

# IMMERSION JOURNALISM

**How VICE Media Challenges the Norms, Methods, and  
Ideals of Mainstream Journalism**

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## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Justification for the Field of Research*

The proliferation of new technologies has had a dramatic impact on the news today. The transition from printed journalism and TV news to the contested platform of the Internet has had huge adverse effects on the economy of many newsrooms. This has not only led to a collective outcry from the media in general, but has also led to an increasing introspection as to how its journalism is, should, and could be done. Not only has newspapers become increasingly multimodal, but new forms of journalism has also started to emerge. Our world has become increasingly complex, so much so, that many are arguing that traditional forms of journalism are struggling to explain it satisfactorily. But what can?

In this thesis I will look at a certain phenomenon within journalism, which despite its long history, has a marginal presence in what we would call ‘mainstream’ journalism. The phenomenon of *Immersion Journalism* can take many different forms, and as we will see, it can be difficult to clearly define. The following is an attempt to lay a sort of ‘groundwork’ of what Immersion Journalism is, or could be, as a part of the ongoing discussions on new forms of journalism. I will argue that the phenomenon has many important contributions to give, not only to a profession which is currently experiencing an apparent paradigmatic shift, but also as an alternative approach to enlighten people in general about the world they live in.

The immersion of a reporter is not a new method at all, where a journalist, to varying degrees, always has to be involved with the subjects and situations he or she is reporting on. This could possibly create some confusion as to what we mean by Immersion Journalism, and this will be one of the main issues which we will attempt to explain in this thesis. This will in turn lead us through some of the key questions which has long dominated the discussion of what journalism *is*, and what journalism *should be*.

We will here be taking for granted the assumption that the ethos of professional journalism is not set in stone, but is just a set of rules and conventions which through time has established a normative foundation (Eide 2011). Doing this will help us discuss the issues at hand more openly, where ‘nothing is sacred’, and allowing us to put forward an argument of how and why this form of journalism is something that can enrich the profession, not something that is endangering it, as some would have it.

Another basic assumption of the thesis is therefore that there should not only be balance in reporting, but also a balance in *methods of reporting*. The belief is that in heightening an audience’s knowledge of different forms of journalisms, this would have a strengthening effect on the profession. With a ‘journalistic literacy’ of the public, the distinction of the different methods used would open up the discussion, to go further than the categories of objectivity/subjectivity or partial/impartial and rather discuss what is quality reporting or not.

When I first started working on this thesis, it was because I believed that *subjectivism* in reporting could be an important way of connecting with the public’s values, in *addition* to the ‘hard news’ method of unbiased, impartial, and balanced ideal of objectivity which we see on TV on the evening news. This clearly marks my bias in the discussion, a bias I more or less still adhere to, although I believe that the discussion is far more complex than that and that subjectivity has many issues related to it.

One of the new places we are seeing new forms of reporting are from an unlikely company called VICE Media. Originally a small glossy magazine from Canada, it has now morphed into something much bigger and broader in scope, although retaining much of its idiosyncratic qualities. What started as a few short online videos in 2006, where its reporters immersed themselves in unusual situations and subjects, has today been developed to be a serious contender in delivering news content to the ‘millennial’ generation. They are supposedly not tying themselves to the old-media’s professional norms, but rather focusing on what co-founder Suroosh Alvi once told Wired: “subjectivity with real substantiation”. Their way of ‘blindly’ throwing themselves into a situation is intriguing, although not unproblematic. But the fact is that VICE Media has had a high momentum in recent years, and it will be interesting to see if their journalism has changed, after they have gained a foothold in the mainstream. It will also be interesting to see where it will go and especially if this immersive form of journalism has any ‘news value’, as it were.

We will also go deeper into different immersionist forms of reporting that we have seen earlier, and to see the similarities of these forms. This will perhaps serve as an attempt to

explain VICE Media's brand of journalism in academic terms, something that to my knowledge has not been done before. Where today's technology is giving us journalism in all mediums, the immersionist forms of reporting were previously confined to the page. In our defining of Immersion Journalism we will therefore be looking to the written form, trying explain VICE's audio-visual journalism within these parameters, as well as with a few other theories. In this respect, the thesis will attempt to bridge an understanding of the immersive form of reporting across the different medias.

Two of the key implications in this discussion would be the question of tension between the objectivity ideal and artistic freedom – of empirical validity and narrative technique – and how and to what extent journalists should use themselves in their reporting. In respect to the first, there sometimes seem to be a notion that they are mutually exclusive, that one cannot survive the other. I would argue, as many have done before me, that a more subjective form of reporting is *not* wholly threatening to the legitimacy of professional journalism, but that it is – or at least *could* be – elevating the whole field of journalistic approaches. It seems that today the public trust of the media is at a low point, and in my view, it isn't entirely unfounded. Notwithstanding many obvious exceptions, it would not be a stretch to say that there is a lot of 'bad' journalism in today's media. If this is true, one could argue that this might be *more* threatening to the legitimacy of today's professional ideals of journalism, than the emerging forms of 'subjective reporting'.

This will hopefully be a good entry point for looking into how, and to what extent subjective forms of reporting – and Immersion Journalism in particular – are challenging the 'mainstream journalism', and if this is in fact giving us something new. We should therefore engage in a normative discussion on whether forms like Immersion Journalism could actually be constitutive of a more legitimate future of journalism or not.

The research questions we are trying to answer in this thesis can thus be succinctly summarised to read:

What is Immersion Journalism, to what degree does VICE  
Media use this form, and to what extent does it challenge the  
norms, methods, and professional ideals of mainstream  
journalism?

## ***Methodology***

One of the problems with this thesis is the fact that it's using descriptions of something written, and trying to transfer these to another medium. This has been a source of some stress when trying to figure out how to analyse audio-visual representation. The result of a few months of reading has resulted in a multi-theoretical approach, where I have built a sort of rudimentary tool-box that will hopefully help me get the answers I want. We will go into them in detail later on, so it will suffice to briefly define them here.

The method we will be using in our analysis is a *qualitative close reading* of the texts, using *semiotics* as a basic foundation. Partly we will be using the theory of social semiotics, which can help us understand the processes of meaning-making in the texts through signs, and the social dimension where these signs are represented in. The assumption in social semiotics is that all communication is social. A social semiotic analysis would thus attempt to answer the question of how 'reality' is created within the specific texts. This is done from the perspective of the spectator, how it creates meaning from the signs represented in the text. Unlike the traditional semiotic approach, though, social semiotics does not focus so much on signs in an linguistic way, but is going further than that, seeing semiotic systems in all of the modes of human communications.

We will also use the theory of the *gaze*, which is a psychological term popularised by Jacques Lacan, but here developed by Vivian Sobchack. Her theory of how the phenomenon of death is represented in documentary film and how we gaze at death will be an important gateway into our analysis. She posits that there are many ethical issues concerning our viewing of *real* death on film, rather than fictional death, and her theory goes on to problematize these. This is of course highly relevant for us, but with the assumption that this still holds relevance in not just viewing death, but also other forms of adversity and suffering of others.

Nichols' theory of *documentary modes* will serve as another tool in our tool-box. He presents four different modes of documentary films, which explain how the filmmaker positions him/herself to the audience. This means looking at the basic organisational patterns the texts are organised in, and how it uses conventions of authority and credibility to forward its argument. This is a different perspective to the social semiotic one, in that it makes us think from the perspective of the how the *filmmaker* tries to create meaning, rather than how it is perceived by the spectator.

As the reader will notice, we will sometimes be using the word 'documentary' when



speaking of the reports we have chosen to analyse. We are, however using it in a broad sense, choosing this definition of it: “Using pictures or interviews with people involved in real events to provide a factual report on a particular subject” (Oxford Dictionaries Online [1]). This is partly because we are dealing with audio-visual representations of reality, but also because of the mode of production of these, where a crew is often a part of the process. We are in this perspective linking the documentary term strongly to that of the ‘reportage’, which presuppose a “factual, journalistic presentation of an account in a book or other text” (Oxford Dictionaries Online [2]). When speaking about the production of the audio-visual, we will often be using the word ‘filmmaker’, because it is thought to convey a more general sense of the production process (although not as some kind of ‘auteur’), rather than using the singular ‘reporter’. This could include a producer, editor, as well as the presenter / journalist / narrator of the individual cases, as this seems to change somewhat. We will also be using the word ‘film’, in full knowledge of the technical inaccuracy of the word in this context. It is, however, so broadly used in daily speech, that the understanding of it has become synonymous of something audio-visual.

The thesis will be written in an essayistic style, which allows us the freedom to explore and develop a coherent discourse, which needs to be based on the thesis’ own strength of argument and theoretical foundation. This will take the form of discussion of the different theories and arguments against each other, trying to achieve an understanding of which elements in our analysis, and Immersion Journalism in general, goes against the professional norms and ideals of journalism.

The starting point of the discussion is, however, not one of a strictly balanced pro/con discourse. A problem with a qualitative approach, and especially a semiotic approach, is that the results are based on my own interpretation, and aspects like my background, beliefs, and education will naturally have an impact on my subjectivity. As I pointed out earlier, I have a bias towards this form of journalism, and I am interested in making a case for the kind of reporting put forward here, but that is not to say that that will not be done with a critical mind, always looking for the counter arguments and opposing theories to balance my own arguments. This in turn makes the veracity of the claims in the project rest solely on my authority as researcher and the logic of my argumentation. This can be tested by a contradictory close reading of the same material, logically testing and comparing my argumentation and evidence presented here.

## ***Thesis Outline***

The structure of the thesis will go as follows. First we will go into the professional ideals of journalism (Chapter 2), attempting to explain what we mean by *journalism*. We do this by going into a historical outline of the profession, focusing on what can be said to be its most important paradigmatic shifts of the last two hundred years or so. We will here go into how the ideal of objectivity became a sort of ideology and to further explain some of the problems associated with it.

This leads us to what was a response to this disbelief in objectivity, which spawned a more ‘subjective’ form of reporting (Chapter 3). In going through a variety of different journalistic genres, we will hopefully distinguish many of the traits that Immersion Journalism is thought to be about. Another important aspect of this, would be how reporters in this form think about reality. We will therefore briefly summarise the phenomenological understanding in the New Journalism of the 1960’s, which can be seen to follow a more general paradigmatic shift in the sciences. We will then look at another genre within journalism which is very interesting in the context of immersive reporting, explaining some of the key elements of this in the section *Being (in) the Story*. The last section of this chapter will be a summary of how we would define Immersion Journalism.

In Chapter 4 we will describe the theoretical perspective we are using in analysing audio-visual representation. How we *gaze* at the suffering of others, as well as how a filmmaker chooses the ethical stance of their film. This is then coupled with Nichols’ theory of documentary modes, which depicts the more structural elements of documentary films in general. We are then going to shortly describe why we have chosen a social semiotic approach to our analysis, before introducing the company whose films we are analysing (Chapter 5), and then the analysis itself (Chapter 6). In the last chapter we are presenting our findings, summarising it and connecting it to the frame of reference which we are starting to build now, by first looking to find an answer to the question: What is journalism?

## CHAPTER 2:

### THE PROFESSIONAL IDEALS OF JOURNALISM

#### *Introduction – What is Journalism?*

One summer morning in a suburb outside Paris there happened in 1836 the perhaps most concise, or at least the deadliest parable of the conflict between profit and profundity. After numerous insults and slander against each other, the gauntlet was cast, and the editors of the newspapers *la Presse* and *le National* were to duel with pistols at dawn. It was supposedly some small triviality which finally provoked the dignified fury of Girardin and Carrel, resulting in both men being hit, and one dead of the injuries. Carrel, the editor of the political broadsheet *le National* passed away a few days after from a bullet wound to the groin. And to paraphrase Sigurd Allern; the ad-financed tabloid won over the subscription-based political newspaper, and the combination of low prices, and more versatile and entertaining news soon became a commercial success (Allern 1988: 22). Today there are very few newspapers which does not need advertising money to keep itself afloat, and the fluid boundary between profit-margins and good journalism is still very relevant today.

In this chapter we are asking ourselves 'what is journalism?' To find our first answer, we might turn to a general answer proposed to us by Martin Eide (2011) in his book, whose title asks that same question. It is difficult to say what journalism *is*, he says, without asking what *should* be. Nonetheless, we need a framework to contextualise it in. To do this, he proposes this definition: “Journalism is a modern institution which collect, process, and disseminate information that make claims of veracity, and may be democratically relevant” (:10).

This definition of the professions democratic ambition may give us an entry point to critique the norms and methods of how the traditional forms of journalism is trying to achieve this. One of our assumptions here, is not only that journalism is an ever-changing collection of such norms and methods, but that several *different* journalisms would constitute an even

greater democratic relevance.

In our attempt of finding out what journalism is and should be, we will look back on the professions long and varied tradition. Many would probably agree that elements of what journalism *should be*, is often reflected in professional heroes who somehow broke with the established, and in their own way form a basis for what we think of when we speak of journalism today. Similar to the almost deified investigative *Washington Post*-reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, there are many examples of exemplary journalists through recent history who has become romanticised and put upon a high pedestal by many within the profession. There are many who have had a great influence on journalism and journalists today, and such towering figures is an central part of the professional self-image and self-romanticising. One could argue that this romanticising is important, maybe even necessary, for that which is often an ungrateful, demanding, and sometimes dangerous work. Together with several self-imposed norms and rules, these exemplary figures are a part of the professional ethos in journalism. By looking closer on some of these elements in a historical perspective, we will not only have a foundation to understand the opposition to some of these norms which we see in Immersion Journalism, but perhaps also gleam a silhouette of what journalism *is*, a profession which in many ways elude simple definition.

### ***A Brief Historical Outline***

As we have seen, the tradition of journalism and how it legitimises itself is to a certain degree something that changes through time. We will here look at some of the most important changes in the profession through the mostly American perspective we have chosen here.

Michael Schudson puts the birth of the modern concept of “news” to the so called ‘penny press’ in the 1830’s. These newspapers was novel in the sense that they made it their regular practice to cover political news, both foreign, domestic, and local, as well as reports from the police and courts, and private households. As he writes, that “for the first time, the newspaper reflected not just commerce or politics, but social life.” In these years it not only reflected a small trading elite, but “the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing”. For the first time in news, the penny press inaugurated the “democratic attitude” of triviality, in the sense that any event and happening in the world could be fit for print, as long as it was worked into the right form. The new concept of “news” also made the everyday life more important, in that it for the first time

made it into being a marketable product, which not only acknowledged its importance for the readers, but also delivered it with a regular timeliness. That it finally started to write about the social life, however, is not to say that it wrote about the familiarities of the reader. The appeal for the reading middle class was rather that which was exotic for them, often the everyday lives of other classes (Schudson 1978: 22-28).

At this stage the professionalization of journalism had not yet taken form. The clear definition of the *journalists* as a common group with similar ideas and ideals did not emerge before very late in the same century. At the same time as the professionalization of politics were taking place, a revolt against the ideas of formalism, where science and realism in literature became in ever greater favour, journalism would rise to prominence. Although covering the news in a more 'scientific' way, where facts were important, the *truth ideal* was still a little blurry. It was common to 'spice' the stories with fictitious remarks in the non-essential parts, although the essentials were still based on facts.

One ideal the newspapers nonetheless had and which is still important today, is the distinction between news and opinion, even though this division wasn't always absolute. Schudson cites a handbook for journalists from 1894 by Edwin L. Shuman, who writes that "the one deals with facts, the other with theoretical interpretations, and it is as harmful to mix the two [...] as to combine church and state in government. *This at least, is the only safe theory for the beginner.*" (Schudson 1978: 79-80). The italics are made by Schudson, and emphasises that the distinction was more of a guiding principle for the youngest journalists, rather than an absolute ideal in journalism. The desire of journalists to tell stories in their personal and distinctive way made any sort of objectivity in the modern definition impossible.

Is it perhaps some of the same reasons why the New Journalists revolted against the traditional journalism in the 1960's? The impulse for writing about the world in a more narrative way is by no means a new one. In the late 1800's, there started to emerge two distinct models of journalism, the *story model* and the *information model*. On the one hand, it was believed that the primary task of the news was to create satisfying aesthetic experiences that would help people interpret their own lives and social surroundings. On the other hand, there was the 'unframed', 'pure' information, which by Walter Benjamin was characterised as a product of a "fully developed capitalism", and whose chief purview was to be quickly verifiable by the reader, as well as to be very 'understandable' in its writing (Schudson 1978: 89-90). As we know, this 'decontextualized' form of news has become the norm in today's mainstream media, as it is the information model that has become associated with ideas of

fairness, dispassion, and objectivity.

In these two models there were also a clear class distinction. As Schudson notes, there is a connection between the information model and the educated middle class, as it is with the story model and the lower middle and working classes. And thus one wonders, as he does too, why should this be so? Why is the educated middle class less interested in story, and the working class more? In the 1890's, these two models could be seen in newspapers such as the prestigious New York Times and the yellow journalism of the New York World, where the story model have thus been cast in a rather bad light, and have been ever after associated as more base in the arguments of greater and lesser journalistic quality. But does that mean that dispassionate 'pure information' is the higher form of journalism? How journalists make sense of reality in different ways is something we will come back to in the next chapter.

