

Gore Vidal's *Screening History* comprises three lectures in the field of American Civilization that the author delivered at Harvard. The ostensible subject is how the movies, by their way of interpreting history, affect our lives. The actual subject is how the movies have been affecting Gore Vidal. The actual

subject is Gore Vidal: his thoughts, feelings, and such parts of his life as he cares to divulge. The trouble is that megalomania is more fun as a participatory activity than, as for Vidal's readers, a spectator sport.

Perhaps the best way to convey the essence of this short book (96 pages, but after you subtract ten for pictures, more like 86) is with a little *explication de texte*. Let's take a paragraph on page 17, from the first lecture, "The Prince and the Pauper," named after a movie that, in 1937, was a crucial influence on the 12-year-old Gore:

From the earliest days, the movies have been screening history, and if one saw enough movies, one learned quite a lot of simple-minded history. Stephen [sic] Runciman and I met on an equal basis not because of my book *Julian*, which he had written about, but because I knew *his* field, thanks to a profound study of Cecil B. De Mille's *The Crusades* (1935), in which Berengaria, as played by Loretta Young, turns to her Lionheart husband and pleads, "Richard, you *gotta* save Christianity." A sentiment that I applauded at the time but came later to deplore.

You will notice the characteristic Vidal tone: at best, ironic; at worst, snotty. Unlike some writers' irony, which, though subtle, is always unmistakable, Vidal's is of a more ambiguous nature: often one can't be sure whether he is kidding or whether he means what he's saying. In a writer as shrewd as Vidal—and given the frequency of the occurrence—this cannot be accidental: he wants us not to be sure. Why? Because he makes out-

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SCREENING HISTORY

Gore Vidal

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reviewed by JOHN SIMON

rageous statements that delight a certain type of reader, but strike another as ridiculous. Thanks to his ambiguity, Vidal can make Reader A believe that the author means it all, and Reader B (whatever he may suspect) not wish to risk being taken in by such an "obvious" irony. Not an unclever strategy.

"Quite a lot of simple-minded history." This could mean that, though oversimplified, history is still history in the movies. Or that it is balderdash, but what the world comes to believe, and so *becomes* history. Earlier, Vidal told us that "we perceive sex, say, not as it demonstrably is but as we think it ought to be as carefully distorted for us by the churches and the schools, by the press and by—triumphantly—the movies, which are, finally, the only validation to which that dull anterior world, reality, must submit." Note the ambiguity in this statement, too. Sex is a plain, good thing, demonstrable and undistorted. It is real. Along come religion, education, and journalism to distort it for us, make it bad. But now the movies "validate" sex for us; their "triumphant" distortion is better than "that dull anterior world, reality." So reality is dull, a bad thing? But, of course, we are meant to take that triumph of the movies as irony, right? So the movies are a terrible but wonderful thing that distorts the real; but, for making it, however mendaciously, wonderful, more power to them! We get lost in this hall of mirroring ironies.

Back, however, to our simple-minded movie-made history. It's distorted, but not *so* bad. Thus when Vidal encounters the eminent historian of the Crusades, Steven Runciman,

he meets him "on an equal basis." Reader A takes this at face value: someone as smart as Vidal can learn from movies seen as a boy about as much as a distinguished historian can from a lifetime of study. When Reader B demurs, Vidal retorts, "You fool, can't you hear the irony? Can't you see I'm joking?" Well, but Runciman has written about Vidal's historical

novel *Julian*. We don't know whether this means that he reviewed it, and, if so, how favorably, but the mere fact that the famed historian took notice implies that he took Vidal the historical fictionist seriously. Yet that is not the basis for the equal footing, says Vidal with charming self-depreciation; the real reason is that Vidal, at age ten, saw De Mille's *The Crusades*, and so knows all one needs to know about the Third Crusade when, however many years later, the two men meet. Among other accomplishments, Vidal clearly has a photographic memory.

