A MIRROR FOR OBSERVERS

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The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion: Creating New Reporting Styles
By Jason Mosser
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THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE, that quintessentially modern supposition in quantum mechanics identified by Werner Heisenberg in 1927, extends beyond the white-coated world of boffins and geeks to affect the fundamental way we report and understand contemporary events. Physicists unavoidably affect the outcome of experiments through the simple act of observation, while local busybodies report the news morphed through their own often histrionic language and experience. Can serious journalists interject themselves into social and political events, and then report those events as participants, without severely distorting our understanding of what transpired? Does it matter, after all?

Jason Mosser, in his book on participatory journalism, offers a close reading of four representative writers in an attempt to understand the motivation, meaning, and intent of New Journalism and these unique historical narratives. Mosser's approach involves applying relevant rhetorical theory to extended passages, thereby illuminating the mechanics and subtext of rhetorical techniques, generally reserved for fiction, in the tradition-laced business of reporting current events. Our understanding of Michael Herr, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer, all leading representatives of participatory journalism, generally is enhanced by Mosser's critical inspection.

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Chapter One presents an engaging overview, placing New Journalism into critical and historical context and analyzing the rhetorical theory of relevant genres and styles. Mosser relies, for a definition, on early research by James Murphy, who sees New Journalism as an "'artistic, creative, literary reporting form with three basic traits: dramatic literary techniques; intensive reporting; and reporting of generally acknowledged subjectivity.'" Murphy also emphasizes that New Journalism adopts techniques normally associated with fiction, such as "'scene by scene construction, realistic dialogue, selective point of view, and symbolic details'" (3).

Mosser then turns to Kenneth Burke for justification of the form. Conventional journalists adhere to a "semantic" ideal, Mosser maintains, and thus remain detached from the people and events they cover; participatory journalists believe in a "poetic" ideal, and therefore value emotional experience and expression as a better vehicle for truth. Mosser, again quoting Burke, suggests that New Journalists "'try to derive [their] vision from the heaping up of all these emotional factors, placing them off against one another, inviting them to reinforce and contradict one another, and seeking to make this active participation itself a major ingredient of the vision'" (62).

Michael Herr, whose *Dispatches* provides an account of his time covering the Viet Nam War for *Esquire* magazine, is perhaps the lightweight examined here, despite the laudatory reviews that his memoir earned when it first appeared in 1977. Mosser justifies the inclusion of this important work by noting that Herr "offers us an opportunity to examine how a previously unknown self can be constructed through style" (10). Under inspection is the power structure of an extended conflict as defined by the rhetoric of the American participants, with the oblique and highly-structured language of the "Mission," or the dominant establishment culture of Command Headquarters, contrasted with the intentionally inarticulate voice of the "grunts," front-line soldiers whose fighting techniques could be as brutal as their language. Mosser again takes a page from Burke to dissect this collision of words:

> The Mission strives . . . for the "semantic" ideal, a language that attempts to present a detached, objective reconstruction of events. By contrasting the bureaucratic version of events with the colloquial version supplied by the grunts, Herr demonstrates how Mission's language strips away any given event of its emo-

> tional content at the same time that he brings that content to the foreground. (80)

Other stylistic techniques of New Journalism appear in Joan Didion's *Salvador*, an account of American involvement in the 1982 San Salvador civil war, and in *Miami*, an examination of the social and political trials of Cuban citizens who immigrated to Miami following the 1959 overthrow of the Batista regime. Mosser points to Didion's attempts, as both participant and narrator, to identify truth within the barrage of press releases, radio announcements, and eyewitness statements from opposing sides of the Salvadorian struggle. Ultimately, Mosser finds, Didion "reaches the point at which observation and interpretation become a game, a form of verbal play" (207). The importance of language in the Miami and San Salvador events is reflected in Didion's own style and diction, such as repetition of the phrase "I should not," an anaphora to dramatize the context of repression and fear, or the iteration of balanced phrases to dramatize the importance of recounted events. She also undermines the credibility of official statements by a close examination of text, similar to Mosser's own approach toward understanding these authors. Didion engages the dominant texts "in a dialectical relationship, refusing to grant them their intended status as absolute truth" and thus "opening the way for ongoing debate and struggle" (227).

