

“Your Country Is Your Head”: An Interview with Gore Vidal

Drake Stutesman

This interview with Gore Vidal, in Los Angeles, took place via telephone on April 19, 2007.

Drake Stutesman: It’s been a pleasure reviewing your work. You have a wonderful writing style.

Gore Vidal: It doesn’t put you to sleep?

DS: No. I admire the smoothness with which you write.

GV: Thank you.

DS: I was told that you had once done a script for Marco Bellocchio, is that right?

GV: For who?

DS: Bellocchio, the Italian director.

GV: No. I never did. I admire him . . . but no. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever met him.

DS: You wrote so many scripts but were disappointed with some of the outcomes. In an ideal world, if you had had more control over your scripts would you have gone on writing scripts, even until today?

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GV: No, script writing is ridiculous. You have so many focus groups that review what you have written, kids off the street. “Do you understand it?” . . . “No we don’t understand it. What are those long words?” You know, it’s ridiculous. Committees of people who think they can write? It’s given us some of the world’s worst movies.

DS: So it’s not a form that would have gone on appealing to you?

GV: It would. I’m a drama student. I’ve had six or seven plays on Broadway. And I did about twenty plays in the era of live television.

DS: Yes, you’ve said that you enjoyed writing those live television screenplays a lot.

GV: Oh, because the writer was terribly in charge, and you picked any director you wanted. That’s how it got done. The idea of the director as auteur was a mistaken French notion.

DS: When you were writing the screenplays for live TV, was there something about that process that taught you something about writing itself, that you took on into writing in later life?

GV: Oh no, everything you do somehow or other relates to what you ultimately do—certainly perhaps. Also, we had enormous freedom to do just about anything we wanted, and we cast ourselves, the writers cast, the director would be cast by us, not the other way around. And directors did not, in live television, figure very much; writers did.

DS: They were writerly driven.

GV: Yes, and the result was I think we had a vast audience out there.

DS: Very much so.

GV: And the quiz shows were cheaper to do, so that work killed off live drama.

DS: People remember many of those dramas. *Requiem for a Heavyweight* is still famous, and your own *Visit to a Small Planet* was very successful.

GV: It went on.

DS: But you were very disappointed with its later production.

GV: Yes, of course. By then, the studios were taking over, and I was going to do it with David Niven, and the next thing I knew, Jerry Lewis had grabbed it. That was the end of that project.

DS: Well, I thought your idea of casting Lily Tomlin as Lincoln was very funny. It reflects the disappointment you've felt in the way some characters have been cast over the years.

GV: Yes.

DS: You have an interesting comment in *Screening History*: "I saw the movies and understood the world." You're talking about yourself as a child and people in general looking at the movies as a way of conveying information, especially about history. If your films had not been taken over, would you have chosen film as a greater way to influence people or would you have stayed with writing?

GV: Well, writing is the key to all of it. It's not improvisation that you see on the screen.

DS: Writing in the form of, let's say, essays or novels, which you moved into and away from screenwriting.

GV: Well, it's one way to get away from the producers. The studio system was actually pretty good. If you had the talent, they left you alone. As they thought of Orson Welles, which we regret not having any longer. Or rather, it's the other way around: isn't it wonderful not to have those old movie moguls running studios? You think, "My god, I miss them." Harry Cohn would always have room for an Orson Welles movie, but nowadays, there's none.

DS: Were you ever interested in directing a film?

GV: No.

DS: If you could remake *Myra Breckinridge* [Michael Sarne, US, 1970], would you?

GV: Oh yes . . . the so-called director has gone around telling thousands of stories, none of which are true, about what happened. I know what happened, and he was very much a part of it. And, by the way, this was a game that he wasn't playing because he was nobody. Totally manipulated by Daryl Zanuck—the most expensive property that 20th Century Fox had. It was just deliberately wrecked for personal reasons by other people.

DS: Who would you have chosen as director, or who would you have cast?

GV: Well, it was their understanding that Mike Nichols would take over. And then a pop singer in England, who is not at all pop, ends up directing and writing the script, and he never set foot in the United States.

DS: That's very English.

GV: But it's also a very American studio, and they don't know what they're doing, and there's the influence of the higher people, the business end of it.

DS: Mike Nichols would have been a very good choice. Films influenced you a lot as a child, especially *The Mummy* [Karl Freund, US, 1932] which you saw in '32 and which you've said had a very long-lasting effect, even today. What was it about that film?