But what are we to make of "thanks to a profound study" of De Mille's film? Vidal may have seen *The Crusades* since, perhaps even more than once. But no, the tone is manifestly ironic; the picture is silly, and Loretta Young doesn't even speak proper English: "You *gotta* save Christianity," she says. But ironies contain further ironies: the way movies screen history *becomes* history, for all of us, and so whatever Runciman may have unearthed through research pales beside Vidal's knowledge of screened history. That *gotta* is from the heart, and the heart has its reasons, which mere historical reason knows nothing of. I wonder, incidentally, whether the always ladylike Loretta Young really said *gotta*. And whether Vidal—if he saw the movie only in 1935, and if he doesn't have, on top of his photographic memory, a phonographic ear—can be sure of how she spoke that line. At age ten, not even Vidal would have thought ill enough of *gotta* to bother noticing it.

Now what about that last sentence? Vidal informs us that in his first decade he was still a believer in Christianity, but that, as he grew older and became an

atheist, the piety he had applauded came to look deplorable. That is his privilege, but why tell us about it here? What has it to do with the Third Crusade, Steven Runciman, screening history, or American Civilization? Nothing; it has to do with Vidal's considering his opinions, relevant or not, of patent interest to all.

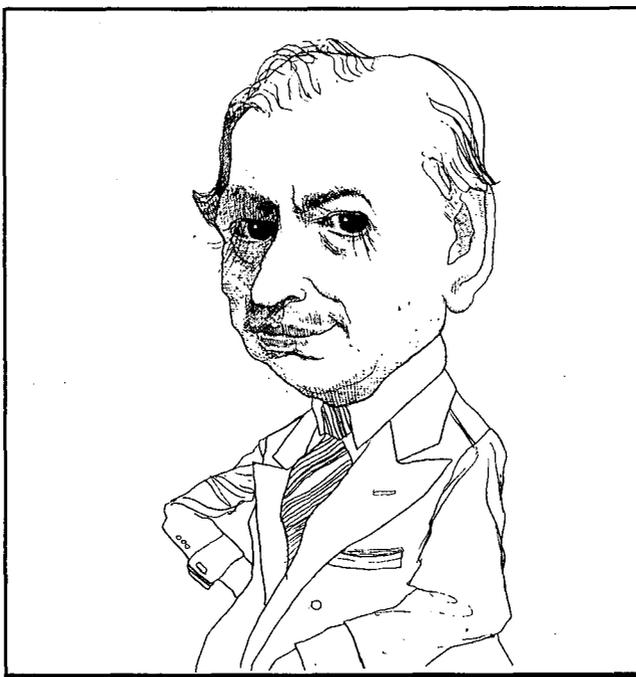
The passage also illustrates another leitmotif of the book: Vidal's personal contacts with all kinds of celebrities. Virtually whenever Gore drops a famous name in any context, good or bad, by the next sentence—or, at the latest, paragraph—he has come to know this celebrity. The celebrity may be ridiculed by him now (perhaps even then), but meet him or her he did. Often he gets to know the person intimately; on a few occasions, the meeting doesn't quite take place. At a 1939 outdoor performance of *Turandot* at the Baths of Caracalla, when Gore is fourteen and touring Europe with a group, Mussolini is sitting next to them. (What good tickets the group was able to get! How much in advance did they buy them?) "As Mussolini passed within a yard of me, I got a powerful whiff of cologne, which struck me as degenerate." (Vidal doesn't mention whether what he deplored at the time, he came later to applaud.) Anyway, he once saw, or whiffed, the Duce plain.

Similarly, he doesn't actually meet the loved and envied idol of his childhood, Mickey Rooney. But at the very moment he is delivering these William E. Massey Sr. Lectures at Harvard's Sanders Theater (a mighty big auditorium), Mickey is "at the bookstore of the Harvard Coop, autographing copies of his latest book." Which is better: autographing your book at a bookstore—something Vidal has, in any case, done countless times—or giving a series of lectures in Sanders Theater? Any fool can answer that question. But it takes a special kind of fool, if only by implication, to raise it.

Screening *History*, to repeat, is divided, like all gall, into three parts. The first lecture, "The Prince and the Pauper," is essentially about what movies meant to young Gore from age seven to when he enlisted in the

Army to escape the horrors of his home and a couple of schools, horrors mitigated mainly by his steady moviegoing. "My life has paralleled, when not intersected, the entire history of the talking picture," he tells us ingenuously near the start. In consequence, it is not surprising that he often gets confused about whose effect on what he is talking about.

