

What's Gonzo about Gonzo Journalism?

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What are the origins of the word “gonzo” and how has this word been used to describe the journalism of Hunter S. Thompson?

The word “gonzo,” of course, is most closely associated with the literary journalism of Hunter S. Thompson, but let us first examine the possible origins of the word. In an article appearing in the journal *American Speech* in 1983, Peter Tamony claims that Gonzo’s “earlier history is obscure.”¹ While this remains true, a few sources suggest the word’s origins. For example, Tamony speculates that “Gonzo looks Spanish” and asks whether the word might be an Americanization of *ganso*, meaning “gander, lazy slovenly person, [or] dunce.”² The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests another possible source, the Italian *gonzo*, meaning foolish. The OED defines the adjective form of “gonzo” as “designating a style of subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetoric . . . bizarre, crazy” and the noun form as “a person who writes in this style.”³ The word has been used, in the United States at least, to sell everything from pizza to Muppets to motorcycles (Pollak 1975),⁴ and it is commonly understood by people who have never heard of Hunter S. Thompson to mean “crazy, off the wall, out of control.”

The term “Gonzo journalism” was coined by former Boston *Globe* editor Bill Cardoso who, now deceased, was never particularly helpful in tracking down the word’s origins. He suggested to E. Jean Carroll, one of Thompson’s biographers, that the word might be “a corruption of g-o-n-z-e-a-u-x. Which is French Canadian for ‘shining path.’”⁵ However, in an article tracing the word’s etymology, Martin Hirst discounts Cardoso’s guess,⁶ and in any case,

“shining path” doesn’t seem to describe Thompson’s writing, which more often assumes the form of a “savage journey,” as the subtitle of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* suggests. Another Thompson biographer, Peter O. Whitmer, claims that Gonzo was a term that the “South Boston Irish used to describe the guts and stamina of the last man standing at the end of a marathon drinking bout.”⁷ Given the subject of Thompson’s “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved,” this definition seems to correlate most closely to Cardoso’s reaction. Thompson himself has explained that he understood “gonzo” to be “some Boston word for weird, bizarre.”⁸ William McKeen explains that another possible origin for the word is a New Orleans instrumental tune with which Thompson was familiar.⁹ “From the first,” Tamony notes, the word “seems to have denoted ‘brash, importunate, flamboyant,’” a fair description of Thompson’s journalism.¹⁰ Tamony correctly asserts that the “earliest use [of “Gonzo”] linked the word with drugs and journalism,”¹¹ but the journalistic method of reporting, writing, and editing that Gonzo specifically describes does not necessarily require that the writer be, as Thompson notoriously often was, under the influence of mind-altering substances.

In a letter to Jim Silberman of Random House, Thompson confessed that he had mostly fabricated the depiction of drug use in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.¹² Tamony hedges the drug issue when he says that the term has come to denote a style of journalism rather than just Thompson’s specific work,¹³ which raises the obvious question: can similar techniques employed by other journalists appropriately be categorized as “Gonzo”? Examining the term in its fullest context, I would suggest that there’s only one true Gonzo journalist, and that’s Hunter S. Thompson.

In an article published in the short-lived *Scanlan’s Monthly* in 1970, Thompson presented his first experiment with a new style of journalism, “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved.” The Derby story introduces several elements that would become characteristic of Thompson’s Gonzo journalism: the presence of a first-person, autobiographical narrator who assumes the role of protagonist; the participation of a male bonding figure, in this case illustrator Ralph Steadman, who, like Oscar Zeta Acosta would later do in *Las Vegas*, plays the role of Thompson’s comic foil; the change of focus from the ostensible subject, the Derby itself, to Thompson’s failed return to his hometown, Louisville, Kentucky, to face his personal demons; and, finally, Thompson’s agonized struggle to produce a finished article by the deadline. After a frenzied bout of hard drinking and a prolonged dark night of the soul among Louisville’s Blueblood elite, Thompson confesses he had “blown my mind, couldn’t work. . . .”¹⁴ McKeen explains that Thompson’s narrative “was only *fairly* coherent because, under deadline pressure, Hunter broke from

the narrative and started sending the editors scrawled pages ripped from his journal: half-formed thoughts, sketches, semi-lucid notes.¹⁵ In “A Technical Guide to Editing Gonzo,” Robert Love demonstrates Thompson’s legendary practice of transmitting unedited copy via his Mojo Wire to hapless editors who scrambled to make sense of it all.¹⁶ Upon the Derby story’s publication, Cardoso, impressed with the results, wrote to Thompson, praising the piece as “pure Gonzo journalism,” the first use of the word to describe a journalistic style.¹⁷

At least two figures in Thompson’s life claimed to have co-created gonzo journalism: Oscar Zeta Acosta, author, activist, and the prototype for the Samoan attorney in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and artist Ralph Steadman, mentioned earlier. In a letter to *Playboy* Forum, Acosta insists that his direct participation in the infamous journey that inspired Thompson to write *Vegas* contributed to the creation of Thompson’s Gonzo style.¹⁸ Steadman contends in his memoir of Thompson, *The Joke’s Over*, that his drawings were as much a part of the original Gonzo reading experience as Thompson’s prose.¹⁹ Of the two, Steadman, whose work will always be closely associated with Thompson’s, has the better claim, having illustrated the “Kentucky Derby” story, the first *bona fide* Gonzo text.