GV: Egypt. Oh, I was marinated in history as a child. I did nothing but read history, and every now and then there would be something interesting about past civilizations like the Mayans, and it would have a great visual effect on one, a subliminal effect as well.

DS: And of course the film's special effects were considerable. Jack Pierce did the amazing make-up. Was that something particularly stunning to you—the visual of it?

GV: Yes.

DS: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [Max Reinhardt, US, 1935] drew you to Shakespeare. Do you think something specific in your childhood attracted you to words over other art forms? You talk about the films in those days as being akin to the oral tradition because you are so steeped in it.

GV: Yes, well you learn the films as you saw them, and that made a great impression on me—to learn a film as I watched it.

DS: Did you want to turn to words, as opposed to another medium?

GV: Is there another medium without words?

DS: Well, you were fooling around with sculpture at the time.

GV: Sculpture's mindless.

DS: (Laughs) Well, that may be, but you anchor those learning experiences in

these films, but it was through film that you became fascinated with Shakespeare and his language—

GV: But I was also reading to my grandfather during that the entire time.

DS: And you had his fabulous library. Do you think it was that that caused books to become crucial?

GV: I saw a movie about the Roman Empire. In my grandfather's library there were maybe a 100 books about the Roman Empire, so I'd read them.

DS: You've said that you don't go to the movies very often anymore—

GV: I'm a member of the Academy. I have to see them.

DS: Did you see *300* [Zack Snyder, US, 2007], which is about the Spartans at Thermopylae?

GV: No, but it's certainly my kind of material. From time to time, I am shocked with all I have written about these subjects.

DS: *300* is interesting on many levels, especially in its choice of inaccuracy. But there seems to be a sense of history, in films made today, that merges with fantasy rather than just inaccuracy.

GV: Well, that is one way to get away from truth.

DS: Yes. This is almost a science-fiction fantasy. So that a *Lord of the Rings* [Peter Jackson, NZ/US, 2001–3] movie and a supposedly historical film like *300* look very similar.

GV: I have spared myself that.

DS: (Laughs) I think you'd be interested. You've said that the historical films in the thirties and the forties were so often about kings and queens and that very few were about founding fathers or, in that sense, American history. Why do you think those choices were made?

GV: Well, there was no interest on the part of the people who ran the studios. If they thought it would make money, they would do Alexander Hamilton or something, but they didn't. And our educational system is a very, very bad one. The average person, unless you come from a well-to-do family, is not going to find out anything about anything. You just sit there and find out that

everybody on earth adores America and wants to come here and live and enjoy our democracy and the leaders here.

DS: What do you think about these old films, which dealt with kingship? Did they have any effect on the way the Constitution is talked about today? There has been a huge rise in interest in Americana over the last twenty years.

GV: No, I think those were films in the thirties and the forties. And then we have nothing but the best examples of people searching out their identity. Of course, most people are not interesting. Their identities are not terribly interesting except to themselves, but they all translate into great fictions. The best of fictions are often about domestic life . . . So, any sense of a larger country is forbidden because either people don't know about it, or they think they don't want to know about it even though it proves that they were beginning to be interested in our history.

DS: Americans have become very interested in American history.

GV: Well, that's me. It was me that turned them on. It's *Burr*, *Lincoln*, it's *1876*. I mean this is the only door opened to American history that they had had presented to them. They can buy it in hardcover. They can buy it in paperback. Sometimes it adapts. *Lincoln* was quite a good TV biography, not written by me, but . . . I decided that it was time to give it the history. And high school textbooks weren't doing it terribly well—that's quite an understatement—so I set out to do it. And I spent thirty years doing it.

DS: You chose the historical novel over, say, a straight biography or a straight history. You write in a very conversational style and, in the essays particularly, a sort of story telling. You're generous with the audience. You want people to know what you're saying—a tremendous talent. You often use the first person with a variety of narrative structures. Why did you feel, as a historical novelist able to exert a point of view, that this was the best way?

GV: Well, there are only two ways of doing that. One is as the historian. There are a lot of really bad historians who think they can lecture their readers on their point of view. The abolition of slavery or something. I think that is cheating, and I think that they are visitors. They are really bad history visitors. When I have *Lincoln* in a novel, everything he says and does, he said and did as far as I can tell. I take that from letters, from conversations, recorded from newspapers. That's how I do it. These are very good history factoids. They are very precise history. Why the imaginary characters? Because they can have points of view about what is happening, as the reader will have points of view about what is written. That explains why I'll have somebody like John Hay, who actually was a real person. So, I can use him as

a chorus because he was Secretary to Lincoln and Secretary of State under Theodore Roosevelt, so I have an ongoing character, who is involved in history and brings together two periods. And that's why that is done.

