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## What is Gonzo? The etymology of an urban legend

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### **Abstract:**

The delightfully enigmatic and poetic 'gonzo' has come a long way from its humble origins as a throw-away line in the introduction to an off-beat story about the classic American road trip of discovery. *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas* is definitely a classic of post-war literature and this small word has taken on a life of its own.

A Google search on the Internet located over 597000 references to gonzo. Some had obvious links to Hunter S. Thompson's particular brand of journalism, some were clearly derivative and others appear to bear no immediate connection. What, for example, is gonzo theology?

Despite the widespread common usage of gonzo, there is no clear and definitive explanation of its linguistic origins. Dictionaries differ, though they do tend to favour Spanish or Italian roots without much evidence or explanation. On the other hand, biographical sources dealing with Thompson and new journalism also offer different and contradictory etymologies.

This paper assesses the evidence for the various theories offered in the literature and comes close to forming a conclusion of its own. The paper then reviews the international spread of gonzo in a variety of areas of journalism, business, marketing and general weirdness by reviewing over 200 sites on the Internet and many other sources. Each of these manifestations is assessed against several gonzo criteria.

## Gonzo: Who, what, where, why, when, and how

Gonzo Grasis is a promising infielder for the Arizona State *Sun Devils*, his university major had not been decided at the end of his freshman year and he took a medical redshirt due to a wrist injury (8: *Gonzo Grasis - Profile* 2000). He may never read *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*, but if he were to graduate as a pharmacist or a lawyer, his clients may later in life, call him 'Doctor Gonzo'. Perhaps his friends will tease him about this scene from a classic of American literature:

I lunged backwards into my attorney, who gripped my arm as he reached out to take the note. "I'll handle this," he said to the Moray woman. "This man has a bad heart, but I have plenty of medicine. My name is Doctor Gonzo. Prepare our suite at once. We'll be in the bar." (Thompson 1998a, p.24)

Dr Gonzo is based on Thompson's real-life lawyer, medicinal consultant, campaign adviser, road buddy and friend, Oscar Zeta Acosta. In the book *Dr Gonzo* is a 300lb Samoan lawyer, Acosta was a Chicano political activist from the west coast who met up with HST in 1970. He assisted Thompson with 'Strange rumblings in Aztlan' (Thompson 1998b) about the murder of journalist Ruben Salazar by Los Angeles police. Acosta also helped on HST's political campaigns in Aspen (Whitmer 1993, p.172). There are many versions of the 'gonzo' legend, some of which seem to be a plausible approximation of the facts. Oscar Acosta disappeared in the mid '70s; some sources suggest he is dead.

*Fear and loathing in Las Vegas* originally appeared in *Rolling Stone* over two editions in 1971<sup>1</sup>. It was written almost simultaneously with the Salazar piece. It's been recalled that Thompson wrote *Fear and loathing* to unwind in the mornings after a full night trying to put the Salazar story together (McKeen 1991). HST took Acosta to Las Vegas so that he could talk to him and get the facts of Salazar's murder straight. McKeen says that together these pieces mark the beginning of Thompson's rapid rise in confidence, ability and fame.

Thompson had picked up the Salazar story commission from *Rolling Stone* on the strength of his breakthrough piece in *Scanlan's Monthly* (June 1970): 'The Kentucky Derby is decadent and depraved'.

Gonzo remains largely an American word, but it is not unknown in other English-speaking societies. Like Thompson's other famous phrase, 'fear and loathing', 'gonzo' has come into the lexicon and enjoys daily use in a variety of circumstances, but what does it mean? Even the word itself is hard to nail down with any certainty. What we know for sure from Thompson's own memories and his biographers, is that it was first used by his friend, the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine* editor Bill Cardoso (Perry 1992, p.142; Whitmer 1993, p.168).

After the *Scanlan's* Derby story, Thompson meticulously perfected the gonzo style, even though its essence was its raw, un-edited quality. He considered *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas* as a failed experiment in the true gonzo style.

