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# “There’s Something Rotten in Film Criticism, and His Name is, Regrettably, Not Johnny”

*Walter Metz*

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There’s something profoundly rotten in the state of film criticism, and not just in Denmark. Professional journalists—who are trained to know nothing about cinema other than what someone should or should not like—are the best of the lot, surrounded by hoards of “citizen” Internet denizens, full of inanity and vitriol. On the academic side of things, wonderful ideas are being placed (certainly not shared) onto library shelves and in the “deep web” online sector, to be accessed by almost no one.

There is an obvious cure to this disease, but one easier formulated than implemented. We are in desperate need of a “middle-ground” criticism, one that is fueled by research and learning, yet written with a generous spirit of accessibility, and published in venues that people can actually read. While this is an old Ivory Tower saw, it seems particularly apropos at the present moment, when the humanities at public research universities kneel at the guillotine of public indifference. To attempt an intervention, I teach an online course in film criticism to as many students as possible, all-year round (especially in the winter intersession, to capture the Oscar bait; and over the summer, to demonstrate how important blockbusters are to a proper understanding of American civilization). All of this work is publicly collaborated on with my present and former students via my “surface” website, accessible to anyone who cares to look (it is located at: <http://waltermetz.com> [<http://waltermetz.com>]). Finally, I have been doing audio reviews for our local National Public Radio affiliate, WSIU, often with the express purpose of questioning, refuting, and/or otherwise problematizing their national (certainly professional is the incorrect formulation) reviewers. A case in point is Kenneth Turan’s review of *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg, 2012).

On Friday, November 9, 2012, Turan gushed on NPR about what a great writer Tony Kushner is and the miraculous way Daniel Day-Lewis disappears into the role of Lincoln. These simplistic claims obfuscate the complexity of the matters at hand. First, Tony Kushner is indeed one of the most accomplished figures in the contemporary American theatre. His historical epic, *Angels in America* (1993), uses the Brechtian techniques of

split stage and one actor playing multiple characters in order to express how human dignity can triumph over the diabolical political machinations of the likes of Roy Cohn as late 20th century America grappled with the AIDS plague.

Yet the translation of political modernism into popular audiovisual representation has not gone well. HBO's conversion (2002) by Moises Kaufman of his play, *The Laramie Project* (2000), resulted in gimmicky stunt casting of Hollywood stars—Peter Fonda and the like—stripping the multiple casting of its political effect: the theater actor playing homophobic preacher Fred Phelps puts down his "God hates fags" sign, walks across the stage, and sits down as another character, one of the jurors at the trial of Matthew Shephard's murderers. No justice possible, Kaufman's play thus speaks without words, merely relying on the horrifying stage picture. To have television stars embody separate roles hamstring the political impact of the play.

HBO's televisual adaptation of *Angels in America*, on which Kushner collaborated with Mike Nichols, fares just slightly better: the multiple casting was retained this time, but nonetheless, the reliance on big Hollywood stars—on the order of Meryl Streep—strips the play of its modernist minimalism. However, despite this time collaborating with a filmmaker even more committed to classicism, the populist master Steven Spielberg, *Lincoln* solves the problem of classical cinema's stripping of modernism's politics with skillful ambition. In the opening scene, despite there being no Brechtian tricks employed, the splitting of historical subjects is nonetheless directly presented on the screen. In a clever gesture, Kushner and Spielberg present the Gettysburg Address as a discursive battle, delivered not coherently *by* Lincoln, but through multiply diverse voices speaking it *at* him, and us.

And here we get to the crux of the impoverishment of contemporary popular film criticism. In his review for the McClatchy-Tribune service, Roger Moore (alas, no James Bond in sight) declares, “the Lincoln that American schoolchildren picture in their heads from now on could now have a weedy drawl provided by an Oscar-winning Englishman, one of the finest actors who ever lived.” Yes, Daniel Day-Lewis does a wonderful job portraying Abraham Lincoln, but so would any number of method actors, ranging from Robert DeNiro to Dustin Hoffman. In a tragically understudied essay on historical fiction, "A Body Too Much," film theorist Jean-Louis Comolli suggests that the problem with the biopic is that there are one too many persons present within a performance of a famous historical figure, both the actor and the person whom she portrays. [1][#N1] The classical Hollywood film, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (John Ford, 1939) has Henry Fonda embody the triumph of down-home American values on the precipice of World War II. Similarly, Day-Lewis evokes a Lincoln caught in the swirl of present-day chaotic historical forces. But Comolli's brand of post-structural theory posits that split subjectivity, not individual coherence, describes the human experience in the cinema. Daniel Day-Lewis does not disappear into one coherent Lincoln, but instead embodies one fragment of the many possible.

There is no one coherent Lincoln into whom Day-Lewis *could* disappear. Would he be

the revered storyteller of simplistic American myth? Or, is his Lincoln the shrewd political manipulator portrayed by the book on which the film is partly based, Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals*? [2] [#N2] Or should he be the villain of the neo-confederacy, as Thomas DiLorenzo positions poor Abe in *Lincoln Unmasked* and *The Real Lincoln*? [3] [#N3] The Kushner of *Angels in America* prepares us to see history as the debate among the shards of historical subjects who make up our past and affect our present. When Lincoln finally stops hiding in his office to stump for passage of the 13th Amendment to banish slavery in the United States, he reminds one of Lyndon Johnson on late-night phone calls in the 1960s, threatening and cajoling Congress for the passage of the legislation that would fulfill the Great Society.

More pressingly, as *Lincoln* depicts the wildly divisive 1860s House of Representatives, on the floor of which Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens had to endure the racist taunts of border state Democrats, viciously defending the specious eugenic argument of white people's superiority to black people, one cannot help but think that President Obama's struggle with health care reform in our divisive Tea Party House pales in comparison. And thus, I concur with the popular film critics' celebration of Daniel Day-Lewis' masterful embodiment of the president: Lincoln... and Johnson... and Obama. Let us as academic film critics follow his path, and write about the cinema in a way that does intellectual justice to such great actors, and leaders. Middle-ground criticism must be about WHY films matter, not about whether they are good or not. Even more importantly, good criticism must study HOW such films are able to achieve what they do as artistic re-workings of our precarious, decaying civilization.

## Author biography:

Walter Metz is a Professor in the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University, where he teaches film, television, and theatre history, theory, and criticism. He holds two Bachelor’s degrees, one in Materials Science and Engineering and the other in the Humanities, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has a Master’s degree in Communication Studies from the University of Iowa, and a Ph.D. in Radio-Television-Film from the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of three books: *Engaging Film Criticism: Film History and Contemporary American Cinema* (2004), *Bewitched* (2007), and *Gilligan’s Island* (2012). Currently, he is drafting a book manuscript entitled *Molecular Cinema*, a new theoretical exploration of materialism in cinema as a way of re-thinking the relationship between science and film.

## Notes

1. Jean-Louis Comolli, “Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much,” *Screen* 19, 2 (1978), 41-54. [1] [#N1-ptri]
2. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006). [2] [#N2-ptri]
3. Thomas DiLorenzo, *Lincoln Unmasked: What You’re Not Supposed to Know About*

*Dishonest Abe* (New York: Crown Forum, 2007); and *The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War* (New York: Crown Forum, 2003). [\[#N3-ptri\]](#)

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