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# Gore Vidal's *Caligula* (1979): Denying the Author

Daniel O'Brien

Gore Vidal's involvement with and subsequent disownment of the film *Caligula* (1979) is well known. Produced in Italy and financed by *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione; it started as an ostensibly serious biopic of the infamous Roman emperor, scripted by Vidal, but ended up as a lurid blend of graphic violence and explicit sex. The focus of this article is not on *Caligula* itself, but an accompanying documentary, made at the time of the film's production with Vidal's participation. The prosaic title *A Documentary on the Making of Gore Vidal's Caligula* (1981) is notable for apparently granting Vidal authorial ownership of the film. However, the content of the documentary, supervised by Guccione, subverts and questions this authorship, ultimately denying both Vidal's entitlement to this position and the validity of the concept itself.

My methodology includes debates on authorship in relation to the cinema, which have usually centered on the director and ideas of personal expression. As noted below, Vidal scorned the notion of directors as cinematic authors, or auteurs, regarding them as mere technicians who neither required nor displayed creative ability. However, *A Documentary on the Making of Gore Vidal's Caligula* highlights opposing ideas of film authorship that befit further analysis. As Peter Wollen states, the concept of the auteur is linked to the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which promoted the *politique des auteurs* during the 1950s, albeit in haphazard fashion (74, 77). In English language debates, the auteur figure was taken up by American critic Andrew Sarris, who transformed the original *Cahiers* polemic into what he considered to be a precise theoretical framework (Cook 387). The auteur theory, or policy, permitted specific filmmakers to be aligned with the romantic, and romanticized, principles of individual creativity despite working in a medium that was by its nature "collective, commercial, industrial and popular" (Caughie 13).

The auteur director is contrasted with the *metteur en scéne*, a craftsperson-like director who efficiently realizes his source texts – original script, book or play - into cinematic form but lacks the inclination and/or ability to enhance the material with his own thematic or visual tropes (Wollen 78). On the other hand, the auteur filmmaker never subordinates him/herself to another author, however famous or esteemed the latter might be. The source material, whether unashamedly populist or challengingly intellectual, is merely a basis for creating ideas and images "which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work" (113).

From the start, aspects of auteur theory were disputed, challenged and revised but, as Pam Cook notes, the argument that the director is an important originator of meaning "remained relevant to debate in film studies [on both sides of the Atlantic]" (390). Certainly, at the time *Caligula* was created, the concept of the auteur, however contentious, retained its currency in terms of film scholarship and wider cultural debates.

Compared to the director, auteur or otherwise, the screenwriter occupies a less prominent position in critical and academic debates on film. However the script and those responsible for authoring it are essential components of the filmmaking process: "It guides the screen choices for story structure, characterization, motifs, themes, and genre" (Boozer 4). Jack Boozer cites American critic Richard Corliss who has argued that the best Hollywood films originate "from the productive intersection of a strong writer and a strong director – and often a strong actor – exploring mutually sympathetic themes and moods" (16). John Caughie notes that some proponents of the auteur theory will "allow creativity – even creative dominance – to enter at other levels," citing the screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky and actor James Cagney as examples (13-4). I would add that certain producers have been cited as the true auteurs of their films, notably David O. Selznick. In the case of *Caligula* I argue that Vidal believed the film should evolve out of a harmonious collaboration between screenwriter, producer and director, with the screenwriter at the center, producer Guccione serving as a useful patron and director Tinto Brass functioning as the lowest form of *metteur en scéne*. As the documentary and other media record, this approach to authorship was perpetually challenged: the disputes between Vidal, Guccione and Brass became a key component in the film's reception.

