Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson—a documentary

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Written and directed by Alex Gibney

Journalist and author Hunter S. Thompson, something of a cult figure for several decades, is the subject of a new documentary by Alex Gibney (*Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* and *Taxi to the Dark Side*). Thompson is perhaps best known, aside from his extravagant lifestyle, for his novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) and his reporting on various national election campaigns. He is credited, or blamed, with helping to popularize and advance the so-called "New Journalism," in which the author often places him or herself at the center of events, and fact and fiction become difficult to distinguish.

Gibney deals sympathetically with Thompson—born in 1937 and who committed suicide in 2005—in *Gonzo*: *The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*. (The "Dr." before his name was a joke, obtained from a mail-order divinity school.)

The film employs audio recordings, film footage and photographs, as well as interviews with both of Thompson's wives, his son and political and literary notables such as George McGovern, Pat Buchanan, Jimmy Carter and writer Tom Wolfe, to craft a picture of the man *Gonzo*'s filmmakers consider to be an "iconic crusader for truth, justice and a fiercely idealistic American way."

Ralph Steadman, the British artist, whose drawings provided an unsettling visual complement to Thompson's works, is one of the talking heads who pays tribute to his former colleague's unorthodox personality. Another is Jann Wenner, the co-founder and publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine, who was Thompson's editor for over thirty years.

Actor Johnny Depp, who played Thompson in the 1998 film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, reads the author's words, always intended to 'knock the squares.' Bill Murray also played the writer in Art Linson's 1980 movie, *Where the Buffalo Roam*. A character based on Thompson at one time featured prominently in Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury."

Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky, his father an insurance adjuster who died when his son was 14, his mother a librarian. He never finished high school, getting into trouble with the law, as an alleged accomplice to a robbery, and then joining the air force. He eventually moved to New York City in the late 1950s and attended Columbia's School of General Studies on the G.I. Bill. To help him learn how to write, he copied F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* word for word on a typewriter.

After initial experiences as a journalist and writing two novels and several short stories without much success, Thompson came to prominence in 1965 with a piece for the *Nation* on his experiences as an embedded journalist with the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang: "In a nation of frightened dullards, there is always a sorry shortage of outlaws, and those few who make the grade are always welcome." He was subsequently badly beaten up by those in the outfit who objected to his capitalizing on an insider's view of their operations.

Thompson was artistically influenced by the Beat writers, whose anti-establishment writings and activities attracted many disaffected young people in the Eisenhower 1950s. The emergence of the "counter-culture" and the New Left also obviously had a major impact. Originally drawn to San Francisco's hippie ethos, Thompson eventually became critical of what he saw as the hippies' apolitical culture.

According to Gibney's *Gonzo*, Thompson's witnessing of the infamous police brutality outside the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago sent him into a deep crisis. The exposure of the Democrats as both the party of imperialist war and violent repression at home radicalized a great many. In *Generation of Swine*: *Tales of Shame and Degradation in the '80s*, Thompson writes: "1968—The Death Year ...The Democratic Party has never recovered from that convention. It is a wound that still festers and these people are not quick healers."

Nonetheless, however horrified Thompson was, he was never able politically to go beyond the bounds of liberalism and the two-party system. In some naïve fashion he never gave up hope that American capitalism could be made to live up to its professed democratic ideals. He genuinely believed in them and never understood fully that for the entire political elite, Democratic and Republican alike, words like "democracy" and "freedom" were only useful for holiday speeches and duping the population.

In 1970, Thompson ran for sheriff in Aspen, Colorado, on the "Freak Power," ticket, campaigning for the legalization of drugs for personal use. He shaved his head, so as to be able to refer to his crew-cut rival as "my long-haired opponent." For *Rolling Stone*, he wrote articles covering the campaigns of President Richard Nixon and his unsuccessful Democratic opponent, George McGovern, in 1972. These were combined and published as *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*.

About Nixon, whom he despised, he asked, "How low do you have to stoop in this country to be president?" He famously described Nixon as a man who "could shake your hand and stab you in the back at the same time ... He was a swine of a man and a jabbering dupe of a president." In the film McGovern's campaign manager, Frank Mankiewicz, says of Thompson's reporting, "it was the least factual and most accurate" of the campaign.

The Democrats' resounding defeat in 1972 was another blow to Thompson. It's difficult not to see his recourse to drugs and alcohol in

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large quantities, aside from the personal psychological history, as a sign of deep demoralization and a wish to hide from an American political reality he found increasingly ugly.

