Transformers

Dir: Michael Bay, NULL
USA, 2007

A review by Lincoln Geraghty, University of Portsmouth, UK

The Steven Spielberg produced and Michael Bay directed live-action *Transformers* (2007) is a prime example of Hollywood's fascination with resurrecting old franchises to bolster flagging box office returns. Based on a Saturday morning cartoon series which ran from 1984 to 1987, itself based on a Japanese toy range of transforming robots, *Transformers* reimagined old characters using the latest in CGI technology and special effects. Part of the appeal of the original television series for children was its endless production line of new merchandise; Transformers became the toy every boy wanted for Christmas. For Timothy Burke and Kevin Burke, in their nostalgic look back at the Saturday morning TV shows they watched when growing up, the series was just one out of a dozen cartoons that tried to cash in on the merchandising market. For them toy companies like Mattel and Hasbro, through series such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983-1985), *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985), *The Care Bears* (1985-1988), and *M.A.S.K* (1985-1986), were merely trying to copy the success of Kenner's *Star Wars* action figures by establishing and sustaining a market where the TV show acted as an extended commercial for the range of figures, robots, plush dolls and toy sets that were being produced cheaply in Asia and being sold in America (Burke and Burke, 1999: 57-58). Bay's blockbuster was clearly intended to do the same, attracting a new generation of kids to persuade their parents to buy the latest versions of the transforming robot toys.

Ensuring there would be an audience and merchandising market seemed to be the driving force behind the creative team's decision to go for all out spectacle towards the climax of the film. However, the film can be split thematically into two halves: the first has a narrative familiar to many Spielberg science fiction films; a disaffected teenager befriends a group of friendly extraterrestrials who, by helping them, becomes a responsible adult; the second half is more definitely in the style of Bay, with explosions and digital effects serving to bedazzle the audience even if they really don't add to the overall narrative. It is this second feature of the film which has attracted most criticism and which leaves Mark Bould in no doubt that "digital filmmaking on this scale has produced a regime in which signification is more important than coherence" (2008: 167). For Bould, *Transformers* is an exemplar of current science fiction film's tendency to overload on digital effects – action is fast and frenetic, metal clashes with metal, in an attempt to show off to the audience just how far digital effects technology has developed. Yet, this only serves to illustrate "there is nothing of substance, merely a mastery of technique" (Bould 2008: 166). His reading of the story and main characters is not any better: "Bay brings to the film precisely what one would expect: … [a] shockingly poor taste in soft-rock… an inability to imagine women… homoerotism… concealed homosexual panic… jingoism and cynical patriotism… racist stereotypes…" (2008: 165), and the list goes on. One might agree with such a severe reading but doing so

ignores the more touching and significant scenes clearly inspired by Steven Spielberg's canon of work.

The main human protagonist is Sam Witwicky (played by Shia LaBeouf) who lives a middle class existence in the LA suburbs with his parents. The usual teen angst and trouble with girls occupies Sam, and his relationship with his father is typically tense as he struggles to live up to parental expectations. Sam's life changes when he befriends the first Autobot visitor, Bumblebee, and through their bond Sam learns how to take responsibility for his actions. The changed Sam impresses his father and the two share a new-found respect for each other by the end of the film. This father-son narrative is a perennial favourite of Spielberg's and connects *Transformers* to his past suburban science fiction films such as *E.T.* (1982) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). These two films were cathartic projects, made to "re-create Spielberg's boyhood home in suburbia and attempt to overcome the shattering of that idyllic existence caused by his parent's divorce" (Gordon, 2008: 267), and in that sense *Transformers* is very much a film that reflects his attention to the personal and sentimental, not just the spectacular. The choice of LaBeouf further underscores this nostalgic picture. He plays the lead in the suburban thriller, *Disturbia* (2007), and by the time *Transformers* was released he had been chosen to play Indiana Jones's son in the fourth feature of the franchise, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). In both films, LaBeouf plays a teenage delinquent who grows up and takes on the mantle of responsibility; for the latter role this means becoming the new Indiana Jones, in itself a character that symbolizes a bygone age of daring-do and heroism. While these intertextual references help us to identify familiar character motifs and narrative themes in Spielberg's films, they also highlight contemporary Hollywood's penchant for returning to tried and tested methods of storytelling. Spielberg's other genre films post 2000, *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), and *War of the Worlds* (2005), rely on strong parent-child, children in peril narratives.

Leaving Bould's and my own disparate critiques aside, what is more interesting to analyse, and perhaps offers us alternative ways of reading the film, is the reception it received from the audience. Online fan discourses surrounding the authenticity, cultural worth, and aesthetics of the movie before its release were both heated and imaginative. Such debate was centered on the premise that a reworking of what was once a favorite childhood cartoon series and toy range challenged the fans' own authentic appreciation of a franchise to which they had remained loyal since the 1980s. As adults, now collecting the merchandise long after its has stopped being made (purchasing toys on eBay, at conventions, through fan clubs), they continued to share in their memorialisation of the mythos surrounding the series by re-watching the cartoons on DVD and participating in online blogs and web chats that follow similar patterns of induction into an exclusive cult community such as can be seen with fans of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

The cultural and personal value that the cartoon series and toys still held with fans was under threat by what was seen as an unwanted blockbuster version of the Transformers brand. Bay's attempt at revamping their favorite toy for modern mainstream cinema screens was seen as an affront to the cult status *Transformers* accrues both online and at conventions. In opposition to the film, fans produced and uploaded their own fake trailers and outtake scenes on YouTube, poking fun at the live-action nature of the film and the directorial talents of Bay, who they saw as potentially ruining the film on evidence of his other blockbuster flops such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *The Island* (2005). In one fake trailer, the end of the original teaser trailer seen in cinemas is altered so that after the title and release date come up, the words transform into a turd, the slogan underneath saying "Another piece of shit from

Michael Bay." While some fans appreciated the fact that their much loved but lampooned series was finally getting the cultural and blockbuster recognition they thought it deserved, such vociferous online fan activity intimates a deeply hierarchical and systematized structure of sub-cultural taste and political discourse. This discourse is rooted in the personal value fans have attached to the Transformers toy and cartoon series. Bay's *Transformers* posed both as a threat to the values and tastes that had been built up around the franchise and as a sign of Hollywood's continued fascination for resurrecting multimedia franchises. More generally, the debate prompted by Bay's adaptation highlights the persistent power of generic canons, authenticity, and aesthetic value in science fiction fan communities and how they contribute to the creation and fragmentation of fan identity and culture.