Despite this reservation the introduction records one of Thompson's earliest uses of 'gonzo' to describe his own work:

But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism. (Thompson 1998, p.12)

By the end of 1971 *Fear and loathing* was a success and Thompson owned the word and the style. Thompson's 'gonzo' was new journalism with a twist, but it's clear that it did not apply to some of Thompson's journalistic contemporaries who described themselves as the new journalists (Wolfe 1977).

New journalism was already a decade old when Thompson finally made his mark as a practitioner of the gonzo arts. Gonzo is an extreme version of the new journalism style. It can be categorised as a sub-genre. The literary style of American new journalism is associated more with disaffected group of feature writers on the daily papers in the early 1960s. According to one of its leading members, this group had come to the realisation that it was possible to write journalism "that would...read like a novel" (Wolfe 1977, pp.21-22). Certainly Thompson became involved with these writers and others, but Tom Wolfe already had a doctorate in American studies when he joined the New York *Herald Tribune* in 1962.

In contrast, the early sixties were a lean time for Thompson. HST didn't hit his straps until a decade later after a much less glorious route into journalism. Thompson left the army in 1958 after a short stay in a Kentucky prison. When Wolfe took his PhD in 1962 HST was drifting around South America freelancing for the *National Observer* and often quite unwell. For a period his only traveling companion was an alcoholic monkey (McKeen 1991, p.7; Whitmer 1993, p.125). Like Wolfe and many others at the time, HST was trying to write a novel. He hated journalism at first, but needed it to pay the bills (Perry 1993; Whitmer 1993). This is clearly illustrated in the legend generated by the Kentucky Derby piece. According to several accounts Thompson was overcome with writer's block and in a state of shock because of the student deaths at Kent State, so instead of trying to write the story he simply tore pages from his notepad and presented them to the magazine. *Scanlan's* editor Warren Hinckle was apparently impressed and the story made the magazine's cover (Whitmer 1993, pp.166-168). McKeen (1991, p.43) believes the story of faxing the torn pages from the notebook may be apocryphal and perhaps too closely resembles the story Tom Wolfe retails about how he wrote his first piece of new journalism:

If Thompson is to be believed, he panicked while trying to complete the piece and sent Hinckle pages torn from his notebook.

Thompson was always competitive with Wolfe and they have not always been friends, it is therefore, tempting to believe McKeen on this point, as his assessment of HST's journalism is more 'academic' than any of the other Thompson biographies. However, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion on this point. On a more positive note, it became clear in 1970 that

Thompson's style of journalism was funny and popular. McKeen favours a definition offered by Louisville reporter John Filiatreau:

[Gonzo] can only be defined as what Hunter Thompson does...It generally consists of the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages his audience. It is Point of View Run Wild. (Filiatreau 1975)

McKeen continues the definition:

Gonzo requires virtually no re-writing, with the reporter and the quest for information as the focal point. Notes, snatches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams—these are elements of a piece of gonzo journalism. (1991, p.36)

Certainly this is the *impression* that Thompson would like to give, but is it accurate? Given his infamous hesitation and panic close to deadlines, HST has always required handholding and some serious editing as he tried to finish an article or book. When he was working on the 1972 election campaign he would often file via the 'mojo-wire (fax) after the deadline had expired in San Francisco, "too late to be edited, yet still in time for the printer" (Whitmer 1993, p.198). Alan Rinzler recalled trying to get Thompson to concentrate on finishing the book version of *Fear and loathing on the campaign trail*:

'It took about two weeks,' Rinzler said of the urgent push to get the book out...'It was intense. We worked with a tape recorder, and my secretary would...take the tapes and transcribe them. Then we would be editing the transcriptions.' Rinzler acted as nursemaid, editor and drill sergeant. 'I would have to get him out of bed, get food into him, and coffee.'...'After the coffee would come great quantities of Wild Turkey, just to stoke himself. Then he would do more cocaine and alcohol; those were becoming his favorite drugs in that time period. But he was not a babbling idiot in those days...The idea was to get something into his body that would anesthetize the pain, the anxiety, the deep sense of depression and loss that is underneath all that anger. I see him as a serious alcoholic and drug addict in a state of total denial. No exaggeration.' (Cited in Whitmer 1993, p.200)