It was agreed early on that the film would be entitled *Gore Vidal's Caligula*. In a 1976 interview with Monique Van Vooren, Vidal explained that he wanted it to be distinguished clearly from previous artistic interpretations of Caligula – for example the play by Albert Camus, first performed in 1945 (Stanton and Vidal 137). By incorporating Vidal's name into the title, the project also emphasized its "quality" credentials, distinguishing it from mainstream cinematic fare. Pam Cook notes: "The practice of attributing cultural products to the name of an individual artist ensures that they are marketed in a particular way, as 'art' rather than 'mass production,' and consumed by a knowledgeable, niche audience" (388). Vidal had employed this strategy in the publicity for the 1964 film version of his play *The Best Man*, which was retitled *Gore Vidal's The Best Man*. Inspired by the title and accompanying publicity, viewers would be encouraged to look for the traces of Vidal in *Gore Vidal's Caligula* rather than those of Guccione (the publisher of a pornographic magazine). Penthouse Films issued promotional postcards placing the title, and therefore Vidal's name, next to an image of Caligula, all other information relegated to the reverse of the card.

Vidal was being well remunerated for his efforts: according to biographer Fred Kaplan, his contract (signed in July 1975), paid him $225,000 plus 10% of the gross (690). *The Documentary on the Making of Gore Vidal's Caligula* emphasizes how hard he worked on the project; in the introductory sequence Vidal describes Gaius Caligula (12-41 AD) as an extraordinary and, for some, wicked subject. While this could be dismissed as typical movie hyperbole, he enhances and substantiates this characterization, citing the historical record as justification for the terrible things that will be shown in the film. Vidal reveals his scholarly erudition, placing Caligula in his historical, social and geographical contexts and providing a potted biography of the short-lived emperor. He concedes that one of the key sources, the Roman historian Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars*, has an anti-Caligula agenda and is hardly objective in its account of the emperor.

Vidal also outlines his view of Caligula as an ordinary man granted absolute power and corrupted absolutely. Eventually Caligula regarded other people as mere objects for his amusement, a concept that survives in the finished film. Professing himself a child of the American Empire, Vidal suggested in an interview with the London *Sunday Times* that the

film's major theme was that "freedom and liberalism are aberrations in the history of the world" (qtd. Kaplan 690). A complacent America or Britain could end up with their own modern versions of Roman royalty (690). This statement could once again be read as a marketing strategy rather than an informed scholarly interpretation, yet it nonetheless vindicates Vidal's status as an acknowledged authority on both Ancient Rome and modern America.

Vidal's conception of *Caligula* touched on themes and ideas present in his earlier literary work, not least the representations of sexuality regarded by more conservative commentators as unconventional, shocking and immoral. His third novel, *The City and the Pillar* (1948) "emphasized the ordinariness of homosexual behavior and thereby earned its author some unsought notoriety" (Baker and Gibson 4, 14). The avowedly libertine Guccione would have appreciated the success and controversy generated by Vidal's novel *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), which despite the failure of the 1970 film version nonetheless "further enhanced Vidal's reputation for giving offence" (5, 148). Susan Baker and Curtis S. Gibson argue that the book is informed by Vidal's "ingrained sense of Rome and Roman eroticism," with the author recasting dissolute Rome as contemporary Hollywood" (148). Vidal's relaxed attitude towards sexuality and sexual mores appeared in tune with the *Penthouse* image: interviewed in the *Caligula* documentary, Guccione described the writer as both learned and passionate.

Of all Vidal's novels, the one most relevant to *Caligula* is *Julian* (1964), the story of a Roman emperor who ruled during the fourth century AD and renounced the Christianity of his predecessor Constantine (Baker and Gibson 36). Julian and Caligula share a willful, superstitious nature, the implicit result of years lived in fear of being murdered by a ruling relative, whether Constantine, Julian's cousin, or Tiberius, Caligula's grandfather. In the case of Julian, Baker and Gibson argue that "Such deeply felt vulnerability to the whims or policies of power easily breeds a desire for divinely provided foreknowledge" (45) - a comment applicable equally to Caligula. Both men end up foolish, reckless and self-destructive.