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Frontier(s)

Dir: Xavier Gens, France, 2007

A review by Jonathan Walker, University of Northumbria, UK

Placing the recent 'torture porn' spurt fervently aside, [1] fans of the horror genre have also been treated to an upsurge in European production the last few years, in many of which narratives pay homage to some of horror's most genre-defining pieces. Fully embracing the flourishing self-reflexivity of postmodern horror cinema, we have seen George A. Romero's zombies revitalised in *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002) and *[Rec]* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), Gary Sherman's (*Death Line*, 1972) subway-cannibal reborn in Christopher Smith's *Creep* (2004), and the motifs of Michael, Freddy and Jason amalgamated to create the slasher-cum-lesbian fantasy, *Switchblade Romance* (Alexandre Aja, 2003). These examples merely make up a handful of what is truly many; a filmography of Euro works that seemingly couple the visual extremity of a Dario Argento murder with the cold, industrial mise-en-scène of a US Grindhouse pot-boiler.

Having said that, there are still those movies that succumb to the evil that is 'mediocrity.' *Cold Prey* (Roar Uthaug, 2006) or *Shrooms* (Paddy Breathnach, 2006) anyone? Yet the former examples constitute some of the more admirable efforts. They arguably represent those films which honour as opposed to plagiarise, and signal postmodernity as an impressionable, appreciative tool rather than a careless, butchering knife.

One of the most recent efforts to gain a UK DVD release is Xavier Gen's apocalyptic bloodbath *Frontier(s)* (2007). The 2008 edition box art appraisals signal promise. Having instantly ignored 'From the director of *Hitman*,' of course, "Bloody Disgusting" assures us that this is "one of the greatest genre films of all time." Instantly - and as we have come to learn of the contemporary Euro shocker - we get the impression there shall be many a horror movie convention embellished in this script. As a result, the questions that consequently surface are: how is the film going to attempt to deal with the thematic benchmark set by its predecessors, and, secondly, will it sculpt its use of references with pastiche (use of 'the appreciative tool'), or disembowel them (use of 'the butchering knife')?

"Who would want to be born into chaos and hatred?" queries our pregnant heroine Yasmine (Karina Testa) as this twisted, futuristic vision commences. Set in Paris a decade from now, the city is conveyed as being both a physical and political wasteland. Democracy has been abandoned for poorly policed protest and newsreel footage documents the citizens (including placard-sporting dogs: "I eat fascists… and shit them out") battling the encompassing threat of a dictatorship. "France is the US ten years ago," a character will later state begrudgingly, "we have our George Bush now." And hence, the "hatred" which Yasmine mentioned is deployed as a twofold conflict between governmental abhorrence of the radical, and radical abhorrence of the government.

Throughout the narrative we follow a group of small time French criminals, who, escaping arrest after a 'bank job,' flee the city streets. Yasmine and her ex-boyfriend take her wounded brother to the hospital, whilst the remaining two others head to a rendezvous point - an ominous motel - in the Parisian countryside. What unfolds is an uncompromising mix of sex and torture as the gang are enticed and then, respectively, sliced by the motel from hell owners. Cue a *Leatherface*-like massacre (Jeff Burr, 1990), buzz saws and all, as the authority-hating youth fall victim to a sexually-inducing, albeit patriarchal, neo Nazi family. [2]

Aesthetically speaking, *Frontier(s)* looks rather good. Although the film is essentially no different in style when compared to the likes of *Switchblade Romance, Saw* (James Wan, 2004), and the array of recent American remakes, Gens still captures the true grit of the piece. The saturated appearance of the film stock and the highly contrasted browns, blacks and blues perfectly embody the light with the dark. So, for example, when the blood flows, it shows. It is just a shame that when it comes to certain scenes of action, the first 'attack' for instance, the camera stumbles and wobbles awkwardly. Clearly in attempt to reproduce documentary like 'realism,' the film doesn't quite create the Hitchockian air of mystery that often evokes 'from what we do not see.' What results instead is clumsy choreography which fails to enforce the desired impact. (Credit must go to the special effects team, however, but more about them later.)

As expected, the movie villains are a motley crew of in-house relations: a patriarchal Hitler-like father, a mute mother, three beautiful yet estranged daughters, and finally three brothers: an obese man which suffers from paternal neglect ("Illegitimate bastard!"), a sadist and informally inquisitive police officer ("Did my sisters make you come?"), and the bulbous, grunting Goetz. Yet the film also fails in this instance to execute that much desired, genre hat tip. For in the grindhouse 'classic,' *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) for example, Gunnar Hansen handled the 'butcher' persona of Leatherface with the child-like unpredictability that suited the menace that he was intended to evoke. Unfortunately for Goetz – clearly playing the Leatherface equivalent in *Frontier(s)* - Le Bihan's intensity in characterising the role's mental instability is shamefully reduced to a slapstick performance of ineffectuality. One must conceal one's laughter as he repeatedly hits a helpless victim with a crow bar - not evocative of well-executed comic relief - but more in sheer embarrassment for the characterisation of what is rudimentarily a ridiculous, over-acted and bumbling portrayal.

Worst of all and like the predictable conventions that the movie deploys, the father has too passed his own sell by date (played by the weathered Jean-Pierre Jorris), to the point of no return. His delivery of far right propaganda is often cold, monotone and thereby effective, but considering the circumstances and the genre codes which are being repeated, one cannot feel threatened by his wise old age, but merely cheated by the movie's failure to successfully deliver new ideas. "In tribute to the new mother of our dear beautiful family…" he begins, to which we can only reply, "Here we go again."

