

Haunting in the Historical Biopic: *Lincoln*

Robert Burgoyne (with John Trafton)

Abstract: *Lincoln* features several key moments in which the conventional, realist coordinates of the historical biopic open to a deeper sense of time and place, evoked in the film's references to clairvoyance, haunting, and 'bad dreams'—aspects of Lincoln's interior life that are well known but seldom expressed in film. The theme of haunting in *Lincoln* is rendered directly, but it is also suggested in the film's multiple references to the medium of photography, and in scenes that recall the flicker effect of early film. The film's complex understanding of time underlines the uncanny nature of the historical biopic, and the strange, almost phantasmatic wish at its core—the wish to impersonate and revivify the dead—a wish that is especially visible in films that take Abraham Lincoln as their subject.

Keywords: *Lincoln*; historical biopic; the Abraham Lincoln family; the uncanny; haunting; phantasmagoria; photography; séance.

The opening battle scene in *Lincoln*, a single minute of concentrated brutality, confronts us with an indelible picture of combat, rendering the cruelty and barbarism of war in a series of unforgettable vignettes, including a shot of a soldier standing on another combatant's head until he drowns in a few inches of mud. Intimate and horrifying, the scene is unsettling for the violence of its hand-to-hand combat, and for its *dramatis personae*: uniformed black soldiers pictured in desperate struggle against

what looks like an irregular army of white Confederate soldiers. **Figure 1**

Immediately following this scene, the film depicts President Abraham Lincoln at an Army camp just after the battle, speaking quietly with two black enlisted men, who describe the brutal battle of Jenkins' Ferry, and explain why they took no Confederate prisoners—an earlier battle had resulted in the slaughter of all black soldiers who had surrendered. Lincoln compliments them on their bravery. Accepting the compliment, one of Lincoln's interlocutors reminds the President that black soldiers have only recently begun to receive equal pay with white soldiers, and that there are still no black Army officers.

Towards the end of the conversation, a pair of white soldiers joins in. One of the white soldiers mentions that he was at Gettysburg when Lincoln gave his speech, and begins reciting the Gettysburg Address. He is unable to remember the entire speech, before the two are called back to their posts. As the soldiers depart, the black corporal who had spoken with Lincoln earlier completes the speech, reciting it perfectly as he walks into the distance, back to his regiment. The camera cranes up to depict his departure, framing Lincoln's familiar profile in the foreground. Rendered in the voices of both black and white soldiers, the language of the Gettysburg Address takes on a vernacular familiarity, suggesting that the words have taken root, begun to germinate and spread. More importantly, as Lincoln hears his own words echoing back to him in the night camp, in a voice not his own and sounding more like an exhortation than an admiring recounting, the film introduces a motif that will pervade the film—the haunting of history by what the historian Peter Dimock calls a 'collective narrative of social loss,' the phantom, ghost text of American history, the social loss that continues to shape the American story (Dimock 1991).

The unfinished business of history, the unfulfilled, potential history of nation in which black and white are seen to have a common story and 'necessarily share the same fate,' is audible in the corporal's voice and visible in the mise-en-scène (Huggins 1991). The scene initiates a historical narrative that is as much about the haunting persistence of the memory of slavery, of deep and continuing racial animus, and of the legacy of the Civil War in American life as it is about the moment of apotheosis when slavery was defeated through a political act and military campaign enacted 'by the people.'

It is the unsettling, disturbing moments in *Lincoln* that I wish to explore in this essay, the scenes and images that do not readily resolve into the frames of the biopic or the conventions of the historical film. By looking at patterns that suggest the unsettled, unfixed dimension of historical time, the persistence in cultural life of a war waged over race, I also wish to address, in an oblique way, the perturbing question Robert Rosenstone asked a few years ago, 'What is it that we want from a historical film?', a question I've carried with me for a long while. In *Lincoln*, time seems to gnaw at the person of Lincoln himself; in several scenes, the title character seems dispossessed, as if he intuits that his words, his person, his gestures are no longer his own, as if the past and the future were both hollowing out the present. In Steven Spielberg's film, the history of the struggles to move the 13th Amendment forward is interlaced with scenes that speak to the haunting of the film's present by the past—a particularly powerful theme in 19th century life, and a theme that is projected into the contemporary present by way of photography and recurring suggestions of a cinematic art that is yet to come. And as the spectator searches for the historical Lincoln in the shades and lights of the film image, in the tenor of Daniel Day-Lewis's

voice and in the details of figure behavior and setting, we are also called to consider what it is we want from the historical film.

