[in]Transition

Tom Brown (2025), "Awkwardness and Authenticity: Hollywood's Abraham Lincoln." *[in]Transition* 12(2). DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/intransition.18889

Open Library of Humanities

Awkwardness and Authenticity: Hollywood's Abraham Lincoln

Tom Brown, Senior Lecturer in Film Studies, King's College London, UK, tom.brown@kcl.ac.uk

This video essay considers Hollywood's cinematic uses of the image of Abraham Lincoln, with a particular emphasis on his singular physicality and its echoes across a range of films.

Creator's statement

A very long academic interest in how the cinema has represented Abraham Lincoln, a longish theoretical interest in videographic criticism, but a comparatively recent experience with the video editing that enables it combine to produce a moment of painful self-consciousness. What have I produced? Is this merely another means to disseminate my "intellectual content" (my arguments about Lincoln's on-screen image)? Or have I found a tool through which to uncover new things about the films I examine? Moreover, with its reliance on voiceover and the often very direct relationship between images on screen and my words on the soundtrack, is this video essay ultimately more "explanatory" than my previous experimenting, following the wonderful "Middlebury method," *should* have led?

The distinction between "explanatory" and "poetic," if treated as a spectrum rather than a binary, remains useful for understanding the advanced possibilities of video essays or "videographic criticism." With this in mind, it is notable that one of the reviewers, who in their response, requested more explicit commentary on camera angles, seemed to want something more explanatory, while the other reviewer, who mentions many more films than I discuss or even imagined, seems to have responded to my invitation to see Lincoln in many more places. This underlines that other meta-critical distinctions are pertinent for understanding this practice and what it solicits from the viewer. Catherine Grant's repeated emphasis in her videos and reflections on

more "open" forms and talk of "co-research" (an interstitial experimental practice that makes the viewer a part of the generation of new understandings of the object of study—see, for example, Grant 2024) is relevant here. So too is Roland Barthes, a touchstone for Keathley and Mittell of a kind of "in-between" critical practice, who provides other productive oppositions. Barthes' preoccupation with the activity of the reader (read "viewer") is famously expressed in his ideas of "readerly" versus "writerly" texts (or "works"). My desire to create a sufficiently "writerly" video essay is balanced and perhaps in a productive tension with my love of a written critical practice best exemplified by VF Perkins. Perkins wrote an essay whose title can be posed as "Must we (critics) say that they (films) mean?" However reduced a version of Perkins' rhetorical project this is, he would still, I'm sure, answer with a resounding "yes." While the best written "expressive criticism" might seek an elegance of expression analogous to the (often "classical") works of filmmaking its analysis favours (i.e. Perkins perhaps writes as well as Ophüls films, though I'm sure he would have laughed at the idea), it is intrinsic to audio-visual criticism to use the actual material of the object of study. It becomes a possibility then to create a special kind of dialogue between my rhetoric as critic (evident in my decisions as to structure and, most assertively, in my words and delivery) and the rhetoric of the works of art (films) I allow to play out. In leaving gaps and pauses in my voiceover, I want to emulate, at least to some extent, the definition of the ideal critical debate (after Leavis) as "This is so, isn't it?" "Yes, but..." (see Wood 2006: 3); something perhaps more akin to what one might achieve in a classroom (pausing and playing clips, asking questions) than in an article.

This is apt for a project that defines itself in significant part as *criticism* (but also, certainly in the wider project [Brown 2023], as history also) and claims to be talking about things "that I believe to be *in* the film[s] for all to see, and to see the sense of" (Perkins 1990; emphases mine). Robert Burgoyne in his review feels there to be an absence of a strong theoretical framework, however, and offers Jean-Louis Comolli's "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much." Comolli's essay is a clearly apt touchstone in many ways. My primary focus is various famous actors' embodiments of a famous dead statesman. Comolli is focused primarily on Renoir's (Pierre and Jean's) Louis XVI who, like Lincoln, is another figure almost as famous for being killed as for having lived. Comolli's point about the inherent disjunction between the actor and the famous historical figure is such an important one but it is so broadly applicable so as to not seem that important for to me to re-state. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Comolli's essay's intervention as theory is much less interesting than its insights as criticism—he finds something specific to *La Marseillaise* (1937) that is explicitly or implicitly evaluated: "the difficulty of playing [an historical figure] is