According to the film's production notes, *Gonzo* concentrates on what it considers to be Thompson's "most provocative and productive period from 1965 to 1975." Those years encompass the rise and decline of the political radicalization that saw mass protests over the Vietnam War and the ongoing struggle for civil rights.

At his best, in a droll and deadpan but passionate manner, Thompson laid in to the corrupt and swinish American elite.

He was a practitioner of a genre dubbed "gonzo journalism," an offshoot of the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Almost always writing in the first person, he colored stories with his own observations and emotions, adding an exaggerated, humorous and bizarre twist. "Some people will say," said Thompson, "that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism—which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place ..."

Thompson assumed there was a deeper truth to be sought in the blurred zone between fiction and nonfiction. "Objective journalism is one of the main reasons that American politics has been allowed to be so corrupt for so long," he told interviewers in a characteristic comment.

Of course, the journalism he referred to, presumably the respectable voices of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and so forth, was not "objective" at all in any meaningful sense. This sort of reporting had the veneer of objectivity because it spoke for powerful interests and provided the official version of events.

Tom Wolfe described Thompson's writing as "part journalism and part personal memoir admixed with powers of wild invention and wilder rhetoric." In the film Thompson observes that "People will believe almost any twisted kind of story about politicians or Washington."

Opposing the mainstream American media seriously, one could argue, involved not indulging in a kind of radical (and ultra-feverish) mythmaking, Thompson's preferred course of action, but a journalism rooted in different and opposed social interests. This of course was a closed book to him.

Gibney's *Gonzo* begins with Thompson's impressionistic and wrongheaded assessment of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in which he anticipates a war between extremists. But in a 2002 radio interview, he speaks more thoughtfully about the seminal event: "[Y]ou sort of wonder when something like that happens, well, who stands to benefit? Who had the opportunity and the motive? You just kind of look at these basic things ... I saw that the US government was going to benefit, and the White House people, the Republican administration, to take the mind of the public off the crashing economy ... And I have spent enough time on the inside of, well, in the White House and, you know, campaigns and I've known enough people who do these things, think this way, to know that the public version of the news or whatever event is never really what happened."

In another interview, he spoke of the US media as "cowed" and "intimidated" after September 11, "shamefully" so. He denounced the Bush administration's plans for military tribunals and endless war and the "thieving lobbyists for the military-industrial complex that run the White House."

Thompson shot himself one month after George W. Bush's second inauguration, in February 2005. Four days before he died, what was described by his family as a suicide note was delivered to his wife: "No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. [Seventeen] more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I'm always bitchy. No fun—for anybody. 67. You're getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax—This won't hurt."

In an interview with *huffingtonpost.com*, director Gibney laid out his reasons for chronicling Thompson's life: "It seemed to me that it would be useful to look at a journalist who didn't play by the 'rules' of so-called 'objective journalism' at a time when people in power were manipulating the 'rules' in ways that often sacrificed the truth.

"Look at Judith Miller or Jeff Gannon—a sometime male prostitute given press credentials by the White House so he could ask softball questions in press conferences. When people in power start hiring prostitutes to 'play' journalists who pretend to 'report' the news, when the look of TV news is as fantastical and airbrushed as a *Playboy* centerfold, it may be useful to look at a guy who fought back in unpredictable ways."

There is some validity in what Gibney says, but a far more critical work was called for. After all, Thompson shot himself in despair. The critical issue, which the film sidesteps, is the utterly moribund state of American liberalism.

Today, not just Bush, but Obama too is surrounded by insulated media pundits who, in Gibney's words, do "some of the stodgy sycophantic knee-pad work that was done at the time Nixon died." In the unlikely event that such a figure as Thompson were to emerge, he would be shunned by all leading sections of the Democratic Party. As has been demonstrated on numerous occasions on the campaign trail, there would be particular fear and loathing in the Obama camp of anything that hints of radicalism or iconoclasm.

Thompson came of age in the 1950s, after McCarthy and the purges had done their work. He was hostile to the powers that be, viewing them as the enemies of the population, but cut off from a socialist critique of society. When the wave of middle-class protest collapsed in the mid-1970s, the stuffing was largely knocked out of Thompson, despite his keen eye and, at times, damning insights.

Increasingly disillusioned by the right-wing trajectory of the Democratic Party, he became more and more convinced of his own irrelevance. To his credit, cashing in on his fame to make a comfortable career for himself was never his aspiration. There is an element of tragedy to his political and artistic decline.

His first wife Sondi movingly speaks in *Gonzo* about Thompson's "passion to move people and make them act," believing he could "change the system and make the system work and make the system good. He had that in him." Unfortunately, precisely the mistaken and futile belief that "the system" could "work" and be made "good" contributed to his downfall.

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