The term *objectivity* did not come into use before after World War I, which according to Schudson was a "dialectical response" to the increasing culture of capitalist markets in our society. With the emergence of this individualistic and utilitarian culture, the *critical doubt* that the market – and democracy itself – had encouraged, now started to grow in both journalism and the social sciences, a doubt in the system and the internal logic of its own society. Also, after the Great War, the extensive use of propaganda, as well as the development of the PR industry, the emerging distrust of the facts lead to the emergence of objectivity, as "consensually validated statements about the world, predicated on a radical separation of *facts and values*," (Schudson 1978: 122, my italics). With this, there was also the belief that the objectivity could only be truly objective if it was handled in a professional manner. Or as Eide formulates it: that a simple belief in *facts*, was now replaced with a trust in *rules and procedures* made for a world where facts were subject to doubt, and that the emergence of objectivity was a "methodological technique, but also as a legitimizing professional ideology" (Eide 1992: 39).

Another response for the subjectivity that arose in the 1930's was that which was called 'interpretative reporting', which sought to give more 'substance' to the news. Curtis MacDougal argued that the United States had been unprepared to understand both the First World War, as well as the Great Depression, because the wire services and newspapers had only reported what happened, not an interpretation of why it was happening. This was, however, not inconsistent with the aim of objectivity, but was a move towards a more interpretative journalism (MacDougal in Schudson 1978: 147). Thus one of the same impulses

which started the New Journalism was already taking place both three and seven decades before it, where journalists wanted more context for the events and statements they reported on.

Although an important development at the time, where parts of the story model and information model seemingly merged, it was another form that would become the greatest professional legitimizing phenomenon of journalism, as we know it today. The *investigative journalism* done by the two Washington Post reporters Woodward and Bernstein, and their reporting on the Watergate scandal, has in many ways set the standard as the paragon of journalism. What has become almost more important as myth than reality, their reports has lifted the prestige of journalism to an unprecedented prominence. Rising in popularity at the same time as the New Journalism, it is not unfair to say that it was the investigative journalism that had the greatest impact on the journalism that came after it. What Woodward and Bernstein called “plain reporting” and that they were “just doing their jobs”, their journalism and attitude towards it has become a professional myth which many a journalist tries to emulate. As Schudson writes:

They make a case for journalism true to an ideal of objectivity and false to the counterfeit conventions justified in its name. It is not a personal journalism and not a journalism of advocacy; if there is a personal element in it, it is not opinion or conviction but energy (Schudson 1978: 189).

The energy and power that the Watergate scandal had on modern journalism is beyond doubt. News reporting done well is itself a legitimizing factor for the profession in general today. We can also with good reason start to talk about the ideological hegemony in newsrooms today (Eide 1992), and one of the ideals which has become ideology, is the ideal objectivity. As we shall see in the next section, there are many problems with this concept, and most journalists recognise the impossibility of it in any ‘pure’ sense. Most have therefore stopped talking about it and substituted it with words like ‘fairness’, ‘balance’, and ‘neutrality, but many would probably agree that the ideology is still a big part of journalists’ self-understanding even today. We will therefore go into some of the critiques made on objectivity.

### ***The Limits of Objectivity***

The tendency of news production as professional legitimation is today, according to Eide, facing pressures from an ever stronger orientation towards the market. The economic landscape in our culture can be said to threaten the professional autonomy of journalism,

perhaps more so in the US (Eide 1992: 31-32). In light of these pressures, it seems prudent to discuss the everyday routines that objectivity and the professionalization of the news aspire to, the relationship between structure and agency. In a phenomenological perspective we will look at some of the arguments made against the objectivity ideal, and the criticism against this view. We will also look at how objectivity can reinforce class structures and ideological hegemony. But first we will go into perspectives discussing the limits of the ideal and ideology of objectivity.

### *Objectivity as Strategic Ritual*

Firstly, we will look at Gaye Tuchman's idea of objectivity, who sees it as an epistemological impossibility. For her, objectivity is not seen as a normative base for journalists in everyday work, but rather a *strategic ritual*, a sometimes "compulsive" method used to protect themselves. In her article from 1972 she writes:

To a sociologist, the word 'objectivity' [...] invokes philosophy, notions of science, and ideas of professionalism. It conjures up the ghosts of Durkheim and Weber, recalling disputes in scholarly journals concerning the nature of 'social fact' and the term 'value free'. [...] To journalists [...] the term 'objectivity' stands as a bulwark between themselves and critics (Tuchman 1972: 660).

In her methodological understanding of objectivity she posits five strategic procedures which can be seen as the formal characteristics of a news story; (1) presentation of contradictory or conflicting possibilities; (2) presentation of supporting evidence; (3) using quotation marks to indicate that the journalist is not the one making the truth-claim; (4) structure information with important facts first, known as the inverted pyramid; and (5) separating fact from opinion. Using these formal procedures the journalist can protect himself by invoking objectivity. For Tuchman this leads to a number of problems, and believes that although the procedures may produce "demonstrable evidence of an attempt to obtain objectivity, they cannot be said to provide objectivity" (Tuchman 1972: 676). Some of the problems can be a journalist's selective perception, and as we have seen, the mistaken insistence that facts always speak for themselves. This in turn may promote the journalist's own opinions, so in her view, therefore, the procedures a journalist uses to affirm his or her objectivity are always in danger of making them biased.



### *Objectivity as Consequence*

The phenomenological view that ‘pure’ objectivity is impossible holds a fairly strong position today and most journalists are well aware of their own subjectivity and the potential problems it presents. Calcutt and Hammond (2011) criticise Tuchman's belief – that journalism is never capable of veracity, of telling “The Truth”. They point out that it is logically inconsistent to criticise journalistic objectivity for failing to *be* objective, while at the same time argue that objectivity is *impossible*. Of this critique – that the approach of 'objective' journalism as somehow disguising its ideological nature with the neutral, balanced and impartial ethos of objectivity – they say has become ‘behind the times’ and redundant (Calcutt and Hammond 2011: 23-24). Instead they argue another understanding of objectivity, one where subjectivity is not merely reduced to personal opinion, but where subjectivity is something inherent in the human consciousness. In this understanding it is a natural *consequence* of subjectivity (Calcutt and Hammond 2011: 19). It can therefore be argued that this view of reality is basically a social constructivist one, which in many ways is comparable with the phenomenological view of journalism we will see in the New Journalism in the next chapter.

So in line with journalistic rebels in the 1960's, Calcutt and Hammond believe that the *collective application* of these subjective processes is where objectivity arises in the first place. The reporter's job is to shape something on the basis of an event – which is initiated by an actor – into a text for the reader. To do this it necessarily needs to go through a filter – the journalist. Thus, to qualify as journalism it needs to capture the essential character of the original event, transforming it through their own subjectivity. Objectivity is therefore still the ultimate goal of journalism, they believe, where it strives to produce something that is external for all three subjects (actor, journalist, reader), and attempts to capture the essence of the object they seek to describe.

### *Degrees of Objectivity*

The argument put forward by Calcutt and Hammond is interesting on many levels, but it still cannot bypass the actual challenges that a journalist meets every day, with their constant pressures with deadlines, tardy sources, grumpy editors, and an increasing expectancy to produce more multimedial pieces for less money. Unlike the academic, a journalist's daily life leaves little time for quiet reflection on normative questions. Many journalists would probably agree that the profession is often dependent on the continuous reactions of sources, where the *internalised* norms and methods is most important to how a journalist judges and handles the

situations he finds himself in.

Therefore, Judith Lichtenberg argues that we should rather distinguish between objectivity as an *ideal* and objectivity as *method*. The dismissal of journalists for failing the epistemological assertions within academia is beside the point, she insists, and believes the misunderstanding lies in the perception of objectivity as a correspondence between an idea and reality itself. The metaphysical criticism that comes from the social constructivist perspective, should rather be distinguished from the *political* problems that may arise from objectivity. In the “metaphysical idealism” a journalist would never present a 'true' reality, and would therefore “inevitably reproduce and reinforce cultural and political hegemony in support of the prevailing ideological agenda”. Lichtenberg therefore believes that viewing objectivity as method would imply that at least *some* questions have definitive answers (Lichtenberg 1991 in Sjøvaag 2011: 28).

With this basis Lichtenberg also argues that even if an absolute truth does not exist, it is in a larger perspective easy to know what is *most* true. If doubting the American newscasts on the Iraq war, one can only examine it in contrast to other countries to control and adjust news outlets that might be biased. Accordingly it is important to be critical of all sources of news, and distinguish between good and bad, between less or more correct. Only then, she argues, can we achieve the highest level of shared truth (Lichtenberg 1996: 228).

Nonetheless, Lichtenberg does not deny that our culture, politics, and other interests help shape the way we think, which is again reinforced through the media. This is impossible to get away from. The biggest problem with the critique of objectivity, in her view, is that it is based on the assumption that there are no neutral points of reference, that all is relative. She believes it impossible to criticise a statement or description without comparing them to another point of reference, something better or more precise. The two arguments that social constructivists lean on, she says, is: (1) the general, that objectivity is impossible because we have different and varying categories in our understanding, and (2) that some news stories or organisations present the world in an ideological and distorted way. Following her own logic, these arguments are irreconcilable, because although one admits that the media is serving a biased and ideological function, it still implies that there is some sort of reference point (Lichtenberg 1996: 29-30). In her view, then, one can thus imagine it as presented in degrees, and that this comparative method will, at least in a larger perspective, lead to the *most* objective representation one can achieve. Accordingly it is important to assume that there is such a thing as objectivity, she believes, using it as a regulatory principle identifying a

problem, thus fixing it. This would also tie neatly into one of the main arguments of this thesis, in that it is through a multitude of approaches in journalism that we will achieve the best understanding of our world, in all its facets, allowing us to be more critical of any one interpretation of it.

### *Reinforcing Class Structures*

In a more critical perspective, Graham Knight is not as flippant about the inevitability of socio-political hegemony, and believes that objectivity methods can reinforce the values of the bourgeoisie. He argues that the ideology of objectivity has emerged in the space between economic consolidation and the professionalization in journalism. In his view, the economic culture has led to a homogenisation of news – both in substance, format, and in use of sources. And the monopolisation in the media system is leading to a smaller number of big newspapers, limiting the possibilities of freedom of speech and diversity of opinion. He believes that the only thing holding back the contradictory practice of monopoly and freedom of speech, was through a practice of “objectivity-through-impartiality” (Knight 1982: 22-23).

The biggest problem with this practice, however, is that it is reinforcing the political and ideological hegemony. In its use of sources – 'experts', official spokespersons, academics, et cetera – these persons, the ones appointed by powerful institutions, are then by default the only people with automatic value as sources. Simultaneously their authority and power is reinforced as they are being used as news sources. Whether or not this comes from structural or practical necessities, the consequence is still the same; the “reliance on officials and experts reinforces the form and substance of the news talk along class lines”, which in turn makes the news mainly by and for the upper middle class (Knight 1982: 19). In this lies another problematic issue pointed out by Tuchman; that social movements does not have the same legitimacy as news sources as other formalised organisations, because they do not have the same “bureaucratic-institutional structures”. It is nevertheless doubtful that it is a big conspiracy against the lower classes, but largely what Knight calls a “taken-for-grantedness”. This praxis helps to make the middle class the 'natural' point of view for the whole of society in the news. It also leads to a reinforcement of certain forms of sociality, and the exclusion of others. The ideology of objectivity thus creates a split social intelligence which naturalises the mind-set of the prevailing hegemony (Knight 1982: 16-21).

## *Conclusions*

As we have seen in the different perspectives here, the objectivity as *method*, which emerged in the interwar period, can lead to a number of problems. In Tuchman's perspective, it can be used as a ritual that protects the journalists. In her understanding, the invoking of objectivity and the belief that facts speak for themselves, can hide a journalist's selective perception, and therefore making the news biased, at the same time as it declares its neutrality.

We have also problematized some of the issues of epistemology. It is generally accepted by journalists today that a 'pure' objectivity is impossible, and that subjectivity is an inherent part of human consciousness. Calcutt and Hammond therefore argues that the collective application of these subjective processes naturally produce objectivity as a consequence. Thus they posit that objectivity should still be the *ideal* of journalism, in that it strives to capture the essence of what it reports on, forming it through their own subjectivity and attempts to produce something external for all involved.

The distinction between objectivity as *method* and *ideal* is also very important to Lichtenberg. In the same vein as Calcutt and Hammond, she argues that the relativist-constructivist argument is beside the point, and one should distinguish between the *metaphysical idealism* of objectivity and the *political* problems it can lead to. Seeing the influence and reinforcement of culture and politics through media as an inevitability, she takes the a more practical position that in the bigger picture, one will always be able to discern what is *most* true. In this respect, she thinks of objectivity as a control mechanism that identifies problems and fixes them.

In a much more critical perspective, Graham Knight points to the cultural and political hegemony that is being reinforced by the methods of objectivity. In using sources in power, this both implicitly and explicitly contribute to their power and authority, reinforcing the institutional structures. This coincides with the praxis of viewing the world through the perspective of the middle-class, making it the 'natural' point of view and reinforcing class lines. We could therefore ask, with its alternative perspectives and its reluctance to conform to the professional ideals of tradition journalism, could Immersion Journalism lessen the effects of this taken-for-grantedness?

## CHAPTER 3:

### WHAT IS IMMERSION JOURNALISM?

#### *Introduction*

‘Immersion journalism’ is in many ways not a new expression, and is used in many different ways, by different people, to explain a whole variety of different things. The word ‘immersion’ itself is quite self-explanatory, but can have more than one meaning. At the deepest level, one might say that all our subjective experiences and individual lives are in and of themselves an immersive act, creating our own narratives from day to day; but it can also have the more mundane meaning of lowering or submerging oneself into something, both physically and figuratively. We will look at how an individual immerses itself into another reality than its own, engaging itself within it and attempting to represent it through the act of forming it into something; something which tries to make itself understood so that other individuals can experience it too. In this respect, it can be seen as a sort of exercise in empathy, trying to explain the realities of others, and how they face their own problems, offering us the chance to relate to how other people live their lives on a basic human level.

The editor of *The New Yorker*, David Remnick, playfully characterised the phrase ‘immersion journalism’ as something “I think was made up yesterday”, and as “stories you spend more than 15 minutes on” (*Columbia Journalism Review*) in a discussion at the *New Yorker Festival 2013*. The comment was of course made tongue-in-cheek, but it says something about the ambiguous position the term holds in both journalism and academia today.

The method is difficult to describe, but is often mentioned in the same breath as gonzo journalism, or the seminal New Journalism, or the subsequent literary journalism. What these have in common is that all of them choose subjects from the real world, they require extensive research, and they are meant to find more underlying meanings than is often usual in

traditional forms of reporting. Although the different genres mentioned here – and others like it – share many similar traits, they are not always interchangeable. They do, however, share many traits that define them. The most important for us is that they all share an immersive style of reporting. This is why we have chosen to bundle all these genres together into *Immersion Journalism*. That is not to say that we will limit ourselves to these literary forms, but rather use them as a launching pad for exploring different ideas concerning the act of immersing oneself within a story. But first let us first look at one of the ‘riots’ in journalism, the form Wolfe called the most important literature of its day, “however ungracefully named” – the New Journalism.

In his anthology from 1973, Wolfe and his co-editor E.W. Johnson set out to capture what he called the ‘unique power’ of realism. According to Wolfe the three literary devices most central in this genre are scene-by-scene construction, the recording of extended dialogue, the use of different points of view, and interior monologue (: 21). The first three devices, structural and compositional in nature, should not be seen as set rules, though, since there are differing opinions among journalists, then and today, as to how they should use these devices. The fourth device is done through extensive interviewing and observation. There is also a fifth device, that of capturing symbolic details which encapsulate the subject and situation, which can be aspects like gestures, habits, manners, and descriptions of other details in the scene that would usually be overlooked.

The reporting should nevertheless always be true and accurate and based on facts. Using narrative to a greater extent should not dissuade the reporter from diminishing the story’s truth value. As Eide points out, this insistence on truth and a close connection to reality are traits that separates it from what has been today nicknamed as ‘postmodernism’ – where all norms should be dissolved and where the ‘great narrative’ is dead (1992: 43). Although the New Journalists were not of such an extreme relativist position, we shall see that the social fragmentation and precariousness of identity in the 1960’s America would change how these journalists perceived their own reality. While many of them viewing reality in a ‘realistic’ way, the influence of the phenomenological shift in the social sciences clearly had an impact on these writers, as we will come back to shortly.

As many of the critics of the New Journalism love to point out, the use of literary devices when reporting on factual events can have some inherent problems if used to such an extent that it harms the truth value of the report. One should therefore always be aware of this when

using texts too “reliant on its own interpretative framework”, especially if these are hidden. But as Eide writes: “in New Journalist works the use of literary devices in their reports are both intended and conspicuous. This perhaps, makes it easier to be sceptical towards the truth value of these texts, than is the case in the sober, ‘objective’ news stories” (1992: 45). A caveat he makes, though, a critique also made by Bech-Karlsen (2007), is that this presupposes that the literary journalist plays with his cards open. So in the New Journalism, the reporter will often clearly mark his/her own personal imprint on the story, while the ‘mainstream’ reporter would often do his/her best to hide whatever influence the reporter had on it. So for the New Journalist, the reporter may well communicate his/her own *subjectivity*, but can never alter factual conditions to suit it. So if one is to truthfully unearth a hidden reality of strains and structures of life, to “understand other people’s worlds from the inside out and to portray them as they understand themselves”, as Harrington (1997) puts it, one need invariably to stick to the facts.

