

Gore Vidal: *The United States of Amnesia*

Film portrait of an American radical iconoclast

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Written and directed by Nicholas Wrathall

The newly released documentary, *Gore Vidal: The United States of Amnesia*, about the literary figure, public intellectual and political gadfly and radical who died two years ago, has much to recommend it. The portrait is an admiring one, but it is not superficial. Its greatest merit is the presence of Vidal himself.

Filmmaker Nicholas Wrathall, whose previous work includes *Abandoned: The Betrayal of America's Immigrants* (2001), generally avoids the use of “talking heads.” We hear from Vidal’s half-sister, Nina Straight, a nephew, and several others. Some of the writer’s wide circle of friends and acquaintances are mentioned or interviewed, including Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Sting and Dick Cavett. For the most part, though, the film makes skillful use of archival footage, spanning more than six decades up to and including interviews with Vidal not long before his death, to allow the subject to speak for himself. The result is a compelling portrait, especially when it deals with the political and historical topics that were always Vidal’s main interest.

The archival footage demonstrates a consistency in Vidal’s political life and thought, especially from the late 1960s onward. We see and hear him as the biting critic, the truth-telling enemy of American foreign policy from the days of Vietnam through the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, denouncing the US government as a government “of the rich, for the rich and by the rich.”

Alongside this, however, and inseparably connected to it, is Vidal the bitter pessimist, the man who sees his role as warning the American ruling elite of the danger of revolution. Vidal’s outlook is summed up by his phrase “United States of Amnesia,” used as the title for the movie. For Vidal the socialist alternative and the role of the working class in building this alternative to decaying capitalism are closed books.

Gore Vidal was born into a socially and politically

prominent family in 1925. His father Eugene Vidal was a pioneer of civil aviation and an official in the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s. His maternal grandfather, Thomas Gore, Democratic senator from Oklahoma for much of the 1920s and 1930s, was the greatest influence on the future writer. Vidal changed his name from Eugene, Jr. to Gore Vidal to underscore his attachment.

Wrathall’s film traces the various strands of its subject’s life and career, including his early fame as the youthful author of *Williwaw* (1946), a novel set in the Aleutians, where Vidal was stationed for part of the Second World War, and then *The City and the Pillar* (1948), published when he was only 22 and considered the first American novel to have dealt openly with homosexuality. These books were followed by many others which eventually brought the author recognition, including a series of well-researched historical novels.

To his credit, Vidal was utterly indifferent if not hostile to the identity politics that holds sway among what passes for the intelligentsia today. He discusses his sexual orientation in passing, stressing that there will come a time when it will be regarded as of no greater significance than eye color. There is somewhat more attention devoted to his 53-year domestic partnership with Howard Auster, a companionship that ended with Auster’s death in 2003, after which Vidal returned to the US from his home in Ravello, Italy.

In the documentary’s most interesting and lively moments Vidal holds forth on his views on current affairs, as well as American history. He is outspoken and unsparing, and that is his strength. Certainly not your typical liberal, Vidal calls American participation in the Second World War an “imperialist enterprise.” He indicts President Harry Truman as the architect of the “national security state,” under which, he declares, we continue to live today. He is eloquent on George W. Bush and the Patriot Act, and the “coup d’état” that he says followed the events of 9/11 and he reminds us that it was facilitated

by legislation enacted under the Clinton administration.

Vidal denies the charge that he holds to a conspiracy theory of history. A conspiracy is not required, he explains. “The heads of General Motors, the Chase bank, and the *New York Times*, they all think alike.”

With views like this, of course Vidal made many of the right enemies. He punctured the pretensions of literary rivals like Norman Mailer and Truman Capote. The most famous of his quarrels, so heated it came close to blows, was with the notorious ultra right-winger William F. Buckley, whom Vidal quite accurately called a “crypto-Nazi” on national television some 45 years ago.

Vidal’s animus towards the *New York Times* is a breath of particularly fresh air, especially in today’s diseased political and cultural climate. The author held the “newspaper of record” responsible for essentially blacklisting him after the appearance of *The City and the Pillar*, whose frank subject matter enraged the paper’s publisher as well as its book critic. According to Vidal, “the *New York Times* [afterward] refused to review book after book.” His anger was not based on a personal slight, however. Vidal nails the *Times* as the cowardly and dishonest mouthpiece of the American ruling class. The leading newspaper in the US managed, according to Vidal, to ignore not one but two stolen elections, in both 2000 and 2004.

Also to his credit, Vidal did not hesitate to break from old friends when questions of political principle arose. The late Christopher Hitchens is interviewed at some length in the film. For some years he was close to Vidal, and was even considered the older man’s heir as a political and social critic. When Hitchens embraced the bipartisan “war on terror” and endorsed the imperialist war in Iraq and the struggle against so-called “Islamofascism,” however, Vidal had nothing further to do with him.

The exchange with Buckley is one of a number of interesting video clips in the film. In language that sounds as though it has been copied by today’s Tea Party, the editor of the *National Review* declares, in 1970, that inequality is to be welcomed as the inevitable outgrowth of “freedom.” By contrast, Vidal points to the persistence of poverty and injustice.

One remark above all shows that the argument on the subject of inequality has reached a qualitatively different level. At one point, Vidal warns that social upheaval is in store, pointing to the fact that 5 percent of the population controls 20 percent of the income. Today it is the top 1 percent, not 5 percent, that monopolizes 20 percent of the

income—a concentration of wealth so massive that Vidal could hardly have imagined it 44 years ago.

For all of Vidal’s sharp criticisms, this documentary biography clearly reveals that in the most decisive respect this American radical remained a critic within the system. His righteous anger reflected in part an impotence, a helplessness in the face of what he took to be the almost inevitable decline of American democracy and falling off from the principles of the Enlightenment.

At one point, Vidal tells the filmmaker that he “defected” from the political establishment within which he had been born. There were definite limits, though, to this defection. He could be ruthless in his dissection of the sins of his own social milieu, but he never fully cut his ties with that milieu, and he certainly never changed his social and ideological allegiance to that of the international working class.

Vidal’s outlook is suggested when, in the course of describing his grandfather Thomas Gore, he notes with approval that the old man “was not an enthusiast of the human race.” Neither apparently was his grandson.

Vidal harked back to his grandfather’s isolationism. He criticized the American Empire as the betrayal of the country’s republican ideals, but he also distinguished the American republic from the expansion of democracy, of which he was at least partly suspicious.

Discussing his novels on American history, Vidal said he was interested in “power, not in victims.” For him the masses of working people were and always would be victims. He saw his role as that of carrying on a debate within ruling circles, not building political and social opposition among the exploited and oppressed.

In the closing moments of the film, Vidal is asked about his critical and political legacy, and replies, “I couldn’t care less.” This seemingly clever riposte, in fact, demonstrates a kind of hollow core behind Vidal’s brilliance. What has his life been all about, if it can be summed up in this phrase? He is telling us, whether he means to or not, to look elsewhere for guidance in the preparation for future struggles.



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