represented in the game [Pierre Renoir's performance] itself" (qtd in Brown 2013: 441n3). But, for me, the differences between Louis and Abe are as important as the similarities; so too the differences between Renoir and Fonda and Renoir and Day-Lewis. Renoir's Louis's awkwardness makes us feel some sadness that he must die but die he must; it is a political necessity (for the committed leftist Jean Renoir, at this point in his career). Lincoln's death is always a tragedy. Lincoln's awkwardness is also a major manifestation of an authenticity that is politically valorised. (I find disturbing resonances with Trump—I mean, deep rooted explanations for why Trump has succeeded as much as he has as a politician—who I believe many American voters appreciate for his unconventional social skills; he may be a liar but he's an authentic liar and his social weirdness is somehow a positive!) Also, though I can see that the strangeness of Fonda's performance of Lincoln (in which the nasal prosthesis should not be underestimated) could be seen to consciously employ "the body too much" (though, for me, the strangeness is much more a marker of the sense, internal to the fiction the performance creates, that he senses a destiny he is somewhat fearful of), Day-Lewis has, I believe, no aspiration to convey this at all: it is a performance committed to the attempt to *fully* embody the person.

It is useful, in the peer dialogue around videographic criticism on the pages of *[in]Transition* to articulate explicitly things that the videographic practice may leave unstated. This does not minimise the claims I would make for what the work says fairly explicitly: the video offers a clear argument about, especially, the nature and function of the peculiar physicality of Hollywood Lincoln's physicality. But it is a conscious and deliberate choice to *not* articulate certain things explicitly and to solicit the spectator's involvement in "co-research." In my voiceover, various connections go unsaid: the meeting of a James Stewart character with a screen Lincoln (31 secs); the significance of the Lincoln portrait on the wall in *It's a Wonderful Life* (9:22); the payoff where Jefferson Smith (Stewart again) struggles to balance, Joe Gargery-like, a hat on a mantelpiece (23:10); the shared music in the Ford scenes on screen together (2:30) doesn't even get played (a previous experiment with these scenes seems to me unsuccessful precisely because of the problem of how explicit *I* should be); etc. etc. Many of the vocal elisions were at the service of "mere" humour. (Garwood's cautionary tale [5:10] has perhaps gone unheeded!) But humour has, here, a serious aim in being part of a tone that seeks to establish sufficient critical distance from the Lincoln representations (often hagiographic) without labouring ideological arguments that would be better suited, I feel, to a written discourse (and are in any case not my primary aim). But, as suggested above, I wanted to encourage the active, "writerly" involvement of the viewer, and parts of the voiceover (particularly in the prologue-like section and in the final passage of

speech) directly invite the viewer to see Lincoln elsewhere. I'd love to imagine a version of this work where viewers could click clips as if they were hyperlinks and watch much longer passages and/or the entire film(s).

But the question remains of how much is "new" in comparison with my writing about Lincoln? In fact, there is very little by way of interpretative points or major points of focus in at least the second half of the video essay that are shared with the written one—there is nothing, for example, in the latter on awkwardness, apart from a single line with regards Jefferson Smith's pratfall: "i.e. Stewart's lanky physicality echoes the physical manifestation of the awkwardness with women conveyed by many of the Lincoln incarnations." Videographic work has, for me, emerged not merely as a new means of "content delivery" but as a *method* of analysis (I saw many new things on Premiere Pro's timeline) and as a means of bringing to life the critical dialogue one might experience with students in classroom experiences. It is significant that what should emerge as the new(est) line of enquiry was the idea of awkwardness—something that is visible physically but is felt within a social situation. Film (and television) is very good at awkwardness (see Kotsko 2010), making it a textual element well suited to exploration (revelation) via the videographic mode.

Bibliography

Brown, Tom (2023). "Abraham Lincoln in the Hollywood Cinema." *Open Screens*, 6.1.

Brown, Tom (2013). "Performing History in *La Marseillaise.*" In *A Companion to Jean Renoir*, eds. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (Wiley-Blackwell), 425–443.

Comolli, Jean-Louis (1978). "Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much." *Screen*, 19:2, 41–54.

Garwood, Ian (2016). "The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism." *NECSUS.*

Grant, Catherine (2024). "'I Learned an Awful Lot in Little Rock': Laura Mulvey Reflects on Her *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* Remix." *[in]Transition* 11:1.

Keathley, Christian and Jason Mittell (2019). "Scholarship in Sound & Image: A Pedagogical Essay." In *The Videographic Essay. Practice and Pedagogy* by Keathley, Mittell and Catherine Grant.