Parts of this long anecdote are corroborated, after a fashion by what one-time *Rolling Stone* transcription typist Sarah Lazin told E. Jean Carroll about working on *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*:

I was supposed to transcribe, the two guys I couldn't understand were in some kind of Las Vegas fast-food joint...and after a while, I just said, 'Well, it sounds to me like they're saying this,' so I would type it in. I had my own punctuation, like dot dot dot, dash dash, and sometimes I'd capitalize this, sometimes I'd lower-case that, and when it was printed in the article, it was exact. Exact. Word for word...Hunter didn't change a thing. He took it verbatim. I was amazed. I couldn't believe it. (Cited in Carroll 1993, p.147)

Both of these extracts indicate that the birth of gonzo and the early honing of the style were perhaps more collaborative than just the product of HST's solo imagination.

## Where did Gonzo come from?

Gonzo all started with Bill Cardoso...after I wrote the Kentucky Derby piece for *Scanlan's*...It's the first time I realized you could write *different*. And...I got this note from Cardoso saying, 'That was pure Gonzo journalism!'...Some Boston word for weird, bizarre.' (HST cited in Pollack 1975, p.184).

Bill Cardoso was a journalist working in Boston and could have picked up the term there. Or Thompson could be making this up. It is significant that several biographers and interviews with the participants differ on this issue and several others. For example, there's some confusion over the spelling of Cardoso's name<sup>2</sup>. Some sources refer to him as Carodoza others as Cardoso.

For the record, the guy's name is Bill Cardoso [Car-doh-soh]. He is an important contemporary of HST's and a literary celebrity in his own right. His magazine journalism is collected in *The Maltese sangweech & other heroes* (Cardoso 1984) and includes 'Zaire', about an ill-fated trip to report on the September 1974 Ali – Foreman boxing match in the jungle capital Kinshasa. By this time Thompson was into heavy substance abuse and not writing well. He didn't even make it ringside on fight night. According to Bill Cardoso, HST was flaked out in the hotel pool:

I remember saying to him, 'Hey, man, You better get ready. The fight's tonight. We're leaving.' And he said, 'Yeah.' And he just kept swimming. He missed a good fight. (Cited in Carroll 1993, p.173)

There's no doubt that Cardoso first used 'gonzo' to describe HST's writing style. However, there's some doubt as to where Cardoso picked up the term. Thompson told an interviewer it was Boston slang, but subsequent accounts differ on several points. A key reference is Cardoso's interview with Thompson's biographer E. Jean Carroll, about a letter to his friend in the fall of 1970:

I said, 'I don't know what the fuck you're doing, but you've changed everything. It's totally gonzo.'

I think the word comes from the French Canadian. It's a corruption of g-o-n-z-e-a-u-x. Which is French Canadian for 'shining path.' (Cited in Carroll 1993, p.124)

Not only is 'gonzeaux' not in any French dictionary I consulted, Cardoso's version flatly contradicts an account of this story given by Thompson, but the time references coincide. The occasion was publication of Thompson's breakthrough piece for the sports magazine *Scanlan's Monthly*, 'The Kentucky Derby is decadent and depraved', which is reprinted in volume 1 of the *Gonzo Papers* (Thompson 1992, pp.24-38). Cardoso wrote: "Forget all this shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is a start, keep rolling"(Cited in Perry 1992, p.142). According to another of Thompson's biographers the term was one the "South Boston Irish used to describe the guts and stamina of the last man standing at the end of a marathon drinking bout" (Whitmer 1993, p.168).