The *Caligula* documentary also refers to Vidal's residence in Italy and involvement as (uncredited) script doctor on *Ben Hur* (1959), as inspirations for his screenplay. Vidal is filmed in the garden of his villa at

Ravello, flanked by classical statuary, connoting success and wealth, but also his appreciation of and immersion in Italian landscape and culture. Italy is cited by Guccione as the most appropriate place to make *Caligula* in terms of location, culture, craftsmanship and talent. The project is also described as marking the return of "Hollywood on the Tiber," in other words, earlier ancient epics filmed in Italy such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ben Hur* and *Cleopatra* (1963). Vidal's association with *Ben Hur* is underlined by a framed photograph on a table in his Ravello home; the writer is shown standing with director William Wyler and star Charlton Heston, their relaxed postures and smiling faces suggesting an harmonious collaboration. This is nothing more than an illusion: according to his own account, Vidal was asked by producer Sam Zimbalist to write a full draft of the script, as previous versions were unusable (Vidal, *Palimpsest* 302). The relationship between the Jewish Ben Hur (Heston) and the Roman Messala (Stephen Boyd), close childhood friends, dissatisfied Vidal who felt there was no motive for the sudden intensity of their enmity (303). His solution was to make the characters former lovers, the still-infatuated Messala now rejected by Ben Hur: "Yes, it was *The City and the Pillar* all over again" (304-5). Vidal claimed his rewrite of the Ben Hur-Messala relationship was shot and included in the final cut, although conceding Wyler's denial that the spurned lover angle was ever discussed, let alone used (306, 307). Heston, though disdainful of Vidal, initially praised some of his rewrites, while stating that others were never shot, only to claim later on that none of his revisions were used (*The Actor's Life* 47, 48, 49; *In the Arena* 187). Any homosexual subtext to the relationship was dismissed as outright fabrication on Vidal's part (*In the Arena* 187).

There is a case for arguing that Vidal is in effect the star, or at least the dominant voice in the documentary for the first half of its 60-minute running time. It begins with a written prologue and disclaimer: "Some of the material shown in this documentary, while reflecting a true image of *Gore Vidal's Caligula* may appear shocking and offensive to some people." Vidal makes his entrance in the second scene, dressed in a smart jacket and shirt, against the backdrop of his Ravello villa and the surrounding Italian countryside. Framed in medium long shot, a weathered bust to his left, he faces the camera and introduces himself, outlining his contribution to the film and explaining its subject. This brief sequence presents the author at home, allowing the audience privileged access to his domestic

space, and shows him to be refined and cultured yet also modest. His second appearance, shot inside his villa, is devoted to issues of historical accuracy, research and scholarship. A voiceover from Bob Guccione praises the onscreen Vidal (shown looking through some notes), before switching to Vidal speaking direct to camera. This series of transitions implies a harmonious relationship between producer and writer and a shared vision of what the film-in-progress will be.

Vidal maintains center stage in the next sequence, which comprises interviews, his commentary on behind-the-scenes footage, and excerpts from the film. He outlines his conception, touching on historical revisionism, of the theme of a normal man placed in an abnormal situation. Vidal also stresses how, afflicted by a death wish, Caligula declared class war on the Roman senate, in the knowledge they would eventually turn on and destroy him. By linking Vidal's appearances and commentary to the on-set footage and scene excerpts, the documentary creates the impression that the finished film fulfills his stated intentions, despite the abundance of gory violence and explicit nudity.

Vidal then makes way temporarily for star Malcolm McDowell, who expounds his own interpretation of Caligula as an anarchist who pitted himself against the Roman establishment and bureaucracy. A subsequent neutral voiceover, provided by Bill Mitchell, describes the emperor as a revolutionary and a radical, underlining the overt political dimension to the character's make-up. Vidal subsequently reappears to reiterate his view that any depiction of a historical figure must be relevant to the present day: everyone has the potential to behave similarly to Caligula, should circumstance and opportunity permit. This pronouncement develops into the writer's final statement, which is worth quoting in full: "In our dreams we are Caligula, and what after all is a film, what is celluloid, but dreams made into a kind of shadow reality." Audiences are confronted with and forced to acknowledge their own darkest impulses and fantasies, as embodied without conscience or apology by the emperor Gaius Caligula.