Consider the dream sequence near the beginning of the film—a scene that laminates the themes of haunted recollection and historical foreshadowing that pervade the film. Lincoln was well known to have had many experiences of presentiment and precognition, and was often troubled by dreams; the single dream scene given here—the original script included several such scenes—conveys a strong sense of foreboding and disquiet (Ryzick 2013). It also suggests the imagery of occult practices. Mary Todd Lincoln held at least one séance in the White House following her son Willie's death, and would resume that practice, along with spirit photography, after Abraham Lincoln's assassination. The visual design of the dream scene appears to reference these paranormal pursuits, and aligns them with the medium of early photography (Failes 2013).

In particular, the scene suggests the visual form of the phantasmagoria, a popular entertainment medium in the early and mid 19th century, in which spectral figures, often historical figures, would appear to be resurrected, take shape and move, a visual construct created by the layering of illusions in depth. The medium was literally built out of smoke and lenses—as many as six projections were used. With hidden projectors mounted on rails, the images could be made to appear to drift or hurtle toward or away from the audience. The effect was powerful, as Tom Gunning writes, 'reportedly causing women to faint and men to rise, striking out with their canes against the apparently threatening phantom' (Gunning, 2004, 4). Akin to special effects in cinema, the figures in a phantasmagoria would often be accompanied by eerie sounds and music, such as the 'glass harmonica' (invented by Benjamin Franklin).

The dream scene in *Lincoln*, like the phantasmagoria, brings the spectator's own investment in the reawakening of the historical past into view, suggesting a line of continuity that stretches from early forms of spirit photography and occult practices to the spectator's belief—at some basic, primary level—that the past can be recovered and revived in film. The historical biopic registers this imaginary belief with particular force. With its careful orchestration of period lighting and décor, and above all, its concentrated focus on the act of impersonating the dead, the historical biopic is a vivid example of the uncanny substructure that imbues even genres that have long been regarded as realist. The strange, almost phantasmatic wish at the core of the biopic—the wish to impersonate and revivify the dead—is especially visible in films that take Abraham Lincoln as their subject. And in Daniel Day-Lewis's performance, the power of impersonation is such that his voice, his posture, and his gestures carry an uncanny aspect of reincarnation.

Figure 2

The visual design of the scene produces a striking impression. Standing alone on a boat in a turbulent sea, speeding forward with tracers of air or atmosphere rushing by him, Lincoln seems to be watching himself in a distorted, otherworldly register. He stands erect, suspended in a kind of medium whose colors—black, grey, and sepia tone yellows—leave trails as they flow by him. 'It's night time,' Lincoln's voiceover narrates, 'the ship's moved as if by some terrible power at a terrific speed.' First viewed in a frontal medium close up, then full-figure from behind, Lincoln speeds towards the sea's horizon line. 'I have an intuition that we're headed towards a shore. No one else seems to be aboard the vessel. I'm very keenly aware of my aloneness.' The camera begins to move even faster, leaving Lincoln behind, propelling us towards the lighted horizon beyond. The dream sequence then fades to

an image of Lincoln in the White House, reflected in a mirror, recounting the dream to his wife Mary.

The scene invites several somewhat prosaic interpretations—Lincoln's intuition of his impending fate of assassination (supposedly, he had this particular, recurrent dream on the night before his assassination), or the inescapable reality that the war cannot conclude without the complete abolition of slavery, or as Mary first suggests, Lincoln's anxiety over his decision to order a large assault on Wilmington. The dark, mirror-like surface of the sea, the streaming stars above, and the safety of light beyond, moreover, mimics painterly motifs that were popular in the visual arts of the period (Harvey 2013). The dream also serves, however, as a powerful and unsettling entry-point to the historical past, one that partially assimilates the view of the spectator with the point of view of Lincoln, opening the veil of the past in a way that brings the spectator directly onto the vessel, and then beyond it. As the character says, 'I have an intuition that we're headed towards a shore,' just before he describes his 'aloneness.' The scene carries an affective mood that is almost hallucinatory, the private and the collective, the past and the present welded together.

