

GORE VIDAL'S EARLY HOLLYWOOD: HISTORY, FICTION,
AND FILM

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"In the end, he who screens the history makes the history." (Vidal)

Although Gore Vidal has both worked as a Hollywood screenwriter and written criticism on Film—in this regard, he is perhaps best known for a sustained attack on the *auteur* theory of the magisterial director—I am concerned in this paper mainly with his fiction account of the early days of film-making in his novel *Hollywood* (1990) and the relation of film to national political life depicted therein. This novel is the sixth in a series that gives a more or less continuous historical picture of the social and political history of the US from colonial times to the present. "Political" for Vidal, however, means primarily the acts of statesmen, diplomats, and high-ranking military personnel, and the social history he presents is that of the upper-class which supplies their ranks, so that what Vidal is in fact offering in these six novels is what one might call the history of the American "movers-and-shakers". In an interview about his work, he said: "I am attacking the ruling-class of this country, and the economic policies that dominate the United States, and the fact that we have no politics..." (Ruas 63). It is, indeed, the ruling class that he satirizes, although he has little enough to say about dominant economic policies, i.e. capitalism early or late. The phrase "that we have no politics" seems to imply that the politics that

the US does have is not a true politics, in Jefferson's sense, or even Hannah Arendt's, that is, a collective effort of people bound by mutual promises to constitute a stable worldly structure, which (she thinks) "may be the highest human faculty" (Arendt 175). Nowhere, at least in his fictional works, does Vidal give any hint of what a true politics might consist of.

Vidal has lived among the ruling-classes all his life and is neither intimidated nor particularly impressed by such people. Although he sets himself up, as in the quoted remark, as someone in opposition to the ruling-class, I think that a key to his political stance is that he also shares many of its values, especially the notion that political and social change can be effectively brought about from above, which he may well have learned from the experience of a cosmopolitan life and long association with various establishments. Born at the US Military Academy at West Point, Vidal is the grandson of a US Senator, Thomas Gore of Oklahoma, from whom he says he derived his fascination with politics, and perhaps (it has been suggested by novelist Diane Johnson) his feeling of upper-class *noblesse oblige* (Johnson 24-25). He is also the cousin of Al Gore, Clinton's Vice-President, and once himself ran unsuccessfully for the House of Representatives, so his attitude toward mainstream politicians may be said to be somewhat ambiguous. Biography apart, his historical novels tend to be icon-busting, as he seems determined to expose the pious and hypocritical humbugs behind the national myths. Unlike his perceptive political essays, there are no alternatives in these works to traditional politics, perhaps because he is primarily concerned with showing the ways things were done in the past, and yet his satirization of those things implies a vision of another, better way of doing them. The only solution in the novels that he seems to be proposing is a change, if I may borrow a term from the movies, in the cast of characters.

At the end of *Empire*, President Theodore Roosevelt and megajournalist William Randolph Hearst are engaging in a struggle over some compromising letters from the Standard Oil Company. Hearst,

who in the novel represents the power of propaganda, wants to implicate Roosevelt (who, for his part, represents that all-important contemporary art of self-promotion). There is no factual basis for Hearst's accusation, but he will, as always, simply invent a suitable context, just as, he reminds the President, he has invented Roosevelt himself (i.e. as heroic "Rough-Rider" in the war with Spain). At this effrontery, Roosevelt huffily protests that "history", not Hearst, invented him, to which Hearst replies, in what might be taken to be an epigraph for Vidal's historical project: "True history is the final fiction" (*Empire* 472).

In his recently published memoir, significantly titled *Screening History*, Vidal elaborates on this point with respect to movies: "How, through ear and eye, we are both defined and manipulated by fictions of such potency that they are able to replace our own experience, often become our *sole* experience of a reality become...unreal" (qtd. by Johnson 24). This statement, which calls attention both to the representative power of the visual media and the absent sense of history in the contemporary world, a gap which is increasingly filled by Hollywood films and by television, puts Vidal squarely in the midst of certain strands of contemporary cultural theory. Yet, Vidal evidently has not gone over entirely to Baudrillard's theory of the hyperreal, in which simulation models replace things (Baudrillard 166ff), as the statement implies that he still believes in a reality independent of its representations. Evidently, Vidal thinks that these representations are so powerful they *seem* more real than our own (real) experience.

