

Gore Vidal and the Cinema

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Throughout his writing life Gore Vidal had an ambivalent relationship with the world of films in general, and Hollywood in particular. On the one hand he understood how Hollywood was a dominant cultural force in twentieth century American cultures, helping to shape people's beliefs as well as embodying changing political moods. One character remarks in his novel *Hollywood* (1989): "We [Hollywood producers] are now supplying the world with all sorts of dreams and ideas. Well, why don't we shape these dreams, deliberately?" (Vidal, *Hollywood* 447).¹

On the other hand Vidal tended to dismiss his film and television work - as screenplay writer, actor, or provider of source-texts for adaptation - as insignificant, undertaken mostly for financial purposes. In the mid-1960s he wrote to his friend Fred [F. W.] Dupee: "I don't know whether or not this sort of career is a sign of masochism" (qtd. Kaplan 541). This lack of enthusiasm was perhaps justified, given Vidal's painful experiences of working in films. *The Left Handed Gun* (1958), a version of his successful television play *The Death of Billy the Kid* (1955), was almost completely rewritten by screenwriter Leslie Stevens, prompting Vidal to threaten withdrawal from the entire project. Although given screen credit, he refused to have anything to do with the finished product, apart from collecting the money due to him. He worked on an adaptation of Dominique Lapierre's best-selling *Is Paris Burning?* (1966), and complained: "I was stuck there [in Paris] trying to rewrite an unactable script. The guy directing [René Clément] didn't know any English" (qtd. Kaplan 561). Vidal loathed Michael Sarne, Twentieth Century-Fox's preferred choice to direct the film version of *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) to such an extent that he was prepared to slander Sarne: "[He] isn't a director. And he doesn't have any talent" (Tereshchuk). His screenplay of *Caligula* (1979) underwent major changes

1 For more on Vidal's view of Hollywood, see Dennis Altman, *Gore Vidal's America* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, VA: Polity Press, 2005): 155-63.

in the hands of director Tinto Brass and Bob Guccione: Vidal responded by suing both of them in an attempt to remove his name from the credits. It is thus hardly surprising that he should remark in his 2006 memoir *Point-to-Point Navigation* that the furor surrounding the making of his films was “far more interesting than the finished product[s]” (Vidal, *Point-to-Point* 118).²

Despite these experiences, film work constitutes a significant part of Vidal’s writing life.³ In the Fifties he worked as a contract writer in television, and later on for MGM (one of his major projects for which he received no screen credit was the remake of *Ben Hur* (1959)). At the latter end of his career he appeared several times onscreen in cameo roles in Tim Robbins’ political satire *Bob Roberts* (1992), or the teen angst film *Igby Goes Down* (2002). Several of his novels were adapted to the screen, including *The Best Man* (1964) as well as *Myra Breckinridge*. This kind of work contributed greatly to Vidal’s status as a public intellectual, most aptly defined by Dennis Altman as a person who uses their “familiarity with ideas and language to seek to influence debate on a range of major topical issues,” whether social, sexual or political (24). This kind of influence was sustained by offering numerous points of contact between himself and his audiences – through books, television appearances, screenplays and cameo roles – and thereby helping to “suture the divide that appears to separate them [different media]” (Frank 15). His success as a public intellectual stemmed from his ability to shift between different modes – writing, acting, adapting – in an attempt to offer alternative narratives and other perspectives on American history and politics, other than those provided by official sources (governments, media organizations, etc.) This article will reconsider Vidal’s status through a chronological survey of his film work. I do not intend to be comprehensive, but restrict the focus to films currently available commercially on DVD. There are other examples of Vidal’s television work in archives: anyone wishing to find out more should consult Harry Kloman’s excellent article online (Kloman). Through this survey we will come to understand more clearly the central importance of the media in his quest to promote social and cultural debate in contemporary America. In 1976 he remarked that movies had taken the

2 “I don’t really like any of them [my films] much, as opposed to what I had in mind” (Vidal to Hollis Alpert (1977), qtd. Stanton and Vidal 132).

3 In the early Sixties Vidal formed a company, Edgewater Productions, to produce films with co-writers Robert Alan Author and Reginald Rose. Sadly nothing came of the project (Stanton and Vidal 133).

place of the novel as the principal method of addressing issues in the public sphere (Vidal, "Who" 156). Sixteen years later he called for historical films to be shown in every classroom as a way of stimulating education: "Let us face the shift from linear type to audiovisual the way that our fifth-century BC ancestors were obliged to do so in China, India, Persia, Greece, as each culture, simultaneously, shifted from the oral tradition to the written text" (Vidal, *Screening* 96). Through his various activities in the cinema Vidal tried to educate his audiences – not just students, but anyone who paid the price of admission or watched his work on video or DVD. It was difficult, but also challenging work, which helps to explain why Vidal likened himself at one point to the legendary explorer and adventurer Sir Henry Morgan (1935-88), who selected the Spanish Main as his sphere of operations (Pacheco).