The power of film to reawaken the past, to render multiple layers of past and present in an image, is exemplified here in a way that recalls Gilles Deleuze's metaphor of cinematic experience as an encounter with 'sheets of the past,' with multiple temporalities (Deleuze 1989). Condensing at least three temporal frames, the dream sequence evokes the past of war and slavery together with the historical future as intuited by Lincoln—a future visualized as light on the horizon, and audible in Lincoln's line, 'I have an intuition that we're headed towards a shore,' a line whose echoes extend to the famous speech by Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, where another dream was famously evoked. Here, time extends from the

image in both directions, and is visualized almost literally, as Deleuze suggests, as sheets of the past.

A different register of historical memory is captured in the sequence at the Washington hospital about midway through the film. Lincoln's son Robert, determined to defy his father's wishes and join the Union army, and unwilling to be impressed by Lincoln's attempt to show him the true costs of war, waits in a carriage as his father speaks to the wounded veterans. Lincoln is shown entering the military hospital, the camera placed inside the hallway as Lincoln approaches, bright white sunlight emphasizing the long shadow he casts as he comes through the door. As he pauses on the threshold of the soldiers' ward, the camera remains for just a moment to capture Robert in long shot, framed in the doorway, outside in the carriage. The camera then swivels to follow Lincoln as he enters the room and speaks to the wounded soldiers, their amputations—their stumps and prostheses—plainly visible as they sit or lie on the white sheets of their beds. Lincoln asks if they are getting enough to eat, then asks their names—one of them is named Robert—and shakes their hands in a gesture of friendliness and healing. As he moves deeper into the room, speaking naturally with genuine feeling, the shot abruptly cuts to a long shot of Lincoln's son, framed through the doorway, with two empty beds in the foreground. A large American flag is visible just beyond the frame of the door, with Robert sitting in the distance, his eyes still directed inside.

The ruptured bodies of the injured soldiers are here inscribed in a larger discourse of sacrifice, loss, and the construction of a new nation-state; the bodies of the soldiers become a sign of the wounded nation. Framed by the Union flag, the scene's concentrated discourse of wounding, reparation, and legitimation produces an aesthetic distancing, partially neutralizing the violence of war—an aestheticizing

distance that seems designed to establish a patriotic frame around the pain and injury of war, and to allow the theme of renewal and organic rebirth to emerge.

In an important study of Civil War battlefield and hospital photography, Kathy Newman describes an extensive medical archive of photographs of amputees and soldiers wounded by shot and shrapnel. The photographs, typically framed in graceful oval shapes, are sensitive compositions, attentive to lighting, pose, and the drapery of sheets and bandages; they 'represent the body in pain' but at the same time attempt to 'contain the horror of the Civil War,' their romantic softness serving to neutralize the Civil War's images of rupture, emphasizing the 'boundaries between ourselves and suffering.' The medical photographs of wounded soldiers, like the battlefield photographs of Alexander Gardner and others, appropriate the violence of war in order to convert it, in Newman's words, to redefine the embodied politics of war as the 'heart of the (second) birth of our Nation' (Newman 1993, 63-86).

To some extent, the hospital scene in *Lincoln* reiterates the formal strategies Newman describes as 'the fortification of a creation myth—the creation of a new nation' (82). Placing the character of Lincoln in the immediate vicinity of the battlefields and trauma zones of war, the film traces a pattern visible in other Spielberg films, juxtaposing scenes of appalling violence with scenes of emotional uplift. In *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, the panorama of death and destruction depicted in the opening assault on Omaha Beach is followed directly by a powerful scene at Army headquarters, where Lincoln is invoked as the presiding spirit of American sacrifice, his words quoted with reverence by General George C. Marshall as he decides to bring the sole surviving Ryan son home from Normandy. The famous Bixby letter, a letter of condolence written to a woman whose five sons were thought to have been lost on the Civil War battlefields, became a celebrated

work, as highly regarded as the Gettysburg Address and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. As one well-known writer has said, the Bixby letter has become 'a piece of the American Bible' (Carl Sandburg, in Taliaferro 2014, 95).