## The linguistic origins of gonzo

For the past 30 years the editors and compilers of *some* dictionaries have tried to pin down the etymology of the word, but with little consistency. Peter Tamony noted that the word was becoming more common in every day usage by the early 1980s and it began to appear in dictionaries a couple of years later. The earliest entry I could find was from the second edition of the Random House dictionary in 1987. The entry has the standard reference to Thompson's journalism and notes that the etymology is perhaps from the Italian or Spanish (Flexner 1987, p.821). A similar reference appears in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1989 (Simpson and Weiner 1989, p.668).

'Gonzo' does not appear in the 1990 edition of the *Collins Concise Dictionary* (Hanks 1990), nor in the *Penguin Macquarie Dictionary* (Delbridge 1990) of the same year, but references can be found in later editions, for example the 2003 *Oxford Concise*, and on the Internet.

The online version of the Merriam Webster dictionary defines gonzo as, 'idiosyncratically subjective but engagé <gonzo journalism> also: **BIZARRE**,' but the origin is listed simply as 'unknown' (*Merriam Webster Dictionary* n.d.). A more adventurous *Dictionary of Popular Culture* (Thorne 1994) suggests a couple of sources:

The word itself is an adjective meaning crazy or extremist and derives from a HIPSTER expression made up of 'gone' (as in ecstatic, uncontrolled) and an '-o' suffix (with the 'z' for ease of pronunciation), or directly from the Italian gonzo, meaning a buffoon or simpleton (Thorne 1994, pp.97-98).

The first part of this explanation – the derivation from a 'hipster' source – seems a little contrived, but the possible translation from the Italian is more promising. The *Collins Italian Dictionary* does hold the word 'gonzo' and defines it in translation as 'simpleton, dolt, fool' (*The Collins Italian Dictionary* 1995). It's no surprise that the *Collins English Dictionary* (<http://wordreference.com/>) is consistent with this explanation and it has a definition in two parts:

- 1 wild and crazy.
- 2 (of journalism) explicitly including the writer's feelings at the time of witnessing the events or undergoing the experiences written about'.

The same source suggests an etymology, 'perhaps from Italian, literally: fool, or Spanish *ganso* idiot, bumpkin (literally: goose)' (*The Collins English Dictionary* 2000). This makes a little more sense when you consider that the name 'Cardoso' certainly *sounds* either Italian or Spanish.

Assuming the word did come into English from the Italian or the Spanish: how did the South Boston *Irish* get hold of it? Perhaps from the liturgy of the Catholic Church, but segregation of Irish and Italian congregations would seem to rule this out. Unlike the street-talk of the South Boston Irish, which one might assume has *Gaelic* origins; Italian and Spanish at least share a common *Latin* ancestry. This might also add credence to Cardoso's own suggestion it came from a French Canadian source. However, the closest

reference I could find in a French dictionary was the word 'gonze', a slang term meaning simply 'guy' or 'bloke' (Correard and Grundy 1994, p.387).

The Chambers Dictionary of Etymology notes the first English usage of 'gonzo' is linked to Thompson's journalism from 1972 and it favours the Italian origin, suggesting it might be a shortened form of Borgonzone meaning a Burgundian—a person from Burgundy (Barnhart 2000, p.441).

This possible Italian/Spanish heritage avenue is followed by other sources, perhaps indicating how urban legends are generated and 'verified', rather than any certainty about the origins of the word. The lexicographic site *A.Word.A.Day* (<http://wordsmith.org/>) offered a definition and explanation in a week devoted to 'coined words' in January 2002 (*A.Word.A.Day* 2002):

Gonzo (GON-zo) adjective

Having a bizarre, subjective, idiosyncratic style, especially in journalism...Perhaps from Italian gonzo (simpleton) or Spanish ganso (dull or fool, literally a goose)...Coined by Bill Cardoso, journalist and author in 1971.

The etymology offered here is interesting. If we take fool to be also a jester, though both may be insulting to Thompson. He may have some issues, but no one could suggest for a second that he's a simpleton. Further, the gonzo style is neither dull, nor foolish.

So far I have been unable to confirm beyond reasonable doubt any of the possible explanations outlined here. The central figure in this mystery is Bill Cardoso. What is his source for 'gonzeaux'? How much leg pulling are these experienced jokers engaged in? Does it really matter?

