

# Political Emotions: Civil Religion and Melodrama in Spielberg's *Lincoln*

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This essay focuses on how Spielberg's film engages with and contributes to the myth of Lincoln as a super-natural figure, a saint more than a hero or great statesman, while anchoring his moral authority in the sentimental rhetoric of the domestic sphere. It is this use of the melodramatic mode, linking the familial space with the national through the trope of the victim-hero, that is the essay's main concern. With Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America*, as scriptwriter, it is perhaps not surprising that melodrama is the operative mode in the film. One of the issues that emerges from this analysis is how the film updates melodrama for a contemporary audience in order to minimize what could be perceived as manipulative sentimental devices, observing for most of the film an aesthetic of relative sobriety and realism. In the last hour, and especially the final minutes of the film, melodramatic conventions are deployed in full force and infused with hagiographic iconography to produce a series of emotionally charged moments that create a perfect union of American Civil Religion and classical melodrama. The cornerstone of both cultural paradigms, as deployed in this film, is death: Lincoln's at the hands of an assassin, and the Civil War soldiers', poignantly depicted at key moments of the film. Finally, the essay shows how film melodrama as a genre weaves together the private and the public, the domestic with the national, the familial with the military, and links pathos to politics in a carefully choreographed narrative of sentimentalized mythopoesis.

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Few national figures inspire the emotions that Abraham Lincoln does. Even during his life Lincoln was both passionately revered and hated. His violent death on Good Friday at the hands of a Confederate patriot and Lincoln-hater, merely a month after his second inauguration, transformed the end-of-war gratitude of a nation into the high-pitched worship that only martyrdom can confer. Steven Spielberg's recent film, *Lincoln* (2012), is about the last three months of Abraham Lincoln's life, and more specifically about the complex political effort to pass the controversial Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery. The film's focus on Lincoln's skill as Washington operator and manager of people, both friends and enemies, comes from the book that inspired Tony Kushner's screenplay: Doris Goodman's *Team of Rivals* (2005), which is concerned with, as Goodman's subtitle tells us, "The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln." The film departs in several important aspects from the book, however. One is the more narrow focus on Lincoln himself, while the book examines the other men in Lincoln's cabinet, the "team" of the title. Secondly, Kushner introduces an attention to Lincoln's domestic life as well as his intimate moments with his male secretaries, telegraph workers, and other young men such as soldiers in camp or at the hospital. A third element that Spielberg and Kushner bring to the story is a narrative mode structuring the emotional choreography of the film that is best understood as a form of melodrama. And finally, the film emphasizes an aesthetic and performative aspect of Lincoln that we can read through the concept of American Civil Religion.

My main argument about the film is that it weaves these last two dimensions, melodrama and Civil Religion, together to perform cinematographically a task that national heroes have traditionally accomplished, namely, inspire increased devotion to the cause of national coherence at a time of conflict or patriotic lassitude. I take the word "devotion" from Lincoln's own Gettysburg Address, where he uses the word interchangeably for patriotism and the willingness to die for one's country. The one other time that Lincoln was conjured so insistently through the movies to unite and inspire a weary nation was on the eve of World War II, where two Lincoln films in a row, both focusing on his humble origins, were deployed to heal the wounds of a decade of the Depression.<sup>1</sup> At present, at least five films have been released since 2010.<sup>2</sup> Two are

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<sup>1</sup> *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939, dir. John Ford) and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940, dir. John Cromwell).

<sup>2</sup> *The Conspirator* (2010, dir. Robert Redford), *Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies* (2012, dir. Richard Schenkman), *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012, dir. Timor Bekmanbetov), *Lincoln* (2012, dir. Steven Spielberg), *Saving Lincoln* (2013, dir. Salvador Litvak).

explicitly Gothic, one portraying Lincoln as a vampire hunter, just as the title promises, and another portraying him as a zombie killer. A third focuses on the trial of Booth's co-conspirators, especially Mary Surratt, the first woman hung by a federal court. All are reverential towards Lincoln and portray him as a great humanitarian and super-human hero (in two of these films, literally). All focus on his last years or months of life, and assassination, unlike the earlier films, which were concerned with Lincoln's poor, rural and working class background, an aspect of Lincoln that spoke to a Depression-wracked nation.