The tone of Lincoln's visit with the soldiers, with its theme of reparation and legitimation, is abruptly shattered, however, when Robert notices a black soldier pushing a wheelbarrow covered with a blood stained canvas sheet. Robert leaves the carriage and follows the trail of blood left behind by the wheelbarrow until it reaches a trench outside the hospital. The soldier removes the canvas sheet and unceremoniously dumps a full load of amputated limbs into the trench. The camera then cuts to a big close-up of Robert's shocked face. **Figure 3**

This scene illustrates a convention that has been characterized as a principal 'pathos formula' in the war film—the 'shell-shocked face.' Hermann Kappelhoff describes the shell shocked face as a close-up, usually of a young soldier, that encapsulates the sudden awareness of death, an image of sudden, paralyzing fear, a shot that creates an emotional icon of war's cost. For Kappelhoff, the emotional response aroused in the spectator by these types of scenes, a response of outrage and revulsion at the needless sacrifice of the young, creates a passionate sense of collective anger and horror in the audience—an emotional response that is then recuperated in the war film by formulas designed to convert pathos to national feeling, and map emotion onto larger themes of collective purpose and the necessity of sacrifice (Kappelhoff 2012, 43-57).

The moment of Robert's witnessing, however, reverses the framing strategy established in the previous sequence, and resists being converted into pathos. As the bleeding contents of the wheelbarrow are discharged into the pit, the raw pain and the grotesque ugliness of war are registered as an overriding reality, a reality that, unlike

the hospital scene, refuses to be converted into the symbolism of a mystic nationhood. This moment of revelation is followed by a startling breakdown between father and son. Robert, frightened and mortified by what he has seen, confronts Lincoln and insists that he will still enlist, that his father cannot stop him. Lincoln reminds him that he is the Commander in Chief, and that Robert cannot join the Army without his permission. Robert explains that the only thing that will matter once the war is over is whether you had fought or not, and that his father wasn't so much afraid of him dying, as he was afraid of Robert's mother. Lincoln, uncharacteristically, slaps Robert, and then tries to embrace him. Robert stalks out of the shot. He turns back, and tells Lincoln that 'I won't be you, I can't do that, but I don't want to be nothing.' Lincoln clutches his own hand, as if he has just broken something, and follows Robert with his gaze as he exits the frame, saying, below his breath, 'I can't lose you.'

In a film framed by a ghastly depiction of combat at the beginning, and by the violence of assassination at the end, the stinging intensity of the blow comes not from its force but from the shocking fusion of intimate touch with violent touch. Just before, Lincoln had made a point of shaking the hands of the soldiers he visited, his healing touch very much in evidence. Now the same hand strikes his son, in another kind of display, an eruption of emotion that has the unmistakable aspect of a larger truth revealed. Here Lincoln himself is confronted, and challenged—in the intimate sphere of the family— with the question of sacrifice, of loss, and (in a striking turning of the tables) of war's true costs.

As Elisabeth Bronfen describes it: 'cinema is where American culture continually renegotiates the traumatic traces of its historical past... as we are called upon to continually reimagine the political violence that has come to shape and define America, we implicitly take part in a cultural haunting' (Bronfen 2012, 2, 5). Like

the artistic framing and distancing in the Civil War photographs described above, however, cinema functions like a 'protective fiction,' in Bronfen's words, mediating the raw experience of war's violence in an aesthetic language of form and genre. At the same time, the force of violence, when re-enacted in aesthetic form, brings the actuality of violence into imaginative focus, recalling 'the real referent adhering to the play of light and shadow on screen' (Bronfen 2012, 4).

Bronfen's metaphor is suggestive. The play of light and shadow in *Lincoln*, which is such a prominent part of its visual design, might be seen as a reference to cinema itself as a medium in which the past acquires a particular presence. In several scenes, the work appears to reference the flicker effect of early film projection. For example, late in the film Lincoln surveys the Petersburg battlefield after the Confederate army has retreated westward, leaving the terrain littered with corpses and abandoned trenches. A series of tracking shots follows Lincoln on horseback, passing blue and grey bodies, solemnly tipping his hat to the fallen. Now the sky is a dark blue-grey tone and smoke clouds the horizon line as Lincoln rides through fog. John Williams' score provides a delicate piano piece that recalls the more sombre moments of Ken Burns' iconic Civil War documentary series.