What's more, the action, comic pace and self awareness that carries an otherwise clichéd plot - in films such as *Dog Soldiers* (Neil Marshall, 2002) or *Creep* for example - is non existent here, for *Frontier(s)* exerts an irrefutable seriousness which fails to work in it's favour. So, and perhaps the sorest point of the film is that we never really get the opportunity to sympathise with the traumatised Yasmine. Sure, the concept of in-family cannibalism ("You're sick!") is dealt with in the nastiest way possible (an all too familiar dinner table scene in which Yasmine is the 'guest of honour'), but unfortunately it is at the expense of a

genre convention that has been done to death. Whether or not this is resultant of a 'good idea' exerted in a way which lacks the panache of *The Hills Have Eyes* remake (Alexandre Aja, 2006) - or even *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005) - or merely the fact that the genre conventions are exploited more so than the politics it seeks to convey, *Frontier(s)* plainly does not possess the dynamism which jolts through other examples in the contemporary fold. For tackling such a simple idea of family horror the story is indulgently longwinded, and is often confusing (the concept of the Asian, pregnant Yasmine being the 'hope' for a "pure white race"?) to the point that the narrative dissolves into convolution. One also finds it most unusual that the story doesn't focus more upon the idea of the mysterious creatures/people that live in the cellar. This element, and perhaps the film's last chance at creating tension and unease, is simply brushed over come the final showdown.

It seems so unfortunate that the only redeemable aspect of *Frontier(s)* is rooted in the sheer brutality of the superbly executed special effects. For instance, someone has his fingers shot off in a grim close up; we get to see another man decapitated by a shotgun blow; and in true Nazi fashion we witness one victim exposed to flesh-melting heat in a post-millennial gas chamber. The highlight however, has to be the scene where one villain is forced back onto a rotating buzz saw – echoing the only memorable sequence from the abominable Jess Franco video nasty *Bloody Moon* (1981) – with the heroine shrieking back in manic approval as the blood spurts from the wounds.

Conclusively, *Frontier(s)* doesn't quite succeed in legitimising its critique of fascism, due, as mentioned, to the fact that the plot, the characterisation and the tired script seem lax and painstakingly unoriginal. Of course we, the humble audience, grasp that the microcosm of the Nazi household is an overt mirror of society, and we understand that we should root for the 'freedom' of our struggling protagonists. But, how are we to come to any viable conclusions if we are left with that patronising and clichéd 'ambiguity': is it external society that is solely corrupt, or are we merely the ones corrupting society? Not unlike what Robert Kerman mutters at the end of the infamous *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1979), "I wonder who the real cannibals are?" or as George A. Romero voices (again), "are we worth saving?" at the end of *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *Frontier(s)* essentially deals the same card, leaving only the sour taste of missed opportunity.

Come the end of the film, our heroine drives away, leaving the housebound 'horror' behind her, and of course, re-entering the 'horrors' of society. This simply serves to emblematise that maybe we should have done the same, but only an hour and forty minutes earlier.

Notes

[1] Films such as the *Saw* series (2004-2008) and Eli Roth's *Hostel* movies (2005-2007) have been given the moniker 'torture porn,' due to their excessive, and thus 'pornographic' portrayal of violence. Other films in this trend include *See No Evil* (Gregory Dark, 2006), *Captivity* (Rolan Joffé, 2007), *Vacancy* (Nimród Antal, 2007), and *Halloween* (Rob Zombie, 2007), to name a few.

[2] This 'family of cannibals' movie (the full title of which is *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III*) was the third entry into the original *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* franchise (1974-1994) and, to the disgust of the Motion Picture Association of America, was

considerably (and now infamously) more violent that the previous two. Incidentally, the script was penned by horror fiction author David J. Schow, who aptly coined himself a 'splatterpunk,' due to his graphic writing style.

Into the Wild

Dir: Sean Penn, USA, 2007

A review by Nazmi Al-Shalabi, The Hashemite University, Jordan

Into the Wild (2007) is Sean Penn's adaptation of Jon Krakauer's 1996 nonfiction bestseller that tells the story of a young man called Christopher MeCandless (Emile Hirsch). Taking a very real young man's story, originally told in print by Jon Krakauer, Sean Penn creates a character that reflects Christopher's personality and temperament, and attracts the attention of audiences who don't hesitate to identify with it.

Christopher was an ardent reader of literature. He read London, Tolstoy, and Thoreau; he was also impacted by their ideas. Determined to lead a life of desolation and poverty, he leaves his parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden), marked by their volatile marriage and obsession with appearances, in pursuit of freedom from relationships and obligations. Sacrificing his material possessions by donating all his savings to charity and destroying his credit cards and identification documents, he embarks on an episodic journey, introducing himself as Alexander Supertramp to the people he meets, and aiming to travel into Alaska, into the wild, to live in nature and experience true happiness. On the road, he meets strangers whom he becomes more attracted to than to his own family that he is fleeing. Although Chris flees his parents, he finds himself, almost unknowingly, drawn to parental surrogates: a hippie couple (Catherine Keener and Brain Dierker), a grain dealer in South Dakota (Vince Vaughn), and a retired military man in the California desert (Hal Holbrook).

When Christopher gets to Alaska, he realizes he has been insufficiently prepared for the journey and the hardships to come. He lives there in a "Magic Bus," used as a shelter for people walking in the area. In spring, he observes that he is cut off from civilization by waterways. When his food supply lessens, he resorts to eating plants, of which he confuses a poisonous kind which shuts down his digestive system, forcing him to starve to death. These details clearly demonstrate that Christopher is a nonconformist, who does not conform to that which his parents have set for themselves. Fed up with living in that materialistic society, he determines to shape his identity on his own and start a new life, dropping the past, and sacrificing all that is reminiscent of it. Determined to be himself, he performs many actions that reflect his inner feelings. He willingly chooses to go on this inward and outward journey into Alaska, into the wild. This journey is an inward one because it gives him the opportunity to discover himself, to test his capacities, to examine and appreciate the world around him, and to reflect on his problematic relationship with his parents. It is also an outward journey because it helps him know the world and other people. In addition, this journey shows that he is capable of making choices, and that he is rebellious. Christopher's journey is also a demonstration of his bravery and hunger for all the wondrous opportunities life offers. To me, Christopher is a young man who is confident of himself, innocent, conscious of what he does, capable of love, curious, good mannered, and intent on doing things his own way. He also epitomizes youth in all its glorious exuberance, that fleeting time when we feel that we are

the masters of ourselves, that we are capable of making whatever choice we want, and that we are in a position to do whatever we want.

