12. Tom Wolfe and the New Journalism

If McLuhan's thesis challenged the orthodox denigration of mass culture that dominated liberal, conservative and Marxist theorising, the writings of new journalists such as Tom Wolfe brushed aside the rigid moral and sociological categories of high, middle and low, and sought to reveal the myriad and differing behaviour patterns, styles, and subcultures that he believed were the actual stuff of mass culture. Instead of mass culture and behaviour appearing as monolithic, increasingly standardised consumer responses, firmly controlled and manipulated by the culture industries, an alternative model and image of America began to emerge. Dwight Macdonald had anticipated this alternative model when revising his initial rejection of mass culture. This revision 'is a compromise between the conservative and liberal proposals' as to how to preserve artistic quality in a mass society. Macdonald's optimistic revision is based:

on the recent discovery – since 1945 – that there is not One Big Audience but rather a number of smaller, more specialised audiences that may be commercially profitable . . . The mass audience is divisible, we have discovered – and the more it is divided, the better. (AAG, p. 73)

The range of subcultures and specialised activities that appear in Tom Wolfe's own writings and those of a number of writers he included in his anthology The New Journalism mirrors Macdonald's model of an energetic cultural pluralism. Tom Wolfe's writings move through a kaleidoscopic world of diversity that includes the milieux of Playboy chief Hugh Hefner in 'King of the Status Dropouts', of Southern stock-car racer Junior Johnson in 'The Last American Hero', of the New York art world in The Painted Word, and the
hermetic world of NASA's astronauts in *The Right Stuff*. The selection of writings anthologised in *The New Journalism* explores a mass society that offers a bewildering cornucopia of diversity. Instead of standardised sameness, America as a mass society seems to exult in creative and exotic displays of individualism; from Hunter S. Thompson’s study of the Hell’s Angels, to Terry Southern’s portrait of Southern baton twirling and culture, and Gary Wills’ meditation on Martin Luther King’s funeral and the gospel rhetoric of Southern evangelism. The main aim of these writings is to reveal the inner workings of subcultural codes and styles, to document as accurately as possible events and manners, not to structure them according to predetermined sociological categories.

One of the major preoccupations of this form of investigative journalism became the criminal mind and its acts. In Truman Capote’s account of the murder of a Kansas farm family, *In Cold Blood*, Ed Sanders’ account of the Charles Manson murders, *The Family*, and Norman Mailer’s retelling of Gary Gilmore’s story, *The Executioner’s Song*, the aim is literal documentation, not moral evaluation. Despite Tom Wolfe’s attempt to exclude what he feels are the moralising analytic techniques of high culture from *The New Journalism*, individual journalists in practice often had to abandon this non-committal attitude. Hunter S. Thompson, for example, often framed his responses to a particular subculture or milieu in terms of a mixture of ‘fear and loathing’. After 18 months spent in the close company of the Hell’s Angels, Thompson: ‘Pushed his luck a little too far and got badly stomped by four or five Angels, who seemed to feel I was taking advantage of them’.¹ This incident disrupts the non-committal documentary stance of the new journalism, and Thompson inserts a quotation from Joseph Conrad’s study of the contradictory encounter between Savagery and Civilization, *Heart of Darkness*, to indicate his reactions: ‘The horror! The horror! . . . Exterminate all the brutes!’²

The cultural pluralism of the new journalism that came to prominence in the 1960s became the official national ideology as affluence created the economic basis for diversity and individualism. The rigid orthodoxies of the Cold War and the effort to maintain consensus were increasingly difficult to sustain in face of the economic and political demands of the 1960s. This shift of American ideology towards an acceptance of a complex pluralism of styles, values and behaviour can be clearly traced in the decline of consensus magazines like *Life*, and the enhanced circulations of specialist