



CINEMA FOR ALL

Director  
Alex Gibney

Certificate 15

Documentary  
USA 2008, 1h59m

## Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson



“It never got weird enough for me.”

Said by Hunter S. Thompson, the eccentric writer and journalist, this is certainly something. Famed for his excessive drug-taking, heavy alcohol consumption and obsession with guns, the author of such cult works as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is the fascinating subject of this new documentary by Alex Gibney. Looking past his colourful personality, *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* positions the writer as an important political figure whose work has much to say about the world today.

The political focus of *Gonzo* is perhaps unsurprising considering Alex Gibney's past work. Academy award winning documentary *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007) and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) established Gibney as a director astute to contemporary politics. In *Gonzo*, Gibney focuses on Thompson's political writing and not without reason; he went as far as to describe himself as a 'political junkie', as if politics for him was another one of his drugs of choice. The film follows Thompson's close reporting of the 1972 presidential election between McGovern and Nixon, highlighting his passion for politics and flair for creative journalism. In one memorable piece Thompson details how the Democratic nominee Edmund Muskie had reportedly begun to show the psychological signs of being addicted to an exotic drug named Ibogaine, 'reportedly' being the key word – it had in fact been entirely fabricated by Thompson himself. McGovern's campaign manager perfectly summed up his writing when he referred to it as being “the least factual, but most accurate” account of the campaign.

It was these attempts to get to a greater truth that defined 'Gonzo' journalism, as Gibney says, “Hunter was a novelist and journalist embodied, so a lot of his writing mixes fact and fiction in ways that get to a deeper truth. He takes a righteous anger and channels it into a wicked humour which can be very invigorating. It has a way of penetrating the kind of stage managing that politicians do that always seeks to hide the rough edges and to sugar-coat their messages”.

*Gonzo* comes to the big screen at a time of upheaval in American politics which has been reflected in the cinema by several recent films including *W* (2008) and *Frost/Nixon* (2009), serving a heightened audience interest in American politics. Whilst much of Thompson's reporting is more than 30 years old, there are many parallels that can be drawn with this year's US election, as Gibney found himself, “I was surprised when I went back to read *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail 1972* and you think what relevance is this going to have to anybody today? But you read it and it feels fresh. It feels like he's writing about the campaign between McCain and Obama. He was certainly of his time but I think he has this enduring quality that really makes him special.”

Hunter S. Thompson was also a key figure in the counter-culture movement which emerged during the sixties and seventies. The “wave speech” featured in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* recalls the atmosphere of a mid-sixties California and was regarded by Thompson himself as one of his finest pieces of writing. In it he recalls that “San Francisco in the sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of”. Elsewhere in cinema the birth of this opposition to mainstream culture was famously explored in *Easy Rider* (1969), one of the first films to look at any form of counter-culture and also at the reception of such a resistance by more traditional sectors of society.

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Containing a mixture of archival footage, interviews and playful surrealist flourishes Gonzo makes for a vibrant and detailed account of the writer's life and work. Featured in the documentary is Ralph Steadman, whose distinctive illustrations adorned many of Thompson's books and articles, as well as key political figures including ex-President Jimmy Carter as well as his first and second wife and son. Above all the film is a celebration of the life of an extraordinary and hugely entertaining character, avoiding temptation to sensationalise aspects of his personal life and only alluring to his fiery outbursts with his editors (in particular Jann Wenner of Rolling Stone).

Gibney's decision to include Depp's narration in the documentary allows fans of Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) to make immediate connections to Depp's impressive performance. As a close friend of Thompson, Depp even paid for his funeral, which is featured in the film, and where Thompson's ashes are fired into space in a series of fireworks from a huge double-thumbed statue (the symbol that became synonymous with Gonzo).

Hugely entertaining yet politically incisive Hunter S. Thompson's writing captured the essence of a newly liberated America. In the current climate of change in American politics Alex Gibney's documentary reframes Thompson's writing as still pertinent today.

**Gail Tolley**

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