However Vidal's authorial position is gradually eroded, chiefly as a result of his disagreements with director Tinto Brass over authorship or creative control. Active in the Italian film industry since the early 1960s, Brass dabbled in various genres before finding his niche in softcore erotica. Prior to *Caligula*, Brass made *Salon Kitty* (1976), the story of a

Nazi-controlled Berlin brothel. Interviewed by Hollis Alpert in 1977, Vidal claimed that while Guccione had selected Brass, Vidal accepted the decision "if we can use him as a pencil" (Peabody and Ebersole 69). This comparison is interesting, as it reduces Brass to a mere instrument devoid of creativity, talent or value. Although dismissing *Penthouse* as "the mag for the gynecological set," Vidal credited Guccione with both intelligence and a degree of visual sense: "I thought that if the two of us had control of the picture, it would work. The script was strong, which is why we got [Peter] O'Toole and John Gielgud and Malcolm McDowell and so on" (Peabody and Ebersole 69). With a high quality script and the writer and producer in accord, the choice of director appeared insignificant. Predictably enough Brass did not share this view of the director's role. He and Vidal clashed from the outset, not least because Brass wanted his name on the title (Kaplan 691), usurping Vidal's nominal authorship of the film. By mid-1976, Vidal knew that Brass had altered his script, although the extent of these changes was disputed (690-1). There were also arguments over the film's style, Vidal complaining to co-producer Franco Rossellini that Brass had agreed to a realistic approach, only to abandon this in favor of ersatz Felliniesque surrealism (691). Vidal was not given official access to the revised script(s), although he later claimed to have obtained a copy of the dubbing script (Nobile 85), and stayed away from the set, whether by choice or compulsion.

Vidal always described himself as a novelist who worked in other media only for financial rewards (Baker and Gibson 4). He tended to dismiss most films with which he was associated, whether as screenwriter or original author: "I really don't like any of them much, as opposed to what I had in mind" (Peabody and Ebersole 71). Vidal placed much of the blame for these perceived failures on the contributions of the directors involved, arguing that he could have done a better job: "They would have been more satisfactory to me […] Looking back on it, I think I probably should have tried to direct *Caligula*" (72). If taken seriously, Vidal appears to suggest that working as a film director requires no particular talent, training or experience, as all the creative work has been completed by the screenwriter: "Almost anybody can do what a director usually does. On the other hand, very few people can write or tell a story" (73). His novel *Myra Breckinridge* satirizes the film industry in general and the auteur theory in particular (Baker and Gibson 5). Through the character of Myra Vidal

ridicules the French critics who elevated Hollywood directors to artists: "I have had a marvelous idea for a piece on Pandro S. Berman which *Cahiers du Cinéma* ought to eat up. After all, with the exception of Orson Welles and Samuel Fuller, Berman is the most important filmmaker of the Forties" (Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* 56). Berman, as Vidal well knew, was a producer rather than a director. This stance can be read as an extreme endorsement of Boozer's statement that the script "remains the essential conceptual and creative bible for the film's construction" (4).