### ***Making Sense of Reality***

As we have seen earlier, the embellishment of a news story in journalism’s early days was supposedly not at all uncommon. It was however, as Schudson argues, common for reporters to advocate a form of ‘realism’ in the sense that they saw the facts as a part of the very reality they described, rather than a symbolic statement about it. This belief, however, started to decline in the 1920’s, at the same time as the ideal of objectivity started to emerge. According to David L. Eason, this erosion of the old paradigm was correlated with the “conceptual fragmentation which split reality into an external world and our mental pictures of it.” (Eason 1981: 126). One can clearly see a connection here with the great shift in the sciences here as well, which would happen in the years following, as in the positivism disputes after the Second World War. What Eason argues, is that the dominant theme in American journalism after the rise of objectivism is the desire to overcome the *relativism* created by this shift, by making journalism more “scientific”. This manifested itself in going away from the story elements in the news in order to leave ‘pure information’.

Then, as now, the more narrative forms of reporting were debated as a matter of style and technical artistry. But as Eason points out, the New Journalists does not only call for language as a mere stylistic embellishment, but rather as language as a basic mediation in a much more primal sense, as a ‘cultural act’. He does, however, make the distinction between two modes

of New Journalism – the more ‘realist’ writers, such as Wolfe, Capote, and Talese; and the more subjective ‘constructivism’ of Thompson, Didion, and Mailer. The first of them can be said to be more true to a realism that reflected the world in a more precise manner, while the second took more liberties in ‘creating worlds’ within their writing, often being quite subjective, but still (perhaps less so with Thompson) being grounded in reality (Reynolds 2012: 56).

Writers in the latter camp, though, saw language as something that constructs meaning, rather than the other way around. So as opposed to the belief that ‘objective’ reports is a “natural” statement of “the way things are”, the New Journalists are rooted in the belief that ‘meaning’ is a symbolic structure of interrelated narrative choices through which culture is perceived as a meaningful paradigm (Eason 1981: 126). Or put more easily, our understanding of the world is constructed through interrelated symbolic structures, which in turn constructs our social reality. This can perhaps be said to follow an understanding close to that of Calcutt and Hammond, who believe that objectivity is a natural process of our interrelated subjectivities, which may be achieved if the ‘essential character’ of an event is captured.

The feeling of social fragmentation and the precariousness of personal and group identity was one of the main themes in the New Journalism. With the belief that sociality was a mere construction, this new form started to confront themes such as identity politics as problems of *language*. That is not to say that language create meaning in and of itself. It does not reproduce events, but “jog the reader’s memories” to find an image or icon within its own frame of experience. A writer of narrative journalism would therefore be trying to ‘manipulate’ these frames of understanding in a way as to “create within the mind of the reader an entire world that resonates with the reader’s own emotions” (Wolfe 1973). The information in this form of reporting is thus created by the reader, which confront the reporting as a symbolic structure, a structure that either confirms or contradicts its own experiences. According to Eason, in this way of “imposing a narrative line on events”, instead of assuming the intrinsic value of ‘objective information’, the New Journalism creates a cultural contract between writer and reader which maintain and transform a particular reality.

When Jo Bech-Karlsen (2007) critiques the New Journalism, he criticise it because of its use of what he calls an “illusion model”. A self-proclaimed purist, his argument is that with the use of a third person view, one opposes the ideas of transparency in conventional journalism in that it hides itself from the reader. According to Bech-Karlsen it does this by using the impersonal voice of conventional reporting, at the same time as it hides itself by the



“meticulous constructed illusion” of the language of fiction. The consequence of this, he believes, is that none of these forms invites a discussion about reality, when the objective surety of the impersonal voice, and the “language of illusion” conceals any doubts and uncertainties (Bech-Karlsen 2007: 158-159). Not all New Journalists uses a third person perspective, however, but perhaps if we made the distinction between the ‘realists’ and ‘constructivists’ in New Journalism – I suspect he was talking about the realists – we exclude those who write in the first person? His argument is interesting, but as he writes himself, it could just as easily be turned on its head and be said of conventional reporting as well. But is he right when he writes that the narrative model makes little room for “background, knowledge, and extended perspectives on society and culture”? (ibid.) We will need to ask ourselves, does it serve as a complimentary perspective to the one of traditional news, or is it reductive of the reality it reports on?

In any case, what is in effect a phenomenological understanding of reporting, the New Journalism has had a strong influence on the self-understanding for many journalists. As a reaction to the complex and fragmented social reality which was present in the US in the 1960’s, one could argue that the basis of these ideas was far from new. What we so often see as a two-sided quarrel between ‘story’ and ‘information’, or between subjectivity and objectivity, are merely two sides of our human consciousness and our common search for knowledge.

That being said, there are *many* different ways of obtaining knowledge. In the following sections we will go into the different genres that use immersionism in its reporting. We will then see how some of these journalists use and position themselves in a story and in the events they experience and how this is represented in their reporting.

### ***Immersion Journalism Beyond New Journalism***

As we so often see in the sciences, ideas which have not yet settled into established theory will usually have a variety of similar theories which cover much of the same ground. It is not any different in the question of the immersed reporter. We have mentioned the perhaps best known of these, Wolfe’s ‘manifesto’ of the New Journalism. We will later go into Thompson’s gonzo journalism, which is thought to be important inspirations to the cases we will analyse later. But before this, we will look at some of the most notable developments in written reporting that would be natural to include in the genre of Immersion Journalism.

### *Literary Journalism*

A decade after Wolfe's anthology, there was another development, perhaps not as famous as its predecessor; this was Norman Sims' book *The Literary Journalists* (1984). In it he further develops the definition of *literary journalism*. One of the interesting points for us, is that he replaces what Wolfe termed 'saturation reporting' with the alternate 'immersion reporting'. Agreeing with Eason, Sims argue that literary journalists are an answer for the social realities in which they find themselves. That the usual "scraps of information", which is fed through traditional journalism by centres of power is, in his view, no longer satisfactory for our understanding of the psychological complexities of the world we live in. In a world like this, "'facts' only *begin* to explain what's happening" (Sims 1984: 1, my italics). But that is not to say that 'story' should not be true and accurate. As Eide (1992) notes, Sims and the literary journalists know the difference between facts and lies, but doesn't buy the traditional distinction between literature and journalism.

Unlike the deep-seated norms and conventions in traditional journalism, Sims argues that literary journalism follows its own rules and demands immersion in complex and difficult subjects. The voice of the writer not only communicates to the reader that there is an author at work – what Isager (2006) calls their *individually situated persona* – but it also bring the author's world into our own. The most important and essential forces of Sims' literary journalism is thus, immersion, voice, accuracy, and symbolism.

### *Intimate Journalism*

Another immersive form, perhaps less known than Sims' literary journalism, is Walt Harrington's *Intimate Journalism*. This form focuses more on the interviewing of subjects, rather than just using literary techniques to drive a narrative. Harrington writes that one of the main differences between mainstream journalism and intimate interviewing is that in the latter, the journalist tries to avoid the idea that the story *is* the interview (1997: xxxiv). What he means, is that it tries to capture something more, something deeper than what one usually get in mainstream reporting, where stories often comprise mostly of quotes from interviews, more or less set out of context. Some of the basic techniques of intimate journalism would still entail writing in scenes, as in the other forms we have presented. In intimate journalism the reporter tries to capture a narrator's voice and/or writing the story from the point of view of one or several subjects. It does this by gathering details from the subjects' lives and real-

life dialogue and get to know the subject so intimately as to gather a sort of “interior monologue”. This requires a temporary immersion of a reporter in the lives of the subjects, so that they become relaxed, and that real events can unfold, be developed and resolved (Harrington 1997: xx-xxi).

An example by Harrington himself could be his article about George W. Bush, where he in *The American Scholar* in 2011 wrote a 7000 word essay of several intimate meetings through 25 years with him. The story is in many ways a rare and interesting insight into the personality of the former president, and is exciting in the sense that one gets a very compressed insider view of the life of the ‘most powerful person on earth’. It does, however, sometimes have a dotting quality, often explicitly so. At one point he even quotes one of his own letters published in the newspaper *the St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, where he after the invasion of Iraq defended the president from critics who believed him little less than a “wealthy white man with the right ancestors” only interesting in defending ‘big oil’. To this he answered that people should not underestimate the man, and “that he’s smart, thoughtful in a brawny kind of way and, most of all, a good and decent man.” He does justify himself with saying he did not vote for him, because of several disagreements of politics. “I disagree with him on the Supreme Court, environment, abortion, the death penalty and affirmative action. So I voted against this good and decent man. *It pained me to do it.*” (The American Scholar 2011, my italics). Despite his disagreements on policy, the closeness of the subject can with such statements seem a little *too* intimate. Soon after, thinking his invitations to the White House would cease, now that he has publicly declared he did not vote for him, he nonetheless gets a friendly welcome by the president. Puffing their cigars and talking for three hours, off the record, the reader is let in on only three adjectives, that it was “amazing”, “remarkable”, and “stunning”.

I left the White House in a daze. I even got lost in the pitch-black darkness and had to drive around the small parking lot for a few minutes to find my way to the gate. I called my wife, and she asked how the evening had gone. I couldn’t answer. [...] I finally said, “It was like sitting and listening to Michael Jordan talk basketball or Pavarotti talk opera, listening to someone at the top of his game share his secrets.” (ibid.)

None of this is particularly out of character for this type of reporting, never expressing to be anything else than it is. It should also be said that the passage displayed here is taken a bit out of context; but it does force us to question if this intimate form of reporting *can* be too adoring and dependent of its subjects, even to a greater extent than Sims’ literary journalism. In general, Harrington’s Intimate Journalism does not give us much novelty compared to the

New Journalism it bases itself upon, but it is important to take note of it, nonetheless.

### *Undercover Reporting*

We cannot talk about Immersion Journalism without mentioning the critical journalists who immerse themselves in their own stories the most. These are three examples of historic and contemporary journalists who have a high degree of immersiveness in their stories.

One of the first pioneering people in undercover/investigative reporting was of course Nellie Bly, real name Elizabeth Jane Cochran. She became famous when she faked insanity to report on the conditions at a lunatic asylum for women for the New York World in 1887. To get admitted, she had to fake insanity in a courtroom, and to be examined by two doctors (who concluded she was “positively demented”). After she had immersed herself for ten days, her report on the horrible conditions therein created a sensation, leading to many changes in the routines and funding of the mental hospital. She writes in a narrative prose in the first person view and can be said to have a high degree of realism. She is also reluctant of using interpretative or introspective elements. Her style can be said to be in the ‘act of experience’, in that her form of reporting describes the story through a series of events, giving us all the relevant information so that we can experience the characters and events as they are. It can therefore be said to be a pretty ‘straight’ writing style.

A more contemporary reporter of this kind would of course be Günter Wallraff, who is best known for going deep undercover over long periods of time, as when he worked four months in the German tabloid newspaper *Bild Zeitung* as Hans Esser, uncovering an oftentimes macabre attitude towards their readers, and people in general. Since the 1960’s, Wallraff has done everything from going undercover as an alcoholic in a mental institution, disguised himself as a Turkish immigrant for a year trying to penetrate the German labour market, and even painted himself as a black man trying to expose latent and explicit racism. Both method and man has caused some controversy, and it has often been voiced strong opposition to his methods, perhaps most often from the ones on the receiving end of Wallraff’s hard-hitting journalism.

Another contemporary figure of the same ilk is Barbara Ehrenreich, perhaps best known for her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* from 2001. In it she goes

undercover to investigate some of the difficulties faced by low wage workers, herself trying to balance the income and costs of living on the money made by so-called 'unskilled labour'. In Ehrenreich's experience the life was difficult to maintain, with both monetary difficulties because of high rent and because of physical toil of needing more than one job to keep afloat. The book is an interesting, although not surprising look at the dilemmas faced by many after the US welfare reforms initiated in 1996. Criticising the reforms signed by Clinton, she showed that, although creating new workplaces can look good on paper, it is not as appealing for the person working three of them to survive.

### *Gonzo Journalism*

Not always caring for the rules of professional journalism, and a few judicial ones as well for that matter, Hunter S. Thompson's journalism is perhaps the most idiosyncratic (and problematic) form within the profession. So much so, that it often is on the fringes of what is considered good press conduct. The blending of fact and fantasy and subject and reporter in his writing, has led many within the profession to dismiss gonzo journalism as *serious* journalism. He nonetheless holds a high star with many journalists today. We should not base ourselves on the myth (and caricature) which is perpetrated by both his proponents, opponents, and himself, as this would detract us from any serious deliberation of his work.

Having established himself as a feature journalist in various journals and newspapers, he took the job of writing an article about motorcycle gangs in California for *The Nation* in 1965, which after it was published got several publishers interested in extending it to a whole book. So a year after, his first book, called *Hell's Angels: a Strange and Terrible Saga* (1966) was published, where we see Thompson immerse himself for a year in the world of the motorcycle gang. The book launched his reputation as an intrepid reporter of the "decadence and depravity" of American culture. The reporting in this book follows more closely Wolfe's techniques of New Journalism, but it certainly has many characteristics of his later gonzo style as well. The book has a sparkling rhetoric for which he would later be known for, with the occasional inclination towards the hyperbolic. With the usage of quotes from everything like the Angels themselves, he juxtaposition them with Kierkegaard, as well as both Milton and a San Francisco drag queen, Thompson gives us a remarkable narrative grounded in reality, even though Thompson's world can at times seem fantastical; a sort of gritty and farcical realism.

It is generally accepted that Thompson's article *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and*

*Depraved* (1970) is the start of his gonzo writing, later followed by his two most famous books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1973). According to literary journalism scholar Bill Reynolds this is not the case, who believes that certain elements of the form are imbedded in Thompson's literary style from his start in the early sixties, especially the "sheer audacity of his authorial voice" (Reynolds 2012: 77). But although this authorial voice was certainly his own, the literary persona that he eventually created was not. His former editor described him like this: "[He] has purposely emphasized and exaggerated some of his traits in order to create a fictive version of himself which is essentially a self-caricature". Thompson's fellow *Rolling Stone*-reporter on the campaign trail in 1972, Timothy Crouse, notes in his book *Boys on the Bus* that an important aspect of his persona which is sometimes forgotten, is that of the satirist and humourist.

In Reynolds' article on Thompson's early literary journalism, he quotes several central writers and scholars on their view of his writing, which collectively will perhaps give us a clearer definition of what gonzo journalism is. As scholar Ronald Weber notes, that this is a strain of New Journalism where the writer casts himself as a central character: "he gets inside the context and sees scenes and details that distance and neutrality deny to the more conventional reporters", and that "he is there to see and react to the human reflexes [...] that illuminate a man's character." He also notes that "the evidence now seems overwhelming that the *closer* a serious writer gets to his material, the more *understanding* he gets, the more he is there to record those decisive moments of spontaneity and authenticity" (Weber in Reynolds 2012: 55). Anyone who has read anything of Thompson know this to be a central element to his writing, coupled with the fierceness of his authorial voice. According to the champion of New Journalism, Tom Wolfe, gonzo is a "manic, highly adrenal first-person style in which Thompson's own emotions continually dominate the story", and that although his persona often has this authoritative, knowing quality, Thompson "usually casts himself as a frantic looser, inept and half-psychotic" (Wolfe in Reynolds 2012: 55). This is especially encapsulated in the previously mentioned article on the Kentucky Derby, where Thompson and his long-time collaborator Ralph Steadman is working together for the first time. Here Steadman is cast as a sort of Sancho Panza to Thompson's Don Quixote – a feature found in many of his other works – setting out to expose the depravity of the Derby, when suddenly the approach of "freaks-out-of-their-element" eventually backfires as Thompson realizes *he* is the one epitomising the depraved and decadent "Other" that they have been searching for (Reynolds 2012: 54). Here is an example of this duality, where he goes out to gaze scornfully at the 'rubes', the rednecks, and eventually turning the joke back on himself.

The world is indeed coloured by Thompson subjectivity, reporting on reality, but twisting it into the shape that fits his comforts at the time. Using David Eason's distinction of the realists and constructivists – Norman Sims notes, that in Thompson's world, reality is indeed something created, and exists only on the author's terms (ibid.: 56). Being in effect a cultural phenomenologist, Thompson cast himself as a main character in a narrative built on his own subjectivity, with other people as the supporting cast, recurring when needed.

As we have seen before, one of the collective elements in the New Journalism is its cultural politics. It is as journalism scholar John J. Pauly writes, that it “persistently disrupted taken-for-granted social relationships between writers, subjects, and readers”, perhaps an answer to Knight's critique of objectivity as a reinforcement of hegemonic structures. Pauly also notes the New Journalists' view of the importance of a personal voice, in which we have seen Thompson as an example; he says that these journalists want “to be free to tell their stories as they saw them, without being shackled by institutional conventions of objectivity.” Rather, they believed that “personal involvement and immersion were indispensable to an authentic, full-blooded account of experience” (Pauly in Reynolds 2012: 56). In page 28 of his book *Hell's Angels*, Thompson writes “I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell's Angels or being slowly absorbed by them”, and exemplifies this erasing of the boundaries between subject and reporter.