Kotsko, Adam (2010). *Awkwardness: An Essay*. (John Hunt Publishing).

Perkins, V.F. (1990). "Must We Say What They mean? Film Criticism and Interpretation." *Movie*, 34/5, 1–6.

Wood, Robin (2006). "Criticism." In *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film. Volume 2: Criticism-Ideology*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Thomson Gale), 1–10.

Biography

Tom Brown is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at King's College London, specialising in "classical" cinemas, history and film, performance, spectacle and the relationship between criticism and film history—see most recently, "Hollywood Film Style and the Production Code: Criticism and History" (2025). He has published on Abraham Lincoln in *Open Screens*, and Lincoln (mainly the 1939 *Young Mr. Lincoln*) features in *Spectacle in "Classical" Cinemas: Musicality and Historicity in the 1930s* (Routledge, 2015). His interest in performance and historical films also finds expression in "Performing History in *La Marseillaise*" in *A Companion to Jean Renoir* (eds. Phillips & Vincendeau, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), in which the awkwardness of another famous historical figure (Louis XVI) is discussed, and in "Consensual Pleasures: *Amazing Grace*, Oratory and the Middlebrow Biopic" in *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (eds. Brown & Vidal, Routledge, 2014).

Review by Robert Burgoyne

The video essay on the image of Abraham Lincoln in Hollywood cinema brings several interesting issues into view, prompting me to think broadly about the matter of historical fiction and the role of the actor in representing, or expressing, a historical personage. Tom Brown's essay attempts to come to grips with the vast representational world that surrounds the figure of Lincoln—his image in film, photography, sculpture, painting, and drama—by isolating three themes in Lincoln's representation on film: the depiction of his "awkwardness" in social situations; references to his "vision" of the future and the nation; and his "physicality," marked by both athletic strength and intellect. Most of the video essay deals with the screen representation of Lincoln's "physicality," but the other two topics are given intriguing, if minor, articulation and exemplification. The video essay succeeds in bringing to the fore a consistent set of visual tropes that govern Lincoln's representation on film, showing how the intertextual surround here extends beyond images of Lincoln himself to encompass other films and fictional characters played by actors who also have played Lincoln, or actors who have "Lincolnesque" personas, such as Henry Fonda and James Stewart. I especially liked the point Brown makes toward the end of the essay when comparing the two contrasting types of heroic figures in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ransom Stoddard, the lawyer played by James Stewart, and Tom Doniphon, played by John Wayne. Brown argues that in film portrayals of Lincoln these two contrastive male figures—one the bookish intellectual, wielding the authority of the law, the other the man of great physical power and moral authority—are combined in portrayals of Lincoln. This is a nice point.

There is an absence of theoretical consideration here that made me wonder what the larger historiographic point of the essay might be. I was led to re-read Jean-Louis Comolli's essay *A Body Too Much* after seeing the video essay, a critical work that I think has much to say to the topics Brown takes on. Many points in Brown's video essay are taken up at some length in Comolli and done with a keen theoretical interest in the subject of historical fiction. There are, in Comolli's work, explicit discussions of awkwardness, of physical size, of the "body too much" of the actor playing a well-known historical figure, and how the body of the actor both imposes itself as "other" to the referential figure, and how this explicit "otherness" actually reinforces the believability of the fiction. In Brown's video essay, the actors playing Lincoln are analyzed for the quirks of their performances, for the "discomfort" and discontinuity between the act of playing Lincoln and the actor's own physicality and performative style. This aspect of the video essay, however, could have been made much more explicit, and grounded in a theoretical-historiographic argument.

On the question of the textual form of the video essay, I feel, first, that it is too long. 37 minutes should not be necessary. I think there are too many digressions into other films not about or picturing Lincoln. I also think the author could have done more with the visual analysis. What about the camera angles that are used (often low angle shots); what about the length of the shots in which Lincoln is pictured (usually held for a long time); what about the isolating of Lincoln in the frame, while the counter-shots are most often of the collective? I believe there are important cinematic questions here that might be addressed.

The video essay gave me a good deal to think about, and it was refreshing to return to an area of historical fiction that I have not contemplated lately. Further, Brown's interesting and well thought out responses and description of his project in the accompanying paragraphs are full of useful insights and references. While I stand by my original critique, I feel the video essay serves as an opening to a dialogue on Lincoln, the representation of historical figures in art, and the fascinating subject of awkwardness as a trope of historical and political "authenticity" in film. The essay is also highly original. I endorse it for publication in *[in]Transition*.