***The Left Handed Gun* (1958)**

Vidal's career as a screenwriter only really took off in the middle of the Fifties when he started writing regularly for anthology series such as *Studio One in Hollywood* and *The Philco-Goodyear Television Playhouse*. He produced adaptations of canonical texts (*The Turn of the Screw*) as well as highly successful original plays such as *The Death of Billy the Kid*. Vidal soon became a nationally recognized figure which led to the offer of a contract to work for MGM in Hollywood. By 1957 he had finally convinced Warner Brothers to do a film version of *Billy the Kid*, retitled *The Left Handed Gun*; although he had penned his own screenplay, producer Fred Coe (another recruit from television) brought in Leslie Stevens to make further alterations without Vidal's consent. The experience offered Vidal a salutary lesson in cutthroat Hollywood politics.

The finished product refuses to make any moral judgments on its central character William Bonney (Paul Newman), a ruthless killer who will stop at nothing to wreak revenge on those who killed Tunstall (Colin Keith-Johnston), a cattle-rancher known as "the Englishman" (actually Scottish) gunned down in cold blood. While sympathizing with Bonney's desire, the film suggests that violence begets violence, creating a dog-eat-dog world in which no one is safe from the bullet of a gun. Bonney is a product of that world, knowing no other way of achieving his aims. His death-scene at the end is quite extraordinary – a ritualized suicide rather than a shoot-out.

Vidal's screenplay also blames the media for Bonney's demise. The publicity-conscious Moultrie (Hurd Hatfield) pursues him like a dog while sending dispatches back east that transform Bonney into a romantic hero out to fulfill his aims at any cost. In truth Bonney in no way conforms to that myth; he is nothing more than an adolescent searching for (but not discovering) moral and spiritual guidance. *The Left Handed Gun* anticipates Vidal's later films focusing more directly on American politics (e.g. *The Best Man*), in showing the destructive consequences of constructing a folk hero out of the emotional fragments of its victim.⁴

***The Scapegoat* (1959)**

As part of his film contract, Vidal traveled to Great Britain to work on an adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's novel for Sir Michael Balcon, erstwhile head of Ealing Studios (now sold to MGM). His experiences on the film were uncomfortable, to say the least – not least because he had to cope with a director (Robert Hamer) who assumed less and responsibility for the finished product due to alcoholism. Eventually Alec Guinness – the star of the film – undertook most of the work. Vidal left the project before shooting began, and was not sorry to do so: "I would have been delighted if Robert got all the credit [for the screenplay]" (qtd. Kaplan 428).

The Scapegoat has as its protagonist a disaffected loner John Barrett (Guinness) who encounters his alter ego Count Jacques de Gue (also Guinness) and finds himself quite literally trapped in another man's body. De Gue steals his clothes and hijacks his identity, while Barrett has to learn to play the aristocratic role in the best way he can.⁵ He does a creditable job – so much so, in fact, that he does not want to abandon his mew identity, even though de Gue orders him to do so. The conflict between the two protagonists is resolved in a satisfying finale. *The Scapegoat* shows how trappings of wealth and status are only skin-deep: personality assumes greater significance. Barrett can be an effective aristocrat on account of his sympathetic nature and willingness to listen to anyone regardless of their

4 The destructive aspects of the media were a consistent preoccupation of Vidal. In 1975 he wrote: "Simple falsities have been drummed into their [the people's] heads from birth [...] so that they will not rebel, not demand what is being withheld them" (Vidal, "State" 284).

5 For more on "assumed identity" films like this, see Bernard F. Dick, "The Passenger and Literary Existentialism." *Literature/ Film Quarterly* 5.1 (Winter 1977): 66-74.

social origins. He possesses the kind of inner strength that Paul Newman's Bonney so pointedly lacks in *The Left Handed Gun*, giving him the power to emerge triumphant at the end.

Ben Hur (1959)

Vidal has told the story of how he rewrote the screenplay for MGM's remake in his essay "Who Makes the Movies?" (1976). Evidently the original draft was unfilmable, so he tried to introduce some kind of "psychological sense" into the story by conceiving Ben Hur (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd) as lovers (Vidal, "Who" 154). While this aspect of the story was only suggested (Vidal claimed that Heston did not know "what luridness we contrived around him" (154)), the screenplay indicates that the only way Ben Hur can cope with the consequences of his relationship is by acquiring the kind of inner strength that helps John Barrett through his ordeal of becoming an aristocrat in *The Scapegoat*. This is no easy task – especially for Ben Hur, who saves the consul Quintus Arrius (Jack Hawkins) from certain death at sea, and receives Roman citizenship and a new identity as a reward. Ben Hur only begins to change when he discovers what has happened to his family; the experience teaches him the value of sympathy and compassion as the foundations of a stable society, while providing him with hope for the future.⁶