Hunter S. Thompson's "Gonzo" journalism, revealed in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, his coverage of the chaotic presidential campaign that effectively brought the idealistic sixties to a standstill, offers an especially challenging opportunity for any critic attempting to analyze the conventions of participatory reporting. Thompson not only engages in world-weary speculation, a prime taboo for traditional journalists, but also maligns the subjects of his story with incendiary language uncommon to most publications. Hubert Humphrey is "'a treacherous, gutless old wardheeler who should be put into a goddamn bottle and sent out with the Japanese current'" (164). Richard Nixon "'speaks for the Werewolf in us; the bully, the predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string-warts, on nights when the moon comes to [sic] close'" (157).

Thompson's Gonzo involvement in such shady political shenanigans leads to a psychological breakdown, detailed at the end of the November chapter of Thompson's text, in language that Mosser identifies as characterismus, a

description of an individual's physical condition and personal habits. "'My brain has become a steam-vat,'" Thompson writes, "'my body is turning to wax and bad flab; impotence looms'" (174). Yet ever the participant, just a few pages later, Thompson considers a political career of his own. "Although the narrator's participation in the campaign has come to an end," Mosser notes, "his suffering, and ours, have not, and the historical narrative continues" (193). Mosser sees the same expression of events as open-ended and ongoing in Didion's work, this time explicitly revealed through the author's language. "The style and rhetorical approach of Didion's nonfiction texts are appropriately open-ended," Mosser writes, "because the situations they address are still in the process of historical development. . . . Didion exposes futile attempts to achieve ideological closure where no closure is possible" (226).

Norman Mailer displays a similar, if perhaps more reasoned, commitment to his own involvement in historical events in *The Armies of the Night*, a seminal narrative of the October 1967 March on the Pentagon. This "History as a Novel/The Novel as History", with its near mirror-image subtitle alternating the importance of subject and genre without privileging either, includes an extended metaphor of towers and optical devices illuminating both the reporter's role as imaginative interpreter and the social and political speed-bumps impeding assessment. "The tower, telescope, and microscope," Mosser maintains, "[C]ome to stand not only for Mailer's text, but for the reporter himself. By pointing out that 'the tower is crooked, and the telescopes warped,' Mailer acknowledges the imperfection or subjectivity of his vision" (115). Phillip Sipiora, editor of *The Mailer Review* and author of this volume's preface, reinforces Mosser's interpretation of Mailer's approach and technique while highlighting the author's proactive reporter-persona. "[O]ne of Mailer's functions as a participant in the event," Sipiora writes, "is to act as a catalytic agent to set the drama in motion" (iii).

As Sipiora also points out, Mosser effectively adapts his theoretical template to fit the requirements of author and subject. Mailer's use of hypotactic structures, sentence elements arranged in a subordinate relationship, gives his prose a sense of urgency by building to dramatic climax. Similarly, paratactic structures, with grammatical elements ranked equally, allows Mailer to demonstrate connections between fragments of experience not normally perceived as related. Mosser provides extended textual analysis illustrating

each of these and other rhetorical techniques employed by Mailer to infuse his historical narrative with the life and intimacy of fiction.

Mailer's use of authorial voice, particularly his appropriation of multiple voices to both articulate establishment discourse and the rebellious reaction against authority, is fundamental to our understanding of Mailer's approach toward participatory journalism. Mosser highlights the implications of this technique:

> In addition to the voices of left-wing protestors, those the establishment attempts to silence, Mailer speaks in numerous voices of his own: there is Mailer the reporter, reporting facts, conveying information; Mailer the social critic, attacking complacency on the left and totalitarianism on the right; and Mailer the prophet, dimly foretelling . . . the future of America. (131)

Readers generally associate New Journalism with the iconic practitioners Mosser studies, imagining participatory reporting as endemic to the political sensibilities and emerging sense-of-self exhibited in the late sixties and the handful of decades following. But as Mosser points out in his very first paragraph, reporters have been engaging people and events since Defoe documented the plague year and London and Crane charted events of their times. The legacy of these New Journalists is immediate and lasting: even conventional reporting today often eschews the constriction of the inverted pyramid construction—the convention of offering essential facts in a diminishing trail of importance—in favor of a reader-grabbing, anticipatory approach very like fiction. Perhaps the self-aware involvement of a participatory journalist, passionate about causes and alert to events, provides a better understanding of our lives and times than any conventional reporter claiming impartiality. Certainly observers such as Herr, Mailer, Thompson, and Didion, through the theoretical and stylistic techniques examined by Mosser, afford a better sense of the ongoing rush of current events as they resolve into history. If reporters, like their physicist-counterparts, cannot observe without disrupting outcomes, why imagine otherwise?