As we have mentioned, his writing is too often eclipsed by his use of drugs. Of this his editor in *Rolling Stone* comments that Thompson “used drugs quite deliberately to create a new kind of reportorial voice”, and that “by bringing narcotics into his prose, he introduced a hallucinatory element into nonfiction writing, his own kind of ‘magic realism’ (Cohen in Reynolds 2012: 57). The drugs were not only there as a part of the immersion, but to help creating the wild and wonderful prose of gonzo itself. That being said, not everything is permeated in acid and cocaine, and that the caricature is too often emphasised. His reflexive style of writing which often lets us listen to “his ego's inner monologue” (as Reynolds puts it) tells us that this is the case. It is for example not as prevalent in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, which political advisor to George McGovern, Frank Mankiewicz, has often been quoted saying jokingly, that it was “the most accurate, but least factual account of the 1972 US presidential campaign.”

Drugs are nonetheless a big part of Thompson's ethos, and although it may digress from a serious look into the genre of gonzo journalism, it is difficult to ignore someone who has so often been quoted saying: “I hate to advocate drugs, alcohol, violence, or insanity to anyone,

but they've always worked for me.”

One who has not been scared away by this is Christine Isager, who in her dissertation did an analysis of Thompson's writings, and argued for a genre of the 'spectacular personal reportage'. We will use some of her findings in the next section, where we will look at how journalists position themselves within their stories.

### ***Being (in) the Story***

It is a commonplace praxis within 'mainstream journalism' that the journalist should go to great lengths to hide him/herself within the story and to leave as few footprints as possible, which previously were thought to heighten the sense of objectivity for the audience. Even though it is generally accepted among journalists today that objectivity is not attainable, and has been replaced with other ideals, the *authority* of the objectivity ideal is still maintained.

No matter how emotionally attached the journalists were in any given situation when collecting the facts, they can later be 'filtered' through the professional ethos to become as detached as is required to be seen as 'objective'. It can be therefore be said that the method do much to mitigate many of the values a journalist may have in any given story.

With the selecting and editing of material notwithstanding, video journalism does not have the same capability to retroactively alter the way the journalist presents itself in the situations that is recorded. That being said, in for example TV news, it is very rare to show a journalist who presents much more than the 'cold' facts. This is usually the consequence of using a specific mode of representation that distances the journalist to be a detached observer, rather than an attached participant. The *gaze* in which we look at the journalist is therefore one of professionalism, in that we implicitly acknowledge that in a situation where, say, others are suffering, the journalist is exempt of any ethical imperatives of helping them, because they are mere recorders of facts. If a journalist *would* be helping those it reports on, it would therefore in most cases not be present in the news story.

As we have seen previously, however, there are many examples of journalists that does not adhere to this form of detachment, but immerse themselves into a situation to such an extent, that they sometimes *become* the story. Instead of hiding themselves behind a passive form, these proponents of the more subjective reporting flaunts their first person pronouns without prejudice, what Christine Isager has called the "spectacular 'I'". In her dissertation (2006) she discusses this rhetorical position, exemplifying it with what she believes to be the two most



spectacular users of this 'I' in the last 100 years of reportage journalism, Günter Wallraff and Hunter S. Thompson.

Both writers have, in their respective ways, created their own radical new forms of journalism, often emulated by others, but with varying degrees of success. Both have become almost mythical figures in professional journalism, and there has occurred a sort of 'collective ethos' in the slipstream behind them, so much so, that some, Isager points out, will even borrow authority by association, just by invoking their names. The assertive force and vigour of the two journalisms has been shown difficult to emulate, but their immersive styles of reporting has indeed stuck in the public mind, as well as the journalistic consciousness.

Despite their respective differences of method and style, there are as mentioned several similarities between the reporting of Wallraff and Thompson. This is what Isager calls the *spectacular personal reportage*. She uses this as a basis for her analysis and argues that it could be seen as its own genre. Her analysis contains some interesting aspects about the rhetorical position they put themselves in, for example that it is a free and often self-absorbed form and that they are clearly represented in their own texts, making it inherently subjective. Isager also points out that the reader is *initiated* in the rhetorical situation the writer finds themselves in, and what powers, feelings, and motives were in play at the moment when they made their rhetorical choices (Isager 2006: 9). This is important, because if such a position should seem coherent and relevant, there needs to be created a context, as is true of any narrative. Usually, with the more traditional forms of reporting, this is already done by deep-seated conventions, making this kind of contextualisation more or less redundant, since the reader usually know 'what to expect'.

The spectacular personal reportage rely on a series of pretexts, or roles ("pretensions" as Isager's calls them) which forms the basic pattern of its collective ethos. These are:

- The role as marginalised, or an alternative reporter.
- The role as the *gate-crasher*, an uninvited or self-invited guest which describes the given scene from within.
- The role as especially finely tuned and immodest person.
- The role as a rhetorical activist and critic.
- And lastly, the role as an extraordinary creative and competent writer (Isager 2006: 17).

This is the rhetorical foundation of this type of reportage. An inherent problem with it, though, is of course that these roles need to actually be filled. As so many have tried to emulate the gonzo journalism, still so very few have succeeded in it. As Tom Wolfe said in a

speech once, “Hunter S. Thompson *is gonzo*”, implying that the style is so idiosyncratic that no one could do it the same way. So the spectacular personal reportage can be said to be a sort of foundation of what gonzo is and which can be reformed and appropriated by others who form their own ‘rhetorical context’, and will, as in gonzo be based on their own *individually situated persona*.

One of the consequences of adopting this personal ethos, then, is that this form of reporting relies heavily on the abilities and authority of the individual journalist. By using a personal pronoun, the audience is immediately aware of the journalist as a living, breathing human being, something which the traditional forms of reporting tries to a greater extent to hide. So in the more subjective forms of reporting, there is a challenge to portray two distinct social situations: the act of experiencing something and the act of writing about it. Isager believes that it is usually the latter that is prioritised in the spectacular personal reportage, because here one can ally oneself with the audience and regain some control of the situation. This could show itself in the presentation of characters in the story, or how they are ‘cast’ in the narrative, where the reporter is the audience’s representative and eyewitness.

In this constructed landscape between the *written* and the *experienced*, though, is where some of the problems start to occur. In Wallraff’s reporting, he chooses to curtail any sort of confrontation whatsoever, and when going undercover will not even identify himself as a reporter. This leads to some ethical issues such as false representation. Thompson on the other hand has chosen to go in the direct opposite direction and confronts his subjects, even emphasizes the social confrontations, making these the story. In this sense, the reporter’s confrontation with other people’s opinions, values, and expectations become a sort of ‘litmus test’ for the environment and people he meets, in that the audience can gage the reporter’s reaction to them (Isager 2006: 16).

The spectacular personal reportage is an interesting perspective that in a way goes beyond the genres we have discussed up until now. Given the nature of the videos we are going to analyse, I suspect the genre can give us a more extensive insight into the ‘gung-ho’ manner of VICE’s reporting. Often being cited as ‘gonzo’ journalist themselves, it will be interesting to incorporate the spectacular reportage and to analyse the position in which the reporters place themselves.

## *What Immersion Journalism is*

If we should try to give an answer to what Immersion Journalism *is*, it can in many respects be as hard to pin down as the reporters presented earlier. It is a freer form of reporting than what is often shown in traditional media, but if one were to compare it with anything, it would perhaps be the slightly vague definition of the ‘feature’, but this doesn’t cover the extent of Immersion Journalism properly. In the same way as feature reporting, it can be about any subject, and the style of it can also vary greatly. It can be the lightest and ‘fluffiest’ stories, like the schmoozing up to a former president, but it can also be the heaviest of reporting, like with the undercover reporters.

Similarly to the literary journalists, Immersion Journalism is to a large degree free from the norms and conventions which are essential to traditional journalism. It is a much more subjective form of reporting, rejecting the ritualised objectivism of the ‘information model’, which arguably makes it a stylistically freer form. This can, however, create some ethical issues, where many of the reporters follow ‘their own rules’. That is not to say that many of the usual codes of conduct does not apply to immersive reporters. Immersion Journalism still needs to be *fair, factual, and accurate*, and to follow the principle of doing no harm, as well as being publicly accountable for their reporting.

As we have seen with Calcutt and Hammonds critique of objectivity, it can however be said that Immersion Journalism would follow in their understanding of it, where objectivity is merely a process where collective subjectivities forms their common understanding of something, and ideally tries to capture the ‘essential character’ of it through facts and accuracy. But what is in fact *the* essential character of anything will again be highly subjective.

It can be said that Immersion Journalism distinguish itself from traditional journalism by its search for more underlying meanings, attempting to contextualise the story it is reporting on. These can be said to take two different modes, one that is realistic, describing the experiential qualities of a situation; or it can take the form of a constructed reality, in the sense that it relies on interpretation and introspection. The *realistic mode* conveys to the audience a more external reality – what happened, how it happened and so on; while the *interpretative mode* conveys an internal reality of the reporter or subject – how an event was experienced by someone. The modes can be used to varying degrees and both can be present in the same text, changing modes as the situation or context demands it.

It can thus be argued that Immersion Journalism is a highly personalised form of reporting.

A consequence of this can be a great variation in degrees of quality. In the same way as mainstream news journalism, the main legitimising factor in Immersion Journalism is the quality of its reporting. Therefore it is perhaps easier to ‘fall short’ as a reporter in Immersion Journalism, than it is in the more ‘ritualised’ mainstream which relies more on established conventions. As such, if one were to view it in a spectrum between journalism as an artistic act or as ‘industry’ on the other hand, Immersion Journalism would surely lean towards the former.

The perhaps most obvious thing about Immersion Journalism, is how the reporter *immerses* him or herself in the story being written. This usually require a greater use of *time* in the reporting than is normally done, although the time aspect can however vary to a large extent, as well as the *degree* of immersion.

An example of deep immersion in a relatively short time span is Nellie Bly’s ten days in a mental asylum. Here she had no chance of breaking the immersion, and were only released when her newspaper ordered the staff to let her go. Not only did she have to live the life in the mental asylum, but the process of getting *in* was also a deep immersive act. In a scale of immersiveness, this would surely be at the extreme end.

At the other end of the spectrum, we would find Walt Harrington’s story about his 25 years relationship with former president George W. Bush. This have a relatively light immersiveness, but spans over a quarter of a century. It gives us a rare insight into the subject’s life and personality, but the level of immersion is here controlled to a great extent by the subject himself.

What we have staked out so far, can be said to be a sort of idealised version of what Immersion Journalism could be. But how does VICE’s reporting stack up against this idealised version of it? While supposedly rejecting so many of the norms of professional journalism, are they able to avoid the pitfalls which this personalised form of reporting present? Are they factual and fair? How are they representing the reality they are reporting on? Does this give us anything that conventional journalism does not? Is it Immersion Journalism, with its goal to unearthing a deeper meaning of reality, or is it nothing more than thrill-seeking sensationalism? These are the questions we will look at in our analysis, but first, we need to account for some theoretical approaches that can help us look at our cases. We will therefore now go into Sobchack’s theory of the *gaze*, Nichols’ documentary modes, as well as explaining why we have chosen a social semiotic approach to our analysis.

## CHAPTER 4:

### LOOKING AT REALITY

#### *Introduction*

Many of the cases we are going to analyse in this thesis will often contain varying degrees of strong pictures of conflicts, violence, and sometimes even dead bodies. This necessarily brings up many ethical issues in reporting, both for journalists that find themselves in such a situation, but also for the viewer watching it. We will use Vivian Sobchack's theory of the *gaze*, which concerns itself with the ethicality of these issues, as well as categorize different ways a filmmaker's choices is reflected on screen, in how he or she meets the realities of adversity and suffering of others.

In her influential article *Inscribing Ethical Space*, Sobchack (1984) asserts that in our culture, death is the most difficult subject to express and work with for filmmakers and journalists. Ethically speaking, the main problem with the phenomenological representation of death is that it “attempts to describe, thematize, and interpret death as it appears on the screen and is experienced by us as *indexically real*, rather than *iconically* or *symbolically fictive*” (Sobchack 1984: 283, my italics). Sobchack is following Peirce's triadic model, which has shown itself to be especially suitable for analysing visual phenomena, and is regularly used in media studies. In the model, *index* stands for the meaning based on causal relationships, *icon* as meaning based on visual similarities, and *symbol* as meaning based on codes and conventions.

The indexical sign seems therefore as something with a direct connection with the thing it is representing. In a semiotic perspective, though, it is not as simple. It can be said that although it has a causal relationship with something factual, it is nonetheless not the ‘thing’ in and of itself – the *Real*. Although the indexical representation preserves uniqueness with an almost irrefutable authenticity – something ‘as real as it can be’ – it is not being authentic in a

Real sense. This understanding of reality is again something based on the belief that social reality is something constructed, and something that can and will change over time. To illustrate this, we will go into a brief outline of how we historically have viewed death in our society.

### ***From Public Spectacle to Technical Phenomenon***

Citing the French historian Philippe Ariès' *Western Attitudes toward Death*, Sobchack argues that the viewing of the act of death has increasingly become a social taboo in the last centuries. One of the reasons for this is the development of modern medicine. With the rise of it came higher birth rates, diseases became more curable, and the life expectancy consequently rose. Death was in earlier times more commonplace, making it a publicly accepted phenomenon with less shame attached to it than we see in our culture today. The mitigation of natural death and death as public spectacle (e.g. hangings) made people less used to the phenomenon, and death went from being a social and public event, to become an anti-social, private event, often contained to the bedroom. Death was increasingly seen as a transgression in rational society, something culturally disruptive, paralleling it with the 'private irrationality' of sex. This eventually led to the romanticising and eroticisation of death in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which can be seen in the era's excessive representations in art and literature. In the following century, natural death became even less common, leading to a displacement of death from sight and common experience, making it a "technical phenomenon" in hospitals, tended to by professionals (Sobchack 1984). This historical outline may be descriptive of how and why we view death the way we do today. The question of whether our relationship to death has somehow changed the ethics of viewing it in today's society, as opposed to earlier times, is of course difficult to answer, but one would think that with death being commonplace, the ethical reality of it would change as well. This also leads us to contemplate the extent of how death is represented indexically in our culture today. We know from fiction film, that violence and death is often revelled in. In what Sobchack calls a "pornography" of death, this taboo subject titillates us in fiction, while still remaining unnatural and perverse in real life. Today's technology also have the ability to represent violence and death in an almost hyperreal way, i.e. where reality and fiction blends seamlessly, but the distinction between indexical and symbolic representations is still easily defined by us using our culture's semiotic systems. Presumably we know instinctively what

'real' is and what fiction is by invoking the different codes we have learned. The “ferocious reality” of death, as film critic Amos Vogel called it, leads us to reflect on the ethics of death within our present culture, especially as it is indexically represented in audio-visual texts.

### ***The Ethical Space of the Gaze***

Whether or not our ethical stances on viewing death has changed, the fact remains, that today, in viewing it on films which we perceive as real, they hold great ethical dilemmas for us. In *Inscribing Ethical Space*, Sobchack presents some propositions about the event of death in film, and use many examples from fictional cinema as an antipode for the documentary film. The latter of which, she posits, is usually marked by an “excessive visual *avoidance* of death, and when death *is* represented, [it] seems to demand ethical justification”.

In dealing with the ethical issues concerning the *real* event of death, filmmakers embody a visible behaviour – a gaze – that represent his/her ethical stance that affect the event captured on film. Sobchack call these the *accidental*, *helpless*, *endangered*, *interventional*, *humane*, and the *clinical* gaze. Where the ethical perspectives in film studies have previously been mostly juridical in nature and focused on things like informed consent and issues of responsibility, the research on the ethical *space* had for a long time been scarce. This changed with Sobchack, and later with Bill Nichols, who in their studies of non-fiction film placed an ethical responsibility on both filmmaker and spectator. Sobchack observed that the filmmaker's relation to death is “inscribed on the screen”, and that this is open for “ethical scrutiny by the viewer, whose own look in turn becomes an object of ethical judgment” (Downing and Saxton 2010: 11). Nichols, who developed several of Sobchack's propositions in his study of what he called *axiographics*, argued that the difference between fiction and documentary was that the eroticisation of the gaze – which we often find in fiction – is not common in documentary film, but rather calls for an ethical interpretation. Both researchers use the term 'ethics' in a general sense, bound by traditional ideas of moral judgment, rather than engaging with the poststructuralist reconceptualization which we often find in phenomenological approaches.

When talking about the different forms of gazes, it can be said that the selection and arrangement of sound and image registers with the viewer as an “authorial subjectivity”, which in turn mediates a “structure of feeling” in the viewer. These emotional responses are manifestations of tonality and subjectivity which convey a “certain orientation toward the

world” – an implied ideology (Nichols 1991). So in this regard, the camera’s gaze always requires a varying degree of distance between camera and subject. This distance, and how it is shown, is what will stand as the ethical justification for what the viewer is experiencing, the space which stands as a signifier of the ethical stance – or ideological perspective – of the filmmaker. To get a clearer picture of what this actually means in practice, we will now go into the different gazes. For clarity’s sake, it should be noted that most of the following section is based on Sobchack (1984) and Nichols (1991).

