

The Meaning of Gonzo (kind of, sort of)

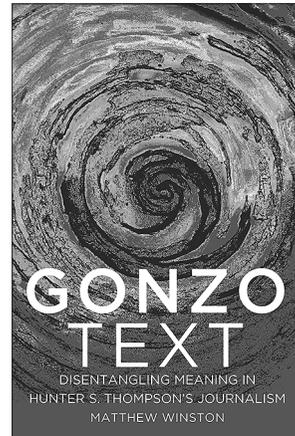
Gonzo Text: Disentangling Meaning in Hunter S. Thompson's Journalism
by Matthew Winston. New York: Peter Lang, 2014. Hardcover, 199 pp., \$89.85

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Matthew Winston, a tutor at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, wrote his PhD thesis on the stylistic elements and literary context of Gonzo journalism. His recent book, *Gonzo Text: Disentangling Meaning in Hunter S. Thompson's Journalism*, develops the earlier research and aims to provide “a critical commentary and a theoretical exploration of how Gonzo can be read as destabilising conventional ideas of journalism itself.” The target audience for the work is “postgraduates and scholars in journalism, cultural studies and media and communication,” as well undergraduates in the field of journalism studies.

Gonzo Text focuses on a set number of Thompson's works for analysis, primarily *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, “The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy,” “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved,” and “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl.” The author attempts to place Gonzo in the larger theoretical framework of journalism studies, using the texts for the specific traits of Gonzo they represent, such as drug use, politics, and sports writing. The book offers the concept of a singular “Gonzo Text,” which Winston defines as comprising “the many texts (as in ‘works’, ‘pieces’ or ‘articles’) of Gonzo journalism” (3). This is a tricky venture, given the diversity of Thompson's works and the changeability with which he himself approached Gonzo. For instance, the notion of “Thompson-the-character” is applied to *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* as equally as it is to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and does not take into account the distinctly different use of fiction in these texts, or that Thompson is not reporting as Raoul Duke in *Campaign Trail*.

Despite the claimed goals of the book, perhaps its use is as an undergraduate text. There is a relative simplicity to the writing style that would make it accessible to undergraduate students who wouldn't have a broader knowledge of Thompson or the New Journalism. As well, Winston's propensity for applying broader theoretical frameworks—such as the work of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida—could prove useful as a tool for teaching students to apply these kinds of analyses to Gonzo. Indeed, large sections of the book are given over to broad commentary on theoretical frameworks and why Winston is using them. The book is as much an introduction to



applying theoretical frameworks as it is an introduction to Thompson.

Two large sections, “Getting Hold of the Drugs” (chapter 2), and “Reality Itself Is Too Twisted” (chapter 3), ostensibly focusing on Thompson’s Vegas book, actually describe the cultural context in which he was writing. This is another good reason why the book might be a useful introduction. In both of these chapters a greater portion of the text is devoted to providing a theoretical framework and the positioning of drugs in society than to Thompson’s work itself. Analysis of historical journalism is at the forefront of “Shallow, Contemptible, and Hopelessly Dishonest” (chapter 4), which focuses on political journalism of the 1800s and the role of objectivity in political journalism as a framework for comments on *Campaign Trail*. Unlike the previous two chapters, this section focuses on Thompson’s work. Chapter 9, “What Sort of Journalist I Was,” provides a brief overview of secondary sources. Chapter 5 attempts to frame Gonzo in the context of “edgework,” while chapters 6, 7, and 8 loosely base their discussion on Thompson’s sports journalism.

Stylistically, there are a few quirks. The lack of consistency in terminology throughout the book—gonzo journalism? “Gonzo journalism”? “Gonzo Journalism”?—is distracting, as is the occasional switch between “New journalism” and “New Journalism,” or, even more jarringly, “New’ journalism.” This is particularly apparent when Winston points out the significance of his decision to capitalize the word “text” in “Gonzo Text” but does not remark on the variable uses he has made of Gonzo journalism (3). Oddly, the author also uses the pronoun “her” when referring to “the author,” as in “[i]n the examination of Thompson’s writing practice, I have made reference to the implications of Gonzo journalism being considered as journalism, in terms of the possible place of the author in journalism, as opposed to her place in fiction. . . .” (19).

I wouldn’t recommend this book to literary journalism scholars. The analysis of both Gonzo or Thompson is given in strokes too broad to provide a deeper understanding. In fact, scholars steeped in Gonzo writings may find themselves frustrated with some of the generalizations, while serious literary journalism scholars seeking to gain knowledge of Thompson would do better to turn to the man’s work.

Gonzo is a tricky form to define. Winston’s claim at the beginning of the book that it is Thompson’s “own exuberantly drug-addled, subversive, subjective method of writing the story” (1). While one of the more popular views of Gonzo, this treatment lacks an acknowledgment at the outset of the complexities of the style. Winston at least acknowledges that his work “does not represent a ‘complete’ or ‘correct’ reading of Gonzo,” and that his “treatment of Gonzo is, by its nature, selective, both in terms of the works on which I choose to focus my enquiry, and in the approaches to the Text which I choose to adopt” (16). One caveat is that the book’s claims regarding both Thompson and New Journalism need to be scrutinized, as Winston does “not feel Gonzo journalism to be a part of the New Journalism.” The book glosses over a number of nuances regarding both, and particularly the flexibility of the definition of either.