The clash between Vidal and Tinto Brass is first alluded to halfway through the documentary. Rather than have one of the key players broach the issue – whether Vidal, Brass or Guccione – it is mentioned initially by Victor Vramant, a French television news reporter. This distancing device is enhanced by Vramant speaking in his native French, his words translated (inexactly) in a voiceover delivered by a woman. Vramant reports Brass as saying that he was not interested in Vidal's approach; nor did he believe that Vidal understood much about Roman history in general and Caligula in particular. Guccione reappears to comment on the widely reported schism between Vidal and Brass, and continues to talk over footage of Vidal working on the script at his Ravello villa. From this point on, Vidal is not seen or heard again; he does not have the opportunity to refute Brass' claims or articulate his views on directors. Instead, Guccione describes Vidal's opposition to the auteur theory, his belief that the screenwriter is the true author and his opinion that directors are parasites living off the talent of scriptwriters. With Vidal effectively removed from the film, both in sound and vision, Brass occupies center stage in an on-camera interview conducted in English on the set, proclaiming: "Who is Caligula for me? Surely I know exactly what he's not," before dismissing Vidal's view of the character. Having discussed his ideas on the corrupting nature of power and its effect on individual people, Brass segues into his interest in sexuality and sexual behavior as communication, accompanied by extended footage of him directing naked performers. This in turn dovetails into Guccione's discussion of the film's aim to combine mainstream cinema with X-rated adult entertainment. Guccione claims to resolve the dispute between Vidal and Brass, arguing that film is invariably and inevitably a collaborative process; a viewpoint best described as disingenuous given Guccione's partial yet multi-faceted position of control in terms of preproduction, production, post-production, publicity, marketing and exhibition. This

leads us to reflect on the notion of producer-as-auteur in a form that is both problematic and irresolvable.

As history shows, the title *Gore Vidal's Caligula* was misleading, contested and ultimately rejected by Vidal himself. Interviewed by Hollis Alpert in 1977, he recalled that he was prepared to sue Guccione "to get my name out of the title" (qtd. Peabody and Ebersole 69). In March 1979, ten months before *Caligula*'s American premiere, New York magazine ran an article on the fallout between Vidal and Guccione, quoting Vidal as saying that he wanted to be dissociated from a film he regarded as "sleazy porn" that reduced his dialogue to filler (qtd. Nobile 85). Guccione in turn accused Vidal of badmouthing the unreleased film in public, despite not having seen any of the final cut, while denying that any major changes had been made to Vidal's screenplay, except that "the finished film has less perverted sex than Gore's original script; it now has more heterosexual appeal" (85).

Guccione's comments merit further analysis. Discussing *The City and the Pillar*, Baker and Gibson describe its reception in the late 1940s as "hysterical and homophobic, rather than critical," a reaction that put Vidal's literary career on hold (14). The 1960s had, by common consensus, witnessed a liberalization of attitudes towards sex and sexuality, as evidenced by publications such as Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* and Guccione's *Penthouse*. This revolution faltered, however, when it came to depictions of homosexuality in media aimed at the popular market. Hence the film of *Caligula* tends to overlook the fact that Caligula was bisexual. *A Documentary on the Making of Gore Vidal's Caligula* promotes the *Penthouse* version of sexuality, which though graphic is largely conventional and heterosexual. The film is in part a vehicle for Guccione's top models, the "Penthouse Pets," who are seen arriving at Rome Airport, visiting the *Caligula* set, and rehearsing the Temple of Isis sequence. There are on-camera interviews with Pets Jane Hargrave and Lori Wagner and hardcore sex scenes filmed by Guccione and Giancarlo Lui. While a lesbian sex scene between Wagner and Anneka Di Lorenzo is foregrounded, such "girl on girl" scenes were and are a common feature of pornography aimed at straight men. It seems that the *Penthouse* brand of liberated sexuality was not after all compatible with Vidal's liberal take on (homo)sexual relations. His insistence on what Baker and Gibson term "the fluidity of gender and desire" (157), as expressed in *Myra Breckinridge* and, it appears, the undoctored script for

