Now, less than five years later, muses Duke as he looks out of his hotel window, “you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes, you can almost see the high water mark, that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.”

Thompson loathed Nixon and “free-enterprise” and, as the wave of hippy revolt rolled back and seemingly stayed back, we have all perhaps been asking where the new wave will come from. Is it in the Arab Spring? Is it in the riots in Greece against austerity and more namelessly in Britain? And does Las Vegas simply represent the triumph of materialism over the ideals of the young?

None of this is quite the point I think. I would rather suggest that both Las Vegas and those youthful ideas in their Hippy-era expression are expressions of the same excess of fearlessness and expansivity in the American mind. You don’t have to be the right-wing hero of Tea Party mythology, the architect in Ayn Rand’s novel The Fountainhead, to stand in the middle of a place like Las Vegas, stare up at the skyscrapers, and feel the adrenaline rush of big-city dynamism. Just because you harbour sympathies with the wave of hippy-era left-wing protest movements doesn’t mean you have to fear and loathe Las Vegas as an ugly symbol of what is left when that wave recedes. Instead, I would suggest, the film tells us two things about fearlessness and expansivity. The first is encapsulated by Carolyn Garcia, one of Pranksters who rode the original Further: “For all the harsh realities… I’d like people to recognise the unbridled, goofy joy of the times. We had a heck of a lot of fun.” The second is this: that poignant remark of Thompson’s, “our energy would simply prevail,” has to be true in the long run. Thompson’s own energy didn’t prevail: he committed suicide in the end (another gesture of excess). But perhaps we can make it prevail.

Bibliography