Why the current interest in resurrecting the late Lincoln on screen? One possible answer is the link between the struggle for abolition and the election of a black President to the White House. In this perspective, Obama's election is the culmination of a process of political enfranchisement that begins with the Emancipation Proclamation. Another answer might lie in the "house divided" trope, a phrase from one of Lincoln's most famous speeches, where he argues that a "house divided against itself cannot stand." The prospect that the American political divide between liberals and conservatives, or simply left and right, is more extreme now than ever before, could therefore account for an appeal to Lincoln since he has traditionally served as a unifying figure. A Southerner by family background and birth, a Northerner by education and adult experience, an easy-going tall-tale telling Westerner in manners, and an Eastern political operator by necessity, Lincoln has often been viewed as the first truly national President. His fervent belief in the Union, and his willingness to accept a Civil War in order to preserve it, also contribute to this aspect of his iconic definition. Lincoln serves as a symbol of unity in yet another way, as a somewhat androgynous figure, a man of feeling, who sympathizes with the grieving mothers of soldiers and who offers pardons at every opportunity. A Southern literary tradition, immortalized in the film *Birth of a Nation*, calls Lincoln the "Great Heart."

A third reason of course is that Lincoln was a war president, and America has been a country at war since 2003, and arguably since 12 September 2001, when Bush announced that the terrorist attacks on New York were "acts of war" and would be retaliated in kind. This is a darker and more complex dimension of Lincoln, one linking him to the 600,000 Civil War deaths, and generating cultural work of memorialization, national definition, and ideological containment that is best approached through the sociological paradigm of Civil Religion.

We can see all three elements acknowledged in the film: the slow but progressive advancement of the African American into the body politic

is evoked by the first scenes of the film, where Lincoln chats with black Union soldiers. The divided nature of American politics and a president's need to procure support from a rival party by any means necessary constitutes the main drama as well as comic relief in the film. And finally, the burden of the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, as American Presidents are defined, to authorize death and wage war establishes the moral and emotional gravity of the film as it opens and closes with battlefield scenes reminiscent of the unforgettable first thirty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, created by the same cinematographer, Janusz Kaminski.

In short, the film engages with various key aspects of the Lincoln myth, as they speak to the current national moment, and weaves them together into a generically hybrid text that invites viewers to renew their faith in the American national project. What I mean by "hybrid" is that the film borrows from several different genre traditions, including the historical biopic, the war film, a congressional variation on the courtroom drama, and of course melodrama, which will be the main focus of this essay. Since the screenplay is written by a playwright, a man in love with words and their complex power, the film is unusually verbose for a Spielberg film. In the first half of the film especially, it feels like we move from one room of talking men to another, with occasionally Molly or Tad to break the monotony. Not that the conversations are themselves monotonous, if you follow their import, but the tone of the film remains fairly subdued in the first two-thirds of its running time before it begins a series of dramaturgical spikes and plateaus that lead to the climax. In fact, I will argue that emotion is central to a thorough understanding of the film and its project, both in terms of the melodramatic portrayal of Lincoln as virtuous victim, and in terms of the way the film is structured emotionally. Melodrama is used to leaven the political hagiography with glimpses of Lincoln's domestic life, while comedy is used to lighten the melodrama with a comic subplot of the three political fixers procuring votes through a variety of schemes and bribes.

In addition, the film adapts melodrama to a contemporary context where the conventional emotional excess of the form yields to a surprising emotional restraint. In fact, some of the most important scenes of the film involve characters *hiding* their emotions, disciplining themselves, and putting on a public mask of moderation or even hypocrisy. One is a flashback of Molly hiding her grief for Willy while hosting a reception at the White House, and another is Thaddeus Stevens refusing to be provoked into a politically inexpedient admission of his radical views. In short, as a modern adaptation of the melodrama genre, the film shies

away from emotional excess and advocates a middle road of pragmatism and moderation. Yet emotion remains at the center of the film, both in its portrait of Lincoln as sufferer, and in its melodrama-heavy second half, where the speechifying of the first half pays off in a series of emotionally intense moments beginning with a violent quarrel between Lincoln and his son Robert and culminating with his assassination.

### *Melodrama*

First of all, it is important to clarify and demystify the term “melodrama,” a term that is used loosely in common parlance for any kind of emotionally exaggerated narrative or situation. The stigma that Modernism attached to emotional response continues to exert its toxic influence on literary study even if scholars of American culture have been challenging its assumptions since at least the 1980s. Works like Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs* (1986) revolutionized scholarship on the nineteenth century by taking seriously the role and effects of genres like melodrama and the sentimental novel. Tompkins’ expression “cultural work” has in the meantime become the defining term of the field of Cultural Studies insofar as the project of this discipline is to examine cultural texts of all kinds for their inscription of power relationships and ideology. Tompkins specifically looked at the political power imbricated with the sentimental effects of texts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). In the meantime, the field of melodrama studies in film and drama was developing since the 1970s, where works like David Grimstead’s *Melodrama Unveiled* (1976) and Thomas Elsaesser’s “Tales of Sound and Fury” (1972) set the groundwork for a rich investigation of social melodrama in popular culture.