*Caligula*, was deemed unacceptable for the target audience. McDowell felt the writer had been naïve in his dealings with Guccione: "I asked, 'Isn't he a pornographer?' Gore said, 'Malcolm, just think of him as one of the Warner brothers. He just signs the checks!' Well, of course that wasn't true" (qtd. Akbar 2008). Judging from contemporary reviews, Guccione's attempt to mainstream *Caligula*'s sexual content was not successful. *The New York Times* critic Vincent Canby noted: "The film's action is entirely in its orgies, which are exhausting and solemn" (9), while *Chicago Sun-Times* reviewer Roger Ebert claimed that *Caligula*'s makers "have long since lost touch with any possible common erotic denominator […] there were no scenes of joy, natural pleasure, or good sensual cheer' (Ebert). These descriptions of the sex scenes are not entirely accurate yet neither are they atypical of the American critical reaction. In Britain, this material was toned down or cut altogether, although *Monthly Film Bulletin* critic Tom Milne identified "a number of *Penthouse* fantasies" and "centerfold titillations" (233).

Vidal's name was removed from the film's title but not from the credits, which proclaim *Caligula* to be "adapted from an original screenplay by Gore Vidal," a compromise characterized by Kaplan as a small price to pay for an author led astray by "his vanity and idealism" (691). Guccione's decision to keep Vidal's name on the film, despite their public dispute, is intriguing. If *Gore Vidal's Caligula* was now Bob Guccione and Penthouse Films' *Caligula*, Vidal's modified credit could be read as legitimizing the film, as with the casting of respected actors, but also reflecting his demotion from author/auteur to rewritten/replaced screenwriter, a hired hand who had failed to deliver the required goods. For all Vidal's disownment of *Caligula*, he remained associated with the film in a form that radically reduced his contribution and significance to the project without absolving him of its perceived failures. The fallout between Vidal, Guccione and Brass was mentioned in many reviews, Milne noting *Caligula*'s "turbulent history of trials and tribulations" (233). Canby referred pointedly to "the new movie that was not written by Gore Vidal" (9), while Ebert dismissed Vidal's revised credit as nonsensical: "what in the world can it mean?" (Ebert). Hollywood trade paper *Variety* ridiculed the film's content in a manner that also mocked its usurped author: "An anthology of sexual aberrations in which incest is the only face-saving relationship […] far more Gore than Vidal" (qtd. Walker 127).

Vidal's situation was not helped by his relatively low profile as a screenwriter and his open disdain for television and cinema. While Vidal remained controversial as a novelist, he was both critically acclaimed and commercially successful. By contrast, his television career was in the doldrums (although it picked up during the 1990s when he made several acting appearances as well as chat-show spots), while his ten film credits included *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), and *Gore Vidal's The Best Man*. At the time of *Caligula*, Vidal had not been directly involved with a film since *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* (1970), another adaptation. In terms of critical and audience recognition, Vidal the screenwriter, as opposed to Vidal the novelist, offered neither a solid track record nor a firm brand identity, and in these terms had little claim to authorship of *Caligula* in the first place.

Vidal's 2006 memoir *Point to Point Navigation*, which covers his life from the mid-1960s, contains no reference to *Caligula* or any of the film's participants, which could be interpreted as a supreme form of disownment and disavowal. He did, however, participate in *Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal's Caligula* (2005), a five-minute short that spoofs the 1979 film and his involvement with it. The title could be read as commenting on Vidal's naïve assumption/presumption of authorship, although the authorial prefix on the television film *Gore Vidal's Billy the Kid* (1989) suggests he retained his belief that the writer was the true author of a dramatic work, whatever the medium. While Vidal threatened legal action over *Caligula*, I have to date found no conclusive evidence that he wished or attempted to remove his image and voice from *A Documentary on the Making of Gore Vidal's Caligula*. In many ways, it serves as Vidal's case for the defense, as it offers a fascinating chronicle of the author identified, acknowledged and praised, only to be questioned, undermined and marginalized to the point where he is banished altogether from the official account of the film's creation, which becomes in effect the story of the unmaking of Gore Vidal's *Caligula*.

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