It seems that life with father Gene Vidal, Director of Air Commerce under FDR, and mother Nina Gore Vidal Auchincloss Olds—"a composite of Bette Davis and Joan Crawford" in looks, who, in her lifetime, drank "the equivalent of the Chesapeake Bay in vodka"—was not all that easy. And even though, never fear, the boy read books avidly, his voracity for the nepenthe of movies could climax in five movies a day. The one family member for whom he had and has



admiration and love was his maternal grandfather T. P. Gore, who, "at thirty-seven, having helped invent the state of Oklahoma—wit of this sort runs in our family—became a famous [four-term] senator." I have no idea what kind of wit it takes to invent Oklahoma, but the kind needed for this sort of remark runs in the grandson's veins.

Three movies impressed the boy especially: *The Mummy* (1932), his first, with Boris Karloff ("the effect of that film proved to be lifelong"); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935—"I really wanted to be a movie star; specifically, I wanted to be Mickey Rooney, and to play Puck,

as he had done"); and, above all, *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937), as we shall presently see. In the meantime, Gore had achieved the first of his several fifteen-minute famousnesses. At age ten, he flew an airplane by himself. Taught to fly by his father (who, however, stayed on terra firma with the Pathé News crew), and accompanied only by daddy's assistant, who knew even less about flying than his young pilot, Gore landed the plane with only a slight bump. For the newsreel cameras, he had to deliver a line his father taught him, "It was as easy as riding a bicycle." This was not only untrue, it also trapped Gore "in the wrong script." His screen test, as his father had called it, was a failure: instead of a movie star, he became only "a newsreel personage." Nevertheless, there are enough allusions in the text to the flight of "the Boy Airman" to make us feel as if we too had seen, if not five movies, at least five identical newsreels in one day.

"Should I capture my family [including at least one stepfather] upon my page," Vidal tells us, "the result is [sic] like a bad movie—or, worse, a good one." Clearly, then, seeing movies becomes an escape from living them, as, paradoxically, living vicariously what is screened becomes more life than life itself. This is where *The Prince and the Pauper*, starring the real-life twins Bobby and Billy Mauch, becomes particularly important. "I wanted to be not one but two," we learn. "Suddenly, I wanted to be not Puck; or even Mickey

Rooney. I wanted to be myself, twice." There speaks the incipient narcissist, who immediately goes on the defensive, "I dare not speculate what the school of Vienna . . . would make of this," and turns the whole thing into a jest: "I refer, of course, to the Riding School." The arch reference to the Spanische Reitschule is more apt than Vidal, a great one for horsing around, may realize.

He considers his response normal, "particularly if one were the actors' age"; evidently he has not mastered the subjunctive in English. There is nothing contrary to fact about this statement, Vidal being then the twins' age, so the

indicative, “if one was” is called for. “A palpable duplicate of oneself would be the ideal companion,” he writes, without specifying for what: conversation, games, sex? The answer is contained, I think, in the word *palpable*.

“Narcissistic,” he insists, should not be a pejorative: “Generally, a narcissist is someone better looking than you are,” explaining, we are to infer, why other men call him that. Moreover, it’s an epithet “applied to those ‘liberals’ who prefer to improve the lives of others rather than to exploit them.” A doubly bizarre notion: Why would anyone call altruism or philanthropy narcissistic? (Vidal is playing the martyr here.) And who has ever accused Vidal of philanthropy? Has anyone seen his good works—by which I do not refer to his novels?

“The childhood desire to be a twin does not seem to me to be narcissistic in the vulgar Freudian sense.” How about in the refined Freudian sense? “After all,” he goes on, “one is oneself; and the other other.” But just how other is such an other? Is he, in fact, “other” at all? What could be clearer than that “I wanted to be myself, twice,” which, a couple of paragraphs later, Vidal has already forgotten. Now comes the prize: “Is it not that search for likeness, that desire and pursuit of the whole—as Plato has Aristophanes remark—that is the basis of all love?” Plato does not put it exactly like that; *that* comes from the title of a homosexual novel by Frederick Rolfe, alias Baron Corvo, with the title punning on “hole.” “As no one has ever found wholeness in another human being, no matter of what sex,” Vidal continues, “the twin is the closest that one can ever come toward wholeness with another. . . .” Even the elementary schools of Vienna might question this proposition, and wonder whether Vidal isn’t protesting too much. “I certainly did not want to be two of me, as one seemed more than enough,” he explains modestly, “even in a famous family.” I wouldn’t stop at “family”; how about “the world”?