Yes, it does to me. The history of gonzo and new journalism is still being written. Thompson, Wolfe and many others of their generation are still writing. Younger generations of reporters are now confronting this history for the first time. The excitement and seriousness of HST's contribution to journalism hangs on one small word, but we still don't know where it came from. It's one of the enduring puzzles of 20<sup>th</sup> Century literary and journalistic history. As we've seen here, the various versions of the same events create a legendary rendering of key moments. They do not always provide an accurate account *for the record*. I'm still tracking down other sources and could also use the help of an interested linguistic historian.

The term 'gonzo', like the phrase 'fear and loathing' is closely identified with Thompson's style of reporting: a crazed mix of sharp insight, humour, drugs, sex and violence. In the last 30 years it has given rise to many admirers and even more imitators. One of the most intriguing adaptations of 'gonzo' is as a proper name for a person.

American author Bill Crider has created a character called Mike Gonzo in a series of sci-fi titles for pre-teens. Apparently his peers and possibly adults too, find him "troublesome" according to a review published by Amazon.com (Ingram 1998). Crider's other novels include a romantic who-dunnit that appears to have some quirky and perhaps even gonzo elements. A review from *Publisher's Weekly* online lays out the synopsis:



Clearview, Tex., may seem a far cry from the shire-like coziness of England, but it has its small-town gossips and eccentrics, even a ghost who for some reason prefers the county jail to a gloomy mansion...Rhodes...finds himself investigating two murders at a convention of romance novelists. ...One of the victims is Terry Don Coslin, beefcake male star...Except for his apparently having slept with almost every woman at the convention; it's unclear why anyone wanted [him] dead. ...Before Rhodes is done, he will learn these ladies play rough. He is shot at, clubbed and nearly burned alive. (Publisher's Weekly n.d.)

Donna Seaman (2001) commented that in *A romantic way to die*, "Crider affectionately satirizes the mania for writing and fame that, taken to extremes, can turn romance into a blood sport". Again, at a slight, but twisted remove, the shadow of Thompson hangs over an unlikely corner of 20<sup>th</sup> Century popular culture.

## Gonzo copycats

In 1972, J. A. Lucas<sup>3</sup> reviewed Thompson's work to date in *More* in a piece called 'The prince of Gonzo'. The word was originally an adjective used to describe Thompson's style and methods. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'gonzo' officially became a noun in the mid 1970s. An early use was a 1977 reference in *Custom Car* magazine: "To make sure I wouldn't make too big a gonzo of myself" and this usage was repeated in a *Newsweek* piece in May 1980 describing Thompson as "the chief and only true gonzo", (Cited in *Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.).

In 1978 American rocker Ted Nugent brought out an album of live recordings which he called *Double Live Gonzo*, it even contains a track called 'Gonzo'. In 1990 it was re-released on CD, much to the delight of Nugent fans:

The Nuge tears it up yet again with this CD. Everything from Great White Buffalo to Cat Scratch Fever. A true Nuge experience. And remember DON'T TO DRUGS!!! [sic] (Ted 2003)

The musical connection doesn't end with Ted Nugent; country artist Jerry Jeff Walker released a CD called *Gonzo Stew* in November 2001. But Walker's association with 'gonzo' goes back almost 30 years. Walker is most famously known as the writer of *Mr Bojangles*, which was a top-ten, hit for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band in 1971 (Wolff n.d.) and later for Billy Joel and others. J. J. Walker, whose real name is Ronald Clyde Crosby, was also associated with the progressive country scene that emerged in Texas in the 1970s. In 1973 Walker teamed up with other "outlaw" country musicians to form the Lost Gonzo Band. According to a short biography of J.J. Walker posted at Amazon.com's online music store: "[he] was a hard partier throughout much of his career (his friends called him 'Jacky Jack'), and his reputation became part of his identity" (Wolff n.d.). The 'outlaw' Thompson and self-styled 'outlaw' musicians would seem to have at least a predilection for hard-drinking in common. Thompson has often been described as an outlaw journalist with a well-earned reputation for living dangerously. HST has spent time in jail and

was acquitted of serious felony charges arising from an incident at Owl Farm in the winter of 1990 (Whitmer 1993, p.290).