The study that probably had the most influence of all on both literary and popular culture melodrama studies was Peter Brooks’ *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), which argued that melodrama emerged from a post-religious European society as a way of coping with lost moral blueprints and frames of reference. This argument, which gave serious cultural significance to precisely those elements that were most despised in melodrama, namely, its moral simplicity, its emotional overdetermination, and its domestic situations, and identified these characteristics in canonical writers such as Henry James, launched a generation of scholars to investigate how melodrama operates in a variety of cultural texts and contexts.

Besides Tompkins', the most influential and important work to focus specifically on American culture is Linda Williams' *Playing the Race Card* (2001), in which she argues that melodrama is "the fundamental mode by which American mass culture has 'talked to itself' about the enduring moral dilemma of race" (xiv). I would take this insight a step further, and argue that American mass culture talks to itself in a melodramatic mode about American history and identity in general. Like Brooks, Williams sees melodrama as more than a mode seeking emotionalism for its own sake but rather a genre with larger stakes, such as the quest for a "hidden moral legibility" in what Brooks calls a "post-sacred world" (Williams 18; Brooks 15). Brooks' term "the moral occult" is also important and describes the tendency of the genre to assume that there is a domain of "operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality" (Brooks 5).

The fact that the moral occult of melodrama is both secular and yet gestures towards a hidden spiritual dimension or significance aligns it in an unexpected way with the cultural work of Civil Religion, which too is a secular discourse but which presupposes a dimension beyond the physical and empirical informing the agency and meaning of the nation as living entity. Historically, in fact, melodrama and modern Civil Religion are both linked to the emergence of the nation-state and its promise of transcending class, ethnic and religious differences in the dissolving magic of national unity. Like the nation, melodrama seeks to unite and forge links between people, affective links based on a common sensibility. It is no accident that many of the great nationalist novels of the nineteenth century are also very much influenced by melodramatic conventions. These include what Williams calls a "dialectic of pathos and action" (wherein pathos often leads to action), an idealization of a "space of innocence" (often a home or a natural space, in either case a locus of play), the use of character types embodying "primary psychic roles" such as nurturing mother, stern father, good son, or selfish opportunist. Williams also argues, contrary to popular misconceptions about the genre, that melodrama uses the latest devices associated with representational realism in the service of its desire to create identification between characters and readers or spectators. This would explain, for example, why contemporary melodrama is more sober and restrained than nineteenth century melodrama. A final crucial convention, the central one in fact, for Williams, is the focus on a victim-hero and on recognizing his or her virtue. This is the main work of melodrama, and is organized around the depiction of suffering, either mental or

physical. Recognizing the virtue of the victim-hero is also the key to the moral legibility orchestrated by the text (Williams 29).

To these conventions, I have added another one (Soltysik 2008) which I view as a crucial extension of the function of the victim-hero, and that is the death of a virtuous character, usually (but not always) the protagonist. In keeping with the semi-magical logic of the moral occult, the death of a virtuous victim possesses an extraordinary agency, and can convert others to the values espoused by the victim, or can serve as catalyst for action that advances those values. A good example is the death of Uncle Tom in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which converts two up to then sadistic and clownish black slaves on Legree's plantation to Christianity. It also serves as a catalyst for young William Shelby to free all the slaves on the Shelby plantation. In a larger cultural frame, it could be argued that the pathos generated by Uncle Tom's death served as a catalyst for the Civil War. In any case, that is how Abraham Lincoln is said to have described the novel in an anecdote of how he welcomed Harriet Beecher Stowe to the White House with the words "so you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" (cited in Weinstein" 1).<sup>3</sup>

Although Lincoln's words are probably apocryphal, there is perhaps a core of emotional truth in Lincoln's desire to share the blame for the Civil War, or even to slough it off entirely on Stowe, as this quote suggests. And here we come to a possible answer to a question that is begged by the preceding description of the cultural work of melodrama, namely, if the cultural work of melodrama is to produce recognition of the virtue of a victim-hero, why would Lincoln need such recognition? Wouldn't it be redundant, since he's already a national hero? We can see why the black slave in 1852 could need such recognition, or the fallen woman in 1792, when Susanna Rowson wrote the first great sentimental novel of American literature, *Charlotte Temple*, or even the lawyer with AIDS, as Tom Hanks plays him in the melodramatic film *Philadelphia* in 1993. These are all characters that can be said to exist on the margins of social acceptability and the cultural work of melodrama is to render them sympathetic and includable in the body politic of American society. But Lincoln? Isn't he already at the center of the body politic? I would argue that, precisely because Lincoln was President during the

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<sup>3</sup> Although Lincoln probably never said these words, the anecdote has been reproduced by countless critics and clearly strikes a chord among readers and scholars (see Vollaro). The real impact of Stowe's novel on antebellum attitudes towards African Americans can never be measured but nineteenth-century abolitionists certainly believed it helped their cause (Vollaro 28-29).