– First we have the *accidental gaze*, which is cinematically coded in marks of technical and physical unpreparedness, the breaking of the visual taboo is therefore encoded as something unintentional and therefore more acceptable. With the film giving visual evidence that capturing the event happens so sudden and unexpectedly, the filmmaker is relieved of the ethical responsibility of intervening. The camera's unselective vision would here lack the focus and attention of the fatal event, which shows that the original object of interest was clearly located elsewhere. An extreme example of this form, Sobchack notes, is the Zapruder film of the assassination of American president John F. Kennedy. The death is here visible, but not necessarily seen, thus creating a desire to stop-frame the film, to look at the death attentively, replaying it over and over again. Being accidental somehow frees both filmmaker and spectator from the ethical responsibility of the death, because of being caught off guard and not being able to intervene in the event. The technical signs of this gaze is therefore usually marked by chaotic framing and camera movements, blurred focus and the sudden use of zoom, bad sound quality, and the inability to always catch the pivotal moments which are happening. In Nichols’ perspective, the response to the perversion of gazing at death is here legitimated in an *ethic of curiosity*. What can in effect be a thin line between an accidental gaze and a pure morbid curiosity, this gaze can legitimate the continuation of recording what came into the field of view by accident. If the line is crossed, however, the gaze can be ‘infiltrated’ by voyeuristic, masochistic, and fetishistic psychopathologies, which could obstruct an idealised ethical standard and negate the ethical justification of ‘accidentalness’.

– With the *helpless gaze*, the event of death is encoded by marks of technical and physical distance from the event, which can make physical intervention by the filmmaker impossible. He/she can also be prevented to intervene by something like an authority figure or being physically blocked. In technical and visual terms we will most often see this through the use of long lenses and tripods and of panning and zooming in or out, to somehow contextualise the space of where the event is taking place. This absolves the filmmaker from any active



intervention, where in an involuntary passivity, it uses these stylistic effects almost as an obligation for continued watching, as evidence of its inability to challenge what they see. Thus it can be said that the helpless gaze draws on an *ethic of sympathy* towards what it is filming.

– An almost direct opposite to this is the *endangered gaze*, in that it is spatially encoded by proximity rather than distance. Here the filmmaker is facing real, sometimes mortal danger, which indexical signs attest to via the physical embodied presence of the camera. This will shake, hide behind cars, walls, and other (usually inadequate) protection, which will also partially obscure the object of vision and at the same time indexically point to the filmmaker's personal danger. The direct danger of the filmmaker him/herself can be seen as an ethical trade-off for the breaking of the visual taboo of death. Through the inscribed risk of personal death, the filmmaker is thus ethically absolved from the otherwise problematic act of gazing at the death of others. Where survival is at stake, the balance between the perils of recording and staying alive motivates an *ethic of courage*, which stresses our relationship to the filmmaker and camera, and heightens our awareness of the emotional and physical burden of the situation.

– The *interventional gaze* is a very rare form of ethical representation which moves beyond the endangered gaze and confronts the events which it is looking at. In this gaze the filmmaker and camera abandons all preconditions of distance and gets involved in a situation where usually someone other than the filmmaker is immediately endangered. In this way, the camera will in a way become the physical embodiment of the one holding the camera, intervening in the situation. The interventional gaze legitimises itself by an *ethic of responsibility*, which stresses the imperative to answer in a direct and personal response when human life is threatened.

– A *humane gaze* can be seen as the technical and human readiness to break the social taboo of gazing at death, and looking at it without 'blinking' or 'flinching'. According to Sobchack this gaze comes in two forms, depending on the nature of the event: (1) it can fix itself in a shocked and disbelieving way, hypnotised by the horror it observes, or; (2) settle itself into an engaging gaze, inscribing an intimacy, respect, and sympathy towards those who suffer in its vision. Unlike the interventional gaze, the *humane* occurs when there is nothing that can prevent the death, and its humane display mitigates the appearance of morbidity. This gaze is markedly absent of signifiers of helplessness, but have visual signifiers of empathetic response, such as a continuing proximity despite the intrusion. The visual human relationship

between filmmaker and subject, such as dialogue and commentary, are important markers and gives the impression that continued filming is not as important as a personal response. This gaze can therefore be legitimised in the same ethic as the interventional gaze – the *ethic of responsibility* – although mainly through empathetic response to it, rather than direct intervention.

– The last of these gazes is also the most used in journalism, which is the *clinical gaze*. This gaze works in compliance with professional codes of ethics, which situate themselves between the *detached recording* of events and the *humane response*, and is in this sense always “serving two masters”, as Sobchack puts it. This is neither an accidental, nor helpless form of gazing, in that it can through its own ethical codes remove itself from empathy and powerlessness. In other words, where, for example, an accidental gaze stumbles across something, the clinical seeks it out, but chooses not to signal helplessness or empathy and is rather a disciplined response with no display of personal involvement. The professional codes of conduct which this gaze employ is usually activated when being on the *boundaries* of the ethical and usually follows a logic of 'the greater good' and the viewers 'right to know'. This “art of personal detachment”, as Nichols calls it, is of course usually known as objectivity. In the same camp sits Sobchack, which describes the gaze as marked by a “technical and machine-like competence in the face of an event which seems to call for further and human response”. Whether or not this is a little too blunt can be discussed, but as we have seen, the tension between the unemotional, unbiased, and detached approach as 'the recorder of events' and the intervention in the suffering of others, is still an ongoing debate.

The clinical, accidental, and endangered gazes is probably what will be most important for us later on, but each of these different gazes tell us something about the how we face death and the ethical signs with which we justify watching it. By helping us questioning the structuring of the ethical space in documentary film, these gazes will help us understand the ethical implications of the choices made by the filmmakers in the situations they film, and perhaps to glimpse the ideology, politics, and ethics inscribed within them.

The assumption we will be making here, however, is that although these gazes are based on the most taboo and extreme events in our culture, one would think it still has relevance in a broader sense as well. We will therefore assume that the same effect applies when viewing suffering of other kinds as well. There is a possibility that the effect is of a lesser extent, but it would still serve as a good entry point for further discussion in our analysis.

## ***Documentary Modes***

If a reporter does not follow professional codes of ethics usually found in mainstream journalism, and the authority these presuppose, where does it get its authority from? We will argue that much of it comes from how it orientates towards its audience. Through the organisational structure and technical strategies, different documentary modes may be used in different ways to establish authority, and to advance arguments in a convincing manner. In the same way as professional norms are used as an implicit source of authority, filmmakers can also invoke norms and conventions from documentary films, to draw on their socially established authority and tradition. As we shall see, when representing reality in different ways, the following modes use varying forms of narrative and realism.

It should also be said that these modes are also interchangeable and all of them can just as easily be used in a single film. The documentary modes presented by Nichols (1991 and 2010) are therefore used as a blueprint for categorising the films we are going to analyse, but should not be seen as a set of inflexible boxes to pigeonhole our analysis into, thus freeing us to draw outside the lines should the necessity arise.

– First we have the *expository mode*, which is perhaps the most common documentary mode, and is the most important for us. This mode addresses the audience directly, usually through the use of commentary. This can either take the form of a voice-of-god commentary, which is visually hidden from the viewer; the other being voice-of-authority, where the commentator is both heard and seen. Relying heavily on the spoken word as the over-arching informational logic, an expository documentary's images are largely used to illustrate, evoke and illuminate, but it can also be used in a sort of counterpoint to what is being said. The commentary serves as a structural tool, in that it organises the images that is taking place and helps making sense of them, explaining them in a historical context. This commentary can therefore sometimes give an impression of objectivity or omniscience, of being the all-knowing intelligence behind the film. The editing in this mode is mostly used to maintain a continuity in the argument or textual logic put forward by this commentary, which is called *evidentiary editing*. In the recent years this authoritative voice has been used in a more personalised manner, emphasising personal perspectives rather than institutional authority. Nichols notes that this mode of documentary filmmaking is ideal for mediating information within a *pre-existing* category and framework. It will therefore serve in *adding* knowledge within these structures, but will not challenge or subvert the categories that organise or legitimate the knowledge it uses.

– In the *observational mode* the non-intervention of the filmmaker in the story is important. This is not as relevant a mode in our perspective, but is important to note, nonetheless. In its purest form it can be so unobtrusive as to neither have voice-over, external music, nor interviews. It attempts to observe a situation as thoroughly as possible, still being aware of the observation ethos during editing, presenting the most correct representation of both time and place as possible. Hinged on its inherent realism, this mode is often used as an ethnographic tool, giving us a seemingly 'unfiltered' opportunity to look in at the lived experiences of other people, taking the position of the “ideal observer”.

– The *interactive mode* can both intervene and interact in the situation it represents. The filmmaker can immerse him/herself in a situation and be a participator or instigator. Much of the textual authority comes from the comments and responses from the subjects of the film, but it is still hierarchical in nature, with the filmmaker as the highest authority. This mode is therefore much reliant on interviews and consequently the relationship between filmmaker and subject(s), as a voice-over is often not used. Unlike the observational mode, the interactive is freer when it comes to spatial and temporal editing, but also more open about its processes. Interviews, interactions, and locations need not be continuous, where the editing can create some sort of logical continuity. This also leaves an ethical responsibility on the filmmaker, since this more ‘uninhibited’ and in some ways personal mode can control the representations of the subjects it films to a greater extent.

– The *reflexive mode* of representation is open about its process as well, and is in fact one of its most important elements. Where in the interactive mode the historical world is a place for social exchange and representation, the historical world is *itself* the topic of discussion in the reflexive mode, and about the act of representing it. This self-conscious form of filmmaking concerns itself with form and style, but also strategy, structure, conventions, and politics, asking itself; how is/can/should the filmmaker be representing the world? This takes form as a sort of meta-commentary, as when the filmmaker makes the viewer aware of the visual effects it uses to evoke the viewer’s reaction. This mode therefore gives greater emphasis on the relationship between filmmaker and viewer, rather than filmmaker and subject, inducing a heightened consciousness of its relation to the text, and the text's problematic relationship to the represented. It thus sets out to challenge or readjust the assumptions and expectations of the audience, more than adding new knowledge, which sets it in an almost direct opposition to the expository mode of documentary filmmaking.

These modes will hopefully prove to be of some use when we start our analysis, at least as

a tool for discussing the different techniques and organisational structure they use to convey their meaning. We have not described them in great detail here, since we will further discuss them if needed in our analysis. Using these together with Sobchack's theory of the gaze, they will hopefully be complimentary to each other, where we can both look at the larger structure of the films, but also more detailed as to how the camera is used, and how the reporter situates him/herself.

### ***Representing Subjects as Victims***

Thus far we have focused much on the technical aspects of filming reality and how this is shown on screen. But even how 'mechanical' our viewing of documentaries may feel – that we take for granted the interpretative processes of it – there may still be a lot going on without us ever thinking about it. In our cases there is a lot of poverty and adversity represented. But how does one film *poverty* in a Real sense – poverty *in and of itself*? Nichols argue that we cannot, that the concepts and issues in documentary films is almost always abstract and invisible, and the only thing one can do is to film the *signs* of poverty, not poverty as a concept. Further, different people can also interpret poverty through different signs. Thus, the power of documentary film is how they give visual and auditory representations of concepts which are usually just abstract words in our vocabulary (Nichols 2010: 99). This power, however, holds great responsibility, in that a filmmaker may choose how to represent it, which we shall see holds many ethical dilemmas.

The perhaps most problematic aspect in this sense is that we are used to a certain set of *conventions*, which again guides how we understand something. An example that is particularly salient in this context, would be how western media represent the so-called 'Third World'. As Lister and Wells (2001) point out, western media will often frame themselves in an 'Eurocentric' perspective, representing Africans as economically and technologically weak, as dependent victims of various disasters, often ignoring the role of capitalism and historical imperialism in creating these disasters. Not to mention that this construction of Africa and Africans create a picture where their own everyday lives and self-sufficiency and culture is largely invisible (: 78-79). Thus, it can be said that the viewing position of the camera cannot be ideologically neutral, where the pictures that hold most 'news value', and is therefore the ones recorded, are those reinforcing stereotypical ideas of Africans as victims, dependent on western aid or intervention.

Concerning such representations, Nichols (1991) believes, that this iconography of plagues and disasters is in effect constructed much in the same way as a commodity. He means this in the sense of how meanings and values are constructed around an object, whose fabrication propose specific forms of social relations with distinctive places for men and women, rich and poor, First and Third World, black and white (: 11). He argues that like a commodity, the social reality and meanings surrounding concepts such as famine, poverty or adversity is being produced to serve as something “made and cut to measure”, even if it is based on reality. An example of this could be events like the Live-Aid concert in 1985, which he believe constructed its own representation of disaster, coupled with a sort of self-gratulatory response similar to that ascribed to the purchase of a commodity (“Oh, what a feeling!” “Reach out, reach out and touch someone”). Picking up the phone and making a small donation will therefore remove the complex questions of socio-economical politics and how to best assist in such situations. The last thing an event like this needs, he says, is the perspective of the Third World:

It suffices to see them, nameless but not faceless, desperate and without dignity, aware but silenced. For a great many people, these images and these representations will be, if not the sum total of their knowledge, a dominating factor in their awareness (Nichols 1991: 11-12).

It could be argued that this can happen in documentary film as well. In lacking depth and knowledge in covering situations like this, it could help reinforce such simplistic and western-biased perspectives that may occur. So how a filmmaker choose to represent the subjects in a film could have a great effect on how we as viewers see them.

How documentaries choose their subjects, is according to Nichols paradoxical in nature, because they frequently choose to interview individuals who gives the ‘right’ performance on camera. In the space between natural self-presentation and the rehearsed presentation of an actor, documentary filmmakers will usually gravitate towards what he calls a “performance that is not a performance”. Here they will usually look for individuals who give a strong sense of ‘interior complexity’ that will further the films argument, but stripped of the rehearsing and directing that would happen in a fiction film. These selections of ‘performances’ by the filmmaker can also tie in with the reinforcing of our ideas of stereotypical character types, as Nichols notes, that these can stand as icons that evoke pre-existing assumptions and attributions present in the audience (Nichols 1991: 120-122). An implication of this is therefore that the pre-existing assumptions not only lie with the audience, but also with the filmmaker’s selection of subjects to interview and record.

With the representation of adversity there follows a range of different ethical dilemmas that filmmakers and reporters in all forms of journalism has to carefully deal with, not to break any taboos in our culture. But as we have seen, the representation can also construct and reinforce class structures as well as racial stereotypes in our society. What all this have shown us, is that when filmmakers immerse themselves in a situation without a great deal of knowledge of it, or how they should deal with the ethical issues it presents, latent ideological perspectives can emerge, however unintentional these may be.

### ***Social Semiotics***

Many of the implicit assumptions we have made so far, could be placed within what is called a social semiotic approach. This approach view all communication as a social act. A social semiotic analysis seek out to question how a text represents 'social reality'. Or rather how the viewer is positioned in regards to this representation and how it sees the social allegiances and values being promoted within the text. This makes it an inherently critical approach as a semiotic analysis, and as Iedema puts it, enabling us to see the 'nuts and bolts' of texts, so we can engage with it in a systematic and informed way (Iedema 2001: 187). Unlike the more traditional semiotics, social semiotics' main focus is not merely on visual or linguistic signs, but on the whole text itself as an analytical category, focusing on the entire process of how social meaning is constructed. Therefore, in social semiotics, all human communication are semiotic systems, since they are all part of the social conditions we live in and help construct. Hodge and Kress points out that this focus can stretch as far as communication between machines, since they are products of human intentionality. The only communication *not* under the purview of social semiotics would therefore be between non-animate entities, like genetic codes for example. This makes the approach's scope very broad indeed, concerning itself, as it is, with "social meanings constructed through the full range of semiotic forms, through semiotic texts and practises, in all kinds of human society at all periods of human history" (Hodge and Kress 1988: 261).

A limitation which often occurs in a social semiotic analysis of film, though, is that it reads the text irrespective of the situation and persons involved making it. It is read 'as-is'. Given the nature of the films we are going to analyse later, this could be a huge limitation, since much of the conflict and constraints of making a documentary film is rarely seen on screen, and must therefore be inferred by the researcher to the best of his ability whenever needed

during the analysis. This would be relevant if, say, technical or practical circumstances could be thought to have an effect on the meaning-making of the film, as it so often is. Even if this meaning-making was not in the filmmaker's original intent, it has still been edited and assimilated into the 'reality' of the narrative constructed in the film, and would still, therefore, be read 'as-is'.

In this perspective, then, there are no neutral signs, since their functions, intentional or unintentional, are both to persuade as well as to refer. And as Chandler points out, that a semiotician's primary task is to *denaturalise* signs, texts, and codes, showing *ideology* at work, and to demonstrate that "'reality' can be challenged" (Chandler 2007: 215). This should not, however, be seen as the definition that is commonly used in everyday speech. It is more meant as the artist Victor Burgin says, that "ideology is the sum of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life", or as the Russian linguist Valentin Voloshinov declared, that "whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too" (ibid.)



## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **WHAT IS VICE?**

Before we go any further, we should introduce the media company we are going to analyse. Both lauded and abhorred by its critics and competitors, the contrarian attitude towards the ‘old media’, combined with its astronomical growth the last two decades, VICE has clearly hit a nerve in many people. Questions of overvaluation and how long they will sustain themselves is however something asked by several critics, but for the moment, all eyes are on VICE Media.

For a small magazine paying their workers with the three founders’ welfare checks, VICE Media has certainly grown into becoming one of the most profitable, bold, and oftentimes provocative successes of the new media. Starting out as the countercultural magazine *Voice of Montreal* in 1994, later renamed and moved to New York in 1999, VICE was by many nicknamed the “hipster bible”, but has today morphed into a global brand, producing content that caters for a young and techno-savvy audience.