In accordance with this metaphysic, *Hollywood* turns out to be a fairly conventional novel about the early days of film-making, which has some interesting things to say about the power of the image but does not become the exploration of representations of reality that the statement quoted might promise. The novel's main title is misleading, perhaps maliciously so, since the novel deals as much with Washington as with Hollywood, but the satirical point is well-taken: the political capital = the movie capital, both places dealing with the production of

images and both essentially populated by actors, a point which has been clinched historically by the election of Ronald Reagan.

The sub-title ("A Novel of America in the 1920s") is also not quite accurate, as the story begins in 1917, on the eve of the entrance of the US into the First World War, and ends well before the end of the decade, with the death of President Harding (1923), although it does take in the major events of those years: the Great War, the even more devastating Flu epidemic, the Treaty of Paris, the Wilson administration, the formation of the League of Nations and the embarrassing failure of the US Senate to ratify, Harding's campaign, and the Teapot Dome scandal and indictment of top government officials, from which Harding himself was spared by an early death. And yet, since Vidal aims at writing entertaining fiction as well as giving a history lesson, he often relies on the higher gossip. *Hollywood* features such delights as a uxorious Woodrow Wilson, FDR's blonde mistress, Theodore's coke-snorting daughter, Alice, Harding with his imperious wife, two mistresses, illegitimate child, and a tryst in a White House closet, among other episodes.

If this sensationalist "insider" view of the corridors of power cannot be wholly justified by Vidal's background and family connections, he does in fact offer varied historical information not often known, one would think, to the general reader. The author has expressed a need for the novelist to address a large audience, without which "[the novelist] cannot delight, instruct, reform, destroy a world he wants...to be different for having lived in it" (qtd. by Wood 30). *Hollywood* is, accordingly, a sugar-coated pill, didactic entertainment rather than, as so many other popular novels of the genre are, an historical soap-opera. Like Vidal's previous historical fictions, this novel is substantial in detail, as the author attempts to recreate an epoch with a solid basis in the historical record—not only through secondary sources but biographies, letters, documents, apocryphal tales of historical figures, in a social context of the customs and events of the time as recorded in books, newspapers and monographs. Respect for Vidal's scholarship can

perhaps be perceived in the debate in the *New York Review of Books* between the author and academic historians, who might ordinarily be expected to ignore a popular historical novel, on the publication of *Lincoln* (1984).

Theorists like Hayden White have stressed the fictionality of all narrative and the dependence of the historian on narrative to make events comprehensible. For his part, Vidal claims to have blurred the distinction between history and fiction by writing a blend in which historical and imagined events have more or less equal plausibility: "In these books I'm doing the work of a historian or biographer, reflecting on the past and making narratives of it, in much the same way as the historians who interest me the most do...Thucydides, say, who was a proto-novelist" (Ruas 62). Vidal attempts a double angle, to examine what might have happened under differing circumstances, in the light of what actually did happen, so he can, as he says, "attribute motive" to historical figures (which, Michael Wood comments, a conscientious historian shouldn't do, "Passions" 30). Since Vidal doesn't, of course, always know what historical figures really said on a given occasion, his method is to invent plausible dialogue for what they might have said, given the context and circumstances, a method that was in fact first employed by Thucydides, although it should be added that, given Vidal's status as best-selling author, he makes his characters sound rather cleverer than they might have in real life. As "historian", however, Vidal does not resemble Thucydides, the forerunner of scientific history (i.e. cause and effect to explain events, as opposed to the older anecdotal narratives of Herodotus) so much as those two Roman historians who spanned the first and second centuries and chronicled the lives of the movers-and-shakers of that time, the Roman emperors: Suetonius for the gossipy, anecdotal method, and Tacitus for the morally corrective purpose.