Interestingly Thompson has maintained a long friendship with many musical artists, from The Grateful Dead and John Denver in his younger days, then later Bob Dylan and Warren Zevon. Denver was hardly a rebel, but Thompson is alleged to have turned him on to LSD in the late 1970s (Whitmer 1993, p.294). Dylan and Zevon have spent time at Owl Farm and both are the *Kingdom of fear* honour roll alongside movie stars Benicio del Toro and Johnny Depp (Thompson 2003b). Unlike the decidedly non-outlaw Denver, Warren Zevon could be said to impart a 'gonzo' flavour to his lyrics: *Werewolves of London* and *Laywers, guns and money* are two tracks which feature dark humour, violence, sex and status detail—hallmarks of a gonzo style. So too Bob Dylan whose *Hey Mr Tambourine Man*, about a drug-dealer, is one of Thompson's favourite tunes.

While the 'gonzo' style has had a place in journalism since the early 1970s and might well have influenced musicians, at least indirectly, it is only in the last 10 years that we have seen an explosion in 'gonzo' associations.

The most obvious is in the application of an ill-defined 'gonzo' style in the mainstream print media and online. In October 2001 writing in the *Guardian*, Martin Kelner (2001) admitted to a gambling habit which led him to "risk a small proportion of the family's weekly income on backing my judgment of the likely outcome of a race...I do not count this as betting, more as gonzo journalism". A few months later Laura Shapiro (2002) in the *New York Times* applied 'gonzo' to a chef: "Gonzo chef! Surly and sexy! Outlaw in the kitchen! Anthony Bourdain's reputation not only precedes him, it also pretty much takes over for him."

In the sporting arena we have Gonzo baseball gloves and a term to describe difficult, but exhilarating bike rides, notably in mountain-biking:

**Gonzo** adj. Treacherous, extreme. "That vertical drop was sheer gonzo." 2) v. riding with reckless abandon. Not generally appropriate for singletrack. (*gonzo in mountain bike slang* n.d.)

The association between extreme mountain biking and HST may appear tenuous at first, but in his sixties he remains a committed speed-freak. One of Thompson's most recent stunt was riding as a thrill-seeking, death-defying 'café-racer' on fast motorbikes (Thompson 2003a). The prose-style adopted in writing about mountain biking has also taken a decidedly gonzo twist:

I've never had my chain sucked. I think. It's hard to be sure...That's until the guy in front of me veers away from the plank bridge...and aims his bike into the muddy rip in the earth that necessitates the bridge's existence...Me? I've shut down. My brakes are clamped, and my mouth is wide open. (Strickland)

This passage bears the scars of at least one encounter with Thompson's style and a similar addiction to danger. It compares favourably with the opening of Thompson's ode to fast and wild bikes in *Song of the sausage creature*:

There are some things nobody needs in this world, and a bright red, hunchback, warp-speed 900cc café racer is one of them—but I want

one anyway; and on some days I actually believe I need one. That is why they are dangerous. (Thompson 2003a, p.172)

It is not difficult to understand how avid mountain-bikers, including a Colorado compatriot, would be drawn to write their own adventure stories with titles like *Colorado Gonzo Rides* (Merrifield n.d.). Or why a review of a mountain biking handbook would begin: "If road riding is the arrogant godfather of the cycling world, mountain biking is the fun-loving black-sheep stepson" (Tiffany n.d.). Thompson's reputation as a hell-raiser is probably greater than the wider public's recognition of his contribution to American journalism, but in this case a soft link can be read between the lines.

In a twist that Thompson might appreciate, gonzo is also, apparently, a new and popular genre of pornographic videos in which the performers "acknowledge the presence of the camera...there is no storyline or plot, but there may be a theme such as large breasts, anal, newcomers etc." (*xxxmoviereview-glossary* n,d.).

