

A President Engaged in a Great Civil War

By A. O. SCOTT

It is something of a paradox that American movies — a great democratic art form, if ever there was one — have not done a very good job of representing American democracy. Make-believe movie presidents are usually square-jawed action heroes, stoical Solons or ineffectual eggheads, blander and more generically appealing than their complicated real-life counterparts, who tend to be treated deferentially or ignored entirely unless they are named [Richard Nixon](#).

The legislative process — the linchpin of our system of checks and balances — is often treated with lofty contempt masquerading as populist indignation, an attitude typified by the aw-shucks antipolitics of [“Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.”](#) Hollywood dreams of consensus, of happy endings and box office unity, but democratic government can present an interminable tale of gridlock, compromise and division. The squalor and vigor, the glory and corruption of the Republic in action have all too rarely made it onto the big screen.

There are exceptions, of course, and one of them is [Steven Spielberg’s](#) splendid [“Lincoln,”](#) which is, strictly speaking, about a president trying to scare up votes to get a bill passed in Congress. It is of course about a lot more than that, but let’s stick to the basics for now. To say that this is among the finest films ever made about American politics may be to congratulate it for clearing a fairly low bar. Some of the movie’s virtues are, at first glance, modest ones, like those of its hero, who is pleased to present himself as a simple backwoods lawyer, even as his folksy mannerisms mask a formidable and cunning political mind.

The main business of “Lincoln” is framed by two of those, the Gettysburg Address — quoted back to the president by awed Union soldiers on a January night in 1865 — and his Second Inaugural Address, which he delivered a little more than a month before the end of the Civil War and his own assassination. These are big, famous words and momentous events, and the task Mr. Spielberg and Mr. Kushner have set themselves is to make this well-known story fresh and surprising. Mr. Day-Lewis, for his part, must convey both the human particularity and the greatness of a man who is among the most familiar and the most enigmatic of American leaders. We carry him around in our pockets every day, and yet we still argue and wonder about who he was.

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This is, in other words, less a biopic than a political thriller, a civics lesson that is energetically staged and alive with moral energy. Lincoln, having just won re-election, faces a complex predicament. The war has turned in the Union’s favor, but the Capitol is in some turmoil. Lincoln must contend with a Democratic opposition that reviles him as a dictator (“Abraham Africanus,” they call him) and also with a deep, factional split within the Republican Party.

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The legal and ideological questions surrounding what would become (spoiler alert for those who slept through high school history) the [13th Amendment](#) to the Constitution are crisply and cogently illustrated. Once Lincoln has decided that ratification is both the right and necessary thing to do, he has to hold his party together and also pick up a handful of votes from lame-duck Democratic congressmen.

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And the genius of “Lincoln,” finally, lies in its vision of politics as a noble, sometimes clumsy dialectic of the exalted and the mundane. Our habit of argument, someone said recently, is a mark of our liberty, and Mr. Kushner, whose love of passionate, exhaustive disputation is unmatched in the modern theater, fills nearly every scene with wonderful, maddening talk. Mr. Spielberg’s best art often emerges in passages of wordlessness, when the images speak for themselves, and the way he composes his pictures and cuts between them endow the speeches and debates with emotional force, and remind us of what is at stake.

The question facing Lincoln is stark: Should he abolish slavery, once and for all, even if it means prolonging the war? The full weight and scale of this dilemma are the central lesson “Lincoln” asks us to grasp. The film places slavery at the center of the story, emphatically countering the revisionist tendency to see some other, more abstract thing — states’ rights, Southern culture, industrial capitalism — as the real cause of the Civil War. Though most of the characters are white (two notable and vital exceptions are Stephen Henderson and Gloria Reuben, as the Lincolns’ household servants), this is finally a movie about how difficult and costly it has been for the United States to recognize the full and equal humanity of black people.

There is no end to this story, which may be why Mr. Spielberg’s much-noted fondness for multiple denouements is in evidence here. There are at least five moments at which the narrative and the themes seem to have arrived at a place of rest. (The most moving for me is a quiet scene when the 13th Amendment is read aloud. I won’t give away by whom.) But the movie keeps going, building a symphony of tragedy and hope that celebrates Lincoln’s great triumph while acknowledging the terror, disappointment and other complications to come.

Some of the ambition of “Lincoln” seems to be to answer the omissions and distortions of the cinematic past, represented by great films like D. W. Griffith’s [“Birth of a Nation,”](#) which glorified the violent disenfranchisement of African-Americans as a heroic second founding, and [“Gone With the Wind,”](#) with its romantic view of the old South. To paraphrase what Woodrow Wilson said of Griffith, Mr. Spielberg writes history with lightning.

Go see this movie. Take your children, even though they may occasionally be confused or fidgety. Boredom and confusion are also part of democracy, after all. “Lincoln” is a rough and noble democratic masterpiece — an omen, perhaps, that movies for the people shall not perish from the earth.