DS: It's very effective. I particularly like *Julien* and the last paragraph which starts, "I have been reading Plotinus all evening . . ."

GV: The paling of the wings . . .

DS: Yes, you remember. That atmosphere, that grounding is like Cavafy. There seem to be many similarities between Cavafy's work and your own—the languages are straightforward, there's a colloquial feel, there is a sexual focus, there's a normalizing of sex, the mixing of the modern with the history and the layering, and a very economical use of words. You wrote the introduction on Cavafy in a recent book of photographs. What is Cavafy's influence on you?

GV: Well, none at all in my writing. I admire him very much as I write. He is a wonderful poet. But I'm not a poet. How could I be influenced by him?

DS: Through a writing style . . .

GV: Well, there are writing styles, but English prose is very different from Alexandrian Greek.

DS: Can you read the original Greek?

GV: Well, with a Greek.

DS: Were you interested in the modernist poets—Moore, Pound, Eliot?

GV: I read them all. I wrote very bad poetry when I was young.

DS: Their sense of history . . . did that influence you?

GV: No. I'm coming at history raw.

DS: Well, Pound certainly came at history, and Eliot too.

GV: But Pound was full of errors. That's what he said when he was being threatened with the death penalty for treason by the American government. Someone said, "Well, he deserved it, you know? Particularly for those translations from the Chinese."

DS: (Laughs) Yes, he has been condemned for those, but I like them. Could you describe the level of writing itself that you feel—I think all writers feel in some way—the actual act of writing, of turning thoughts into words?

GV: No, you don't objectify what you do. It's largely subjective. You don't think, "Oh, what a marvelous experiment I've just done. I wonder if it will take stains out of the carpet."

DS: Your love of the feeling of writing itself, of the actual process of writing?

GV: It's automatic.

DS: You have a very seamless way of writing. It's a very comfortable, intriguing read, and you're able to write many details, either in the essays about politics or in the novels, that are very accessible. Do you write many drafts?

GV: I wrote seven drafts. The reader is on his own.

DS: You've said many times that you mourn the loss of the audience for the novelist. Is there still good fiction writing being produced but that the audience is no longer there, or do you think that fiction writing has changed radically?

GV: I wouldn't know that. I don't keep up with fiction writing.

DS: What do you think of this plethora of autobiographical writing in the last decade or so?

GV: Well, you know it's the English department to write what you know. Everybody is so vain these days.

DS: Memoir does rule right now. If the audience is no longer there for the novelist, where is great art today and in what form?

GV: I don't know where, if we have to ask questions about it.

DS: What do you mean?

GV: The fact that you are asking such questions means that it's nowhere. If it were there, you would say it was there, you would notice it.

DS: Well, that's a matter of opinion, isn't it?

GV: Well, maybe yes, maybe no.

DS: You often talk about post-Gutenberg and this way of seeing the written word. Do you think it's going into a different state because it's still very active, through the Internet, but it's active in a very different way?

GV: I'm not a theoretician of the media. And to use a vulgar word like media is what I'm talking about.

DS: Well, media has gobbled up quite a lot. Do you think that media has gobbled up film? Do you think that film is a dying art?

GV: It's not a healthy one. There are so many things you cannot do. Film is the only art form that sees, one can see that is an art form; it has no brain, its mind cannot express itself in the film. Emotions can. It's very good at that . . . It's good at thrills and chills and adrenaline flow. That's about it.

DS: You don't think it could—

GV: I don't see how it would. Somebody would have done it by now.

DS: Were you ever interested in avant-garde film?

GV: I acted in Maya Deren's film.

DS: *Ritual in Transfigured Time* [US, 1946].

GV: Oh yes, and three others. I liked Maya.

DS: She was very talented. You lived abroad for many years in different places, particularly Italy. Would you have been as interested in American history if you hadn't lived abroad?

GV: No, my interest was indigenous.

DS: Did it give you a very different perspective though?