One of Vidal's first published essays was on the Roman Empire; and in his subsequent work he continually drew parallels between ancient and contemporary worlds. James Tatum describes how he likened America to "the second Rome" as it transformed itself from a republic into an empire, and thereby betraying the aspirations of its founders. Reading American life as a re-enactment of Roman experience also provides a framework for exploring sexuality and private morality. Ostensibly such traits are considered separate from politics: Vidal shows how they are inextricably related. Tatum remarks: "[Vidal suggests that] the difference between global conquest and private [sexual] aggression is [...] mainly one of scale. The erotic energy that creates empires is channeled against an individual victim

6 Altman emphasizes the importance Vidal attached towards self-expression, unfettered by the constraints imposed by frequently repressive societies; through such means individuals could acknowledge that they were "potentially far more polymorphous" than they might have assumed (140).

instead of a nation; the amor that rules the art of love is also [...] use[d] to characterize the Romans' love for conquest and dominance" (109).

In the screenplay for *Ben Hur* some sequences (for example, when Ben Hur is thrown into jail or forced to work as a slave on a long-boat) emphasize how the rulers can only impose their will through force; others – most notably the chariot-race – demonstrate how that force is used for sexual as well as well as political gratification. Stripped to the waist, sweat pouring from their bodies, the gladiators use their whips on one another as well as on their horses so as to guarantee victory for themselves. Even Ben Hur is not immune from this kind of behavior as he turns the tables on Messala by grabbing his whip and attacking his one-time lover.

***Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959)**

The connection between dominance and sexuality likewise permeates Vidal's screenplay for Tennessee Williams' 1958 drama. The only way that Violet Venable (Katharine Hepburn) can deal with her guilt-feelings for her son Sebastian's death is by behaving in a cruel and unjust manner towards Catharine Holly (Elizabeth Taylor). The action is driven by one major question: what is the story about Sebastian's past that Violet wants cut out of Catharine's mind by forcing the younger woman to undergo a lobotomy? The fear of that sadistic operation permeates the jungle garden where the action takes place.

With its intelligent use of shadows, light and shade, Joseph L. Mankewicz's film conjures up a sinister world in which no one admits to their true feelings while being quick to judge others. Violet defines Catharine's condition thus: "She lacerates herself with memory [...] They [the doctors] can't help her or cope with her fits of violence, her babbling, her dreadful obscene babbling [...] mostly taking the form of hideous attack on the moral character of my son, Sebastian."⁷ This description applies to Violet herself; she cannot expunge the "obscene babbling" of her conscience telling her that she contributed to her son's death while

7 This is a slightly rewritten version of the Williams text which has Mrs. Venable describing Catharine's behavior thus: "she babbled, babbled! – smashing my son's reputation. - On the *Berengaria* bringing her back to the States she broke out of the stateroom and babbled, babbled; even at the airport when she was flown down here, she babbled a bit of her story before they could whisk her into an ambulance at St. Mary's" (Williams 148-9).

reenacting the conventional wisdom that a mother can inadvertently make her son gay by loving him too much (Ohi 30). The only way to escape such repression is to face the truth about oneself and one's past. Catharine undergoes this experience at the end of the film as she recounts the precise circumstances of Sebastian's death. To do this she reenters the world of the fantastic (indulging in the kind of "babbling" that Violet abhors), and by doing so discovers that the truth is unbelievable ("When we got back to where my cousin Sebastian had disappeared [...] he was lying naked [...] They [the lynch-mob] had *devoured* parts of him.")

Vidal's screenplay invites to reflect on the arbitrariness of the distinctions separating the real from the fantastic. Things just happen: whether they are "believable" or "unbelievable" depends very much on the individual's point of view. As Catharine speaks she learns to trust in herself, particularly when she recalls how Sebastian understood that someday he would become a sacrifice to a "terrible sort of a - [...] cruel [God]!" Having acknowledged his sexual orientation, Sebastian knew that he would pay for that choice with his life in a society where homosexuality was still equated with deviance. This knowledge represents a source of strength – something Catharine herself acquires as a result of delivering her monologue. Despite the emotional pain involved, she ends up successfully negotiating the kind of repressions that drive William Bonney to suicide in *The Left Handed Gun*.⁸

Visit to a Small Planet (1960)

Based on a successful Broadway hit, which subsequently formed the basis for the television series *My Favorite Martian*, *Visit to a Small Planet* has a straightforward plot in which Kreton [Cretin] (Jerry Lewis) descends to Earth from an unnamed galaxy, falls in love, nearly breaks up another love-affair, loses his powers and ends up returning to his planet of origin a sadder, if not wiser alien. Norman Taurog's film transforms Vidal's play

8 This kind of individual negotiation of one's personal and sexual identity was central to Vidal's thought: "love, sex and companionship are distinct pleasures, not to be found in the same person, an attitude that constantly confounded a culture deeply committed to their being inextricably linked together" (Altman 135). However this could only take place in cultures permitting freedom and diversity of thought, which was certainly not the case in America in the late Fifties.

into slapstick comedy, a vehicle for Lewis that removes much of the source text's satiric edge.⁹ The film consists mostly of farcical set-pieces in which Kreton places spells on the human characters in the blink of an eye. Some of them are extremely funny, especially when Kreton takes his revenge on skeptical boyfriend Conrad (Earl Holliman), but the film is at best a lighthearted romp.