Penn's film emphasizes Christopher's motives and weaknesses as a human. Sometimes people feel trapped and start harboring fantasies of escape from certain countries where there are laws that restrict their freedom. This argument reveals that Christopher is a human with flaws but he is not a fool. Though he is a college graduate, he is still innocent and makes wrong choices, which provides an indication of the gap separating education from reality. This separation occurs because education does not provide graduates with the skills they badly need to solve their problems and do their jobs well without any training. The problem suggested here is that education focuses more on theory than practice, which adversely impacts graduates due to their lacking experience. Penn seems unable to gather enough insight from the original book to move beyond a superficial level, leaving him unable to enter Christopher's mindset. Penn's portrait of the other characters that Chris meets on the road is not satisfying either.

Sean Penn uses voiceover narration from Chris's beloved sister (Jena Malone), and does a marvelous job in this film by using flashbacks skillfully instead of the linear approach, and shooting Chris in various poses – writing by the ocean, standing with his arms up in the air on top of mountains, etc. The shots are marked by meticulous care and attention to details. For example, Penn cuts to Christopher (Emile Hirsch) as he embarks in the direction of Alaska's Mount Denali after a prelude in which the mother (Marcia Gay Harden) wakes from a dream in which she hears an estranged son's cry for help. Other examples are the shots of Chris's college graduation in the final weeks preceding his journey to Alaska. In addition to the afore–mentioned characteristics, every shot makes the audience feel that they are looking at objects afresh, from a different perspective. However, there are also scenes marked by slow motion such as those in which Hal Holbrook appears as a man who lost his wife and son to a drunk driver, and withdrew into himself (Edelstein, 2007: 3). Better than these scenes are the sequences in which Chris is alone in the wilderness, especially in the "Magic Bus" that becomes his home and sarcophagus.

Generally speaking, Penn's movie is spectacular. The photography and soundtrack are both amazing. Penn and the cinematographer Eric Gautier let us directly into the scene of the action. The whole film is shot almost entirely on location, with everything including deserts, Alaskan wilds, and the gathering of travelers known as Slab city is shot with great care and extended treatment of particularities. Penn surrounds Hirsch with talented actors of whom every one gives a rock solid performance. The single slip is the occasional clumsy narration from Malone, but given the difficulty of the technique, she does a wonderful job and a slip of this sort won't devalue the film. As the film nears the end, Penn shows that the battle is not between man and society. Rather, it is between man and nature, and society is a refuge to which man resorts to flee the hostility of nature. Moreover, by casting Emile Hirsch as Christopher McCandless, a young man who lives simply, Penn probably wants to convey Christopher's message echoing Henry David Thoreau's call for Americans to live simply in nature and do without complex technology. Besides, Christopher himself teaches us a number of lessons. One of these lessons is to be self-reliant and self-made, that we should stop relying on our parents, and make ourselves by working hard. Another lesson is that we cannot enjoy happiness alone; we enjoy happiness while living with others in the community. A third lesson is that young people should think deeply before making a choice. If they don't, they may make wrong choices with grave, untold consequences. In brief, if you have a chance to see *Into the Wild* on the big screen, seize it at once.

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The Lady Vanishes

Dir: Alfred Hitchcock, UK, 1938

A review by Amitava Nag, India

Alfred Hitchcock was known to have often claimed "suspense doesn't have any value if it's not balanced by humour" (Gottlieb, 1997: 144). While all Hitchcock's films suggest he believed this, his Hollywood films are the more known for maintaining suspense at its height, and are more revered than his earlier works. However, I will read here one of the last films of his British period, *The Lady Vanishes* (1939), as this film also marvelously justifies his statement. To me, the marriage between suspense and humour has never been as successful in a Hitchcock film as in *The Lady Vanishes*.

Comedy and Satire

The Lady Vanishes is more 'satirical' than just bluntly comic. It was released in the pre-war (WWII 1939-1945) era, and Hitchcock did not hide his attitude regarding the British stance towards the war. In his later films as well as in many of his earlier films it would be difficult to sense his political identity as clearly as in this film.

Almost the first half hour of the film is comic, with many witty and subtle nuances of dry British humour. The film opens in an over-crowded Alpine hotel in the fictional Eastern European nation of Bandrika where a group of unrelated English citizens are stranded due to an avalanche. This is a stupendous ensemble: Caldicott and Charters are hilariously anxious to get a room, and to leave this 'dreadful' country to return in time for some cricket match; the heavily accented hotel manager treats English socialite Iris Henderson as if she is a member of the royal family, but asks the two cricket fanatics to share the maid Anna's room because there are no other vacancies (the prudish Brits get embarrassed when Anna changes dress without any shame in front of them!); the effervescent Iris Henderson and her two girlfriends who all are there on a skiing holiday (Iris plans to return by train the next day for her wedding in London); Margaret and Eric Todhunter, a lawyer, who are seemingly on a romantic vacation as a honeymoon couple, but in reality are carrying on an adulterous affair. And finally, there is this seemingly harmless and a bit eccentric old bespectacled English lady in tweed, Mrs. Froy, whom we first see seated at the same dinner table as Caldicott and Charters. In that comical sequence, as the cricket fans grumble ("Third-rate country, what did you expect?") about the lack of any basic amenities in the hotel including food ("Is that hospitality? Is that organization?"), Mrs. Froy is undeterred. She tells them that she loves this musical country and has been here for six years working as a governess, but now that her charges have grown up she's returning to London by the next day's train.

That same night, Iris chances upon Gilbert, an over-enthusiastic musician. A bizarre comic sequence unfolds only to end in a casual thriller. But that's how Hitchcock is: he embeds an iota of suspense amongst humour, so camouflaged that we love to ignore it until quite late. For now, we wonder about the fate of the Iris-Gilbert romance which is yet to bloom; but the radiance made to emanate from them by their director takes the viewer's attention. The

following morning when the train leaves, the actual suspense thriller uncoils in a rather slumbering way, as if the overnight's humour is yet to be forgotten. Hitchcock presents us with many fine satirical beads - for us to bind them into a set. Probably, this is one of Hitchcock's most subtle political films: we perceive his contempt for British insularity in its comic streaks, and Hitchcock's comments on Britain's dilemma in the build up of the impending war with Germany (remember the film is made in 1938).