Review by Susan Felleman, University of South Carolina

Tom Brown's "Awkwardness and Authenticity: Hollywood's Abraham Lincoln" manages at the same time to distill years of scholarly research into a rich—if not encyclopedic—pattern, flow, and analysis of cinematic images of Abraham Lincoln and to create a matrix of personal, witty, and "readerly" pathways away from him.

Beginning with an early clip featuring Bernard Miles as Joe Gargery in Lean's 1946 adaptation of *Great Expectations*, and continuing, later, with seeming digressions on three films starring James Stewart (who never played the 16th U.S. President), Brown focuses on patterns that emerge in Hollywood's Lincoln that he recognizes in performances beyond those representations, thus subtly veering away from the texts toward star studies. These recognitions result from salient qualities Brown associates with the screen Lincoln: vision, fortitude, and—particularly herein—a distinct physicality, by which he finds Lincoln "in places he wasn't intended to be."

Joe Gargery does enter the scene wearing a "surprisingly Lincolny" stovepipe hat but it's "the social awkwardness the hat was meant to express" that reminds Brown of classical Hollywood's Abraham Lincoln—played by Henry Fonda, Raymond Massey, and Walter Huston—who always combines considerable stature and physical strength with an admixture of humility, rusticity, and social awkwardness. At its extreme, this awkwardness is rendered comical or eccentric but is associated with Lincoln's authenticity and echoed in the figuration of other American movie heroes, at least for Brown, who wants us, the viewers of his essay, "to see Lincoln in more places than [we'd] previously imagined." Thanks to his analytic and rhetorical associations, I did.

I could follow Brown into an analysis of Jimmy Stewart's countrified but literate integrity and awkwardness in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra, 1939) and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), but was still not entirely convinced, despite Stewart's height, that he is a powerfully Lincolnian entity. He's a bit too gangling and garrulous. Yet, it's a testament to Brown's method that, so strongly associated (for me anyway) is Stewart with his more laconic contemporary, Henry Fonda, another quintessentially American actor—who did play Lincoln—that I couldn't help finding echoes of Brown's echoes in Fonda's filmography, in films as unalike as Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and Preston Sturges's *The Lady Eve* (1941).

And while Brown does discuss Daniel Day-Lewis as *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), he tends at the same time to hold this performance aside, perhaps for good reason; set in 1865, the last year of its protagonist's life, the film concerns itself with the mature Lincoln, already president, rather than one becoming himself, as in the earlier biopics. And yet—with the essay's brief interpolation of the Western genre and comparison of Lincoln to the Westerner—I was forcefully reminded of a whole chain of Day-Lewis performances, those discussed by Jim Cullen in his book, *Sensing the Past: Hollywood Stars and Historical Visions*, one chapter of which (paradoxically?) posits the British actor as an embodiment of the American Frontier (2013: 53–88). This pathway led away from the native actors who embodied the mythic Lincoln toward other American myths.

Another direction Brown's discursive essay allowed me to pursue is one to which I am always inclined: intermediality. In many of the movies that concern Brown, Abraham Lincoln is a character. But in others he is an icon—an image seen *en abyme*—often in portrait form on a wall and elsewhere in the form of statuary, usually the monumental, seated figure from the Lincoln Memorial. These images remind us that the historical Lincoln was only preserved visually for posterity through such representations and make me wonder whether the slightly stiff awkwardness of Hollywood's Lincolns mightn't be in part an artifact of mimesis. Photography in the 1860s, due to long exposure times, still demanded immobility of the sitter and marble is always already rigid. While less emphasis may be placed in a biopic on whether Mary Todd or Stephen Douglas looks right, Lincoln must. Were Hollywood's Lincolns being made up, costumed, and directed to resemble these stiff icons? Brown's attention to Lincoln's iconicity (cleverly placed in contrast to Napoleon's!) is rewarding.

The essay's view of Lincoln in the movies as a "floating signifier" invited me to ponder all these things and more: to wonder, for instance—based on his known romance with the "lost cause"—whether D.W. Griffith's Lincoln isn't drawn with a somewhat less reverent brush than those of the other biopics. And I've long thought of the hat as a significant element of Hollywood iconography, but this video essay has enlarged my view of the problem, by adding to hat typology the meaning of the relative grace or awkwardness with which the hat is worn or doffed.

Bibliography

Jim Cullen, "Shooting Star: Daniel Day-Lewis and the Persistent Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Sensing the Past: Hollywood Stars and Historical Visions* (Oxford, 2013).