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Film Review: *Lincoln* (2012)

Note: This paper is the result of diverse minds and individual opinions. What started as a social activity, evolved into a collaboration of ideas of the film. One of the many discussions we had was what did Steven Spielberg and Tony Kushner want to accomplish in this biographical sketch of Abraham Lincoln? After a late night screening, the History Club met at a local coffee shop to debate the strengths and weaknesses of the film. The discussion resulted in the threading of various perspectives into a historian's critical analysis of the film. We dedicate this work to our History Department, the journal, and especially to our professor and mentor Dr. Jeremy Murray, who inspired us and guided us throughout.

Hollywood legend Steven Spielberg has found himself under sharp criticism for his adaptation of Abraham Lincoln in his Academy-Award nominated film *Lincoln* (2012). The film stars Daniel Day-Lewis as the older, weary president, and retells the story of Lincoln's role in the passing of the 13th Amendment. The script, written by acclaimed screenwriter, Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), and based in part on Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals* (2006), is contextually set in 1865, the last year of the Civil War and more specifically the months leading up to the passage of the amendment. The film also features Hollywood titans Sally Field as Mary Todd Lincoln, David Strathairn as William Seward, and Tommy Lee Jones as Thaddeus Stevens.

In the film, Day-Lewis takes on the role of an old, squeaky-voiced, intelligent, and burdened president, who collaborates with his cabinet and hired men to advance the Amendment to abolish slavery, which was already passed in the Senate, to passage through the House of Representatives. Aside from Lincoln's dealings with his political friends and enemies, the film pays attention to the many facets of Lincoln's personality: his loving nature with his son Tad; his irritation and affection for his wife; his passion for politics; and his often unappreciated ability to tell long but thoughtful stories. The film also places emphasis on his nature as a politician. Through his dealings within his own cabinet and

with Congress, the film offers an uncommon depiction of the 16th President. He is portrayed as a man who was unafraid to use dishonest, underhanded politics to suit his purpose, nor afraid to assume power, even when it meant challenging his restrictions under the Constitution.

Spielberg, Kushner, and Day-Lewis deftly succeed in humanizing Lincoln on many levels. In addition to his pragmatic politicking behind the scenes, Lincoln is shown dealing with the everyday conflicts of a father and a husband. In the scene where he takes Robert to the Veterans Affairs hospital, there's a moment where they argue about Robert's desire to join the Union forces. Lincoln, who refuses to allow Robert to join, strikes his son in a fit of frustration. While this may be seen by some as typical father and son behavior, it is not typical Presidential conduct. This effective and moving display of domesticity is often lacking in this style of epic production. It is vital in the service of making Lincoln more relatable to the audience – he is a creature susceptible to emotions as are the rest of us.

Why then are respected historians like Eric Foner critical of Spielberg's work? Often when a historical figure like Lincoln is deeply and effectively personified, directors and writers like Spielberg and Kushner may enter into the realm of “the great man theory of history.” A theory that's often attributed to the 19th century Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, the argument this theory poses is that powerful individuals shape their times and societies.¹ The theory is often used to place full credit, or full blame, on one individual for some significant period in history. Herbert Spencer, who presented a counter to this theory, argued that the times and society shaped these men, and not the other way around.² Because notable historical figures are often labeled as heroes or villains, it is arguable that the unintended consequence of Spielberg and Kushner's work was to continue his myth.

Eric Foner, a history professor at Columbia University, won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 2011 for his work, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (2011). Foner's historical criticisms of the film's depiction of Lincoln and the Civil War era hold considerable weight, as he is one of the foremost

¹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907).

² Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics* (London: John Chapman, 1851; New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1883).

living authorities on the subject. Foner's ultimate critique is that in lionizing Lincoln, a great deal of disservice is done to other individuals who played a significant role in the abolition of slavery.³ In an op-ed published in the *New York Times*, Foner cites Lincoln's refusal to consider the Amendment before 1865, when Susan B. Anthony and Women's Rights organizations proposed it.⁴ Also, Foner reminds us that free slaves, most notably those in the south that took over plantations and redistributed land to other slaves, were very effective in leading the struggle for abolition.⁵ These points are well taken and valid when we consider this film's historical recount of the passage of the 13th Amendment. Foner is correct to bring these criticisms to our attention for two main reasons: first, this movie implies that the passage of the 13th Amendment was, at the moment, in the hands of a few skilled men, which is misleading because in many ways slavery was already ending. In other words, Foner reminds us that the momentum for change was already in play and perhaps this drama overstates a pivotal moment in history. Second, the film puts Lincoln at the moral center of the passage for the amendment. This is especially problematic because of Lincoln's past. The man in this film was shown to be perhaps his better self, especially when you compare him to his earlier years; he was much more evolved as a human being and, metaphorically speaking, the times had moved him. While these are valid points that Spielberg and Kushner would have us consider, the unintended consequence could be that Lincoln's role in the passing of the amendment is over credited. The result would be a continuation of an arguably false legacy, one that often titles him the "Great Emancipator."

In light of these points, is it fair to degrade Lincoln's role in this critical moment of history? Absolutely not. Whether it is the villains or heroes, the so-called "great men" of history and their influence over the times in which they inhabited, is a subject that encourages a debate on the actual degree of importance of the presiding figure in shaping the course of history. This debate is appropriately applicable to Lincoln and his larger than life status.

³ Eric Foner, "Lincoln's Use of Politics for Noble Ends," *The New York Times*, November 26, 2012, accessed April 15, 2013, accessed April 15, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/27/opinion/lincolns-use-of-politics-for-noble-ends.html?_r=0.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

While it is necessary to look beyond theory and realize that the causality of history is not exclusive to one man, historians must also be careful to not marginalize the influence that these figures had over the times in which they inhabited. Arguing in abstraction, as Foner and many other historians do, is engaging in food for thought that adds a necessary dynamic to historical debate. Nevertheless, it does, to a degree, marginalize Lincoln's involvement and skills as the political genius he was. Throughout her book *Team of Rivals*, upon which the film is based, Doris Kearns Goodwin makes it abundantly clear that Lincoln was a master of political timing and managing/manipulating personalities in order to achieve his goals. These aspects of Lincoln's managing of personality are apparent in his timing of the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and shifting the purpose of the Civil War to be defined as a war to end slavery as well as preserve the Union. This is referenced in the film in Lincoln's basement meeting with Thaddeus Stevens; timing was everything with the stakes so high and national sentiment so fragile. Therefore, although Lincoln was not the only reason for passage of the 13th amendment, he was heavily involved in its success. So when considering Foner's valid analysis, it is also necessary to give Lincoln's role its proper due.

Though it is understandable to rely on the wisdom of Eric Foner to shed light on the complicated history of the film, one can still see the value in Spielberg's efforts to make Lincoln better known to his audience. Spielberg and Kushner have been interviewed since the film's release. And although they are two separate artists with different talents, both of them revealed in their interviews that the reason they came together to make this film was to bring Lincoln to life. Unlike other Hollywood historical films, which often follow a cradle-to-grave format, their film took a very slim part of Goodwin's book as inspiration and created a character that audiences can relate to; as a husband, a father, and a politician. By humanizing a historical figure in a way that is clearly and strongly sympathetic, Spielberg, Kushner, and Day-Lewis, provide a great service to the present-day audience by allowing them to connect to the past in a way that is memorable, engaging, and evocative. At its best, this film will remind audiences that this mythologized, historical figure was in fact more human than we might recall; at worst, this film will spark interest and debate as to

how important Lincoln was to his time and the course of American history.

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Reviews