In one climactic scene, soon after the vanishing lady reappears, the train's dining coach (wherein all the British travelers assembled), was forcibly decoupled, and it rolls and stops in a forest. Soon, the kidnappers of the lady (we come to know that they are the Bandrikan revolutionary forces) open fire at the desolate coach and the British nationals. The sublime blood-less suspense suddenly turns to a fiery thriller. And here, Hitchcock mocks British arrogance and the baseless superiority-complex. Even as a flurry of bullets are exchanged, the British still take war as a game. To emphasize the childish folly, Caldicott grabs a gun, starts firing, and exclaims that he once won a box of cigars in a shooting game! To magnify his foolish ignorance he quickly adds, "I'm half inclined to believe there's a rational explanation for all of this." As an extension of Caldicott and Charter's peculiar callousness, Eric Todhunter insists, "They can't possibly do anything to us, we're British subjects." And as the gunplay intensifies he assumes, "If we give ourselves up, they daren't murder us in cold blood. They're bound to give us a trial." Soon after he disregards the warnings of the other Brits (who by now started to understand that this is no child's play and there is no saviour to their fate) and walks out of the coach waving a white handkerchief, again exemplifying the impractical attitude towards crisis situations. He is soon spotted and gunned down.

Hitchcock keeps a sly eye on the proceedings. The apparent humour and suspense-turned-thriller suddenly gets a jolt. And here, looking beyond the humour at the pompous façade of the haughty British attitude, it becomes a global phenomenon – showing how a sudden act of terror gives everyone perspective, unveiling the helplessness of individuals and groups at the hands of unknown forces which pry on them.

Suddenly a Thriller

As mentioned earlier, this film opens up as a thriller after a very subtle passage of suspense – so much so, that as spectators we don't realize until after some time that the genre has shifted. The first hint of it comes when the night before the fateful train journey, amidst the funny rift between Iris and Gilbert, we hear another tune. This is by an external musician whom we see playing his instrument outside the hotel. Suddenly we see he is gagged and Mrs. Froy, oblivious of it, just throws some tips. Quickly, we move to the centre of action at that point – the chemistry between Iris and Gilbert. It is only late in the movie that we come to know that the tune itself is the MacGuffin – this is why the lady vanished, this is the secret code which needs to be messaged to the Scotland Yard! The second hint at the impending thriller came in the form of a flower pot being deliberately made to fall – it fell on Iris, succeeding in raising our suspicion on her. Here again, it is only quite late that we understand it was meant for Mrs Froy – the lady who vanished! But by then the drama already ensued.

After the initial tête-à-tête with Mrs Froy, Iris takes a nap. Waking up, she doesn't find Mrs Froy, and to her astonishment, none of her cold-eyed co-passengers agreed that Mrs.Froy ever boarded the train – was Iris dreaming, or was it the hit on the head by a flowerpot that made her forget things? This is the big question. The gag soon becomes eerie as Iris finds only Gilbert to her side in her attempt to figure out where Mrs. Froy can be. In a crafted

montage of shots we follow the couple in their hunt – this is mostly comic. Yet, the drama takes full gear as the train goes full steam. In this ensemble, almost everyone lies - for very different reasons. Caldicott and Charters lie because they fear the revelation of truth could mean a disruption, preventing them from attending the final day of the cricket match. The stern baroness and the ever-smiling Italian magician Signor Doppo (he had a circus act called The Vanishing Lady!) deny ever seeing Mrs. Froy and is soon revealed as part of the conspiracy, whereas Eric wants to be aloof, ensuring his 'unofficial' honeymoon doesn't catch many eyes. And then there is Dr. Hartz, who carries a fully bandaged body on whom he will operate. The doctor is over-enthusiastic to help Iris and only soon we find, it is he who has Mrs. Froy bandaged. The mystery gets revealed and the reason is simple – Mrs Froy is a British spy posted in Bandrika. The remaining gunfight is a Hollywood western but decorated with comic humour as mentioned earlier.

The Final Take

Like many acclaimed films, here again, Hitchcock pioneered his unparallel craft of film-making: the use of transparencies, rear projection effects, matte shots (Gilbert hanging from the train whilst another train approaches and breezes by) and miniatures, in an otherwise shoe-string budget film.

The Lady Vanishes stands as a very important film for Alfred Hitchcock for many reasons – it's undoubtedly his most pointed satire of British haughtiness, and its one of his last films in England before moving over to Hollywood. But probably, the most important asset of this film lies in its position within Hitchcock's career – it borrows so much from the British period, and perhaps more significantly, this film becomes a suspense-comedy template to which the director returned for his more acclaimed Hollywood films.

As mentioned, Hitchcock's earlier films contain traits that recur in *The Lady Vanishes*: a fuzzy conspiracy with unspecified aims; a vital clue in the form of a piece of music which often is the MacGuffin, as in *The 39 Steps* (1935); a female character who initially acts as a villain only to turn against her co-conspirators, as in *Number Seventeen* (1932); a man and woman reluctantly forced together by adversity, as in *The 39 Steps, Young and Innocent* (1937) and a number of his later Hollywood films as well.

The Lady Vanishes towers above many of its Hollywood siblings in its impeccable timing, and its sense of balance between suspense and comedy. If looked at closely, this blueprint can also be seen in Hitchcock's Hollywood masterpieces – although maybe in a more innovative way. The fundamental progression of the narrative in films owe a lot to *The Lady Vanishes*: the heightening of apparently jocular situations towards the culmination of intense suspense as well as the sudden intrusion of menace in every form as seen it is in our daily lives. There are the few motifs that recur: the appearance of long-lost Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943); the shock of Madeleine Elster's suicide in *Vertigo* (1958); and the famous death of Marion Crane in *Psycho* (1960). The impingement of horror within a calm and stable family setting features in most of his Hollywood films. But in those later films, he dealt more deeply with the themes of obsession and paranoia, and the repetition of crime or suspense. This he achieved in most cases by sacrificing the subtle satirical undertones observed in *The Lady Vanishes*.

In one of the funniest initial dialogues Gilbert tells Iris, "My father always taught me: never desert a lady in trouble. He even carried that as far as marrying Mother..." In *The Lady Vanishes,* Alfred Hitchcock ensures that suspense never deserts comedy in trouble.