GV: No, geography doesn't matter. You are who you are wherever you are. Your country is your head. That's all I was brought up with, in the heart of American history in Washington, D.C. and the House of the Senators. One who had invented Oklahoma and simultaneously his father was one of the founders of the party of the people, of the populace. So there I am. I'm in the heart of it all, and I've been reading to my grandfather who is a blind man. So I am learning a lot of history as I read to him from the age of about nine or ten to seventeen or eighteen when I go into the army.

DS: So you feel that one is inherently of the country that one was brought up in?

GV: Well, this one was. I don't speak for others. There are other histories other than that of our native land. Living in Italy, I felt quite a bit of Roman history, and I spent time in Athens, on the Greek Islands. There are other histories I'm taking in all the time.

DS: I think you said, in your first book, *Libby*, that you became completely—

GV: Romanized.

DS: Yes, completely Romanized. In some of your historical novels, such as *Burr* and *Lincoln*, you out some very uncomfortable sexual truths. One is that Lincoln may have passed syphilis on to Mary Todd, and the consequences may have been her insanity and the deaths of the children. And also, Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemmings. This was in '73. At that time, it was very controversial, and now it's commonly accepted and talked about. Do you think that our culture has become more realistic about itself? Especially, say, around sex but not necessarily just that?

GV: Well, I mean it's beginning to grow up. We still don't have a civilization, positive civilization, you're not going to get much light. But it's coming along slowly.

DS: Do you see new processes in the law? Do you see an opening in the society, a greater consciousness about things that were much more shut down?

GV: Not really, no.

DS: Not enough, but some?

GV: Maybe, yes. There are always stirrings.

DS: What is a film or a novel that you consider a truly political contribution?

GV: I've never tried to categorize it. I'm sure there are. I can't think of one.

DS: Well, that can be a difficult question. I recently re-saw *I Am Curious (Yellow)* [Vilgot Sjöman, SE, 1967] the Swedish film.

GV: I saw it and have totally forgotten it.

DS: It's a political film. Sex is very normalized, political in itself and certainly

was in '68. But it also talks about race, class, the monarchy, and money in a very explicit way. What do you think about monarchy, and what do you think the U.S. really thinks of it?

GV: This is one of the many things Americans know nothing about. Americans know nothing about it. It's one of the numerous things that they cannot grasp.

DS: Do you think it's a powerful institution in the world?

GV: No. It's an institution in the world, and it can be used as a prop for governments rising and falling in the UK.

DS: It's the lynchpin of many class systems. It strengthens hierarchies.

GV: People are always in hierarchies.

DS: I'd like to ask you about Tennessee Williams. Why do you think that Americans were so able to accept his way of looking at tragedy?

GV: Well, he was a great playwright. He also had great actors available to him.

DS: But his plays captured the social imagination very intensely. They're unusual, very hard-hitting, very imaginative.

GV: I'd call that genius.

DS: Do you think Williams could have been successful in a different era?

GV: He was not in a different era. It was the era that was.

DS: The Americans in the fifties had a lot of imagination, but were you at all surprised by his enormous success?

GV: You have to remember the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine—all of them, they hated him.

DS: Just one last subject. I heard someone describe one positive effect of the Iraq War was that it deflected Bush's attempt to demonize China, where he was headed once the Cold War ended. Since we focused instead on the Middle East, China and our relations with China have been stable as it were, and if not, reflective—

GV: I've just come back from China.

DS: Yes. And what do you think about that comment? Certainly China is very integral to our system these days.

GV: Without China, we would sink. It's not bad as an insight showing how accidents very often do good accidents . . . like Bush in Iraq can have an interesting prototype.

DS: Were you in China for some time?

GV: Oh several weeks. First Shanghai, which I had never been to. Then Hong Kong, which I have been to many times. Shanghai was like New York in the 1940s. It's getting quite beautiful now. The old quarter with the shanties, and they're cleaning that up and putting in skyscrapers. Buildings I hate. At least as witnessed in New York and suddenly these are extraordinary. They are different colors. There is a great deal of aesthetic going on, and there is a huge prosperity. In 1945 the mandate was handed to us, and we let it go, and it has now returned home. China's a place for the bureaucrats who are now realizing how much they wrecked the atmosphere and the environment. It's barely possible to breathe in Beijing. They're all getting sick.

DS: Were you invited to speak there and found the reception good?

GV: Mmm. They've opened the fourth Shanghai International Literary Festival in China.

DS: Are people there interested in your essays or the fiction, or is it equal?