Nonetheless *Visit to a Small Planet* – in both stage and film incarnations – draws attention to the ways in which individuals are deprived of the capacity for self-determination, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation. This is one of the strategies by which governments dominate the people; by forcing them to play “the opinion game” – in other words, accept secondhand opinions or untruths at face value – they prevent reflection on “the [important] issues” of the day, whether personal or political (Vidal, *Decline* 47). The critic Thomas Disch once characterized America as “a nation of liars, and for that reason science fiction has a special claim to be our national literature, as the art form best adapted to telling the lies we like to hear and pretend to believe” (15). The only way to resist such strategies is to trust in oneself.

***The Best Man* (1964)**

First produced on Broadway in 1960, where it ran for 560 performances, *The Best Man*'s screenplay was penned by Vidal himself. The story focuses on the political in-fighting surrounding the election of a party candidate. William Russell (Henry Fonda), and Joe Cantwell (Cliff Robertson) are the adversaries; it seems they will stop at nothing to achieve their ends, including defamation of character. However Russell undergoes a dramatic change of heart as he withdraws from the race altogether on the grounds that he cannot act according to his true instincts. While the decision

9 The play started life as a one-hour television production broadcast in 1954 in the *Philco-Goodyear Playhouse*, with Cyril Ritchard as Kreton. The stage version opened February 7, 1957 and ran for 388 performances. Vidal had no involvement with the film, which was a critical and commercial disaster, thereby proving “the widespread wisdom that the best thing to happen is that Hollywood pay vast sums for rights, then *not* make the film” (Kaplan 430). In an article published in 1957, Vidal admitted that the stage version of the play represented a watered-down version of the television text, as the producers were scared of including too much political material in case the play failed: “It is not that what was fashioned was bad or corrupt; I rather fancy the farce we ended up with, and I think it has a good deal of wear in it. But the play that might have been, though hardly earth-shaking, was far more interesting and true” (Vidal, “Visit” 39-40).

curtails his political aspirations, it leaves him with a clear conscience and saves his rocky marriage to his wife Alice (Margaret Leighton).

The Best Man makes some trenchant comments on contemporary American political life.¹⁰ “Yes, he was fired from the City College of New York,” remarks Russell about one of his political mentors, “but only for moral turpitude, not for incompetence as a philosopher.” Everyone involved in the campaign cares only for the former, not the latter. Certain topics are considered politically dangerous: Dick Jensen (Kevin McCarthy) tells Russell in no uncertain terms that his speeches should contain “not a word of Darwin. Evolution is out of bounds.” As in *Ben Hur* and *Visit to a Small Planet*, those in power reinforce their authority through censorship and repression. Russell objects to the ways in which politicians behave, recalling an occasion in the South when “a candidate for sheriff once won an election by claiming his opponent’s wife had been a thespian.” However such slanderous remarks are characteristic of a way of life in which “power is not a toy we give to good children. It is a weapon, and the strong men take it.” The rewards, according to current President Art Hockstader (Lee Tracy) are considerable: “[A politician can] get all the folks wound up and eat all the barbecue and chicken at picnics and have all the pretty girls.”

Russell’s decision to abandon his career is a brave one, but necessary if he wants to maintain his capacity for self-determination. He despises those people whose success is constructed “out of the pieces of [their] victims,” with “no responsibility to anything or anyone. This is a tragedy in a man and a disaster in a president.” However this kind of ideology underlies what Vidal later described as “the American Empire,” in which money talks and political beliefs count for little: “The president is still military master of our planet and its dull moon [...] He who can raise the most money to buy time on television is apt to be elected president by less than half the electorate which bothers to vote” (Vidal, *Presidency* 5-6). *The Best Man* was revived on Broadway during the 2012 presidential election campaign:

10 Vidal was less than enthusiastic about Schaffner’s film. In December 1963 he was so appalled at what he perceived as its infelicities that he insisted on major improvements being introduced. The film was initially marketed as *Gore Vidal’s The Best Man*, but the final cut was re-edited by Robert Swink and Hal Ashby, and opened to great success in April 1964. However Vidal remained annoyed by the revised credits which – despite the publicity campaign – announced: “*The Best Man*, a film by Franklin Schaffner.” Kaplan comments: “The auteur theory that overvalued the director’s contribution stared him [Vidal] in the face” (539).

although Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* found the production “sluggish” at times, he admired the play’s “undeniable prescience about future trends in American politicking,” especially “the rise of pandering populism as a crucial element in the playbook of any politician hoping to make headway in a presidential contest” (Isherwood).