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Breakfast with Hunter

Dir: Wayne Ewing, USA, 2003
Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride: Hunter S. Thompson on Film

Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride: Hunter S. Thompson on Film

Dir: Tom Thurman, USA, 2006

A review by K. J. Hunt, Nottingham Trent University, UK

It's unusual to find an English language documentary offering exclusively English subtitles when it's not a concession to the hard of hearing but to assist all viewers' understanding of the chief protagonist. Especially when the film in question, *Breakfast with Hunter* (2003), focuses upon an acclaimed American author known for his immense syntactical abilities and darkly humorous turn of phrase. The subtitles (available on the DVD) are part tongue-in-cheek affectation and part necessary concession to Hunter S. Thompson's individual but often indistinct speaking voice. Indistinct, that is, to the uninitiated ear; his inner circle of friends, long since adapted to Thompson's unique 'gonzo' dialect, affectionately know the quick-fire rhythms of his speech as 'mumblese.'

The apparent irony that an American man of letters, renowned for his words, would require assistance communicating on film is suitably contrary for an author whose hedonistic celebrity persona often threatens to overshadow the value of his work. This contradiction is paramount to the challenge facing director, producer, editor and cinematographer, Wayne Ewing… How can you document Thompson's character and presence as a significant literary figure, and extrovert libertarian, without simply enhancing the indulgent playfulness threatening to mask the intellectual and moral worth of his writing?

That Ewing's aim is to represent a rounded portrait of the man nominated by Tom Wolfe as "the (twentieth) century's greatest comic writer in the English language" (2005) is evident from the care and detail with which *Breakfast with Hunter* has been shot and edited. Taking the form of *cinéma vérité* and digital video, occasionally combined with direct interview and archival footage (notably a Thames Television report from 1970 about Thompson's bid to become Sheriff of Pitkin County, Colorado, and a home video – shot by Thompson – of an attempt to burn an enormous Christmas tree in the open fireplace of his living room), Ewing's documentary skilfully expands upon a select handful of years, from 1996 to 1998, to reflect upon Thompson's rise to fame as a cult writer and counterculture icon during the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

The roughly three-year period Ewing chooses as the core of the film offers a loose narrative based around a series of socially, culturally and personally significant events generated by

Thompson's lifestyle and work. During 1996 to 1998, two of Thompson's most famous books, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1973), reached their twenty-fifth anniversaries; the former garnering a star-studded party at The Lotos Club in New York, thrown by *Rolling Stone* magazine, and seeing Thompson invited to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky to attend a lavish tribute in his honour.

Other accolades partially captured on film include attending 1972 Presidential candidate George McGovern's seventy-fifth birthday; preparing and launching publication of *The Proud Highway: The Fear and Loathing Letters, Volume 1: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, 1955-1967* (1997); and the eventual production and premier, in 1998, of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a Hollywood movie (including footage of Johnny Depp refining his portrayal of the author). Less auspiciously, and most representative of the author's notoriously prickly relationship with authority, we also see Thompson drawn into court on a falsely recorded charge of Driving Under the Influence (DUI) of alcohol.

In one of a series of key scenes that neatly intercut across time, moving backwards and forwards structured by thematic relevance rather than chronological order, John Cusack reads from the vitriolic letter Thompson sent to the Deputy District Attorney (D.A.) when called upon to present himself for arrest. In part, it's showboating – especially as this takes place during a live event (an 'Evening with HST') hosted by Johnny Depp at The Viper Room – but there is also a serious edge to the literary barbs. By making the legal case a highly public matter, the machinations of the process are drawn into the media spotlight, which is more comfortable ground for a maverick writer than behind closed doors at the D.A.'s office. It's a validation, to some extent, of Thompson's oft-quoted credo: "Politics is the art of controlling your environment" (2003b: 71).

What is perhaps more intriguing, in relation to both this scene and Ewing's film more broadly, is that the star turn and focus of attention is nearly always the language/the words, which are so frequently read aloud from letters and books, or heard from speeches and interviews. But how is this achieved in a medium generally regarded as predominantly visual? For one thing, the *cinéma vérité* approach is very effective. Ewing often seems to fade successfully into the background, capturing some genuinely candid moments as a result. Filming in this manner supports the subject because it is intimate and passive, within reason, allowing the details and themes to reveal themselves spontaneously without presuming what might happen next. Secondly, the high regard afforded Thompson as a writer and as a man (albeit in a series of partisan scenarios) mean the intensity of focus is shaped by his presence – and he is clearly passionate about language and the beauty of communicating just the right meaning at the right time with the right emphasis.

Thompson is constantly encouraging, prompting and enjoying his own words read aloud by others, sometimes beating out the rhythm with his hands or growling advice from off-screen ('Slower… slower, slower, slower'). It is apt that *Rolling Stone* operated as his publishing vehicle for so long because he treats the tempo, beat and rhythms of language as music. An awareness of pace and delivery is also evident in the synergy of visual rhymes and verbal associations that help construct the film. Sometimes a spoken passage becomes a voiceover to a series of cuts across time to show the consistency with which a certain sentiment holds true. This enables Ewing to draw together key threads, such as connecting Thompson's involvement in local politics to his belief in social and communal values before cutting to a

gathering of friends offering support in hard times; an echo, in microcosm, of the political coverage produced by the author on a national scale a quarter of a century earlier.

The soundtrack is also highly associative and personalized, having been lifted from an album of songs (entitled *Where Were You When The Fun Stopped?*) compiled by Thompson in 1999 for the EMI Songbook Series. A song like 'The Weight' by The Band, for instance, is chosen to accompany the heavy atmosphere generated by the judicial process when Thompson learns he will have to face trial for the alleged DUI offence. Subsequently, the songs feed into his romantic persona as a rock 'n' roll 'outlaw' journalist and the partially mythologized elements of his life that he consciously plays up to – what is probably best known as the 'Raoul Duke' caricature...

The overlap between Thompson and his alter ego, Raoul Duke (the pseudonym under which *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was originally published), is part of what makes him an appealing subject for a documentary. Duke is an unhinged sports journalist, famously given visual form by Ralph Steadman's artwork, operating outside the constraints of conventional journalism. As a literary device, Duke enables Thompson to make himself an active part of the story – a character rather than a passive eye. However, Duke's intense drug-fuelled adventures also offer an exaggerated version of Thompson's own lifestyle and practices, blurring the boundary between creator and myth. This aspect of Thompson's writing brought him fame and pop cultural status, but it also became something of a cage to his intelligence.