Simultaneously with the political events and scandals of the early Twenties, the story promised by the title is told in the novel, the beginnings of the motion-picture industry in Hollywood. Once again,

Vidal can offer an insider's view of a world, drawing on his experience as a screen-writer and his connections with the industry's personalities. Vidal bridges the two worlds of Washington and Hollywood through the (fictional) character of Caroline Sanford, his model emancipated-woman carried over from *Empire*. After her career as East Coast publisher, she rather improbably becomes an early silent-film heroine. The two worlds can be satirically juxtaposed by her important participation in both. While she is making a melodramatic film about the victorious Allied armies in an early phase of the war, for example, in the "real life" news the German army is overrunning Europe. One of Vidal's themes is, as suggested above, that the movies' version of events prevails as the reality.

In *Hollywood*, Vidal shows how propaganda generates power, as the fabrication of truth in film is paralleled by the fabrication of truth in politics and the press (nowadays, of course, it is much the same thing). The two worlds of movies and politics are separated geographically, West and East coast, but we are to understand that in purpose, if not in style, they have similar aims. In the early years of Hollywood, movies (which Vidal informs us were originally called "photo-plays") were perceived as having great potential for political propaganda and frequently invited the application of political pressure and censorship. We learn that the head of war propaganda in Wilson's administration, George Creech, was an advertising man who, anticipating Richard Nixon, justified telling lies as necessary for national security. In one episode of the novel, Caroline's boyfriend, Tim, a leftist film director, makes a politically radical film called "The Strike Breakers" that is banned as subversive. Since the movie is a silent one, Tim simply changes the title-cards in order to favor the bosses rather than the workers, and the film is hailed as a victory for capitalism. Vidal seems to be making a point here about the ambiguity of visual images; for him, *words* are what mean, which is shown also by Caroline's never being recognized as a film star by her friends and only occasionally by strangers. This suggests that Vidal's stated belief in the power of images is not so strong as he really thinks.

Vidal's historical view is that the American people were not concerned about Germany or Europe in the Twenties but they thought of their own country as a haven for disaffected Europeans (including most early film producers and directors and a number of actors). The country was xenophobic and isolationist, but public opinion was induced by effective propaganda to support intervention in the First World War, which included a complete turn-about by Wilson, who was in fact elected on an isolationist platform. The myths of electoral politics are attacked in the story of Harding's election, which is not the result of popular appeal to a sovereign people, as in liberal rhetoric, but of backroom deals between bosses and the buying of delegates. The bosses select the nominee and the media take over. Harding is shown to have won the election as the man with the fewest enemies. Mediocre in qualifications but tactically astute, he waits for the party favorites to cancel each other out and then steps in to fill the vacuum, a strategy Vidal borrowed from his film about electoral politics based on his own play with the ironic title *The Best Man* (1960).

Although they purport to be historical accounts, Vidal's narratives have a contemporary tone, giving an anachronistic effect in the gap between *histoire* and *discours*, similar to that of a "period" movie. The apparent temporal realism of the narrative breaks down when the explanations that the narrator gives show that he could not have been present at the time of the action. Although this is a common enough postmodernist ploy, Vidal seems indifferent to the discrepancy. There is also an homogenization of the narrative point-of-view. Several main characters become at varying moments the narrative focus, and yet the author, or implied author, always seems to be hovering near, ready with a characteristically acerbic quip or pithy observation: e.g. American democracy was "a fiction that the American people in any way controlled their fate. The Constitution had largely excluded them." This remark mocks two national pieties—individual autonomy and the sacred political text—but it could have been spoken by *any* of the characters, or at least the clever ones. It is in fact the same voice found

in Vidal's essays. This consistency of tone and sentiment, it should be noted, deviates from the supposedly realist mode of the novel, with all of the sympathetic characters tending to sound alike, but it has also been said of a writer as different as Don DeLillo that his clever characters all speak in an aphoristic style that makes them "emanations" of the author (Aaron 74). Note that this is rather different, since DeLillo uses characters as vehicles not for his own opinions but for a variety of specialized languages and professional jargons that either engage in dialogue or collide with one another, in the manner of Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia, while Vidal's characters are univocal.