***Is Paris Burning?* (1966)**

As previously indicated, Vidal had only limited involvement with this multinational production. Brought in to give shape to an unwieldy script, the experience proved unsatisfying, even though he found a kindred spirit in Orson Welles, who played the Swedish consul. Nonetheless René Clément’s finished product addresses issues of major significance to Vidal’s oeuvre. The huge cast – with Jean-Louis Trintignant, Yves Montand and Gert Frobe rubbing shoulders with Hollywood luminaries such as Glenn Ford and Anthony Perkins – bears witness to the importance of co-operation. In the film the Germans are defeated by an Allied force which sets aside their cultural and militaristic differences and fights as one. They remain loyal to one another, even if that means changing the battle-plans. Such virtues are singularly absent from contemporary American political life either in the past or the present, where individuals pursue their own self-interested desires, even if that results in their destruction. By contrast *Is Paris Burning?* suggests that individuals do not have to sacrifice their beliefs in order to participate in a community. General Patton (Kirk Douglas) and Lt. Karcher of the French army (Jean-Pierre Cassel) remain steadfastly committed to their own visions of winning the war. However they are prepared to acknowledge the validity of other people’s views; this is what lies at the heart of the successful campaign to liberate Paris from the Germans. Vidal himself suggested in a 2000 interview that the Forties witnessed the “Golden Age” of co-operation, in which “we [the Americans] and the Russians were allies, and we could have gone on being allies [...] American literature, for once, was now being recognized around the world. Europeans had been cut off from us by war and fascism [...] [now] American literature was all over Europe.” However that state of affairs was abruptly curtailed with the onset of the Cold War in which successive American governments “talked themselves into two things. One, believing that the Russians were coming [...] [and] fighting perpetual war for perpetual peace” (Vidal, *Told* 54-5).

***Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* (1970)**

Based on Tennessee Williams' play *The Seven Descents of Myrtle*, *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* returns to the emotional territory explored in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. This time the basic scenario involves a pair of half-brothers, one Euro, the other African-American — fighting over ownership of a lonely plantation in the South. Jeb, the Euro (James Coburn) insists that it belongs to him; if he should have issue, then the property will be handed down to the infant and exclude Chicken altogether. Chicken (Robert Hooks) possesses a document, notarized and signed by both half-brothers, which he believes will guarantee him ownership.

Sidney Lumet's film explores the half-brothers' complicated past that involves issues of racial and sexual transgression. Jeb tries to suppress this aspect of his life by reinventing the past — for example, by requesting his new bride Myrtle (Lynn Redgrave) to dress up as a gracious Southern lady of the mid-nineteenth century and live in a property restored to what it might have been like during that period. However these schemes are nothing more than evasions: Jeb is confronted with the truth about the past at the film's end. The experience proves so traumatic that it kills him.

Despite Vidal's professed hatred of organized religion, *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* contains distinct Biblical echoes.¹¹ The story takes place over seven days during the rainy season: eventually the family homestead is washed away by a flood, leaving Chicken and Myrtle as the only survivors perched on the roof like the inhabitants of Noah's Ark. Having come to terms with the truth their lives, they can survive the Day of Judgment. Whatever sins might have been committed in the past (involving an interracial affair at a time of strict segregation) need to be acknowledged; only then can the characters look forward to a rosier future. This is as significant to American society as a whole as it is for the characters in the film.

***Myra Breckinridge* (1970)**

Michael Sarne's realization of Vidal's novel has had its fair share of critical opprobrium. It lost Twentieth Century-Fox a fortune, put back

11 "The ways in which religious beliefs are used to manipulate the credulous, in this case through mass media, is [...] a central theme in *Kalki* [1978] an 'invention' that Vidal uses to create an allegory of environmental disaster" (Altman 165).

Vidal's career in films (as screenwriter and provider of source texts) and ruined Sarne's career.¹² The film's backstory has been recounted several times and need not concern us here.¹³ What is perhaps more interesting is to consider the film in its context of production: in 2009 Sarne likened it to "the last dying gasp of the 1960s before the cynical Seventies closed in, and people said, 'Don't be so romantic. Don't be so crazy. And all the shutters came down as people said, 'Stop being so silly! Behave yourselves! We're not like that anymore!' (O'Connor). The film depicts a world in which gender constructions and sexual attitudes have hardened; those who pursue alternative existences are either marginalized or forced to conform. Hence Myra's (Raquel Welch's) desire to enact brutal revenge on those members of the patriarchy who oppress her. Sarne inserts clips from black-and-white films of the 1930s and 1940s – involving stars such as Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin – to contrast the oppressive world of late Sixties America with Hollywood's dream factory of the past. Mae West's presence in the film, with her characteristic bawdy wisecracks, further emphasizes this contrast.