In the scene that immediately follows, Lincoln is pictured sitting on a porch in cool daylight with General Ulysses S. Grant, discussing the upcoming surrender of General Robert E. Lee. As we see his muted, contemplative discussion with Grant in medium close-up, a pattern of shadows moves across his face, the silhouettes of soldiers and wagons moving by. As he watches the passing men and weapons, which the spectator sees only as shadows, Lincoln and Grant admit that they have 'made it possible for one another to do terrible things.' The ghosts of a traumatic historical past are evoked here as Lincoln contemplates his own agency, and reflects on his role

in the carnage he has just witnessed. Presented as if they were already ghosts, the shadows of passing soldiers clarify and accentuate Lincoln's words and features as he says of the Petersburg battlefield that he 'had never seen anything like it before.'

In a sense, the scene is addressed directly to the spectator, to our own work of imaginative reconstruction, and to our stake in the historical film. The 'inside of historical events,' in Paul Ricouer's words, is what is evoked here as we read the scene both through the eyes of Lincoln, and at the same time, at a certain distance from Lincoln (Ricouer 1984, 7). Although the title character is portrayed as perceiving the flesh and blood soldiers—the survivors of the battle—the spectator sees only the shadows of those soldiers—shadows that might be read as the mindscreen of Lincoln, or, more to the point, a kind of projection into the future, anticipating the endless file of the war dead in wars to come, a sequence that calls to mind the closing images of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), or *J'Accuse* (Abel Gance, 1919).

The photographs of slave families and slave children that are embedded deep within the diegesis are a further case in point. The photographs, on fragile glass plates, offer a small dissertation on the power of images to render the traumatic experiences of the past palpable and subjectively meaningful. Illuminated from behind by a candle or by firelight, the images hold a particular interest for Lincoln's young son, Tad, who views them with what one writer calls 'morbid fascination' (Larsen 2012). In an early sequence, Tad is pictured sleeping in front of the fire. Lincoln enters and, after bending low and looking at his son, quietly picks up two glass plates Tad had been viewing and holds them in front of the fire. The young slave boys pictured on the glass plates are vivid figures; their alert faces, ragged clothes and the prices written on the margin make a strong impression. Later, Tad is

seen looking at a photograph of an adult male slave with a terribly scarred back, and at an image of a young slave woman, as Lincoln and his son Robert argue about Robert's wish to enlist. Tad then asks why some slaves are more expensive than others. After a short conversation about the experience of slaves—with Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Lincoln's seamstress telling Tad that she was beaten with a fire iron when she was younger than him—Keckley urges Lincoln to go to Mrs. Lincoln, who has retreated to Willie's room. The film then cuts directly to a shot of Mary Lincoln caressing a framed photograph of young Willie, the son who had been lost to typhoid three years earlier, sitting in a room lit by a single candle.

Tad's viewing of the slave photographs, which 'give him bad dreams,' recalls the haunting experience of paging through an old family album, an album that had been lost, or perhaps an album of family members who had been lost—an idea that is reinforced by the cut to Mary Lincoln holding a large framed photograph of her son Willie. The uncanny ability of photography to resurrect the past, and to connect us to the experience of others, here takes the form of a symbolic family album stretching from the traumatic experience of slavery to the trauma of the loss of a child. The scarred back of a slave, the boys who were sold, the son who was lost, are knit together here in a seamless fabric of violence and loss—a different kind of national story. The quiet and subtle connection the film draws to its own project of recollection, its own act of witnessing again, gives the photographs and moving shadows embedded in the work a particular significance.

Figure 4

For the most part, Spielberg's treatment of Lincoln as a historical icon contrasts with previous considerations of both the man and myth. A sense of melancholy hangs over the film that parallels that of Lincoln himself—his historically

well-documented prevailing mental state—and that stands in sharp contrast with the rough-man-from-Illinois portrayal given by Henry Fonda and others. Through this overarching tone, Spielberg draws a connection between the heavy burden that Lincoln bore on his shoulders with the burden of the past that American carries on its shoulders, a past infused with fratricidal violence and ghosts that still play a role in defining the American present. In this sense, *Lincoln* does not simply project the spectator into the past. Rather, the film can also be read as bringing a haunted past to the present.

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