But what, in any case, has this long digression on Vidal’s quest for a *Doppelgänger* to do with “screening history,” the alleged subject of these lec-

tures? It has to do only with Vidal’s pleasure in washing his dirty laundry in public—especially since he thinks he can make us believe that it was clean in the first place. “Something of an avatar of Mark Twain,” he calls himself; could the handsome young Samuel Clemens be the ideal with whom Gore wishes to be entwined, or entwined?

One reads on, wondering how much any of this has to do with movies, screening history, and American Civilization, and how much of it is simply a narcissistic ego trip? As when, for instance, we are casually apprised that in the “oval drawing-room of the White House . . . I solved for an Attorney General the mystery of his bad character.” Now there is something one would like to hear more about, however tangential it may be, but Vidal’s natural modesty evidently forbids his going into details.



To be sure, the movies allow Vidal to get off some nice one-liners and epigrams. I rather like his foreseeing a presidential election in which “it will be Schwarzkopf versus Schwarzenegger.” I also like the reference to Eddie Cantor’s *Roman Scandals* as “another film that opened for me that door to the past where I have spent so much of my life-long present.” I am less impressed by “the loudly menacing Franklin D. Roosevelt, with a black spot—like a dog’s—over his left eyebrow.” Funnier is the notion that the Machiavellian musings of Henry VIII in *The Prince and the*

Pauper were “perhaps addressed to the serfs at Warner Brothers, a studio known for its love of tradition, particularly the annual Christmas layoffs.”

Such felicities are most interesting when they reveal the true Vidal, as when he speaks of that film’s appeal to the altruism of youthful viewers: “Now altruism is a brief phase through which some adolescents must pass. It is rather like acne.” Amusing, but if that is the truth about Vidal and altruism, why should he worry about being vilified as one of those narcissistic “liberals” who want to improve the lot of others? Surely his altruism, like his acne, is well behind him.

The second lecture, “Fire Over England,” is particularly fatuous. Its main point is that because Hollywood movies were so full of pro-British (and, to a lesser extent, pro-French) propaganda, Roosevelt and Churchill were able to drag us into World War II, something Vidal would have had us stay out of. He can be quite witty, e.g., about “the long-awaited and planned-for war with Japan. A war of Ideas, as always. *We* had the idea that the Pacific Ocean should be ours; they thought it should be theirs. Plainly, two powerful ideologies on a collision course.” And he proceeds to make lusty fun of “gallant-little-England pictures” and such. But what, I wonder, would have happened to Vidal, not to mention his apartment in Rome and house in—is it Portofino?—if America had stayed out of that war? One did not deliver lectures like these under the Führer, or even under his more odorous counterpart, the Duce.

On and on marches Vidal’s snottiness, a typical cheap shot being a reference to “Rafael Sabatini, the Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., of his day.” Yet I cannot help wondering just how many Harvard students, the ostensible chief beneficiaries of Vidal’s wit, knew who Rafael Sabatini (the author of *Captain Blood*)—or, for that matter, Arthur Schlesinger—was? I say this not out of rancor toward my alma mater, but out of disappointment with the Harvard University Press, which published this book without correcting Vidal’s gross mistakes. Gore cannot even manage those

simple Latin tags with which he tries to convey to us that the Exeter education he repeatedly sneers at was nevertheless not wasted on him. "*In hoc signes*" we read, and "*annum mirabilis*." "I was subjected to Latin irregular verbs for four years," he writes with mingled contempt and pride about Exeter Academy. Too bad he wasn't subjected to declensions and noun genders as well.

But, then, his English is often hardly better than his Latin. He commits the gallicism "irreal" for unreal, the pleonasm "general consensus" and "ludic game" (whose Latin cognates likewise bypassed him at Exeter), "quotidianal" for quotidian. His syntax can be as faulty as "I was sent to a school for disturbed rich boys, although I was neither disturbed nor my father rich" or "The Eleanor screened in the Rose Garden is not what it [sic] looks to be. . . ." But such patent offenses against English are not caught by the Harvard University Press either.