Myra takes a malicious pleasure in debunking contemporary attitudes; in response to an irate learner who asks "*Tarzan and the Amazons*? You mean you like that?" she replies: "It was a masterpiece." The learner responds: "It's *trash*! There isn't a single moment of truth. I mean, it's not *real*."¹⁴ Myra silences him with the following putdown: "Whatever 'real' means. Is that necessarily good?" Through this statement Myra underlines the constructed nature of American society in which patterns of taste are determined by a dominant minority in power in collaboration with so-called "enlightened" artists. The same rules also apply to sexuality: what is deemed "normal" or "abnormal" often depends on the views of an (invariably male-dominated) élite. *Myra Breckinridge* picks up where *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* and *Ben Hur* left off by deconstructing behavioral norms and attitudes (Diffrient 66).

12 Myra Breckinridge was memorably included in Harry Medved and Randy Dreyfuss' *The Fifty Worst Movies of all Time (and How They Got That Way)*. New York: Popular Library, 1978.

13 For further reading, see John Lytle, "Mike Sarne? Mike Sarne? Why?" *The Independent* 17 Jul. 1993 or the documentary included in the film's 1998 DVD release ("AMC Backstory: *Myra Breckinridge*."

14 *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945), directed by Kurt Neumann, starred Johnny Weissmuller, in which the eponymous hero has been thoroughly domesticated, focusing especially on his relationship with Boy (Johnny Sheffield).

Although Vidal distanced himself from the film adaptation, it nonetheless restates the importance of maintaining one's own belief in sexuality, even if that involves embracing a "radical transgressive" point of view.¹⁵ Many gay males attending the film's premiere at the Criterion Theater in Manhattan understood this as they sported their "yellow aviator sun glasses and identification love bracelets," while squealing and rolling their eyes "in campy histrionics [whenever] the police pushed the barricades back" (Bahrenburg).

***Caligula* (1979)**

In writing the screenplay for this film, Vidal returned to the strategy he had employed for *Ben Hur* of using the ancient past to comment on the present. As with Messala in the earlier film, *Caligula* (Malcolm McDowell) uses a combination of intimidation and duplicity to achieve his ends; he comes across as a spoilt child, so accustomed to a life of privilege and luxury that he has no idea how to deal with people. The only way he can achieve his ends is to eliminate his rivals; the perfect representative of a society – whether in the past or present – committed to censorship and repression. Vidal commented in a 2007 interview that in contemporary America, like ancient Rome "Due process [of law] – what is that? The notion of the jury, which seems to get more and more corrupted, as it's used as a government weapon to get rid of political parties that you do not enjoy. No, we are in danger of not having a country. We certainly aren't having a republic" (*Told* 20-1). The *mise-en-scène* sums up *Caligula's* outlook on life; it is claustrophobic, devoid of natural light and dedicated to pleasure. Anything is permissible so long as it pleases him – half-naked women gyrate to music and drink to their heart's content.

In terms of Vidal's previous screen work, *Caligula* implies that everyone is free to pursue their own forms of existence in whatever way they wish.¹⁶ It is this aspect of the film that encouraged Bob

15 The novel had a similar impact when it was first published two years earlier: "In creating a transsexual as a means of undermining the sexual and gender order Vidal foreshadowed both the political and the cultural events that would see sexuality become the basis for a set of new political and cultural movements" (Altman 132-3).

16 In Roman times, attitudes were complex: *Caligula's* indiscriminate seduction would hardly have raised eyebrows, but what Suetonius criticizes about *Caligula* is his sexual passivity (*stupratum*) and his lack of moderation (he bathes in perfumed water; drinks pearls, like the much maligned Cleopatra), or dresses up as Venus). See Nikolai Endres, "Roman Fever: Petronius' *Satyricon* and Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*." *Ancient Narrative* 4 (2004): 99-141.

Guccione, publisher of *Penthouse* magazine, to finance the project. On the other hand *Caligula* makes some trenchant comments about life under a dictatorship that pretends to be liberal in terms of its attitudes.

***The Sicilian* (1987)**

As with *Ben Hur*, Vidal ended up writing most of the screenplay for Michael Cimino's film, yet failed to receive screen credit following arbitration by the Screenwriters Guild of America (Kaplan 761-2). Set in post-1945 Italy, the film examines the campaign mounted by Salvatore Giuliano (Christopher Lambert) to establish a more just society in a rigidly hierarchical world dominated by the Cardinal of Palermo (Richard Venture), rich landowner Prince Borsa (Terence Stamp) and Mafia boss Don Masino Croce (Joss Ackland). Inevitably Giuliano's efforts are doomed to fail – in spite of his convictions, he ends up being manipulated by the institutions ranged against him. Nonetheless there is much to admire about him – at least he makes efforts to challenge the dominant hegemony by redistributing land more equally among the people.