GV: It's about equal. First of all, their only access to me for a generation or two has been through Tapei, which feeds my work and then translates them into Chinese, transporting them illegally through China, where I think they were forbidden all over the place. I couldn't find it.

DS: How many of your books have been disseminated in China? Is it mostly fiction?

GV: You don't know. You cannot find out.

DS: Just one last subject. Films, vis-à-vis culture and the war. Do you think that the seventies *Godfather* films reflected a consciousness about the Vietnam War?

GV: I don't think that they reflected anything other than Mario Puzo's rather

admirable studies. Puzo wrote it all and did a good job. They did not interest me.

DS: I know that you are not an avid TV watcher but you've heard of *The Sopranos*?

GV: It's not something I know enough about.

DS: You haven't watched the show?

GV: No.

DS: I wondered if you thought the show was reflective of a war consciousness.

GV: I wouldn't sit down and watch something like that on television.

DS: Do you watch TV?

GV: No.

DS: It still doesn't interest you?

GV: Why should it?

DS: Well, there are the some good things on it. Do you see similarities between Iraq and Vietnam, or do you think that they are quite different?

GV: Well, given that they are run by people who don't know what they're doing. I mean this is easily not only the worst administration that we've ever had, but for the first time, we don't have anybody who understands the art of governance. They don't know anything about anything. So we stand alone now, hated by all.

DS: We have the Gonzales hearings going on now right as we speak. Do you feel that there is an upturn?

GV: There will only be an upturn if he goes to jail.

DS: There has been some change in the power of the House, and there has been at least some proactivity. Do you think that this is going to go on?

GV: Well, I believe it will, yes. I hope that some of the proactive types will. They're all too serious about getting the vice presidency and the presidency.

DS: Do you think that's possible?

GV: Of course.

DS: Certainly, it's getting closer.

GV: Well, the crazy little president will of course declare martial law, and he'll come down with guns and try to drive everybody out of the capital. And at that point, we will have a national collapse, and he will discover then how unpopular he really is.

DS: He might feel assailed for the first time. I think he never has before, remarkably.

GV: He's too stupid.

DS: Some feel that he is secretly smart.

GV: What a well-kept secret.

DS: Have you been looking at this recent legislation regarding the new laws about oil ownership in Iraq? They're doing a lot of secret—

GV: I took a little glimpse in the *New York Times*, yes.

DS: This is a crucial undercurrent in Iraq. A major backdrop as to whether we pull out or not. I wonder if you had any opinions about this?

GV: Well, look we've had a coup d'état in the United States. The sleaziest oil people have taken over three branches of government, and we lost the Constitution; that's where we stand. And the oilmen will continue to grab money at a time when oil is going to be absolutely beyond our reach. We're running out. I've just put in solar heating in my house here and all of the power is generated inside the house. All electricity, I get from the sun. It was not that expensive, and it was not that difficult to put in. And it works perfectly. I am off the grid. Now if I can do this, other people should do it too. In other words, oil is past tense.

DS: Do you think that will be put into effect?

GV: They haven't really tried because the oil people control. Corporate America is in charge of all this. And the oil people, although they are very colorful, sleazy, and greedy people as we know first hand, they want to keep the price up. I remember when the electric car appeared here back in the

fifties and how quickly it disappeared. “Oh, they don’t work.” So they killed it, and you can count on them to do that again and again.

DS: Did you see the documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?* [Chris Paine, US, 2006]

GV: I heard about it, but I didn’t see it.

DS: It’s exactly as you described.

GV: I was there the first time around.

DS: In the eighties the cars were forcibly recalled and then completely obliterated.

GV: They did the same thing with our streetcars. L.A. used to be the most convenient place to get around. You could get on a train in Union Station and go straight out to Malibu in record time, but they tore up all the tracks. These things never came back. They wanted diesel engines all over the city, wrecking the air.

DS: It would be great if there could be a powerful lobby for solar power—

GV: But it’s going to have to be. They can’t play around with it. The oil is an issue. There are no new sources. What, should we make holes in the ocean?

DS: Finally, what do you think of the situation at West Point? I know that your father and your uncle were there.

GV: Okay, what’s going on in West Point? Tell me.

DS: West Point is losing its officers at a rate of 65 percent.

GV: I think it still shows that they are basically rather intelligent.

DS: It’s an interesting phenomenon. Thank you so much.

Drake Stutesman is the editor of Framework.