Here the link to Thompson may be more direct. He's certainly developed a legend as an avid consumer of porn. His Rocky mountains hideaway, Owl Farm, is reportedly overflowing with pornography and there's usually a tape playing in at least one room whenever Thompson is at home (Carroll 1993). Thompson also worked for a short time in the late 1970s in the notorious Mitchell brothers' San Francisco porn theatre while researching a book, *The night manager*, which has not yet surfaced (Whitmer 1993). According to sources interviewed by E. Jean Carroll (1993), Thompson would arrive at the O'Farrell theatre late at night and stay for long periods of time. For some time he worked as a ticket collector, escorting patrons to the more private and explicit performances. Thompson (2003, p.22) says he worked at the theatre for two years and was good friends with the dancers and the Mitchells. The Mitchell brothers and several performers from the O'Farrell paraded outside HST's felony trial in May 1990, much to the distaste of older resident:

If the trial went on, the Mitchell brothers promised to turn the streets outside the courthouse into a circus. Some feel that it was the threat of having a porn parade descend on Aspen that really led to the dismissal of charges against Hunter. (Perry 1992, p.259)

It's perhaps not surprising that 'gonzo' has surfaced in fringe social groups, like heavy rockers, extremist mountain-bikers and Californian pornographers. The extension of the most common literal meanings of gonzo—its very 'extremeness'—would suggest this might happen sooner or later. One place it might seem less likely to get what the spin-doctors call 'traction' is in the world of business and marketing. But that's precisely what happened at the end of what HST calls the American century. The term 'gonzo marketing' caught on following the publication of Christopher Locke's *Gonzo marketing* in October 2001. It is now commonly used to describe unconventional and some times confrontational marketing strategies: Locke's book is subtitled: *Winning through worst practices* (Locke 2001).

## Gonzo Marketing

The rewards for Levi's and Prada are more subtle; they are investing in 'gonzo marketing', whereby big companies eschew conventional advertising and, instead, quietly sponsor some interesting project and hopefully benefit by association. (Leonard 2002)

It seems that Christopher Locke is one of a celebrated small group of net-savvy communication gurus who first gained notoriety with a collection called *The cluetrain manifesto* (Locke, Weinberger, and Searls 2001). A reviewer for online journal *Salon* described it as "refreshingly humanist," and using an "unabashedly narrative approach" (Scoville 2001). In *The bombast transcripts* Locke (2003) published a collection of online columns written by his alter-ego RageBoy in the webzine *Entropy Gradient Reversals*. The material includes interviews and commentary on everything from hard science to the mundane. According to the online publisher's notes Locke is aiming "for the jugular—via a triple bypass transplanting business, media and social mores" (*Publisher's comment on The bombast transcripts* (Locke 2003) 2003). The *Los Angeles Times* review invoked a memory of Thompson suggesting the book "had the whir and hum of the '60s" (Salter Reynolds 2003).

Some online reviews of *Gonzo marketing* were more explicit in linking the concept to Thompson:

Bringing the aesthetics of Hunter S. Thompson to Madison Avenue, Locke argues that online advertising and 'permission marketing' don't and can't work. (booknews.com 2001)

The publisher's note at Amazon.com takes its reference to HST literally:

*Gonzo marketing* is a knuckle-whitening ride to the place where social criticism, biting satire and serious commerce meet...Locke has assembled a unique guest list from Geoffrey Chaucer to Hunter S. Thompson...Irreverent, penetrating, profoundly simple and on the money, *Gonzo marketing* is the raucous wake-up that no one interested in...twenty-first century business...can afford to ignore. (*Publisher's comment on Gonzo Marketing* (Locke 2001b) 2001)

A review posted on the Internet by Australian marketing academic Tom Anderson also makes a passing literary reference to Thompson – clearly the style is addictive:

*Gonzo marketing* delivers a solid kick in the bazookas to reputable and recognised consulting firms and theories – probably just what the doctor ordered. *Gonzo* will provoke, perhaps outrage and definitely entertain readers inside and outside the marketing departments. (Anderson 2001)

*Gonzo* has become clearly a postmodern theory of counter-intuitive marketing. It represents a potentially profitable commodification of the gonzo spirit: a self-referencing egocentric personality with added shock value: a penchant for rough trade, mind-altering experiences and twisted humour. Locke has certainly mined that vein in the service of business communication and personal narrative:

Wandering barefoot on the Lower East Side of New York, over a thousand dollars cash in my pocket, looking to score...Also in my pocket, the Tarot...I went into The Eatery on Second Avenue and my waitress saw the cards...I had just dropped another tab and had little time left...but she sat with me...'You have two Magicians,' she said. (Locke 2003)

Seems like HST could be the model here, with a touch of Brett Easton-Ellis' annoying habit of name-dropping and excessive status detail. Even more distressing to Dr Thompson's literary and professional reputation is that not only have the "greedheads" (Thompson 1987)<sup>1</sup> appropriated his style, Gonzo is now a brand-name for everything from baseball mitts to pet supplies. Today, or any day, over the Internet it is possible to buy items like the *Gonzo Pet Odor Eliminator*, or *Gonzo Pet Hair Lifter* from PetGuys.com; or a "Hoppin' hot" salsa with the SalsaExpress.com's "gonzo flop-eared mascot, Salsa Jack" on the label. The most successful example of gonzo marketing is internet pornography, and the biggest selling category, the so-called gonzo genre.

## Conclusion

Despite the distance the word 'gonzo' has moved from its obscure origin as a descriptor for Thompson's often wild reportage, the concept still has some relevance in journalism today. Unfortunately the recently ascendant gonzo marketing has come to dominate popular culture. We can see that current trends in so-called reality television and teen movies such as *JackAss* are clearly imitating the bizarre nature and extremism of the gonzo form, but without any real sense of the truth behind Thompson's early work. On a more positive note perhaps someone like Mike Moore might typify a more 'original' type of gonzo journalist. He doesn't project the same bizarre image as Thompson did with drugs and sex, but he does approach his political material with a similar personal and involved account. Moore is also physically 'gonzo' in appearance, deliberately dressing down to affect street cred and to underline his working class Michigan roots. Perhaps Moore's work can give us a new word 'gonzumentary'. A marriage of gonzo sensibilities and the realist documentary form.

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<sup>1</sup> "Greedhead" was an insult aimed at HST's political enemies during his 1970 campaign to become sheriff of Pitkin County. Article One of the Freak Power platform was to change the name of Aspen to Fat City to "prevent greedheads, land rapers and other human jackals from capitalizing" (Thompson 1987, p.88)

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## ***Abbreviations***

HST Hunter S. (Stockton) Thompson

OED *Oxford English Dictionary*

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<sup>1</sup> When the story first ran in *Rolling Stone* Thompson used the nom de guerre 'Raoul Duke' indicating at least a small level of comfort with the Garry Trudeau cartoon strip *Doonesbury* in which this thinly disguised caricature had begun to appear.

<sup>2</sup> Cardoza is the spelling used in Perry (1992) and Whitmer (1993). Other sources spell it Cardoso (Pollack 1975).

<sup>3</sup> 'Lucas' is the spelling used in the *OED*, while Whitmer (1993, p.202) refers to Tony Lukas and describes *MORE* as "a competitor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*".

Gonzo journalism involves an approach to accuracy that concerns the reporting of personal experiences and emotions, in contrast to traditional journalism, which favors a detached style and relies on facts or quotations that can be verified by third parties. Gonzo journalism disregards the strictly-edited product favored by newspaper media and strives for a more personal approach; the personality of a piece is as important as the event or actual subject of the piece. Use of sarcasm, humor, exaggeration, and profanity is common.Â "What is Gonzo? The Etymology of an Urban Legend" (PDF). University of Queensland. Retrieved 1 December 2007.