Civil War, he needs redemption and recognition in order to be included in the nation as conceived by popular culture. His potential exclusion stems partly from the precarious position occupied by any sovereign, paradoxically both the leader and the potential scapegoat of the national collectivity.<sup>4</sup> However, an even more obvious reason for Lincoln's need for redemption is suggested by the comment to Stowe that has been so persistently attributed to him. After all, Lincoln is the president with the largest number of deaths of Americans on his hands, 600,000, which is more than World War One, World War Two and the Vietnam War combined. The work of recognizing his virtue is a cultural task that can never be accomplished once and for all but must be re-performed by every generation that wishes to claim him as a unifying figure.

On a third and more mundane level, as this film focuses on the micro-political aspects of Lincoln's leadership, his manipulation of people and votes, and especially his frequent equivocations, this also produces a less than saintly Lincoln who needs to have his higher purpose and deeper virtue recognized by the film audience, since many people in the world of the film fail to perceive it. For example, some senators call him a tyrant, others see him as full of "tricks," and even the film audience sees him playing with words in a distinctly Clinton-esque manner to achieve his purpose.<sup>5</sup> This was part of Spielberg's plan to invite Lincoln off the "alabaster pedestal," as he puts it in an interview, referring to the way the film tries to show Lincoln's personal and domestic side (Fleming). However, the irony of Spielberg's strategy is that he takes Lincoln off his pedestal only to better hoist him onto an altar, inscribing the film within a long tradition of national hagiography in which Lincoln occupies pride of place as national martyr and quasi-divinity (one need only to think of the temple-like appearance of the Lincoln Memorial).

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<sup>4</sup> According to Marvin and Ingle, the sovereign and the military together belong to what they call the "totem class," defined by both the power to kill and the ritualistic offering of themselves as sacrifices for the collectivity (6, 248-253).

<sup>5</sup> The most striking example is when Lincoln sends a note to the House floor asserting that "So far as [he] know[s], there are no peace commissioners in the city nor are there likely to be." This was technically true only because Lincoln has instructed the Richmond commissioners to be denied access to the city.



*Civil Religion*

Here the concept of Civil Religion needs to be explained. Originally coined by Rousseau, there are two principle ways in which it can be understood. One is the way that Rousseau originally meant it, which was an artificially invented but politically expedient religion of the state (see Cristi 17-27, and Gentile 18-20). The other way, which has been more influential in an American context, has been as a kind of natural emanation of a national culture and statecraft. This is the sense in which Robert Bellah understood the concept when he wrote the essay that launched a decades-long debate among American historians: "Civil Religion in America" (1967). Although scholarly interest in the concept waned after a decade of intense debate, it remains a compelling framework through which to understand the emotional and quasi-mystical dimensions of American politics and has even enjoyed something of a revival in recent years.<sup>6</sup> I use Civil Religion to refer to the way in which national institutions, rituals and ideologies function like religion, in the Durkheimian sense. For instance, national civil religion divides the world into sacred and profane spheres (e.g. punctuating the yearly calendar with national holy days: Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Flag Day, etc.), provides members with a sense of supra-individual transcendence and collective continuity (the nation for which the flag stands, as the Pledge of Allegiance terms it), and tries to offer an emotionally satisfying framework for coping with death in military service (i.e. dying *for* one's country).<sup>7</sup> If national civil religion resembles traditional religions in these three aspects, the modern nation has wrested from religion two other aspects that it now monopolizes completely: the power to kill non-members for the sake of its self-preservation and the right to ask members to die in its name. Currently, only the nation legitimately holds this power, which is why the nation can be said to have replaced religion in the social organization of death (Marvin and Ingle 25).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Marvin and Ingle, Cristi, Gentile, Pahl, and Haberski.

<sup>7</sup> See Billig for a discussion of the importance of nationalism in Americans' lives even if it seems unnoticed (8).

<sup>8</sup> I follow Aviel Roshwald in not making a distinction between patriotism and nationalism, which are commonly differentiated into a healthy versus a fanatical devotion to an existing or aspiring state (4). Similarly, making a distinction between civic nationalism and religious nationalism provides no significant critical traction with respect to the United States, which has been defined in terms of the latter as often as the former despite the officially secular status of its foundational documents.