It is with a begrudging admiration that many of its competitors in the mainstream media are now increasingly starting to take the young company more serious. The now deceased media columnist, and self-proclaimed “crusty old-media scold”, David Carr, commented in an article about VICE’s proclamations of becoming ‘the next MTV’, and ‘the next CNN’: “outrageous claims at the time,” he writes, “but they are becoming truer every passing day.” (NY Times 2014). Although not being as ‘crusty’ as he would have it, Carr’s comment is still indicative that one of the heftiest newspapers in the world is beginning to take something that was first taken as brash self-adulation, as something to be taken seriously.

From what was once a magazine focusing on a mixture of sex, fashion, and drugs (or ‘News, Nudity & Nonsense’ which the self-published ‘best of’ collection of the magazine’s articles is called), today it spans several divisions. It has the magazine, a record label, a film company, a book publisher, two advertising companies, an Emmy-winning series on HBO,

and 11 different channels providing digital content on their webpages and on YouTube. There is now also a deal with HBO to extend its series from 14 episodes a year to 48, in addition to a 30 minute daily news report every weekday, 48 weeks a year on its new online initiative HBO Now. At the time of writing this, the collected numbers for all of VICE's channels on YouTube are over 10.7 million subscribers, with a total of 1.8 billion views. It is also reported that the company is going to establish a Washington news bureau, planning to follow the upcoming US Presidential election, and to establish a 24 hours news channel on Canadian television. One of the last projects publicised is the company's VR News experiment, where a rally of protestors in New York, December 13 2014, has been filmed with a 360-degree camera system, which can be viewed using devices such as Oculus Rift, or using an app on a smart phone. In December 2013 they also established their own news division, VICE News, which continues VICE's development into more serious news content. It will therefore be interesting to see how much of their attitude they will bring into the world of news.

With an almost dizzying proliferation of VICE Media's content production, it does, on the surface at least, seem very impressive. But how all of this is funded has had many commentators point out the concerns of the blurring between editorial and advertorial content, something which VICE executives *are* open about, but aren't fond of talking about publicly.

In August of 2014, VICE Media sold a 5 percent stake of its company to the Rupert Murdoch-owned *21st Century Fox*, and later another 10 percent to *A&E*, which is owned by *Disney* and the *Hearst Corporation*. After which VICE's own spokesperson put their own value at around 2.5 billion dollars (CNN 2014), which if true, puts them in the absolute top league of media companies today. It has, however, been raised questions if co-founder Shane Smith has not exaggerated the numbers, so only time will tell if they will live up to their own hype. For one should be very clear about that, VICE are experts in hype. It is nonetheless little doubt that the once countercultural fanzine now is morphing into a mainstream behemoth. Or as alternative media outlet (and notorious competitor) *Gawker* writes; “[let's] call *VICE* what it is: an ever-expanding machine for selling counterculture cool to the world's largest and most mainstream corporations” (Gawker 2014). There is surely something to be said about this, but one cannot help notice a certain resentment (and perhaps a little bitterness too?) in much of the criticism launched against VICE. That being said, the ‘monetisation of counterculture’ is quite clear, in that they celebrate themselves as outsiders both in terms of their own cultural position, while at the same time catering for the biggest commercial brands in the world. One could wonder if

this tell us more about the state of today's "counterculture" than it does of a company whose pure capitalist logic should be as surprising as flies on dung.

VICE Media is clearly a product of the new media order, and seems to play the capitalistic 'game' better than many other companies today, as it is an impressive success in terms of growth in otherwise hard times for media businesses. However, that does not say much about if it is as successful in journalistic terms, where some critics have raised questions about their methods of reporting, calling it no more than thrill-seeking, testosterone fuelled stunt reporting.

Another questioned often raised, is about the blurred distinction between editorial and advertorial content, which in general has become more common today. This is of course something that VICE are no strangers to. Through its two PR and ad-agencies adVICE and Virtue, VICE creates much of its content in collaboration with big brands such as *Nike*, *Red Bull*, and *Intel*. The perhaps clearest example is the latter's co-funding of the art/technology-channel The Creators Project, where VICE and Intel provides so-called *native ads*, more commonly known as branded content. It is therefore important to look closer at the phenomenon of VICE Media with a healthy dose of caution and restraint. Where is branded content used? How is it used, and to what extent can we see it in the reporting of VICE Media, if at all?

As Shane Smith commented in an interview with *Adweek.com* in 2014, the formula used by VICE is simple: "We want to do three things. We want to make good content, we want to have as many eyeballs as possible see that content, and we want to make money so that we can keep paying to do that content," he says. What order of priority each of these have is uncertain, but as he comments later in the interview: "Even when VICE was at its craziest and most zany and salty, we were still 50 percent ads" (Adweek 2014). On defending himself of accusations of branded content, Smith said this in an interview with *The Guardian*: "we don't do branded content, we do content sponsored by brands". Using an outdoor pursuits program sponsored by North Face as an example, he defends VICE's production saying: "Does North Face tell us where to go? Do they pick our hosts? Do they fucking pick the story? No. We're gonna make that fucking story. Do we wear some North Face shit? Sometimes." He further points out that no program has ever been edited for a sponsor (The Guardian 2014), but this does not cover the issue of the *intent* a filmmaker has when making that content, although this is something we can only guess at. Even though they are often

vague when talking about how and where such *sponsored* content is mediated, it does at least seem that the news division of VICE has by and large been spared of it. On the other hand it is worth noting that this compliance to the capitalistic logic is common for most editorial desks, treading the line between good journalism and not biting the hand that feeds it. Smith has on several occasions said its audience has been brought up on advertising and brands, and that since "young people have been marketed to since they were babies, they develop this incredibly sophisticated bullshit detector, and the only way to circumvent the bullshit detector is to not bullshit," he says (The Guardian 2014).

According to the media critic and linguist, Noam Chomsky, the function of the capitalist US mainstream media is to imbue and internalise values, beliefs and codes of behaviour to individuals, integrating us into the institutional structures of society. From a semiotic perspective this is not surprising at all, because what is this, if not how we all are socialised, through all layers of society, and every mode of communication, through the act of *semiosis*. The 'sacred' divide of capital and journalism is often a 'church-and-state' question for many commentators. But the unfortunate reality of our media systems today is, that it has an unfortunate dependence on the ones it seeks to criticise, where supposedly no news organisation is completely innocent of this logic. One should therefore not hate the proverbial 'player', but one should be highly critical of the 'game'.

In their classic book *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), Herman and Chomsky posit that news are sieved through a number of "filters" that interact and reinforce each other. What they call the *propaganda model* tries in this respect to explain why dissent is covered less in the mainstream media than that of the interests of governments and big business. Although its age, the theory is still an 'oldie-but-a-goodie', and at least two of the filters explained in the model would be relevant for us here. The first is how news can be filtered through the prism of the "size, concentrated owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass media firms". The second is the filter of using "advertising as the primary income source", again, both of which VICE *clearly* has institutionalised in the later years.

Some scholars have criticised the propaganda model as being deterministic, or that it does not take into account other influences. But it has identified some of the interrelating socioeconomic forces which has been proven to be at play in big media companies. In this respect we should at least be aware of some of the influences these filters could have on content. And the question will still remain, to what extent does VICE differ from their

mainstream competitors when it comes to the influence of commercial capitalist logic?

Herman and Chomsky point out that the influence described in the propaganda model does not necessarily happen at the institutional level, but can generally be so internalised by news people themselves, that the filters naturally occur. Despite the adoption of its capitalist logic in the last decade or so, I would still argue that many of the choices made in the *news content* made by VICE's reporters, to a certain degree goes against much of the constraints described here. This can, of course, could be said of many reporters in more traditional news organisations, but the contrarian ethos that is such a selling point for VICE, does, however, seemingly give reporters some freedom to pursue different stories and telling them in a different way than is usual.

A thing that separates the films of VICE from the more literary forms of immersionist reporting, is that this mode does not require the same amount of research. Where time and effort in both gathering material and writing can take months or years in written form, a filmmaker can merely click a button and point the camera. This in turn can make it more superficial, or even uninformed. The filming of reality is by nature a much faster way of gathering information, and as a viewer we often take for granted that 'seeing is believing', which might bypass the need for a reporter to interpret the situation. But just in the same way that a writer choose what perspective and information he writes, there will always something that is not filmed by the camera, only giving a partial picture of reality. It can also be said that, in a way, what sets apart VICE's 'D.I.Y.' immersionism from the literary forms presented earlier, is that it does not interest itself in aesthetics and style in the same way, but rather trying to capture human attitudes and behaviour and to address some fundamental questions in social history in a faster, some would say, shallower way.

One could therefore say that the compositional and stylistic literary traits do not have the same relevance here, in that they define qualities which are *inherent* in video journalism. Being a more direct medium than print, when interviewing a subject on film, the dialogue is indeed recorded in full (at least in pre-edit), there are use of various perspectives (both through the camera, reporter, and subject), and the camera pick up symbolic details, not only more or less inadvertently, but also through selected shots edited in later. The traits are therefore perhaps not as helpful as categories of defining what immersion *looks like*. It would therefore be reasonable to ask if they share any traits at all, or is it perhaps just the contrarian spirit they share with the earlier journalistic rebels?

In defining Immersion Journalism we have until now focused mostly on different forms of narrative reporting, but we will argue that it is much more than that. But going from the written word to the audio-visual is a challenging thing to do. But with the use of theories about documentaries and ethics in a social semiotic perspective, combined with a historical perspective of journalism and various forms of it, we are ready to analyse the reporting of VICE Media.

## CHAPTER 6:

### ANALYSIS

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter we are going to analyse three films from VICE Media. The first one is called *The VICE Guide to Liberia*, subtitled *The Cannibal Warlords of Liberia*, the second is called *Monkey Meat and the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia*, and the third *The Fight Against Ebola*. All films take place in the Republic of Liberia's capital, Monrovia, and are made by different reporters at different times. The cases has not been chosen merely because of their location and the comparative possibilities this gives us, but also because they will perhaps tell us something about whether VICE has changed its reporting or not.

*The VICE Guide to Liberia* was originally made for what was then called VBS.tv, an online television network part of VICE Media, later merged into what is now the company's main webpage VICE.com. VBS.tv started with the cooperation of MTV and was a continuation of the style in the magazine, which was a sort of edgy men's magazine. A part of a series called *The VICE Travel Guides*, the name could give the impression that it is a conventional travel show, but is in reality just a part of a gimmick, which the slogan "We Go There So You Don't Have To" should give an indication of.

This film will hopefully serve as a comparison to the two films from VICE News, to see if there are any differences between them. At first glance it seems more technically crude than the two latter ones, and is perhaps a clearer break with the professional norms and ideals of the traditional media. Using *VICE Guide to Liberia* will hopefully give us a basis to analyse how and if VICE News is any more 'grown up' in its reporting, where an assumption is that they are more adherent to the type of professionalism we are used to in mainstream media.

Since growing into a global multimedia company, VICE Media has moved more and more towards 'hard news' in their journalism. In the MTV-funded travel guides, it seems safe to

suppose that their attitude towards journalism was more relaxed than with VICE News. But if this is true we will see, as well as if this has had an effect on the immersive element in their reporting. We will briefly present the three films here:

– *The VICE Guide to Liberia* (2009) sees VICE co-founder Shane Smith and a crew of two, traveling to Liberia, which is a country that is still recovering from civil wars, and the majority of the population is living in abject poverty. In this film, Smith and the crew travel to the capital city Monrovia, where they interview three local warlords, who talk about the massacres, cannibalistic rituals, and child soldiers of the two civil wars that lasted from 1989 to 2003, where thousands of people were brutally murdered. They also travel to one of the city's slums, where they report on filth, drug addiction, rape, and the prostitution that takes place there.

– In *Monkey Meat and the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia* (2014), Kaj Larsen is reporting for VICE News on the consumption of so-called bushmeat, which is believed to have started the Ebola epidemic that would spread mostly around West Africa in 2014. One of the main points of the film is that many people does not believe Ebola is real and continues to consume the bushmeat. We follow Larsen while he interview different people in Monrovia just months before the epidemic would hit its peak.

–*The Fight Against Ebola* (2014) is made only months after the second film, and we follow Danny Gold in Monrovia, where the Ebola epidemic is now at its worst. Gold travels to see and speak to many of the aid organisations who tries to mitigate the spread of the epidemic. Like Smith, he also travels to West Point, where he interview both Ebola sceptics as well as the families of infected persons.

Although covering the same area, the three films are very dissimilar in their representations. Not only do the reporters have different perspectives and personas, but they are also distinctly different in the ethical space in which they situate themselves within the story. In many ways the films are examples in degrees of such things as professionalism, sensationalism, subjectivity, and how to cope with the ethical issues of the suffering of others. None of the films are clear cut examples of anything, but can be said to be representative of the range of different types of reporting done by VICE, and will serve as points of reference to each other.

That being said, we should again note that *VICE Guide to Liberia* has not made any pretensions of being 'real' journalism, and separates itself from the others, where the reporter



is part of a news channel and working under an editor-in-chief, and is perhaps more bound to good press conduct. But we are not only interested in value judgements on which of them has the best journalism, as we are in how they are representing the reality that they are reporting on, and how these representations are ethically justifiable.

In our analysis, we will be using two sets of tools, which together will give us insight into the meaning-making of the films. A part of why we are focusing on the technical aspects of the films as well as the journalistic, is that these can show us not only what has been edited and used in them, but also what have been left out, what has been constituted as unimportant and taken for granted. We will attempt to find this by looking at the films in both a micro and macro perspective, and to analyse both distinct parts, like scenes or shots, as well as the works as wholes. In this we are following six levels of analysis, which include the frame, shot, scene, sequence, generic stage, and work as a whole:

Table 1: “Six levels of tele-film analysis” (Iedema 2001).

	<b>Level</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Frame	A frame is a salient or representative still of a shot
2	Shot	In a shot the camera movement is unedited (uncut); if the camera’s position changes this may be due to panning, tracking, zooming, and so on, but not edited cuts
3	Scene	In a scene the camera remains in one time-space, but is at the same time made up of more than one shot (otherwise it would be a shot)
4	Sequence	In a sequence the camera moves with specific character(s) or sub-topic across time-spaces; when it is hard to decide whether you’re dealing with a scene (1 time-space) or a sequence (multiple time-spaces), this is because editors may render time-space breaks as either more obvious (-> sequence boundary) or less obvious (-> scene boundary)
5	Generic stage	Roughly, stages are beginnings, middles and endings; each genre has a specific set of stages; narratives tend to have an orientation, a complication, a resolution and maybe a coda; factual or expository genres may have an introduction, a set of arguments or facts and a conclusion, or an introduction and a series of facts and procedures
6	Work as a whole	Depending on the lower levels, the work will be more or less classifiable as a particular genre; the primary distinction is between social-cultural, industrial-economic and symbolic-mythic orders

We will also be distinguishing three structural aspects – *meta-functions* – of the films, which will allow us to discuss the theoretical perspectives put forward thus far. That is (1) the *representational*, which tell us something about the world, meanings represented visually,

verbally, or how sound or music is used, and the associations these signs present. In this aspect, we can ask what the subject is in the shots and what it, he, she or they are doing. Since we are also dealing with reporters, this will also tell us something about how these relate to their situated realities.

The (2) *orientational* aspect tell us how the camera and reporter uses its gaze, and how it orientates itself towards its subjects and the audience. It asks how the meanings in the film positions the characters, and how this is perceived by the viewer (in this case, me), which could be called the ‘inter-personal’ meanings.

Lastly, we are going to look at the (3) *organisational* aspect, which gives us an understanding of how the meanings in the films are organised, and how they are integrated into a semiotic structure – how meanings are linked together (Iedema 2001: 191-192).

With Sobchack’s theory of the gaze and Nichols’ documentary modes as starting points, we will see how the films structures themselves, as well as ethically justify themselves in their orientation towards its subjects and viewers. We will also go more into detail when describing the representational aspects of the films, choosing scenes and sequences that are particularly salient. Together these should give us an understanding as to what the dominant patterns are in the films, as well as the journalistic aspects. This can give us an insight into what arguments are being put forward in them, as well as how these are implicitly or explicitly made. Being a social semiotic analysis, it takes all modes of communication represented in the film ‘as is’ and uses it to see how it constructs its reality.

### ***VICE Guide to Liberia***

The structural organisation in this film could be said to be a mix of the interactive and the expository mode. It addresses the audience directly with a combination of the reporter being on screen and a voice over, what Nichols called the ‘voice-of-authority’. Here it is both the ‘knowing reporter’, explaining the historical context and current situation in Liberia with the help of video clips, news clippings, and maps, but also as an explanatory device for transition between segments. The voice-over and stand-up is also apparently the same shot, where Smith sits in VICE’s office in New York, explaining to the viewer how it was like to be there. This could perhaps be said to diminish the ‘all-knowingness’ of his commentary at times, in that it often features straight descriptive language of what happened, almost like a friend explaining a vacation gone horribly wrong. The voice-over/stand-up is nonetheless the structural unity in

this film. On camera, the crew rely much on the relationships between them and the subjects, and the interviews and interactions with them. The film is also quite open about its processes, but still edits events into its own textual logic.

A salient example of this and how it orientates itself towards its subjects can be seen in one of the brothel-scenes. The following frames (Figure 1) are taken from a scene about 24 minutes into the film. Frame 1 shows reporter Shane Smith sitting in the front seat of a car, speaking over his shoulder to the cameraman while they are driving to a brothel in West Point. It is one of the first in a series of shots, which shows Smith and the crew driving into West Point at night to interview the women working there.

