

'J.F.K.' Is Not What He Had in Mind

As a man of words — most of them barbed — Gore Vidal disdains the triumph of movies and television over the printed page.

"Television viewing is like staring into a fire," he declared. "The brain idles, wool gathers; it is hard after a couple of hours to remember much of anything — thank God, perhaps."

Yet, he added during an interview from La Rondinaia, his Italian home in Ravello, television and movies are "all that most people have in the way of history." And if that is the case, "history screened is better than what we have now, which is just about nothing for everyone," Mr. Vidal said, elaborating on the lectures he gave last year at Harvard University, now published as "Screening History."

Consider, he said, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. "We would never have gone into Vietnam if Jack and Lyndon and all the other kids at the White House had ever seen a movie about Vietnamese history vis-à-vis China, say, or a documentary on the Buddha."

However, he added, "Over all, Rambo has probably made as much money as the war cost us, and so the managers of our great nation can point with pride to the books."

In his Harvard lectures, Mr. Vidal said that the "screened history" Americans need would consist of "mythical works" — not "falsified or romanticized history" but what he called "tribal narratives."

"When I speak of national myths, I refer to the ones that I would like to see on the screen — Jefferson and the pursuit of happiness, Madison and Mason and the Bill of Rights, Grant and Lee, T.R. and empire," the 66-year-old author said.

Can any movie serve as a tribal myth for the increasingly multicultural United States?

"Arguably, in the era of interesting new tribal movements — Hispanics, Orientals — the *idea* of the United States has faded, and who would even want to screen white male Europeans in Philadelphia? My answer is that if you don't, there is no country at all," he said. "I find Confucius more interesting, in many



JANE BROWN

Gore Vidal.

ways, than Thomas Paine, but it is Paine that gave us those relative freedoms that now, unscreened, we lose through the Supreme Court."

A self-conscious attempt at creating myth, Oliver Stone's film "J.F.K.," is most emphatically not what Mr. Vidal has in mind.

"'J.F.K.' is a royal mess by someone who has not grasped the history of that day," he said, especially scorning the

film's suggestion that Kennedy's assassination prevented him from ending the Vietnam War. "He liked war. Believed in dominoes. Evil empire. Twilight time. L.B.J. was actually rather queasy about the whole thing, but he was in awe of Jack's classy Harvard advisers and so, humbly, he followed their eerily bad advice."

More reprehensible, Mr. Vidal added, was that Mr. Stone "played on the essential infantilism of the TV-shaped electorate who have been trained to think if only we get a nice man or woman in the White House, everything will be nice. That's the burden of the movie, and far from the truth."

Although acidly cognizant of the limitations of the moving image, Mr. Vidal accepts that "movies and television are the ultimate reality for the passive consumer citizen," and sometimes fulfill a useful function. "I think that C-Span is the best thing we have in the way of media. It also demonstrates that, with sufficient time, complex matters start to become clear — for instance, the investigation of the Keating Five senators."

As a memorable veteran of television talk shows, Mr. Vidal is glad that the programs have recently become part of political campaigns.

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"I would rather have the candidates on Larry King than in 30-minute spots paid for by the banks or whoever is paying for the candidate," he said.

"Ideally, free time should be given by the media to all candidates. No one can buy a single ad. Then let them debate each other, be grilled by Arsenio Hall and so on. You'd soon find out who was who."

(Speaking of who is who: yes, the Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate, Al Gore, is a distant relation of Mr. Vidal, himself a two-time candidate for Congress. "Clinton-Gore will win. I'd rather see Gore Vidal. But these are twilight times.")

For all of his ruminations on "screened history," Mr. Vidal remains wedded to the word. "There will always be some readers and thinkers," he said. "In 1776 a higher percentage of the three million Americans could read history competently, even passionately. Better education should revive reading — and that is the only way one can grasp ideas and concepts and the connection between disparities."

Mr. Vidal has often used the novel to examine history. A series of his novels has traced the history of the United States: "Burr," "Lincoln," "1876," "Empire" and "Hollywood." He is at work on the final installment, "The Golden Age."

However, he has turned to ancient times in his novels "Julian," "Creation" and, most recently, "Live From Golgotha," described by his publisher as an iconoclastic look at the life of Jesus that includes network coverage of the Crucifixion.

Mr. Vidal insisted on a prepublication embargo of the novel — only one review copy was issued, to *The Advocate*, a gay and lesbian magazine — and similarly restricted his comments on it. "I have, as always, dealt with great reverence and tact with the religious sensibilities of my countrymen, dwelling as they do, spiritually and geographically, in what Spiro Agnew assured us is the greatest nation in the country." Pressed for more details, he gave a trans-Atlantic wink: "Wait and see."

MICHAEL ANDERSON