Given his extrovert personality and "perverse resistance to security and predictability" (a quality noted by his son, Juan), Thompson clearly revels in his license to provoke outrage and play up as an anarchistic hillbilly or recalcitrant redneck. Flamboyant clothing, wigs, lipstick, silly glasses, blow-up sex dolls, joke-shop novelties and fire extinguishers are all part of the act. One or more such props are usually present at his personal appearances, which often take on the air of a 'happening' or some other unconventional (though partially contrived) event. Fans of the Raoul Duke persona tend to expect the craziness and, in particular, the unapologetic consumption of alcohol and recreational drugs.

Thompson appears happy to oblige, seldom featuring without a bottle or glass of Chivas Regal as well as cigarettes and perhaps his hash pipe or coke grinder. There is a sense, however, that absorbing these substances is about pragmatism as much as fun. The booze and drugs are permanent fixtures rather than glamorous motifs, just as addiction is a crutch and a need rather than a want, and while Thompson clearly enjoys their effects they also (it seems) help him to function. Which is not intended to sound like a moral judgement; in fact, Thompson turns the issue around by presenting his reliance on stimulants as a matter of free will. He is a willing addict, though not an advocate, who has succeeded in his chosen profession – thereby posing the rhetorical question: what is so morally wrong with that?

Nevertheless, there is a fine line between carving out a personal niche and being hailed as a public apologist for drug use, even one who endorses the need for individual responsibility, but this dangerous area on the fringe of social acceptability is where Thompson feels most at home. In a mocking testament to the perverse contradictions between what is legal and what is logical, he is also filmed on a couple of occasions driving with a glass of (presumably) whiskey and ice water in hand. The first of these follows immediately after a late night discussion with Benicio del Toro and film producer Laila Nabulsi, who reads aloud from 'The Sharp Necklace Agreement' – the seven-point legal document hammered out between Thompson, his legal representatives and the Deputy D.A. as a resolution to the improper

charge of DUI. Notwithstanding any temptation to push this agreement to its boundary, it's worth noting how central the written word is to Thompson's libertarianism – and, in this instance, his liberty.

Following the anniversary party for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, we are shown a panning shot of the author's private breakfast. An expansive first meal of the day, often taken early to mid-afternoon, is part of Thompson mythology. The phrase 'Breakfast with Hunter' therefore operates as shorthand for excessive consumption (of all kinds), whilst using the wry inference of having stayed the night to play on the notion of an up close and personal experience. Amidst an array of toast, fresh fruit, pots of jam and various empty and full plates, bowls and ramekins, we see beer bottles and a Bloody Mary (or, just maybe, a plain tomato juice) along with a glass of Chivas Regal being tamped down with ice. CNN plays in the background as Thompson reviews his coverage in the papers.

In addition to inferring a daily ritual and providing a metaphor for the film, the breakfast spread shows Thompson quietly relishing the acknowledgement of his work as a permanent fixture within literary history. Speaking at the Louisville tribute, the historian and editor of Thompson's letters, Douglas Brinkley, explains that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is now part of the Random House Modern Library (along with Thompson's 1967 book, *Hell's Angels*). Positioned somewhere between Tolstoy and Thackeray, Thompson's gonzo style has "gone reputable" (as stated in one post-party newspaper headline). The combined implications of 'excess' and 'success', witnessed at breakfast, tap into two major themes of the documentary; they also highlight the self-imposed problem Thompson faced when reconciling his celebrity with his writing.

An overblown public image of guns, cars, girls and wild living is seemingly all grist for the mill because it builds Thompson into a larger than life character. But the same behaviour also threatens to belittle his status. The carefree grandeur of such gestures – the untameable romantic spirit shaped by powerful creative urges – become undermined if they are interpreted as a mere caricature or comic book persona. To strive for stature in the vein of Ernest Hemingway and see oneself shrunk-down to become a cartoon character (as with Gary Trudeau's 'Uncle Duke' parody of Thompson in his 'Doonesbury' strip) is a swift move from the sublime to the ridiculous. The 'fun' side of Thompson is self-consciously boisterous and improvisatory; an anarchic combination of Lenny Bruce and mock performance art. The serious side, rich with satirical observations and self-deprecating humour, is documented on paper. To identify Thompson primarily with the former rather than the latter can lead to a misjudgement of his self-perception and deeply held sense of values. For all the horseplay, the distinction is relatively simple: Thompson takes his work seriously, though not himself.

As a result, the author becomes defensive and angry when his frivolous media persona threatens to define his serious literary output. When writer/film director Alex Cox and his co-writer Tod Davies visit Thompson at his Colorado home, Owl Farm, to discuss their draft screenplay of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a long argument develops over the possible use of animation to solve a technical problem within the film. Incensed at the idea of some of his best prose potentially being reduced to a visual metaphor based upon Steadman's 'cartoon' imagery (following the design of the Raoul Duke caricature), Thompson debates and berates Cox and Davies until they concede defeat and politely leave.

In this scene, we see Thompson at his most volatile and most serious, protecting his legacy and articulating his purpose. The literature takes priority over all other considerations, so

when it's suggested that Steadman's images essentially represent and distil Thompson's appeal for the popular mind the retort is brutal and frank: "Fuck the popular mind. I didn't write this (*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) for the popular mind."

What comes across in the transition between the public and private faces of Thompson is not an enormous difference in his behaviour but an awareness that his excesses are part of a fiercely independent manner of relating to the world. When seen in public these excesses constitute 'showbusiness' and are essentially superficial, such as attacking the Hollywood stars of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* with a giant sack of popcorn. The bag inevitably bursts open and the contents sprays free, creating a spectacle (and headline) for the film premier press reporters, cameras and crowding fans. Minutes before, behind closed doors, we hear Thompson acknowledge: "I don't mind putting on an act for them." Watching the author in more personal surroundings, and reading his collected letters and other works, it becomes clear that the intemperance found in his writing is intended to leave a more profound and permanent mark; the exaggeration carries a more sustained impact, like sharpening a sledgehammer to a point in order to admire the intricacies and accuracy of the blow.