*Lincoln: The Project*

Keeping in mind the cultural work of both melodrama and Civil Religion, we can turn now to Spielberg's film and begin to understand how it draws on both frameworks in its depiction of Lincoln as melodramatic victim-hero and national martyr and how these two are made to overlap. I will examine several scenes from the film, paying particular attention to the musical score, as it plays a key role in the emotional choreography of the film. The very first scene is a direct inter-textual reference to Spielberg's other major patriotic war film, *Saving Private Ryan*, which is best remembered for its gory depiction of the landing on Normandy which set a new and possibly unsurpassed bar for gruesome realism in battlefield scenes. *Lincoln* also opens with a combat scene from the Civil War. Much shorter, but even more dense and intimate, the scene depicts hundreds of men engaged in fierce hand to hand combat, stabbing each other with knives and bayonets in a muddy, rainy field that recalls medieval depictions of hell. Since death by bayonet was relatively rare during the Civil War, we must understand the scene rhetorically as part of the film's desire to make history intimate by thrusting the spectator in the midst of a very personalized form of combat. Thus, against the backdrop of a deafening human roar, we see the faces of men murdering each other personally and up close, stepping on each other and drowning each other in the mud. Quickly, however, a voice-off narrator pulls us out of the scene and we discover that the battle is a memory being recounted by an African American Union soldier to Lincoln as he chats with the men in a military camp. With no remorse, the soldier reports not taking any prisoners among the Southerners that day, in retaliation for the execution of black soldiers by Confederates in an earlier battle. We are thrust immediately into the ugliness of the Civil War as it was driven by emotions of vengefulness and racial hatred, where white racism is paid back in kind by black Union men.

Listening calmly and sympathetically to this gory account we discover Abraham Lincoln, as first we hover with the camera just over his shoulder. A black soldier reproachfully reminds Lincoln that black soldiers were initially paid far less than their white counterparts, and that there are still no black officers in the Army. This complaint offers an occasion for the film to show its first example of Lincoln's "political genius," namely, his skill at diffusing awkward or tense situations with diversion and humor. First he asks the soldier what he will do after the war (the diversion) and then answers the soldier's allusion to the limited

job prospects open to black men with a joke about how no barber can cut his wayward hair (the strategic humor).

We are thus offered an illustration of Lincoln's rhetorical talents, engaging even the most humble men in familiar conversation, and diffusing any potential conflict with the subterfuge of self-deprecating humor and personal anecdotes. When Lincoln says that his last barber hung himself, we know we are in the presence of the Western tall-tale and the moment for serious discussion of racial injustice has passed. Two white soldiers interrupt this exchange to tell Lincoln that they heard him at Gettysburg. They then proceed to recite the famous Gettysburg Address, first one soldier and then the other taking up the recitation. As they are ordered back to their company, only one black soldier remains, and he finishes the speech as the soundtrack reverentially hushes and a respectful piano solo accompanies his recitation as he walks off. We are left with a Lincoln hagiographically half-lit from behind as the music and light both fade.

This first scene deftly captures the dual nature of the film's project, evoking on the one hand the iconic and national Lincoln, the man whose speeches are memorized by soldiers and generations of schoolchildren, and on the other hand, the human and personal Lincoln, who takes the time to have personal conversations with Union soldiers in a military camp, even allowing disgruntled black soldiers to vent their grievances to him without resentment. This is the sovereign who mixes with the populace, lowering himself to the level of the humblest infantryman while retaining the dignity of the head of state as he sits on a crate in the midst of barrels and ammunition. The next two scenes continue in the vein of showing Lincoln at his most humble and domestic: one where he tells his wife Molly about a dream and another where he takes his little son Tad to bed by lying down on the floor beside him first. The film's desire to show a Lincoln at his most intimate and accessible is apparent, and the touching scene of Lincoln on the floor could not make this clearer or more visually literal. A devoted husband and father, Lincoln seems saintly from the start. The first overt sign of trouble is when the eldest son Robert returns and is rudely dismissed by Lincoln who is deep in conversation about the war. In fact, the next hour and a half of the film is devoted mainly to statecraft, Lincoln's conversations with his Secretary of State William Seward, his contentious cabinet, and his political allies and rivals, as he maneuvers the Thirteenth Amendment into a debate and a ratifying vote. Just as Lincoln dismisses Robert from his office, so the film places the domestic

on a back burner while the political theater of the Senate and its behind the scenes workings are displayed.

Lincoln: *The Pathos*

However, the last third of the film builds to a dramatic climax as a series of increasingly emotional moments are initiated with an explosion of the conflict with Robert that has been brewing since he arrived. Taking Robert to a military hospital but unable to persuade him to step inside, Lincoln plays father to the young men missing legs and arms while his own son waits outside and finally follows a mysterious leaky wheelbarrow to the hospital's dumping ground for amputated arms and legs. Shaken and weeping, clearly ashamed of his own fear of injury, Robert confronts Lincoln with his determination to enlist. Here the film's emotional meter jumps to a new level as Lincoln slaps Robert then tries to embrace him and is violently shaken off.