The consistency of tone is in fact typical of satire. Northrop Frye's discussion of Menippean satire as a stylized rather than naturalized narrative pertains, as critics have noted, more to postmodern fictions such as Pynchon's or DeLillo's than Vidal's novels, which tend toward a fully naturalized discourse, but the latter do resemble Frye's description of Menippean satire in that they present "people as mouthpieces of the idea they represent," a "vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern" (Frye 308-10). Vidal's work illustrates the strengths and limitations of satire. Satire attempts to correct folly and abuse in individuals, institutions, and society as a whole through the classical techniques of wit, ridicule, violent juxtaposition or contrast, parody, burlesque, and caricature. In other words, it employs shame to expose abuses with the implied aim of correcting them. And yet, the claim to correct abuses implies an ideal standard from which the satirized persons and institutions are deviant. Satire can therefore be seen not only as critical but as deeply conservative. For one thing, it implies the satirist's access to the truth. For another, the satiric mode, as Richard Poirier says, allows the imagination only to reproduce the environment, or (in the more common American mode) create an alternative ideal environment, a utopia, which shares with satire the privileging of an idealized society over an actually existing one. Satire is therefore critical but "essentially submissive, in being merely corrective, to the necessary reality of an established society" (16,42).

It can be argued that the US in modern times needs and deserves its satirists quite as much as ancient Rome. For his part, Vidal clearly feels that Americans prefer national myths to historical realities (in which, surely, they are not alone) and he intends to set us straight about our own past: "What little the average thoughtful American—that is, the 5 per-cent of the country who read books—what little they know about American history, I taught them" (Ruas 60). Apart from the characteristically breezy arrogance and gross generalization of this statement, it is highly authoritarian in its assumption not that history is mediated by fiction, which is true enough, but that Vidal himself somehow has access to the truth, to a "truer history" than the ones available, superior to others for being somehow in closer correspondence to what really happened. This is not, it should be noted, Hayden White's theory of alternative versions of the past that may in fact be offered in good faith but are inevitably different since they are written from different historical times and places and with necessarily different ideologies. Vidal, I think, believes that there is an unproblematic reality out there that can be misrepresented for political reasons, and that he, Vidal, has discovered and chosen over other willful misrepresentations. It is characteristic of the satirist, from Juvenal to Swift and beyond, that he is unique among men in understanding the corruption of his society.

Frederic Jameson has argued that historical novels from Walter Scott onward depend to some extent on previous historical knowledge, the received knowledge one acquires, mainly in school, through the culture's legitimizing, orthodox histories (a knowledge that, as both Jameson and Vidal recognize, historical films and television programs now provide even more than historical novels). This kind of novel, Jameson says, establishes a dialectic between what the reader already knows in this way and the revelations provided by the novelist. Historical fiction thus mediates between one fiction and another. Jameson refers specifically to E.L. Doctorow's period Hollywood novel, *Ragtime* (1975), which one is tempted to compare to *Hollywood* since

they both have a central political dimension and a parallel story of the early years of Hollywood film, covering roughly the same historical period. Doctorow's political story is a (fictional) one, however, about a black revolutionary and his white cohorts. Jameson's point is that *Ragtime* is an example of the new type of historical novel which does not set out, as *Hollywood* and its predecessors do, to represent the historical past but only our received ideas about that past. It "short-circuits genuine historiography" through a procedure that employs a singular, pared-down language and a designation of both historical personages and generic family names that reify the characters to such an extent that "it is impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge or doxa" (Jameson 70). Implicitly, Vidal recognizes this in his interview statements about teaching Americans the history they haven't learned in school, although he evidently thinks he can give a "correct" version of events.