Still, Vidal is funny: "I once heard [Henry Luce] say to my mother that his famous wife, Clare Boothe Luce, did not understand him. I was thrilled: this was MGM dialogue at its best." Or scathingly sardonic, as when he refers to Orson Welles as "a miracle of empathy . . ." he knew all the gradations of despair the oyster experienced as it slid down his gullet." Such antihedonistic sniping would, however, be stronger coming from a less sybaritic mouth. Again, "More than once, [Bush] has confided to us that he has a problem with what he calls 'the vision thing,' not to mention the English language, which we at Exeter always thought somewhat neglected at Andover." A touching bit of old-school tie loyalty from the otherwise Exeter-goring Gore, but rather undercut by the howlers cited above.

For related reasons, one wonders about Vidal's reference to "Roosevelt and Churchill, two powerful demagogues for whom the actual fate of nations must have been as unreal as a play is to a star when he is not himself at centerstage." Who is our concerned isolationist to talk about FDR and Churchill as self-centered thespians, mindful only of their own stardom? They at least were actors on the great stage; Vidal, at best, is a prankster in the gallery, pelting them with his jeers. And, as you may well ask yourself, what does all this have to do with the topic of the lectures?

W e come now to the third of these, "Lincoln." Here the point seems to be to show that, first of all, American history has been screened less than other kinds; there are only a couple of films about Lincoln, and none about other great American historical figures. Furthermore, when someone like Lincoln is screened, he is glossily idealized. Honest Abe is turned into an abolitionist from a "unionist and would-be colonizer of the ex-slaves." Vidal can make sense: "The black population always got the point to the slave-owning Virginia founding fathers, which means that our history, *properly* screened, is a potential hornet's nest."

He quotes "the head of a network" to the effect that the American TV audience is not interested in Lincoln and the Civil War, though he does not name the network or its head; our muckraker knows on which side his bread is buttered. But he is amusing: "There is not much of an audience for strange stories about long-dead people who write with feathers."

And he does make some pertinent observations, however impertinently expressed. Thus about the Vietnam war: "This defeat, screened daily on television, was then metamorphosed into a total victory for the *Rambo* movies, films which [for "that"] not only convinced everyone that we had, thanks to Mr. Stallone, won that war but which [for "also"] made almost as much money at the world box office as we had wasted on the war itself." "In the end," he concludes, "who screens the history makes the history. . . . If I could not destroy Hollywood, I would buy it, as the *Tora! Tora! Tora!* folks are now doing." True enough, but, again, he may well be overestimating his hearers if he expects them to get that synecdoche.

He is best when not indulging in grand theories about the movies, but sticking to anecdotes about his own experiences in Hollywood, for example the story of how Frank Capra, originally scheduled to direct Vidal's *The Best Man*, proposed to make sentimental hash of it. This, of course, is the Capra whose "movies usually pitted the good guy, Jimmy Stewart, to be admired because he has been elected to the Senate without any understanding of politics, against the bad guys who want to build a dam when what the folks really need is a new river, or the other way around." And buried

under all kinds of showing off (what JFK or the Duke of Windsor said to Gore) are some bitter basic truths. The problem the movies face trying to screen our past is that our "people have become so heterogeneous that many of them have little or nothing in common with one another, including often the English language. Plainly, it is not easy to inculcate patriotism when there is no agreed-on patria."

S o what is Vidal's solution? To throw out our school curriculum as it is now constituted. He would make history—screened history—the spine of a twelve-year compulsory indoctrination. He would eliminate attempts at improvement of "reading skills," as "this is not going to happen for the third generation of TV-watchers, as well as computer-masters." True, perhaps, but will these take any more kindly to history than young Gore did to irregular Latin verbs? Where Vidal is nearer the mark is in having "always found it curious that the two things a human being must cope with all his life, his body and his money, are never explained to him at school. Few adults ever know where their liver is



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until too late, and few ever know where their money is until the Savings and Loan system collapses.”