The ideological stakes of this scene are higher than they might initially seem since Lincoln is more than just any father worried about the safety of his child. He is a man who has sent hundreds of thousands of sons to their deaths on the battlefields of the Civil War, and his refusal to sacrifice his own son can be read as a grave failure of moral courage and as an unfair attempt at personal exemption from the cruel lottery of war. I believe that this too is offered by the film as one of the reasons why Lincoln must be redeemed. And indeed, the film begins the redemption immediately, if we understand it in terms of the melodramatic logic of suffering. Though Lincoln attempts to prohibit Robert from enlisting, Robert refuses both his authority and his affection in one brutal rejection, leaving Lincoln standing alone, head bowed down.

The emotional punishment, we could almost say crucifixion, of Lincoln continues in the next scene, when he and Molly argue. Molly reproaches Lincoln for Robert's enlistment (which we know he tried to prevent) and accuses him of having wanted to put her in a madhouse because she was heartbroken over the death of their other son Willie. The film shows him stoically enduring Molly's accusations, and gives him the last word in the argument. With Molly kneeling histrionically before him, Lincoln explains with extraordinary calmness and self-insight that he "couldn't tolerate you grieving so for Willie because I couldn't permit it in myself," and that he had to stifle and hide his grief for Willie in order to carry on with his duties as president.

With this revelation, critical for a melodramatic reading of Lincoln as silent sufferer, he describes wanting to crawl into the coffin with Willie, and still feeling that same intensity of grief every day. He concludes by telling Molly that she alone can “lighten the burden.” With the trope of grief as a heavy burden, the film tacitly introduces an image of Lincoln as Christ carrying his cross, an image that links the melodramatic focus on suffering with a Civil Religion reading of Lincoln as national martyr. In addition to his grief for Willie, Lincoln must cope with Molly’s emotional self-indulgence, Robert’s resentment, and the lack of support and understanding of his plans by his own cabinet. In short, the film depicts Lincoln as both solitary and afflicted, a classic example of the virtuous victim of melodrama. In keeping with the myth of Lincoln as the Great Heart, the toll of the war is depicted as weighing on him as much as the grief for his own son. Thus the film shows him awake at 3 in the morning, anxiously signing pardons in his secretaries’ bedroom, wishing to spare at least some lives among deserters sentenced to hang.

The two most emotionally climactic scenes of the film are the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment and the assassination, and both are conventionally melodramatic but in directly opposed ways. In keeping with the temporal logic of melodrama, as described by Linda Williams, the first moment can be read as a just-in-time rescue, a standard feature of the melodramatic plot, while the second is the too-late melodramatic death. Both scenes are linked, however, by their depiction of characters weeping and their invitation to the film audience to weep as well. The first is the dramatic vote count in the Senate that culminates in the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. As the final count is tallied, the film cuts the speaker off in mid-sentence and instead shows Lincoln with little Tad in his office as he begins to hear the bells ringing in the town. Lincoln looks otherworldly as light from the window bathes him in a saintly glow. The film then cuts to the senate floor, where people are jubilantly throwing papers, laughing and crying at once, in a carnivalesque scene of celebration. There is a close-up of Mrs. Keckley, Mrs. Lincoln’s dress maker and confidante, weeping and smiling as she looks upwards in silent thanks. Then we see a crowd outside the White House, waving American flags and throwing hats into the air as they cheer and shout.

This scene, which continues for several minutes, functions as a prototypically melodramatic moment, where the plot stops so that characters and viewers can be moved to tears together: here to tears of joy or national pride. The important thing is that viewers and characters are emotionally in tune during this scene and one of the driving objectives

of melodrama – to dissolve the boundaries between characters and between viewers and to allude to a moral occult – has been achieved. The moral occult evoked by the scene is the unfolding of the national narrative of democracy and equality, as one of the most cherished myths of American Civil Religion. The passing of the Thirteenth Amendment is charged with mighty national portent, as it represents a step towards the realization of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. Here we see the collapse of the melodramatic narrative into the Civil Religion one. In the melodramatic frame, we have the temporality of “in the nick of time.” With just two votes to spare, the two-thirds majority vote has been achieved, the slave population has been rescued, and the characters and viewers exult. In the Civil Religion framework, we have what appears as the successful workings of the state, an affirmation of the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and a correctly executed modification of the Constitution: in short, a successful state ritual and an affirmation of the virtue of the collectivity.

