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Playtime for gonzo

IS THERE A SINISTER CONNECTION BETWEEN GONZO JOURNALISM, PORNOGRAPHY, GLOSSY MAGAZINES AND REALITY TELEVISION? MARTIN HIRST CONNECTS THE DOTS DURING A LONG HOT SUMMER OUT ON HIS SUNDECK. ILLUSTRATION BY PETER SHEEHAN.

More than 30 years since the publication of Hunter S Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, the attitudes of gonzo have spread well beyond the fringes of literary journalism. At one end of the spectrum, Gonzo describes an off-beat style of mountain-biking, at the other it's the brand name for a range of picture products.

Then there is gonzo marketing. Gonzo marketing has to outrage and entertain, not just sell. Several global brands have taken up gonzo marketing by moving away from product pitches towards sponsoring interesting content and gaining benefit by association.

The most successful, least acknowledged, example of applied gonzo marketing would have to be internet pornography. The porn providers have perfected one aspect of online marketing that nobody, except perhaps the creators, has been able to replicate: a direct connection between the computer screen and the credit card in the computer user's wallet.

This explosion of access to porn created by the Internet has had another interesting cultural side-effect: pornography has suddenly become semi-respectable.

The cultural and media imagery of porn is everywhere around us. On television, the visualised content of reality-based dating shows like The Bachelor/sister franchise is an expected element of entertainment. On programs like Temptation Island the sexual content is explicit in the premise of the show. The American cop shows have overloaded on sexual-drama detail.

This trend is nearly demonstrated by reference to recent Monday and Tuesday night television line-ups. On Monday there was the American Bachelor dating game followed by Wyle Swan on the Nine Network, and on Tuesday Extreme Makeover followed by the cosmetic surgery-based drama Nip/Tuck.

The dating game genre sets couples up to copulate. We're left with the impression that some do. The lovebirds and deceit are real. Who'd want to marry a Joe Millionaire? Now we have Joe Average, who usually doesn't get the girl. It doesn't matter, the contestants and the hired guns are interchangeable.

Wife Swap generates in me a severe fear and loathing. I was pleased to read Stephen Romeos's review calling it "distasteful". He wrote: "There are real people's real lives and I don't want it in my living room." (The Australian, January 3, 2004). I heartily agree. Swaps are made that will generate maximum tension for all concerned. These people are not Brad and Jen. Before I forget, at 10.30pm on Monday on Nine was Fat Club, a reality game show desiring for the moribund eve, every taste catered for.

The gonzo/docs trend is not just in reality TV and cop dramas, it's also in magazine layout. Over the holiday I conducted a literary experiment to test this hypothesis. I bought four popular glossy magazines: GQ, Rolling Stone, Cleo and Cosmopolitan. I figured it wasn't much of a coincidence that a very sexy Britney Spears was on all the covers. The Britney brand had just released a new CD.

In GQ magazine from November 2003, a photospread advertorial carried the headline "Sex and the city skins". The text was simple: "Off the cuff corporate affairs, with no ties, are guaranteed to keep the executive sweet — if a little hot under his collar." In one photo the woman is on a desk with her legs spread, in another lying on the floor, corporeal, under a glass table. In the same issue a full-page ad for Beck's beer had the Portland clothing label logo attached. Why? The Portland brand is everywhere, including on the T-shirts of suburban teenagers worldwide. What does it mean?

Perhaps it means that we can all be cool like the 'players' at the 2003 Ping Olympiaks, complete with "hooves and hitches" at your service. George Quenets's piece in GQ introduced readers to the top dogs of the extreme sport of pimpmanship, who celebrate their craft in a "gripping brick-front motel in the heart of the notorious Southside of Chicago". In a convincing gonzo voice, Quenets writes that despite its "hood and hip-hop resonance", the whole event is a "boulevard garnish on the real issue of prostitution in the USA".

Part of the answer also lies in the attraction of gonzo pornography defined by the acronym-on-web site as a popular genre in which the performers acknowledge the presence of the camera in the scene and there is no fictional storyline or plot. One of the most controversial producers in this genre, Shane's World, has made videos in which college students are active participants.

According to Ken Hagan's piece in November 2003 Rolling Stone, several students were exposed in compromising situations with various Shane's World personnel. The modus operandi is simple: you organise a frat party, get everyone drunk, bring in the actors and start filming. Hagan's piece is also written in a gonzo style, but it seems somehow second hand. He's wearing Hunter S's cast, but it doesn't quite fit right.

Despite the occasionally moderately good piece like this one, Rolling Stone is itself an interesting case study in how magazines are picking up trends now well established in both pornography and reality television. Today: RS is a pale shadow of its former self. A terminal case kept alive on the drip-feed of corporate advertising.

The magazine has several segments such as "Hot Actors", "Hot Bodies" and small puff pieces for current reality TV programming. In the "Hot Buzz" column is a piece about "Hippie Porn". Of course the U.S. is mentioned under a pic of a semi-nude, hippy woman.

The Britney-draped Cleo was busy campaigning against sexual assault while also posing underwear and nude at a swinger's party. A coverline touted answers to readers' questions about anal and sex and the ubiquitous sealed section boasted before, during and after surgery "pos" of a liposuction operation.

Not to be left out of the "outrageous sex sells outrageously" stakes, December 2003 Cosmopolitan had a sealed section "Out there sex loves". This supplement contained "real life" stories about dangerous car-park sex — parking in spots that are known for this sort of thing and allowing whoever wanders up to the car to pep or a feel. One adventurous woman reported enjoying the attention of several onlookers during a particularly pleasurable encounter.

This has its dual nature of gonzo — the extremity, the shock-value and the sexual tension. Trouble is, how true is it? Throughout the stories the caveat appeared "as told to...", or the names were changed, etc. Not convincing journalism — more voyeurism. Coincidentally, GQ, Cleo and Cosmopolitan each had a sex columnist whose recently "busted" were somewhat interesting and disturbing. There were, of course, shown with suppliers' names and price details in tasteful snapshots, not in actual use.

And then there are those final gonzo devices: extremism and violence involving guns. Both are passions of the good Dr T. Prime-time television is full of violent gun-related crime, real and dramatically constructed. Yet when a successful reality-based movie comes along that shows this extremist gun culture up close, there are those who claim it was faked for the cameras.

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Mike Moore's sidewalk hit movie Bowling for Columbine was released on DVD in time for Christmas, along with several series of The Atehlo Truth television shows. This is pure gonzo. I reckon it's gonzoanrady, a radical new genre that bites back at the commercial reality beast. Unlike the manufactured reality of reality TV, Moore's work demonstrates the techniques and production values of the social realists and cinema-vérité.

One of my favourite magazine pieces recently was Richard Guillain's profile of Pitta Sunnman Paulie French in Good Weekend. Guillain described French's comic style as "gonzo verismultidrome". It has an edge and confronts dark prejudices. I think this ideal of truth is the important line between the tradition of Thompson and the bravado of the imitators. This year will undoubtedly be dominated by the imitators: local offerings will mix sex and renovating, the imports will just add the next number against their comedy titles. The Bachelor Series VII could yet be very interesting.

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