Yet Giuliano is not a masculine hero of the type represented by John Wayne (for example). Unlike most of his contemporaries, Vidal identifies a connection between the construction of masculine heroism, the bloodshed of the Civil War, and the almost perpetual state of conflict that characterizes the relationship of the United States to the rest of the world since 1945. At the time *The Sicilian* was released, President Ronald Reagan was still involved in a long-running dispute in Nicaragua, even though the United States had already been found guilty of violating international law by supporting the contras in their rebellion against the Nicaraguan government four years earlier. In Vidal's novel *Hollywood* (1989) President Woodrow Wilson proclaims thus: "Because to fight to win, you must be brutal and ruthless, and that spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of national life" (45). While Giuliano has a ruthless side to his nature, he also understands the significance of community amongst his followers in the mountains, as well as sustaining a relationship with his fiancée Giovanna Ferrà (Giulia Boschi). Such beliefs constitute the framework of a stable society rather than the militaristic aggression shown by most recent American Presidents.

The Sicilian offers another satiric portrayal of the media, which – as in *The Left Handed Gun* – begins by reconstructing Giuliano as a folk-hero

challenging the traditions of Italian society. However their approach soon changes, once they realize that Don Masino is in the ascendant: Giuliano becomes the villain threatening future stability. The media are like weather-vanes, with their views changing in an instant if it suits them to do so.

***Lincoln* (1988)**

Lamont Johnson's three-hour version of Vidal's 1984 novel – with a screenplay by Vidal himself – shows the eponymous central character (Sam Waterston) working hard to sustain the kind of loyalty that kept Giuliano focused on his quest for social equality. The task is an onerous one: many of his political rivals, notably William H. Seward (Richard Mulligan) believe that they are far more suitable for the presidential role. Lincoln appreciates the weakness of his position, but possesses sufficient self-reliance to continue in power and implement those policies that he believes would best suit the national interest.

However Lincoln's success is achieved at a price, as he devotes more attention towards winning the Civil War rather than promoting racial equality. For the sake of expediency, he sides with the Anti-Abolitionists, even if he does not share their views. Vidal's interpretation was attacked by critics for being "grossly distorted." C. Vann Woodward, emeritus professor of history at Yale, wrote in the *New York Review of Books* (24 Sep. 1987) that the book contained "numerous historical blunders and errors," including episodes that might have happened, but never as told by Vidal." Vidal defended himself by suggesting that Lincoln never set out to be historically accurate, but rather tell the great leader's story "through someone's consciousness [...] I only show him [Lincoln] as those around him saw at specific times." Lincoln was a Unionist at heart, who once observed that the prospect of liberating African-Americans was not to be contemplated, as it would cause too much controversy amongst the whites ("An Exchange.") Such pragmatism was highly effective in a country seeking to extricate itself from civil war. *Lincoln* reminds us about the complexity of Vidal's politics; he is not necessarily for or against any specific ideology, so long as it is directed towards public rather than individual interests.¹⁷

17 It is instructive to compare Vidal's *Lincoln* with Steven Spielberg's 2012 film that portrays the central character (Daniel Day-Lewis) as someone fond of using verbal circumlocutions to make his point, as well as helping him to come to decisions. His private life functions as some kind of respite from the rigors of public life.

Vidal's Onscreen Appearances

As well as writing screenplays, Vidal made numerous cameo appearances, either as himself or in minor roles. While not demonstrating great acting ability, his presence in films helped to reinforce some of the major themes running throughout his work.¹⁸ In *Fellini's Roma* (1972) he appears as himself, sitting at a restaurant table surrounded by plastic decorations on display in tubs. His adoring fans listen to him describing the city of Rome as a refuge from an overpopulated world: "What better place to live in the world than in a city that calls itself eternal?"¹⁹ The irony of this statement is obvious: Rome's status as an eternal city is under threat from capitalism (symbolized by the ersatz decorations) and self-interest. In the documentary *The US vs. John Lennon* (2006), Vidal returns to the same theme: successive American Presidents have been so preoccupied with feathering their own nests that they have worked hard to eliminate any opposition. So-called "undesirable" aliens like Lennon threaten their future stability. Vidal offers this memorable comparison: "John Lennon was a born enemy of those who control the United States, which I always say was admirable. Lennon came to represent life, while Mr. Nixon ... and Mr. Bush [George W. Bush] represent death."