The other major melodramatic moment is Lincoln’s assassination. However, before that scene, sandwiched between the ratification of the Amendment on 31 January and the fateful departure to the theater on 14 April, there are two more low-key but important scenes in which the film grows heavier both with emotion and ideological import: Lincoln’s meeting with the delegation from the Confederate States, and his visit to a battlefield. In the first scene, he asks the South to surrender and scolds the delegates for having “not kept faith” with the “democratic process,” explicitly conflating religious and political rhetoric. When the delegates reply by accusing him of having kept the Union intact not with ballots but with bullets, arguing that “your Union, Sir, is bonded with cannon-fire and death,” Lincoln makes a speech very reminiscent of the Gettysburg Address. As the film pans in for a close-up, a lone oboe in the background scores the scene and cues the audience to know that what Lincoln is saying is Important and True. And what he articulates at this moment is the essence of the moral occult aspect of Civil Religion. He says that “we have shown the world” – and one can note how making visible, legible, and producing recognition, the core drives of melodrama, are central to this speech – that there is a “great invisible strength in a people’s union.” He continues, “we have shown that a people can endure awful sacrifice and yet cohere,” invoking the central tenets of Civil Religion and nationalist ideology in general, which is that sacrifice and national coherence are linked. The “yet” seems to imply an opposition, but, as the Gettysburg Address expressed, and many social theorists have argued, national or group coherence in fact *depends* on

sacrificial violence.<sup>9</sup> Thus, turning the reproach of the Southern delegation about the hundreds of thousands who have died during his administration into a Gettysburg moment, Lincoln uses precisely those deaths as proof and moral guarantors of the legitimacy of the cause they died for. The words that allude to the occult or religious dimension of the national project are the “great invisible strength.” The existence of invisible but powerful forces guiding events and giving sense and meaning to them – in a secular but somehow spiritual way – is precisely the core of the melodramatic mode as much as the Civil Religion one, and the locus of their overlapping objectives.

Lincoln’s visit to a battlefield after a battle brings us full circle to the beginning of the film, as it were, except it is not the same battle, and now we witness, with Lincoln, the results. The scene is gray, somber, dark, still, and Lincoln rides through it grimly. We see the Union and Confederate dead lying together, indiscriminately, piled on top of each other, surrounded by smoke and rubbish and destruction. It is a hellish landscape once more, only this time instead of the roar of battle, we have a piano solo, scored by John Williams, titled, curiously “Remembering Willie,” alluding to the Lincolns’ dead son. The title of the piece suggests that Lincoln’s grief for his own dead son merges here with his feelings for the dead sons of the nation in a classical melodramatic move of breaking down barriers through pathos. As the audience already knows that Lincoln carries the cross of grief for Willy, this scene suggests that Lincoln’s cross actually is freighted with grief for all the other sons that have died in the war. Not surprisingly, in the next scene, as Lincoln talks with Grant he looks so exhausted and shaken by what he has just witnessed on the battlefield that Grant tells him that he looks “ten years older.” The screenplay confirms that this is true and that make-up artists had been asked to make it clear: “He has grown older, the skin around his eyes is cobwebbed with fine creases, and his hair’s thinner, softer, suffused with grey” (<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/-Lincoln.html>). Here we have again the logic of melodrama, where the virtuous victim’s virtue is made manifest by making his suffering visible and recognizable.

If the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment follows the melodramatic logic of the just-in-time rescue, then the assassination is framed in terms of a temporality of the too-late. Hence the night of the assassination is preceded by a sunny carriage ride, where the Lincolns make plans for travel in the future and Lincoln tells Molly reassuringly,

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<sup>9</sup> Most notably, Girard, Burkert, and Marvin and Ingle.

“we must try to be happier.” The film draws on the audience’s sense of historical irony since we know that the Lincolns will not travel anywhere, and that they will not be happier, because it is “too late”: the assassination will happen that very night. The aesthetic choices informing the representation of this event are also cued for maximum emotional impact. In principle, the assassination of Lincoln can make for a colorful narrative, with the handsome actor John Wilkes Booth sneaking up on Lincoln from behind at the Ford Theater while the Lincolns watch a comedy, then getting tangled in the red, white and blue banners as he leaps on stage to cry “Sic temper tyrannis” and “I have done it, the South is avenged.” Spielberg’s film sidesteps all these historical details and goes for pure emotion instead. What it shows is little Tad breathlessly watching a play in another theater and then his reaction to the news that his father has been shot. Like the ratification scene, this moment is also clearly meant to make the viewer weep as the camera closes in on the child screaming again and again in anguish at the loss of the beloved parent. The screen is dark except for Tad’s anguished face, an image of pathos. The film then cuts from Tad’s shrieks to Mary’s face also distorted with weeping, then to one of the many men weeping around his bed during the almost comically heavy-handed deathbed scene where Lincoln lies in the middle, bathed in light. At this point Spielberg abandons realism altogether and presents Lincoln superimposed on a flame like a god or a saint. In dying, the virtuous victim of the melodramatic plot merges with the national martyr and we begin to hear his voice and recognize (or some will) the Second Inaugural Address.

