Lincoln’s Unfinished Work

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Amidst the widespread discussions of Steven Spielberg’s recent film Lincoln, few have sought to place the film within its own tradition of Civil War films. There’s nothing new, of course, about focusing a film on the character of Abraham Lincoln, though it has been well over thirty years since a major television or film production took him seriously (Hal Holbrook in Sandburg’s Lincoln [1974]).

In the early days it was different. The American film industry grew around his figure. In The Birth of a Nation, D.W. Griffith’s ground-breaking, racist masterpiece of 1915, Lincoln appeared as a wizened and tolerant executive at war with the maniacal Radical Republicans, whose racial tolerance merely masked their desire for vengeance against the rebels. In Griffith’s film, Lincoln’s premature death unleashed the Radicals, necessitating the bloody turmoil of Reconstruction. In the form of the Ku Klux Klan, only the energized spirit of white supremacy could save white womanhood — and, indeed, Anglo-Saxon civilization — from the rampaging black beast.

Birth’s stick-figure Lincoln — he has but one major showdown with the Radical Thaddeus Stevens before his death — gave way to more detailed portraits. In 1930, Griffith released Abraham Lincoln, one of his only two sound films. In Young Mr. Lincoln (1939) and Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1940), Henry Fonda and Raymond Massey made star turns in films designed to explore the origins and rise of a figure heroic beyond imagination, but whose everyman qualities rendered him remarkably accessible.

The stuff of celluloid Americana before World War II, Lincoln pictures fared somewhat worse after. The Civil Rights movement in particular upturned the traditional Civil War narrative, which could no longer assume Southern sympathy. Lincoln portrayals had always proven malleable, but now the very locus of historical change had come into question. The social historians of the Civil Rights era began re-posing emancipation as the product of slave agency as
much as Union policy. The 1970s marked a brief moment of promise, in which popular film might adopt the new scholarship. Television projects such as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974) and *Roots* (1977), which both found critical success, focused on stories on the ground — of the lives of those who lived under and struggled against slavery.

The cinematic impact of these early efforts proved abortive. The projects heralded no new era of popular historical film in which the oppressed would voice their own stories. As American political culture withdrew into the conservativism of the Reagan years, the cultural space for depicting social history on film diminished. In particular, major studios came to believe that films about black people’s past could never find a major (read: white) audience.

In 1989, *Glory* broke the logjam with a new formula. By focusing on war, the movie appealed to audience tastes for violence and period detail. And by seeking to balance the story of its black protagonists (who were fictional caricatures) with its white one (Robert Gould Shaw, the colonel who actually led the regiment), studios fabricated a cross-over film that might appeal to multiple audiences. Historians derided the film for privileging its "white" story over its black, for fictionalizing the stories of subjects on whom a goldmine of historical sources existed, for depicting masculine endeavor as the sole pathway to freedom, and for ending its story before the war was ever won. Yet it also earned critical and box-office renown.

More significantly, it comported with other depictions of the black "freedom struggle" in film. Many of these concerned the Civil Rights Movement, which in the late 1980s was quickly passing from lived experience into historical memory. Films such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *The Long Walk Home* (1990), and *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996) depicted African Americans’ struggles against segregation and caste oppression. At the same time, a spate of films addressed the struggle against Apartheid in contemporary South Africa. *Cry Freedom* (1987), *A Dry White Season*, and *The Power of One* (1992) — all portrayed the black freedom struggle in terms remarkably reminiscent of the films set in America.

Whether set in the Civil Rights South or South Africa, these films all sought to balance white and black stories. In each, though, the real drama derived from the struggles of white protagonists as they cope with the caste ostracism attending
their conversion to the cause of black freedom. In *A Dry White Season*, when the white protagonist — a teacher who witnesses the violence of Apartheid — is fired, his wife admonishes him: “You have to choose your own people, or you have no people.” In *The Long Walk Home*, the protagonist Miriam, a middle-class white woman participating in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, suffers her husband’s abandonment.