Vidal was cast as such 'death-like' figures in *With Honors* (1994) and *Igby Goes Down* (2002). In the earlier film he plays a Harvard law professor who is so concerned with his own self-image that he cannot accept the dissenting views of one of his learners, Montgomery Kessler (Brendan Fraser). In *Igby Goes Down* he plays a school principal who simply does not understand the way the eponymous Igby (Kieran Culkin) behaves. He has become a representative of that spirit of "bored cynicism" that dominates most institutions, whether governmental or educational (Vidal, "Writing" 30). In the science fiction thriller *Gattaca* (1996) he plays Director Josef, who remains firmly convinced that no one can become a superior being unless they have the right background and qualifications; in other words, if their face fits. Anyone daring to differ from that norm – for example, the genetically inferior but brave Vincent Freeman (Ethan Hawke) – is viewed as both inferior and threatening.

18 Vidal made numerous onscreen appearances as himself, which have not been discussed in this article. See the *Internet Movie Database* listing "Gore Vidal: Self." Web. 24 Mar. 2012.

19 Vidal describes the filming of this sequence in his memoir *Point to Point Navigation* (London: Abacus, 2006): 139-40.

On other occasions Vidal played characters who were victims of such cynicism: in Tim Robbins' political satire *Bob Roberts* (1992) he plays Senator Brickley Paiste, a rival for the party nomination to the eponymous central character (played by Robbins himself). Paiste is an old-style politician, believing in virtues such as loyalty and community values; he proves no match for the thrusting Roberts who – like Joe Cantwell in *The Best Man* – will stop at nothing to fulfill his political aims. Vidal drew a parallel between his experiences of the film and his earlier abortive campaign to run for the Democratic Party in 1982: “The hall is familiar, even to the extent of the Gettysburg Address in giant gold letters above the stage. Then I realize that I have been through all this” (Vidal, “Time” 54). In the political thriller *Shadow Conspiracy* (1997) Vidal played Congressman Page, another politician forced by thrusting young aide Bobby Bishop (Charlie Sheen) to support the President's (Sam Waterston's) policies, even though disagreeing with them. If Page refuses, then his political career will come to an abrupt end.

Vidal's final film as an actor was in Jonas Pate's *Shrink* (2009), where he played George Charles, a chat-show host interviewing celebrity psychiatrist Henry Carter (Kevin Spacey). Carter admits on-air that he is nothing but a fraud; he is as mentally scarred as most of his clients, and can only deal with his problem by taking Class A drugs. Charles observes somewhat cynically onscreen that such duplicity is characteristic of contemporary society in which everyone seeks self-gratification while remaining oblivious to the plight of those around them.

Conclusion: Vidal's Cinematic Legacy

Although Vidal spent a lot of time and energy working in the cinema, both behind and in front of the camera, he remained largely disappointed with his efforts.²⁰ Very few (if any) of the film adaptations of his work satisfied him, while his battles over screen credit in *Ben Hur* and *The Sicilian* gave him a cynical view of the film business, which he believed was controlled by precisely the same giant corporations that controlled the American government. In 1977 he claimed that “every mistake you've

²⁰ Vidal experienced other disappointments; his work never caught on in academe (leaving him largely sceptical of critics' evaluations of his work), and he twice failed to be elected as a Democratic nominee.

made so far in your life you will continue to make. There's not a chance of getting out from under. Now I know quite a lot about movies. I know how they're put together. Yet I go from disaster to disaster. Obviously, I'm getting stupider" (Stanton and Vidal 135). On the other hand the cinema provided him with the chance to inform American audiences about their nation's failings for nearly half a century, focusing on a variety of issues: the growth of the 'American Empire;' politics; capitalism and its ills; the growth of religious belief and the simultaneous growth of sexual freedoms. It is perhaps wrong to describe Vidal's views as comprising a coherent philosophy; rather he offered a series of observations that defined both the past and current history of the United States. He was a great example of that rare kind of person – the public intellectual remaining outside of academe, with the ability to communicate to all types of viewers.

For a long period in his life Vidal was an expatriate, making his home in Ravello, Italy, and traveling infrequently back to his country of birth. While Altman argues with some justification that Vidal never renounced America (he refused to learn Italian properly, claiming instead that he was still learning English), the experience of living abroad gave him an outsider's as well as an insider's view of the country (Altman 178). This renders his work particularly accessible to all types of viewer, whether American or non-American. As a public intellectual, Vidal drew no distinction between the two; he saw himself as a social figure, the product of a society and the agent of political change. Through his involvement in a variety of cinematic projects, Vidal focused attention on important issues such as the importance of acknowledging the lessons of the past, the recognition of difference, whether social, political or sexual, and the right to criticize official government policies both at home and abroad. By doing so he represented what Edward Said once described as "a kind of countermemory with its own counterdiscourse that will not allow conscience [i.e. America's collective conscience] to look away or fall asleep" (39).

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