A number of critics and journalists have helped provide us with a comprehensive understanding of Gonzo journalism. McKeen writes that Gonzo “requires virtually no rewriting, with the reporter and the quest for information the focal point. Notes, sketches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams—these are the elements of a piece of Gonzo journalism.”²⁰ Jesse Jarnow adds that “as a literary style, [Gonzo] had two main tenets: total subjectivity and a first-draft/best-draft approach that jibed perfectly with the post-Beatnik literary world of the late 1960s.”²¹ In his “jacket copy” for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson has claimed that Gonzo is based partly on William Faulkner’s observation that the best fiction is truer than fact.²² Thompson’s best-known work of Gonzo journalism is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, a crazed account of dune-buggy races, district attorneys, and massive substance abuse in Sin City in 1971. Thompson later confessed that he regarded *Vegas* as a failed experiment in Gonzo journalism because he had to revise his prose to create the effect of raw spontaneity,²³ and yet, as multiple interviews testify, he defined Gonzo differently at different times. In a way, Thompson seemed stuck with a label that he didn’t create and that he could never completely define.

Seen from one perspective, Gonzo reflects Thompson’s iconic, drug-slugging lifestyle, full of “fear and loathing” and “bad craziness.” Gonzo is also

a mode of perception in the sense that the deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol de-familiarizes reality, opening the door to paradoxically clearer perceptions, a twisted perspective evoked so perfectly by Steadman's grotesquely expressionistic caricatures. Gonzo is also a narrative technique, a form of subjective, participatory literary journalism that places the narrator in the center of the narrative while it spontaneously records a dark reality, often fabricated. Gonzo also describes Thompson's style, employing a verb-driven, "running" syntax, as well as digressions, metaphors, fragments, allusions, ellipses, abrupt transitions, and gaps, all of which model the narrator's feelings of desperation, degradation, and despair. As Thompson frequently maintained, Gonzo also represents a commitment he shared with George Orwell "to make political writing into an art,"²⁴ an expression of his leftist-anarchist politics, best exemplified perhaps by *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Gonzo is even a kind of journalistic ethic, as Thompson told P. J. O'Rourke: "If I'm going to go into the fantastic, I have to have a firm grounding in the truth. Otherwise, everything I write about politics might be taken as a hallucination."²⁵ Finally, Gonzo was a way for Thompson to differentiate himself from other New Journalists of the same era—Wolfe, Mailer, Didion. As Thompson related to one interviewer, "I just thought if I'm going to be a journalist, I might as well be my own kind."²⁶

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NOTES

1. Peter Tamony, "Gonzo," *American Speech: A Quarterly of Linguistic Usage* 58, no. 1 (1983): 74.
2. *Ibid.*, 75.
3. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "gonzo."
4. Richard Pollak, *Stop the Presses, I Want to Get Off: Inside Stories of the News Business from the Pages of More* (New York: Random House, 1975).
5. E. Jean Carroll, *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 124.
6. Martin Hirst, "What is Gonzo? The Etymology of an Urban Legend." University of Queensland, Australia, UQ eSpace, 1 January 2004, http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:10764/mhirst_gonzo.pdf (accessed 17 February 2012).
7. Peter O. Whitmer, *When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 168.
8. Pollak, 184.
9. William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 150.
10. Tamony, 73.
11. *Ibid.*, 73.
12. Hunter S. Thompson, "Letter to Jim Silberman," in Douglas Brinkley, ed., *Fear and Loathing in America: The Brutal Odyssey of an Outlaw Journalist. The Gonzo Letters, Volume II, 1968–1976* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 205–08.
13. Tamony, 74.
14. McKeen, 148.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Robert Love, "A Technical Guide to Editing Gonzo: Hunter S. Thompson from the Other End of the Mojo Wire," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2005, 61–66.
17. Paul Perry, *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1992), 11.
18. Oscar Zeta Acosta. "Playboy Forum," in Ilan Stevens, ed., *Oscar "Zeta" Acosta: The Uncollected Works*, ed. Ilan Stavans (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1996), 104.
19. Ralph Steadman, *The Joke's Over: Bruised Memories: Gonzo, Hunter S. Thompson, and Me* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), 72–77.
20. William McKeen, *Hunter S. Thompson* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 36.
21. Jesse Jarnow, "Man of Action: Hunter S. Thompson Keeps Moving," in Beef Torrey and Kevin Simonson, eds., *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 196. Previously published in *Relix*, April–May 2003, 59–65.
22. Hunter S. Thompson, "Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*," in *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time* (New York: Summit Books, 1979), 106.

23. *Ibid.*, 106.

24. George Orwell, "Why I Write," in *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1981), 314.

25. P. J. O'Rourke, "Interview with Hunter S. Thompson," in Anita Thompson, ed., *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: De Capo Press, 2009), 153. Previously published in *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 1987.

26. Peter Olszewski, "Interview," in *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom*, 62. Previously published in *Loose Licks* (Australia), Spring 1976.