Some of the freedom struggle films performed solidly at the box office, and a few garnered some critical acclaim. But none proved successful enough for the notoriously risk-averse Hollywood establishment. By the turn of the century, the American public had apparently had enough with racial sanctimony, white guilt, and boring history. Indeed, Civil War stories still made it to the screen; the Lost-Cause paean *Gods and Generals* (2003), could not have been made had not *Glory* made such ground safe — but gone was the sharp edge of racial politics and white agony. While race placed a minor role in Ang Lee’s *Ride with the Devil* (1999) — the key black character plays a Confederate guerilla — the film adaptation of *Cold Mountain* (2003) was set so snugly in white Appalachia that the issue barely arose.

The freedom struggle formula devolved. One bifurcated strand led toward "black" stories that appealed to a vague culturally nationalist sensibility: Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* (1992), John Singleton’s *Rosewood* (1997), and Mario Van Peebles’s *Panther* (1995). More rarely, it was preserved in stories that centered on white protagonists, such Michael Apted’s *Amazing Grace* (2006), the story of Great Britain’s great champion of slave trade abolition, William Wilberforce.

Spielberg’s earlier venture into the history of slavery, *Amistad* (1997), was of this ilk. The film retains vague hints of caste conversion, as in the figure of lead attorney Roger Baldwin, whom it depicts as a pragmatist driven to take up the cause of slave rebels in spite of himself, whereas the real Roger Baldwin represented the Amistad captives out of a deep and longstanding commitment to the plight of the less fortunate. *Amistad* also sought to tell "black" stories, whether of the slave rebel Cinque, or of Theodore Joadson, the fictional free African American who (as black characters do in *Lincoln*) serves as moral counter-weight to the political pragmatism impelling the primary action.
Against these films, *Lincoln* occupies an important and curious place. With each passing year of cinematic neglect, Lincoln’s cultural prestige has risen, making it all the more difficult to tackle him with due reverence. Taking on a topic of such gravitas is a high-risk, high-reward proposal, with success promising enormous prestige. Such was Spielberg’s respect for his subject that on set he even abandoned his trademark civvies and baseball cap in favor of a suit and tie. In this sense, Lincoln clearly resembles — indeed, epitomizes — Spielberg’s previous attempts at haute cinema: *The Color Purple* (1985), *Schindler’s List* (1993), and *Amistad*.

Yet for all of its pretense, *Lincoln* offsets its gamble by focusing on a remarkably thin slice of Civil War history. Unlike the great epics *Birth of a Nation* or *Gone with the Wind* (1939), it concerns itself with only a brief period — just four months, or five pages of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s enormous *Team of Rivals* (Simon and Schuster, 2005), the inspiration for the film.

In distilling the story of freedom into a tale of back-room politicizing and pressure-filled legislative maneuvers, *Lincoln* strips the Civil War epic of its most popular and potent narratives. It eschews Lost Cause mythology just as much as it evades caricatures of a brother’s war. Likewise absent is the common depiction in American films of politics as the hopeless preserve of the self-serving; here, Lincoln’s mastery of the political process reifies noble ideas. Gone also is the freedom struggle film’s motif of caste transformation. Spielberg’s Lincoln has already been converted — not, albeit, to a full-blown commitment to racial equality, but to an attenuated commitment to the necessity of abolition. The film depicts the convert’s work of enacting a platform we never see him struggle to adopt.

The film’s constricted chronology mirrors its constricted ideals. *Lincoln* succeeds, but only within the strict limits of its own moral universe. The struggle is not to enact a meaningful freedom for the millions recently freed, only to secure legal abolition. To be sure, this was far from nothing. But neither was it the full freedom promised by emancipation, enacted briefly by the Radical Republicans, and nullified by Redemption. Of that failure, which is surely an indispensable element of the Civil War narrative, *Lincoln* says nothing (more on which shortly).
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Lincoln thus doubly distinguishes itself from the pack: whereas the unreconstructed Civil War film tradition gestured toward sweeping tales that spanned from the antebellum period through Reconstruction, Lincoln concerns itself with a single measure and a few short months. And whereas the reconstructed Civil War film tradition concentrates on the local and often lowly, Lincoln sits confidently on its perch atop the halls of power.

Lincoln confounds because of this combination of historical gravitas and narrow focus. The problem is not what the film does so much as what it doesn’t do. Compressing the subject from freedom writ large to the Thirteenth Amendment compensates for the risky weight of Lincoln’s subject. Strictly delimiting the story insulates the filmmakers from charges that they have missed something important. “Why did we not deal with X? Because we chose not to make that film.”