Figure 1: Six frames from brothel-scene in West Point (VICE Media).



The shots leading up to their entering the brothel, combines both a voice-over from Smith, him speaking over his shoulder in the car, as well as him speaking directly into the camera, while walking through the narrow alley to the entrance of the building. The commentary goes like this:

[Voice-over intro:] Driving into West Point at night is pretty freaky. There's no electricity grid in Monrovia, so it's pitch black. [In car:] It's kind of like, 'if a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound?' Like ... if a fucking van goes

missing... [Walking to entrance:] So this is the craziest, fucking scariest drive ever down here. We got a little bit lost in the port and you couldn't see anything, there's no electricity. And then you just see people wandering around, fucking shit, piss – fucking yelling at us 'ghaa we want money, we want money!'

The scene continues indoors (frame 2), where they inspect some of the rooms there, while a number of people are starting to enter the building. They then start the interview in one of the rooms with four of the women working there, but the interview does not go as planned. One of the women sitting beside one of VICE's local contacts, is clearly on drugs, and makes it clear after a few questions that she does not want to continue the interview unless they get her a job. In an already tense situation, the scene takes an even more dramatic turn when the woman get provoked by the crew's light in her eyes. She tries to get up, but is calmly restrained by VICE's contact, but her sudden change in attitude have a disruptive quality to the whole scene. Having immersed themselves into a situation where the crew's personal danger seems very high indeed, the possibilities of escape seems slim. With signifiers of an immersion that goes deeper and deeper into one of the worst slums in the world, it evokes the spirit of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow is going up the Congo River. The reference is perhaps not that illusive, with Smith introducing one of the fixers previously in the film as a "Kurtz-like character".

With the camera removing its gaze as soon as they understand that the frustrated woman does not want to be filmed, what follows (frame 4 and 5) is a series of fast and confusing cuts, where the camera lacks focus, as if it does not know where it should turn. The two longest shots shows the floor and roof, where we hear the woman in the background, shouting that her parents are dead, and that she wants money. As the scene goes on, it continues to struggle for a focus point, and rapid cuts and fast percussive background music intensifies it even more. We are therefore reliant on Smith's voice-over to make sense of the situation. He says that:

As soon as the girl started screaming, a bunch of heads popped into the room. And then when she started screaming about money, everyone's going, 'money, money, money, where's the money!?' And at that point, Nagbe [the contact] said to us, 'you'd better get the hell out of here'. So we sort of took off through the tangled alleyways and just tried to get back to the car ... And when we got to the car, our driver – who was also supposed to be our security – was so freaked out that he peeled out and nearly hit a group of people that had surrounded the car. And if you hit a group of people down deep in West Point, that was it. It was a death sentence. They would have torn us apart.

What we see in the final frame, is the crew safely back in their car, with the action finally dissipating. The scene is both highly tense and dynamic, and there are many things happening at the same time. Although few things went as planned, the visit was being set up as one of the

high points that the film had built up to, with a visit to the brothel earlier in the day. The break in action and release of energy that happens when the woman starts screaming is a good example of the ethos displayed in the film in general, of going into dangerous situations and hoping for the best. The feeling of deep immersion is a prevalent one in this film, but one has to ask oneself if this is really true, or if it is simply how it is being represented in the film?

The main argument in this film is about the UN's role in the country, who is set to leave in under a year from the time of filming. Although it is a recurring argument that serves as the structural logic of the film, it is clear that the argument itself is second priority, with the danger aspect being the first. From interviews with former Liberian warlords, we learn that, although now idle, their militant groups could assemble inasmuch as two-three hour and retake the capital if needed. The dilemma is thus, that if the UN leaves, *anything* could happen. The possible consequences of this is a common theme, with cross-cuts from external historical sources which among other things depicts the atrocities during the civil wars. This takes the form of documentary material, like newspaper clips and TV-interviews, but also as very graphic video clips, as when a gang of armed and uniformed men are tearing out a piece of meat from what appears to be a human cadaver. In one of the shots in the opening sequence there is also a group of child soldiers gathered in front of the camera, where one of them is holding up a human heart, professing he will eat it. We do not know it is a human heart just by looking at it, of course, but the context makes it quite clear.

We are, however, never actually shown the act of dying, or of eating human flesh. That would be perhaps considered too shocking, personal, and outside ethical boundaries. It is, as is usual in documentary film, showing the effects of death (a dead body) rather than the act of dying itself. But it does sometimes stretch the limitations of what could be considered ethically justifiable. With the internet being as it is, where viewers must physically choose what they will watch, it can perhaps go a little further in such matters than what is usual on linear TV.

It can therefore be argued that the implicit message here is clear. With the viewer's intermittent barrage of violent pictures, it emphasizes both the danger they are putting themselves in, but also what the previous civil wars look like, and therefore imply how the next one would look as well. The use of graphic content is thus to benefit the argument the film is making, but perhaps most importantly it underlines the threat to the crew's personal safety. As we have seen in Sobchack's theory of the gaze, the ethical issues when concerning

the real phenomenon of death can be mitigated by the ethical *stance* the filmmaker takes. It could be said that this film occupies several of the different gazes, but very clearly it is the *endangered* gaze that has the highest authority.

With the heavy use of zoom, and through verbal queues from the commentary, there is very often encoded a spatial intimacy to the events and subjects filmed. This gives many of the shots a claustrophobic quality to them. This closeness is often heightened by the walking through narrow corridors and alleyways or by the constant use of close-up shots. The danger-element is therefore extra prevalent, and gives the feeling that things could go bad at any moment.

One could also ask about the inter-dependency between the danger represented and the shock-effect of the clips that are shown, in that the danger could perhaps be exaggerated by both the reporter, voice-over, and by the editing. The question would also then be to what extent do they go further than any other journalist would? There are a few examples where one wonders if they are taking too large a risk, but how much of apparent risk comes from the cross-cuts of violent acts? It is clear that the film would lose much, if not most of its effect if it had been missing the one or the other, when so much of the ethical trade-off needed to showing of visual taboos like human cadavers comes from the danger that the film crew puts themselves in.

This could for example be seen in the sometimes contradictory relationship between Smith's voice-over and the on-screen reactions of other people, contrasting in the actual footage we are shown. As in one of the first scenes in the film, where they are going into a police station to release one of the warlords (who goes by the nickname of General Bin Laden) from prison. The voice-over tell us that:

The minute we arrive in Baboon Town, our car is surrounded by a bunch of sketchy dudes. So when Myles [fixer] came back and said we could interview Bin Laden in the police station, I was like, yeah, let's get out of here and get in there really quick. ... So we get into the police station, and it's chaos ...

The 'sketchy dudes' in question is apparently a group of people, ranging from children to men to a couple of housewives, just standing outside a building, some of them smiling and some giving the thumbs up. How it was like to actually be there is impossible for us to know, but what we see on screen does have a certain incongruity with what we are told. This will of course have a lot to do with how the shots are edited, and where the voice-over is used. But as the events on screen and the commentary is put together, because of genre conventions we will as viewers instinctively connect the two as having a cognitive relationship. As in the

police station, with its apparent ‘chaos’, shows us a fairly calm situation, some would say boring.

Figure 2: Two frames from about 6 minutes into the film: (1) Outside police station, (2) Police officers inside station (VICE Media).



As in a few other places in the film, the visual representation of reality and the reality constructed through the voice-over can seem somewhat at odds with each other. It would therefore be in its place to ask if this would constitute a breach in the ideal of accuracy, and to what extent the chaotic situation is being constructed through the reporter’s voice-over and technical aspects like camera movement and editing. It can at least be said that it seems that the subjective tension the filmmaker’s are feeling is being transferred to the screen.

Whether or not some of the danger elements in the film can be said to be exaggerated or not is difficult to say, since we can only know for certain what is presented in the text. When presenting a coherent argument and textual logic, it is, as in journalism in general, necessary to focus on some aspects more than other, to frame it in a certain way. But the truth-claim of reality is perhaps stronger when filmed, as it is not as much of an interpretative exercise as writing. That being said, one of the distinctive features of the film, is the openness of its production, which will perhaps mitigate for some of the inaccuracies that may happen between experienced reality and the ‘Real’ reality.

The openness of the film is usually represented through signs of the camera’s presence. It attracts both interest from onlookers and often gives a clear sign as having somehow disrupted the situation it finds itself in. This also ties in neatly with the endangered gaze that is so prevalent in the film, in that the camera is often seen as an embodiment of the man *behind* the camera, because of the seeming emotional and physical threat to the camera man. This also creates a sort of shared experience for the viewer, when the reporter in situations of emotional acuteness turn to the camera/camera man, breaking the role as reporter and communicates his heightened state on a more basic level (often through variations of “Fuck!”, “Dude!”, and “Wow!”).

Another widespread feature of the film is, except when doing interviews, the camera and reporter are usually moving. This can be from the car or as when they are walking through the slums of West Point. The function of the car can be said to be a sort of refuge and protective barrier in an otherwise hostile and crowded environment outside, as it happened after the brothel-scene. It can also have a technical function in that much of the expository shots of the streets, markets, and crowds are done through the window of the moving car, producing relatively smooth tracking shots of the events outside. Outside the car is also a lot of movement, but away from the protection of the car, the movement now takes a quality of self-preservation. If one were to look at it with a critical mind, it can be said that it sometimes makes the impression of being more of a slum safari than actual journalism.

In the previous chapters we have presented various perspectives through which different types of journalisms can be produced. Historically, in journalism in general it was the contention between models of *story* and *information*; in the New Journalism it was the *realist* and *constructivist* reality; in the spectacular personal reportage we saw that the *rhetorical position* of the reporter could be either in the act of experience or in the act of writing; while in Immersion Journalism we see this through what we have named the *realistic mode*, which describes the external reality of a situation, while the *interpretative mode* describe how that situation was subjectively experienced.

Seen through these categories, it is not clear cut as to what *VICE Guide to Liberia* is using. In many ways this film is rather free in its form, but this sometimes makes it seem as if it wants to be several things at once. In the first two thirds of the film, the voice-over tries to be informational and factual, talking about the historical imperialism and the civil wars, while in the rhetorical position when on-screen is very much in an interpretative mode as well as in the act of experience. Notwithstanding the problematic aspects we have posited here, it at least attempts to form an authoritative journalistic foundation on which it builds its arguments, combined with the gung-ho subjectivity of the reporter.

However, the film changes in perspective in the last third, when they meet the ex-warlord Joshua Blahyi. Here the film goes into a sort of redemption narrative of the cannibalistic General of child-soldiers who found the path of god. We are, through his eyes, learning of the monstrosities that happened during the wars, where he openly explain the acts that was committed by him and his soldiers. Although Smith intermittently expresses his doubt directly to the viewer whether this redemption is totally legitimate, this part of the film is clearly showing Smith's limitations as a critical journalist.



As in one scene where Blahyi is leading them to a house outside of town to meet some of his former soldiers, where they must cross a small stream of water. The main focus of the scene is that Smith is walking barefoot through it, saying he will probably “end his days shitting out blood”. But in the shot after that, walking towards the house, Smith asks if the men used to drink or do drugs before they went fighting. To this Blahyi answer that “yeah, most of my boys would drain the blood of an innocent child and drink it.” With a slight stutter Smith then asks “so, you kill the child, then you drink the blood?” Indeed, that was what had happened (and it is in fact the second time Blahyi mentions it in the film), but again, to this Smith apparently had no follow up questions, who go straight into another line of questioning. This is just one of many examples of a lacking skill in asking tough questions, to explore what the subject is actually thinking about it, where the reporter here has suddenly taken the metaphorical back seat in the film.

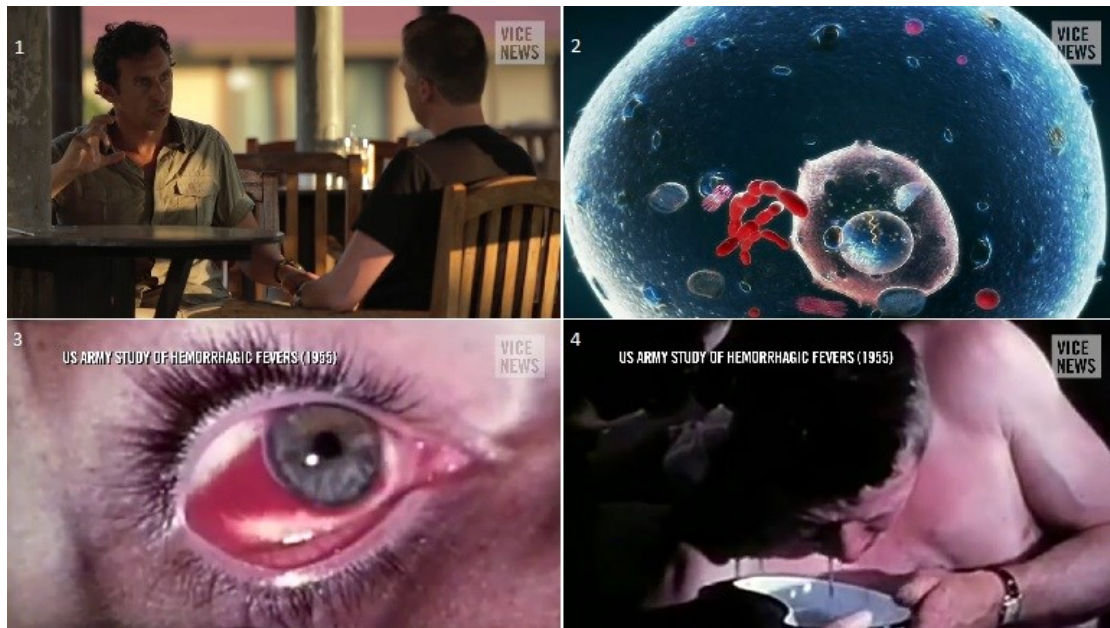
In the same way as in Harrington’s interview with president Bush, the film has now relinquished its textual authority to the uncritical subject. This is marked through the lacking voice-of-authority which has been prevalent throughout the first parts of the film, and the apparent handing over to the rhetorical control of the situation almost completely to Blahyi. Not before the very end do Smith’s commentary return, saying that the experience made him feel like he was on acid. The mix of interpretative and informational description – a sort of watered down gonzo journalism – has now been substituted for the same dotting quality of its subject as we saw in intimate journalism. It can also be said that the documentary mode has now changed from the expository to the interactive mode, where it relies heavily on the responses of the subject, but where the usual hierarchical nature of filmmaker as highest authority has been broken.

### ***Monkey Meat and the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia***

Clocking in as the shortest of the three, *Monkey Meat and the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia* is an 18 minutes long expository film about the Ebola virus that has now started to infect people in West Africa. At the time of filming there have been seven people dead from it, so it is still at a fairly low point in the spreading of the virus, which will hit its peak only months later. The film starts out with reporter Kaj Larsen giving the basis of the films argument: That some scientists believe that the infection may have started through the consumption of bushmeat like fruit bats and especially monkey.

After having established the main argument for the film, it then cuts to a scene where Larsen interviews a virologist who explains how the virus works when infecting a human being. The expert's information about the virus is highly technical and is cross-cut with a digitally made illustration of the viral infection as well quite graphic shots from a U.S. Army study on this type of infection.

Figure 3: Interview with expert with following illustrations (VICE Media).



[Virologist] Ebola is what we know as a viral haemorrhagic syndrome, so a syndrome is just like AIDS. Ebola is an aggressive haemorrhagic fever syndrome. Ebola in particular causes the walls of the capillaries to slightly separate and blood starts leaking. [...] That petechial haemorrhage ultimately leads to shock and death.

In the first layer of meaning, the film have thus visually and verbally grounded itself in scientific evidence that emphatically underlines both its own argument and the danger that the reporter is about to expose himself to. On the second layer, it also gives the implication that this film bases itself on science, and that the truth-claims made later should also be considered as true and accurate.

The structural organisation of this film is therefore clearly in the expository mode. The authority of the reporter's voice-over is heavily drawn from the scientific evidence and expert statements that support these evidences. This could be said to be what Nichols called 'evidentiary editing', which means that it maintains a continued textual logic and argument through what can seem like an objective reasoning. The film also uses a few more illustrations to further the films argument, and heightens the dramatic involvement of the reporter.

When the reporter's voice-over is segueing into the next scene, we can however hear a slight break in the 'cold' and factual tone when he says: "Despite the fact that I was now worried about bleeding from my eyes, we headed to a local lab where they were quarantining and testing for Ebola." This is also an example of what Nichols have pointed out, of an authoritative voice that has become more personalised in expository documentaries in the recent years. The comment can be said to be used as a contextualisation of the next scene, which see him standing in a hallway in front of a white sheet, where the medical staff hangs their protective equipment. In the scene, which is perhaps indicative of the rest of the main orientation in the film, the reporter is speaking to a medical assistant in a casual tone. He asks if he is not scared when he goes outside. The medical assistant looks at him with a slightly amused look, saying: "No, scared of what?" "Scared of Ebola!!" the reporter answers, "I'm standing out *here* and I'm scared! ... I'm glad your work is in there, and mine is out here." Having been surprised by the matter-of-factness of the medical assistant's response, the reporter is looking over the camera to his crew laughing at the whole situation.