Barbara Foley, in comparing *Ragtime* to John Dos Passos' great trilogy *USA* (1930-36), its main literary model, argues that for Dos Passos, history, which exists objectively, provides the frame for the novel in its balancing of fact and fiction, with the characters being subject "to the plot of history," while "Doctorow treats history ultimately as motif" (85-105). She would presumably support Vidal's method and aims as offering a text subject to the "plot of history." More suspicious of such objective theories of history, Linda Hutcheon argues that it is "a relatively unproblematized view of historical continuity" that gives "a stable plot structure" to Dos Passos' novel; by contrast, Doctorow calls this stability into question by his "postmodern reworking of the same historical material" (Hutcheon 95). It is to the point, as Foley herself says, that Doctorow's central episode of Coalhouse Walker's rebellion has its source not in history but in other fictions, namely Kleinst's *Michael Koalhaus* (which Jameson also mentions) and a little known Thirties novel, *Catalogue*, by George Milburn.

In contrast to *Ragtime*, Vidal's historical fictions do not depart from the historical record nor from what Foley calls "the realm of the plausible," that is, they aspire to be realist fictions, while Doctorow is deliberately anachronistic. His novel, more technically sophisticated than Vidal's, is a pseudo-historical or, in Linda Hutcheon's term, "metahistorical" fiction, and would seem to have more in common with John Barth's *The Soft-Weed Factor* (1960) than Vidal's attempts at historical realism. Foley makes the relevant point that Coalhouse Walker, for example, does not conform to what Lukacs called "typical characters," those who in destiny and psychology represent social trends and historical forces, but is rather a Sixties "Black Panther implant" into the early century. Doctorow is therefore anachronistic in a (postmodernist) knowing way, while Vidal seems unconscious of the discrepancy between his narrative voice and narrated events. Doctorow's anachronism, where the characters use concepts and speak a language that clearly belongs to later usage, is meant, Hutcheon thinks, to present the past, not as Vidal's pseudo-eyewitness "you are there" type of historical fiction, but more like what actual historians try to do: establish a relationship between the past they are writing about and the present they are living in (Hutcheon 71; Danto 185. qtd. by Hutcheon). Jose Saldivar, who would evidently agree more with Foley, argues that Doctorow has merely conveyed the American radical past formally, through the slick postmodern surface style, in which "the sharp edges of the Real have entirely disappeared, substituted by pop images and the simulacra of that history" (539).

All this suggests that any attempt to represent even a more critical version of the past is not without theoretical difficulties. Vidal claims to be attacking the class structure of power in the US, but he does so in ways that at least partly reinforce it. His exclusive emphasis on powerful and influential individuals is, of course, a view shared by the class he would be criticizing and helps reinforce that view insofar as it is convincing. The novels are content-oriented, rich in character and incident, but in fact reproduce the world-view projected by the

dominant classes and so are (as the marxists would say) historically incomplete, although they pretend to be comprehensive. As I have suggested above, it seems that, for Vidal, in most cases a mere change of "cast" would suffice: substitute good guys for bad guys, or, in his refreshingly unpuritanical vision, more interesting and less hypocritical bad guys than the pious banalities of American politics. This personalist view obstructs a situation in which a structural problem of unequal power and institutionalized injustice needs addressing. Both the problems and the solutions are reduced to personalities.

In conclusion, I might summarize the features of Vidal's historical novels that reduce their critical power as: the fiction of an unmediated, represented reality, and the concurrent transparently unproblematic language that expresses that reality; the dramatization of an essentially banal factuality, principally through the personalization of the historical process; a linear, coherent plot that best serves this dramatization but that risks falsifying historical complexity; a moral message that the linear plot, realist metaphysics, and transparent language all facilitate. These interconnected notions and procedures are also, it will be noted, structural features of Hollywood cinema (Stam, Burgoyne, Flitterman-Lewis), the "classic realist" movies derived from the techniques and assumptions of 19th century novels and plays (Connor 174). It is somewhat ironic that Vidal's novels, which satirize the Hollywoodization of American reality, so resemble Hollywood movies in their formal features and unexamined assumptions.

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