This move replicates Spielberg’s earlier foray into the realms of nineteenth-century antislavery, Amistad, the story of an 1839 slave revolt aboard a Cuban ship that wound up on New England shores. That film’s bizarre elision of American slavery was made sensible only by the filmmakers’ claim that they sought to tell an accurate story that adhered to a real history — just one that happened not to be set in the South. How else could one make a film about antebellum slavery that somehow says almost nothing about the American slavery? Instead, the film displaced responsibility for slavery onto the decrepit Old World regime of Spain. In Amistad, the very choice of subject predefined the parameters of what the film could tackle, in the process effectively side-stepping the cataclysmic reality of Southern slavery’s impact on the entire American political system.

Similarly, in Lincoln Spielberg lays claim to historical authenticity by defining his topic tightly — in this instance, the legislative minutiae surrounding a very selective slice of the story of slavery’s ending in the United States. And as with Amistad, scholarly critics have been left gasping. The film clearly does not work well to illuminate the concerns of the present generation of scholarship on the Civil War, which focuses on the innumerable stories of emancipation that Lincoln decided not to tell.
It is entirely fair to ask why Spielberg chose to make this film about slavery and not another. The challenge may appear presumptuous, but is it any less so than Hollywood filmmakers' claim to tell historical stories that reflect the most respectable scholarship? After all, Lincoln does not offer itself as a highly fictionalized variety of historical filmmaking on the order of, say, The Patriot or Gladiator; it pretends to something higher.

Spielberg’s choice of topic is not a trivial matter, for it speaks to the entire tradition’s most glaring sin of omission. Though Lincoln addresses the end of slavery, it says nothing about what followed. Whereas Civil War films before World War II often coped with the aftermath of war by incorporating the predominate “Dunning” school of conservative Reconstruction historians, the post-war tradition has never assimilated new generations of scholarship on the period. Both Jane Pittman and Roots offered promising but stillborn possibilities.

Since the genre’s re-birth in 1989, only a very few films have even attempted to explore what followed the Civil War. Though set in Reconstruction, the critically-acclaimed film version of Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1998) dealt more with the memory of slavery than with the pressing political concerns that shaped the post-Civil War South, while the major-studio release Sommersby (1993) used the post-war setting to re-enact the medieval story told in The Return of Martin Guerre (1982). Neither commented much on the harsh political realities required to make the emancipation depicted in Lincoln meaningful.

Lincoln thus helps illustrate that the dominant motif of the modern Civil War film tradition is this failure to address the aftermath of slavery. What in epics like Birth of a Nation and Gone with the Wind had served as integral chapters in the Civil War story have been utterly neglected, despite that — or, more likely because — waves of scholarly revision and synthesis have completely overturned the old racist mythologies. Nothing better emblematizes this than Lincoln’s Radical Republicans. Personified by Thaddeus Stevens, they appear almost as Dunning-school archetypes, contemptuous of democracy while hypocritically relying on it for their power.

This is an enormous shame. Not only is it inaccurate, it does nothing to help Americans come to grips with the failed promise of freedom that followed Lincoln’s death. The destruction of slavery liberated four million people of
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African descent, but only because a devastating war demanded their emancipation. And while war settled some of the fundamental issues that started it, such as whether or not humans could be held as property, it did not resolve the meaning of freedom. Determining the fate of the millions liberated in the course of war meant determining whether or not the United States would be a nation that extended the blessings of liberty to all, or sanctioned a second-class citizenship at variance with its own national promises. This subject occupied the painful decade following Lincoln’s death.

It is an ignominious tale, but not because champions of black freedom acted vindictively and overturned the racial hierarchy. Rather, the victorious Union failed in its commitment to full freedom and meaningful liberty for African Americans, a subject on which Lincoln remained deeply ambivalent to his end. When the political going got tough, the white supremacy latent throughout American society re-emerged. It won the day, and what followed was a descent into the nation’s most disgraceful and anti-democratic period of racial antipathy. In the era of Jim Crow, history moved backwards, away from inclusion and the triumph of liberty. It took another century to reverse gear and begin to deliver on the broken promises of Reconstruction.

Lincoln is yet further evidence that this story is not one Hollywood seems much inclined to tell. But in an age wherein a person of African descent may be placed in Lincoln’s office by an electorate whose right to vote remains contested, it may be well worth someone’s effort.

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