### Lincoln: *The Ending*

In ending with this particular speech, the film not only bookends its narrative with Lincoln’s two most famous speeches, the only two speeches inscribed on the Lincoln Memorial, but he ends with the speech where Lincoln approaches most closely the tone and rhetoric of a preacher. This makes a certain narrative sense, since the speech is placed after his death, as if he’s crossed over to another register, where the political and the religious co-mingle, which is indeed the peculiarity of that Inaugural Address. This is Lincoln’s most religious speech, and the film picks it up towards the end, leading up to the most famous last lines, where the first words that we hear clearly are: “fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.” Not only



does it explicitly mention praying, but with the word “scourge” it evokes a medieval instrument of religious self-punishment. In stark counter-distinction to the oft-quoted words that will follow, urging charity for all, here Lincoln imagines divine judgment upon the South and possibly America as whole, with the notion of “every drop of blood drawn with the lash . . . paid by another drawn with the sword.” This is the logic of the Old Testament, with its moral equation of an eye for an eye, and this is the God of the Puritans, whose will directly guides the unfolding of history in the United States. If the anecdote about Lincoln attributing the Civil War to Stowe is apocryphal, here we see Lincoln unmistakably shifting responsibility for it onto God himself.

More importantly, however, by invoking this kind of theological understanding of American history, Lincoln is also reminding his audience of the Puritan’s notion of a covenant. An angry god is one who loves the people he is chastising and cares about the bond they have with him. By implication, then, the chastised people can really believe themselves a single people, bound by divine covenant to each other as much as to this personal and engaged, if momentarily displeased and vengeful, God. In this very specifically American way, Lincoln offers a definition of Union that is explicitly theological and hearkens back to the religious and cultural origins of the United States. It also indirectly sets the stage for a more charitable attitude towards the South on the part of the Republican North, by implying that the South is already being punished by God. Moreover, as Lincoln’s remarks must be understood to mean that the North has been punished as well, since it too has lost hundreds of thousands of men, the implication is that it too was somehow guilty. If both sides have been punished by God, there is no need for human retribution, which allows Lincoln to end his sermon on a note of healing, charity and care for the widow and orphan, and calling for a “just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

The general rhetorical impact of this speech is to lend Lincoln an aura of great moral and religious authority. The words “pray,” “God,” “Lord,” and a quotation from the Bible, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,” stand out for the film viewer, leaving him with the impression that Lincoln is like a prophet. Visually, the scene is staged like a famous photograph of the inauguration, where Lincoln is barely visible in a sea of faces. As a result, his voice seems to emanate from the people itself, or from some invisible source, like a voice of God, as film voice-off narration is sometimes called. I have argued that Civil Religion offers melodrama a powerful partner because both paradigms operate on the assumption that a moral occult exists and can

make sense of the world. Both discourses offer the hope of redeeming suffering and death by bestowing an invisible meaningfulness on what otherwise seems as a tragic waste of life. In the case of Civil Religion, or even just simple patriotism, the moral occult that is invoked is that of the nation itself. According to this logic, it is the nation and its continuity in time and its meaningfulness that redeems the lives that are sacrificed in its name. It is no accident therefore that the last word of this speech, and the last word of the film, is “nations.” With all the earmarks of a religious sermon, what Lincoln is ultimately urging devotion to is not God, Old Testament or New, but the nation and system of nations that has replaced religion as the main way of organizing human collective life.

With this final image of Lincoln addressing the crowd like a preacher, invoking an angry and righteous god, the film reveals something else about one of the many roles of cinema in American culture. I would argue that by mixing an emotional experience with a historical and ideologically freighted narrative, film can serve as a kind of ritual or liturgy in the national civil religion in which emotions of patriotism, belonging, pride, and connection to a social reality called the nation are rekindled and reaffirmed. It is undeniable that film combines many traditional elements of ritual – collective participation, heightened emotion, music, and the use of collective symbols, tropes, myths and references – to tell a story about the history and values of the collectivity. It is also clear from these remarks why melodrama would be particularly useful to mediatised ritual: by synchronizing moods and emotions through music as well as narrative and focusing attention on a serious (earnest) dramatic story, melodrama can heighten the intensity of “emotional energy” created by the film ritual (Collins 49). Thus, for better or for worse, *Lincoln*, with its melodramatic construction and attention to Lincoln’s charismatic state performances, can be understood as a ritual of collective revitalization, drawing on both melodrama and civil religion to create a potent exercise in national mythopoesis.

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