The representational function of this situation is something that recur in many of the scenes in the film, with the reporter interviewing both medical professionals and people on the street and no one seeming to believe that Ebola is as prevalent as the reporter would have it. This is then alternated with cross-cuts of the white male expert virologist to explain what is really happening and why. There is also an extended sequence of an American scientist discovering a related virus in a monkey in the 1970's, with him being interviewed in his office, as well as quick shots of him behind a microscope to establish his authority. At an organisational level then, it can therefore be argued that the scenes and sequences taken together and put in juxtaposition with the 'unknowing' Liberians constitutes a 'western bias' in the film.

This could be further be substantiated by the statistics, where all but one of the locals interviewed in the whole film (nine out of ten) is either handling the bushmeat in question, or professing their scepticism about Ebola.

As in the scene below, which happens after the reporter have been to the illegal market to buy some monkey meat. Outside he meets a group of people, two of whom is explaining how one would usually prepare the meat. On the question from the reporter if they are worried eating monkey meat, they say that they could just as easily eat what the reporter have bought as is, which they do.

Figure 4: Eating monkey meat (VICE Media).



After having jerked the meat into two pieces, we then see in frame two from Figure 4 the reporter rather ungraciously exclaiming: “Could we not splatter the monkey all over me, please. Oh, my god! I’m getting fucking pegged with Ebola monkey right now! I’m getting fraggged with Ebola monkey!” We are then seen the two men eating the meat, almost scoffing at the reporter’s worries about the virus. Being an interventional and ethically dubious act by the reporter – buying and then giving supposedly Ebola infested monkey meat to its subjects – it still makes the cut as one of the central scenes in the film.

So if we were to ask what kind of gaze the camera and reporter applies in this film, it would be difficult to give a clear answer. Despite its apparent danger-element, it also certainly has the ‘ethic of curiosity’ which Nichols attribute to the *accidental gaze*, but filming mostly in stationary positions, we see nothing of the unintentional lack of focus or picture and sound quality. But then again they are not viewing death or adversity in a direct way, although the argument is intermittently being put forward by the expert source as well as the reporter’s voice-over how dangerous Ebola is. One could therefore argue that as *represented* in the film, the reporter takes a curious but somewhat unsympathetic role towards his subjects, and we may ask if the representation cannot lead to stigmatisation of the victims. Being neither a detached observer, nor a sympathetic actor, the gaze in this film can be said to be situated somewhere in between the spectacular ‘tourism’ of *VICE Guide to Liberia* and the sympathetic reporting done in our next case.

Journalistically, the *Monkey Meat*-film relies heavily on what we have called ‘pure information’, but as was the case with our former film, it tries to be several things at once. It can be said, though, that one of the things it is not, is particularly immersionist. Both in time,

which seems limited, and depth, which is confined to an office, a patio lounge, a bar, and a common market. Being as superficial as it is in this respect, one also get a feeling of it attempting to be more serious journalism than it actually is, where it seemingly cannot get away from a sort of inherent “VICE-ness”, as it were. This slight gonzo ethos combined with a ‘straight’ reporting will despite its ‘scientific’ grounding feel both uninformed and uninformative. The rhetorical position the reporter situates himself in can also be said to have an implicit western bias, which at times can be interpreted as stigmatising. One of the redeeming features of the film could be said to be, that the argument, in a way, was right. Not in the over-dramatized fear mongering of the monkey meat, but in that Ebola was real, which so many became painfully aware. That does not, however, excuse the oftentimes unsympathetic persona with which the reporter orientates himself towards his subjects, and one supposes that such an attitude would be ethically unjustifiable had the situation been any worse than it was during filming. We can at least see a clear difference between this reporting and the one in our last film.

### ***The Fight Against Ebola***

The main argument in this film is of course that there are not enough being done to mitigate the Ebola crisis in West Africa, and especially where the virus has hit the worst, Liberia. The film is made a few months after the second, and *The Fight Against Ebola* is being filmed at the high point of the epidemic. With reporter Danny Gold we are taken around Monrovia to get some insight into what is being done to mitigate the spread of the highly infectious virus.

Compared to the previous one, this film is notably different in both tone and perspective. Being the more ‘professional’ of the three films, it is clear that VICE has developed in their news production in the recent years. But the main tribute to this, would have to be the reporter himself, who does not have the same ‘thrill-seeking’ aspect in his reporting as Smith, and is arguably more sympathetic towards the subjects he is covering compared to Larsen. The gravity of the situation is also genuinely more severe than it was in the second film, which may be contributing to the more restrained, controlled, and unobtrusive quality of this one. This unobtrusiveness may also be a part of why we find so few signs of immersiveness in this film, but the biggest reason is perhaps the *actual* danger the reporter puts himself in. As a matter of fact, one of the crew was known later to have been infected in one of the scenes in this film, so as a matter of ‘going there so you don’t have too’, the gimmick of the first film

has some salience here as well.

In the context that it situates itself in, it is perhaps not so surprising that the gaze that holds the most authority in this film is the *clinical*. Being one of the worst disasters the country have had since the civil wars, the more subdued approach chosen by Gold is certainly the more ‘tasteful’. But the reporting in this film goes a little further than that. As Sobchack said, the clinical gaze is always “serving two masters”, as it sits between responding in a humane way and being the detached recorder of events. He is not a ‘cold’ and detached observer, and this is often shown in the *humane gaze* in which the camera situate itself. Being unable to prevent the suffering they are seeing, the filmmakers are thereby relieved of the ethical responsibilities of trying to help. The only response possible is therefore that of empathetic personal responses.

What you see below in Figure 5 is from an especially salient scene where Gold and his crew contemplates the ethical and safety aspects of talking to persons who have not gotten help in an hospital or aid station. During an interview outside one of the humanitarian clinic, which due to several reasons cannot take in any more patients, an old lady tell them about some sick people in her community that have been turned away from the clinic. Having just returned home, the community’s people are now worried that the sick people are going spread the virus.

What we see below, is the first three frames of a scene where the townspeople are explaining what have happened, and that if the people were to go to the hospital, they would be refused at the gate. They are then (4) imploring him to help them, so that they can be saved and so they will not infect the others. Clearly affected by their request for help, he promptly asks if it would be alright if they went to talk to them, only to almost immediately realize the problematic aspects of the situation. With a worried facial expression he turns to his crew saying he does not know what to do, asking if they think it’s a good idea to go into the house. They promptly answer him, “don’t go inside the house”, which they do not. Looking down at the ground and then back at the old woman, the reporter is clearly torn. Over it comes his voice-over saying:

After a short debate, we decided not to follow up on the potentially infected neighbours. For fear of our own safety, and because we didn’t want the make the impression that we could provide help [end scene].



Figure 5: Six frames from scene where reporter is asked for help (VICE Media).



What we have here is a sympathetic reporter, contemplating how far he should go to get the story, but deeming it ethically irresponsible to give the impression that they could do anything of value. The scene is not as visually dramatic as the brothel-scene in the first film, but it can be seen as an example of the different approaches and ethea the three reporters have in their respective situations.

The visual signifiers in this film is that of helplessness. This makes the human relationships portrayed in the film an important part of the argument of the film. Where in a situation where indeed nothing can be done, and the only thing within the reporter's power is to record the events and inform people of the humanitarian crisis. The human suffering of this inhuman enemy makes the humane gaze one of the only ethically justifiable positions to take.

Structurally this is also an expository documentary, but as we have seen, it has certain elements of reflexivity in it. But this is not where the film gets its textual authority, and can perhaps be seen as an open, self-conscious form of expository mode. As in all three films

there is used the voice-of-authority, with the reporter's commentary being the organisational unity of it, which both maintains the films over-arching argument and context, as well as explaining the scenes we see through both voice-over and on camera. In expository modes, the pictures are usually there to illustrate the films point, and there is a lot of that, but it also relies much on interviews with many different subjects, as seen in the interactive mode of documentary.

A notable difference in the journalism here is, as we have seen, its professionalism. It can be said to follow the informational model, describing the situation in a highly realistic mode. Compared to the two former films, this is notable in its lack of subjective interpretation of the events, and in this respect the reporter is sticking to what is seen and experienced, not focusing on his own feelings and inner monologue. He is however sympathetic towards his subjects, which is also reflected in the films editing. As shown in Figure 5, the subjects are here fully aware of the dangers, and in frame 3 we can even see a close up shot of a man washing his hands with anti-bacterial liquid. Compared to the *Monkey Meat*-film, how the subjects are represented here is very different indeed. This is also furthered when the reporter a few times explicitly want to help the infected subjects in the film, but cannot, in danger of being infected himself. In this sense, the issues of stigmatisation prevalent in the second film is not present here, where its subjects are depicted as active participants in mitigating the crisis, many to the extent of being represented as self-sacrificing heroes.

## ***Findings***

One of the key differences found in these three films is how they view their subjects. As we have seen in Shane Smith's representation of Monrovia, there is an almost constant danger lurking everywhere. This is being constantly reinforced by Smith's voice-over, by chaotic camera movement and editing, as well as percussive background music. All together it creates a sort of adrenaline fuelled, high-tension drama which places the reporter in the middle of it all. In this sense the film evokes many parallels to a gonzo journalism on steroids. It also potentially run into some ethical issues along the way, as being too sensationalistic in its representation of its subjects and of their own level of danger. As one of the producers so emphatically stated when asked about this to the Independent: "They aren't. It's one guy with one camera. We report it as we see it. We are just trying to show people what's happening, to report the news." (The Independent 2010). But as we have seen, there are indeed many things



that can skew how one sees reality, and that ‘reporting it as you see it’ has in fact many pitfalls, and the comment can therefore seem a little naïve.

This is perhaps best shown when comparing *VICE Guide to Liberia* to *Fighting Ebola*, where the latter is based mostly on factual accounts, interviews with various health and aid workers, as well as the families and communities of infected people. It gives a much more nuanced and fuller picture of the situation, and takes it time to hear what people have to say without being imposing. In this respect *VICE Guide to Liberia* is far more claustrophobic, and one could argue, somewhat myopic in terms of its understanding of the situation. As we have seen before, a lot of the filming is done from inside the car, and when they are outside, it can often take the form of a sort of ‘slum tourism’. Or as David Carr famously retorted when Smith in the documentary *Page One* belittled the New York Times’ effort in Liberia: “Just because you put on a fucking safari helmet and looked at some poop doesn’t give you the right to insult what we do.” (NY Times 2014). A little chest-thumping, as he has admitted himself, but it still holds more than a grain of truth to it.

In the cases we have chosen, it is in hindsight perhaps not the best ones to describe what we mean by Immersion Journalism. If we would measure them against pioneers like Nellie Bly or Hunter S. Thompson, the films in question would seem rather meek in comparison. But in comparing the three films against each other, we can still see a clear tendency of more immersion in the first, and the less and less in the two next films. And even in *VICE Guide to Liberia* one has to ask oneself, how much of this is real, and how much is constructed in the imagination of Shane Smith?

As we have seen, there are so many variables that suggest that what we are seeing is not so much the Real ‘reality’, but construction made out of the inter-subjectivity of the filmmakers. From the intention, research, and knowledge of the reporter, to how the camera behaves itself and how it places itself in the ethical space, how this is edited, and finally how we as viewers are interpreting what we are seeing. In this perspective, a claim of capturing reality *as is* would perhaps seem wide-eyed.

One should therefore also be careful in trying to judge the severity of a situation through what is viewed through the screen. However, it does seem to be a correlation in the three films of the ‘seriousness’ of its reporting and the immediacy of the threat reported on. This can be seen in *Monkey Meat and the Ebola Outbreak in Liberia* when compared to *The Fight Against Ebola*. Although basing itself on scientific evidence, the ethical issues the reporter face in the first film can be said to be less acute than in the second. The implicit message in the film,

which can be said to be little more like ‘we have evidence Ebola is real and may come from monkey meat, and look at them, still eating monkey meat’. This certainly has a shock-effect, which is what so much on the film relies on. But one could ask if this approach would not seem overly unsympathetic and ethically dubious if adopted at the height of the epidemic.

It therefore seems that the reporting done in *The Fight Against Ebola* is the proper and humane response to such a level of suffering, being nothing the reporter can do directly, but serving the greater good by bearing witness. This would not be the time for a spectacular personal reportage as seen in *VICE Guide to Liberia*, since it would be ethically unjustifiable to put oneself first in such a situation. To ‘report it as they see it’ can thus be taken as a naïve and somewhat overconfident statement, where as we have seen there are many different ways of ‘seeing it’.

We have also witnessed three different types of journalism. From the gung-ho, gonzo-inspired journalism of Shane Smith, to the quasi-professionalism of Kaj Larsen, to the humane, self-conscious and professional journalism of Danny Gold. One should be careful of saying that these films are generalizable to VICE Media as a whole, since each reporter seems to bring their own individually situated personas and their own ethea to their reporting. What could be said, however, is that there seem to be a clear change in the seriousness of VICE. This has probably to do with the establishment of VICE News and their ambitions of becoming “the next CNN”.

From the first film to the last two spans six years, and in terms of journalistic professionalism we can see a clear evolution in the methods of their reporting. But in how VICE are challenging the mainstream ideals, a few ethical concerns arise. This seems especially relevant when reporting on situations of poverty, suffering, and death. As we have seen, one can easily victimise its subjects, making the reporting biased and thus reinforcing certain class structures or racial stereotypes. From what we have seen in our analysis, the more immediate the suffering is, the more VICE adopts the institutionalised procedures of traditional journalism. One wonders, then, if not all the hype about the challenging of the norms, methods, and ideals of the ‘old media’ sometimes is just exactly that – hype. There are many elements of the immersionist ethos of VICE which could contradict this, but there is no denying that the ethical issues presented when reporting on stories like this, seem to demand a certain professionalism which has been already developed in traditional journalism.

## **CHAPTER 7:**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

In this thesis we have looked at the history and formation of the profession of journalism, but also some of the problematic elements of it. Through looking at the limits of the ideal of objectivity, we have seen that it has several inherent and explicit issues when followed blindly. It can for example be used as a protective ritual for journalists, where a too great belief in facts that ‘speak for themselves’ can hide the journalist’s subjectivity in the text, but can still be seen through its selective perception. Although, our analysis has shown, that the blind belief that subjectivity in and of itself is a better way of communicating a reality, is too simplistic, where it can be in danger of having adverse effects, especially when reporting on the suffering of others.

As we have seen through the New Journalists, that although representing reality in a more narrative way, facts and accuracy are still imperative. Although much of the Immersion Journalism presented here takes for granted that our different realities are indeed a phenomenological construction, to discuss them in an extreme relativist perspective would serve us no purpose. In this sense, there is the possibility of going too far in this line of reasoning. This can perhaps be exemplified with the ethicality of reporting. Even if our ethical stances towards death is historically determined, the ‘wrongness’ of an unsympathetic reporting on other people’s suffering is nonetheless felt as strongly by all of us. It is, arguably, an almost instinctive reaction we have, and if a reporter would go against this feeling we are less receptive of the argument put forward. It is thus not only an ethical issue of how one should act around suffering, but also a matter of building and sustaining an authority.

This authority is perhaps more difficult to obtain for VICE News than other news outlets, as their apparent rejection of the ideals and norms of professional mainstream news, they are also rejecting the implicit authority and fail-safes that these ideals have built over a long time.

That is not to say that many of these ideals and norms are *not* followed by VICE News. In fact, we have seen that there is a somewhat breach in the ‘life and learning’ of the company, as it is often closer to a traditional form of journalism than the hype might suggest.

It seems that the more freedom one wants in reporting, the more personally responsible one is for the quality, authority, and truth-value of it. Since VICE Media and Immersion Journalism rely on such a highly personal form of reporting, this in turn make them more exposed to ‘bad’ journalism.

One should therefore speak of degrees, rather than extremes when it comes to the immersive element in reporting. One of the more extreme forms of immersive reporting has been gonzo journalism, and as we saw there, the reality constructed by the writer (the ego’s inner monologue) could indeed give us a totally fresh perspective, but at the expense of factual accuracy. When reporting on death, disease, and suffering, such an approach would be much more liable to being ethically problematic and insensitive towards its subjects. One could perhaps argue, then, that the more suffering one is reporting on, the more professional and factual and accurate one should be.

Although in difficult situations like these, I would still hold that Immersion Journalism can be a more empathetic form of journalism than the traditional forms, in that it attempts to explain the complexities of our world and the people in it. Going immersive can help a reporter unearth hidden meanings which would not have been found otherwise. In changing to this deeper perspective, it can however gloss over other, broader aspects. As our analysis has shown us, it can run the danger of being to contextually myopic, seeing only what is directly in front of it, but ignoring the broader perspective. This is why it can be argued that a *combination* of the ‘hard news’ form of mainstream journalism and Immersion Journalism is important. One covering the news to explain the world ‘as it is’, while the other can go deeper into explaining why this is so.

In the changing media landscape we are experiencing today, many have expressed their worries about the future of journalism. It takes a lot of money and a lot of time to immerse oneself in a story, and with a general decline in the news business at the moment, the funding for such immersion is apparently scarce. Nonetheless, there seems for many to be a strong desire to understand the world we are living in. One can thus be a little bit more optimistic about the future of journalism, for as long as people want to understand the world they are living in, journalism will have its place, being there to bear witness. It is also encouraging to see that the audience, and a young one at that, is interested in news that goes deeper than daily

journalism. I would therefore argue that Immersion Journalism can play an important part in the future of journalism, providing us with a deeper understanding of the world we live in.

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