But he promptly lapses into sterile cynicism again, funny but wrong-headed: “Those interested in the arts would be strongly discouraged from pursuing any of the arts. This will save many people from lifelong disappointment while limiting production, in the most Darwinian way, to the born artist who cannot be discouraged.” There is a kind of callous near-truth to this. But the greater truth is that, though arts cannot be taught, art appreciation can, and without a public informed about art and able to discriminate between the genuine and

the phony, we end up in the muck we are sloshing about in today.

Perhaps if education—including art education—were better, the melancholy proposition that drives these lectures, “Today, where literature was, movies are,” might be at least partly reversed. Then Vidal would not have to lament that he is no longer “a famous novelist”: “I am still alive but my category is not.” Then he wouldn’t have to worry about competition from television and movies. Unless, of course, the books he writes are poor stuff, only good for giving him fifteen minutes of fame apiece. In which case he may profit more from the status quo. □

KISSINGER: A BIOGRAPHY

Walter Isaacson

Simon & Schuster/893 pages/\$30

reviewed by GEORGE SZAMUELY

When Walter Isaacson set out to write this biography, he had no trouble getting Henry Kissinger’s full cooperation. Richard Nixon even granted the author no less than three interviews. Given the reception of *The Wise Men* (1986)—the story of six of the leading architects of the United States’s Cold War foreign policy, which Isaacson co-authored with Evan Thomas—such assistance is not surprising: that book was almost universally praised for its scrupulous objectivity, its monumental scope, and its lively, lucid style.

Yet surprise should have been in order. For *The Wise Men*, though entertaining, was strikingly ambivalent on the most salient issues of the Cold War. The authors, for instance, found that their subjects “made anti-Communism dangerously rigid and U.S. commitments overly sweeping,” that “they bore part of

the responsibility for creating a world divided between East and West, over-armed and perpetually hovering at the brink.” And the authors arrived at this conclusion: “All in all, it can be argued that by failing to anticipate the consequences of their words and actions, [the *Wise Men*] sowed the seeds of both the Vietnam tragedy and, ultimately, their own undoing.”

Isaacson is an assistant managing editor of *Time* and it may be that these last sentences are the sort of bland equivocations to be expected from anyone who has put in time at that magazine. In fact, they express the standard post-Vietnam liberal position: Anti-Communism and the U.S. Cold War effort may have been justifiable while Stalin sat in the Kremlin, but they ceased to be so the moment he disappeared from the scene. The rift with China meant that the Marxist-Leninist world was so divided that we no longer had to worry about Communists running around in Rome or Saigon or Managua or Santiago.

Such assumptions have been fashionable for years, and Isaacson gives every indication of sharing most of them. But they are not the best qualification for writing biographies of the principal figures of the Cold War.

Isaacson, needless to say, subscribes to the conventional view that America’s cause in Vietnam was hopeless and that the only reasonable policy the Nixon Administration could have pursued was unilateral withdrawal. (He even puts forward the notion shared by Senator John Kerry that had this been done all of the American POWs would have been released, just like that.)

What Isaacson will not entertain is the argument that Nixon and Kissinger tried to act honorably toward an ally while also securing the United States’s own interests. Their policy combined escalation against—and concessions to—North Vietnam with promises of arms control treaties and trade agreements to the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the opening to China would ensure that the two Communist giants would each try to outbid the other for U.S. favors.

The policy came to be known as “linkage.” The problem was not that it was too complicated but that it was never really tried. There was never any serious danger of the United States walking out of the SALT negotiations because the Soviets were being insufficiently cooperative on Vietnam. Nor was there any serious danger of the United States halting troop withdrawals because Hanoi was showing signs of increasing belligerence. Kissinger has written with some justice of the pressures the Nixon Administration was under to go that extra mile to improve relations with the Soviet Union. Within the administration itself there was resistance to “linkage.” The State Department, Kissinger noted, “was most eager for liberalizing East-West trade unilaterally . . . and above all for beginning SALT as soon as possible. Any White House directive to the contrary was interpreted with the widest possible latitude if it was not ignored altogether.” As for the troop withdrawals, their popularity ensured their continuation, regardless of the military consequences.

A riskier alternative would have been for the administration to lead, rather than follow, public opinion. The bombing moratorium originating from the last