One of the reasons Ewing was able to produce *Breakfast with Hunter* is because he gained access as a trusted friend and neighbour. A certain bias in the editing and selection of material reflects these facts, and it is through these creative processes that the director, having managed to fade into the background whilst filming, shapes the general tone of the documentary. A perennial problem when seeking to show the unadulterated 'reality' of a media figure is that no such exposure is possible. The concept itself is a fallacy. The material must be selected and the subject 'constructed' from the raw footage that exists. But Ewing is under no pretence, with regard to either Thompson or the process, and does not produce a hagiography.

Although the events depicted clearly emphasize that Thompson is a significant artist within the literary canon, the viewer is left to judge for themselves whether the author's wit is amusing or banal, his irreverence laudable or meretricious, and his manner engaging or boorish, or, perhaps more likely, a mixture of all those things and more. Unlike Tom Thurman's *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride: Hunter S. Thompson on Film* (2006), there are no obvious attempts to link biographical details about Thompson's upbringing with how he lived as a writer. Instead, the various epithets and anecdotes offered throughout *Breakfast with Hunter* build up a verbal portrait that the viewer is encouraged to amalgamate, conceptually, with footage of the man himself.

Breakfast with Hunter preaches to the converted. Those offering comment are friends, family and supporters, while those most likely to watch the documentary will already be fans. There are no absurd 'rosebud' moments or startling revelations and the film was completed in 2003 – prior to Thompson's suicide in 2005 – thereby avoiding the trap of mawkish reflexivity. Even so, the concept of mortality, or rather immortality, has emblematic significance. Thompson's journey from the cultural fringe to the cultural centre is a personal victory as well as a legacy. This is the metanarrative behind *Breakfast with Hunter*, which does an admirable job of conveying the lack of conformity and compromise with which Thompson lived his life, not just as a writer but as a doggedly inspirational American.

By contrast, *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride* is a less compelling documentary that takes a more conventional approach. Bereft of the intimacy afforded Ewing and seemingly produced in response to Thompson's death, Thurman's film has something of a paint-by-numbers quality

about it. Whereas *Breakfast with Hunter* launches straight into footage of Thompson, *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride* begins with a potted biography and progresses into a series of talking heads. It's a less energized film, following a more predictable format and progression.

Nick Nolte provides a somewhat schmaltzy voiceover in a defiant guttural drawl ("Hunter liked to stay in touch, but also just out of reach"), evoking a certain kind of whisky-drenched sentimentality whilst simultaneously hinting at his own 'wild man' persona – the police mugshot accompanying Nolte's arrest for DUI in 2002 has more than a touch of 'fear and loathing' about it, Hawaiian shirt included… As the biographical section segues into the commentaries, occasionally supported by voiceover, we encounter an impressive list of politicians, writers, broadcasters and film stars, as well as friends and family. Footage of Thompson helps link the various recollections, including a generous number of cuts from *Breakfast with Hunter* and the BBC's *Omnibus: Fear and Loathing in Gonzovision* (1978). The overall effect is of a portrait through association. Everything feels one step removed, lacking the direct engagement of *Breakfast with Hunter* and the dynamism this generates.

Where Ewing's film foregrounds the expressive power of words through an understated respect for language and literature, *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride* makes a similar point in a more direct manner. Selected chunks of text scroll up the screen accompanied by a recitation from one of the talking heads. Certain words and phrases – such as 'doomed generation' and 'American Dream' – are highlighted to enhance their symbolic significance. This desire to cherry-pick shortcuts and identify metonyms for Thompson's acute perceptions about life in America can distract from his emphasis upon rhythm and the fluidity of language as music. The words are well chosen, but their greater significance is only meaningful if you are already familiar with the writing; this seems at odds with the introductory air the film otherwise presents.

Another shortcoming is that some of the talking head testimonies feel a little contrived, although this is probably because they are. It's not that the sentiments being articulated are insincere, but that the forged sense of spontaneous expression undermines their value as heartfelt validations of Thompson's best qualities. As a result, Gary Busey's *ad hoc* advice on how to stage an 'impromptu' interview adds to this sensation of stage-managed responses, even while exposing the editorial process for what it is.

The subtitle, *Hunter S. Thompson on Film*, explains much about *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride*'s limitations. By focussing upon Hollywood films, the chief concern is not Thompson's life and work but his representation on celluloid and the stars who played at being him. Bill Murray and Johnny Depp subsequently offer interesting insights, the former having taken on the Hunter role in the 1980 film *Where the Buffalo Roam*, but as a whole the documentary tends a little too far towards a showbusiness epitaph – literally so when Harry Dean Stanton sings 'Danny Boy' over the closing credits.

From a certain perspective, refracting the focus to concentrate on filmic interpretations of Thompson's work is a clever conceit because it helps rationalise the celebrity interviews whilst providing a workable concept for the documentary, but it's also a lacklustre way to approach a writer's work. It's worth noting that *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride* was produced by the *Starz* network, because it delivers pretty much what was intended: an accessible, neatly edited, unchallenging documentary that steers clear of controversy. Not the sentiments Thompson's name usually brings to mind.

Of course, to really understand Thompson – or at least develop a clearer understanding of his capabilities, achievements and thoughts – there is no substitute for his writing. Much of what is missing on film is likely to be found there, if anywhere... And yet, room clearly exists for a detailed and impartial documentary that explores the phenomenon of Hunter Thompson as one of the many extraordinary figures who fuelled the countercultural clashes and creativity that help define the 1960s and early 1970s, with all the anecdotal and personal detail in between – both positive and negative.

If *Breakfast with Hunter* is too personal to offer a telling critical stance, and *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride* is too surface-orientated to provide a satisfying sense of engagement, then perhaps Alex Gibney's *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Hunter S. Thompson* (2008) will fill a particular analytical void by focussing more intently upon the cultural context in which Thompson made his name. Even so, these definitely won't be the last films made about Thompson or inspired by his work (in fact, *The Rum Diary* is set for release in 2009). And that's a good thing, because no one can ever be reduced to the sum of their parts, least of all a man whose character is perhaps ensnared in the same evocative phrase he offered in remembrance of Oscar Acosta: "…one of God's own prototypes – a high-powered mutant of some kind who was never even considered for mass production. He was too weird to live and too rare to die…" (Acosta, 1989: 7).

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