

Romantic Realism and Moral Value: Spielberg's
Lincoln and Hooper's *Les Miserables*

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Spielberg's *Lincoln*¹

Stephen Spielberg's *Lincoln* focuses several times on the president's fascination with Shakespeare, with apt references to *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. Lincoln was, indeed, an admirer of William Shakespeare, but this is appropriate in another way: as a film, *Lincoln* is history gilded and poetized just as Shakespeare's history plays are. Real events are altered, exaggerated, or downplayed, to highlight deeper, thematic truths. There's nothing wrong with this—it's just what history movies *ought* to do, in my opinion. But viewers must keep in mind that the screen isn't the literal truth. Drama originated in religious ritual, and it retains its ritualistic and dogmatic traits in some respects.

That fact was brought home to me last night [November 17, 2012] as my wife and I heard members of the audience in a theater in Orlando, Florida, quietly reciting aloud to themselves along with Daniel Day Lewis's performance of the Second Inaugural—"With malice toward none, with charity for all," muttered people around me. It was a gooseflesh-inducing moment.

The danger of mythologizing history, though, is that your text must be good enough to capture that deeper truth. And *Lincoln* fails on this at times. This is especially the case in the scene in which the president ruminates on Euclid and first principles. Speaking to two young clerks, he tries to draw a deeper constitutional lesson from Euclid's axiom that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. This is the basis for all understanding of geometry, he says. "It's true because it works," and this is the same kind of self-evident truth that the U.S. Constitution is based upon. Now, Lincoln did believe that the Constitution was rooted in the Declaration's principle of

¹ A slightly different version of this piece appears on Timothy Sandefur's blog *Freespace*, November 18, 2012, accessed online at: <http://sandefur.typepad.com/freespace/2012/11/spielbergs-lincoln.html>.

equality, and this is drawn from a real statement of Lincoln's, but the original statement is far more accurate and profound:

One would start with great confidence that he could convince any sane child that the simpler propositions of Euclid are true; but, nevertheless, he would fail, utterly, with one who should deny the definitions and axioms. The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of free society.

And yet they are denied and evaded, with no small show of success.

One dashinglly calls them "glittering generalities"; another bluntly calls them "self evident lies"; and still others insidiously argue that they apply only to "superior races."

These expressions, differing in form, are identical in object and effect—the supplanting the principles of free government, and restoring those of classification, caste, and legitimacy. They would delight a convocation of crowned heads, plotting against the people. They are the van-guard—the miners, and sappers—of returning despotism.²

Lincoln, who had an exceptionally strong grasp of logic, was not trying to draw some untenable connection between mathematical and racial equality, but to illustrate a valid point about epistemology and principle. Spielberg's version transforms it into a jumble of hazy concepts that sounds like Old Abe is just trying to show off that he's heard of a Greek geometer. Nor would the real Lincoln *ever* have said "it's true because it works." Such a pragmatic definition of truth is wildly anachronistic (it was formulated only later in the nineteenth century) and is counter to Lincoln's classical-liberal belief in natural rights. Had he believed that something that works is true, he would hardly have opposed slavery, fought to preserve the union, or sought the permanent end of slavery as a condition of peace.

Other parts, too, are more syrup than peaches; Spielberg has a hard time not turning his more sentimental films into scene after scene of resolute monologues and softly climactic music. The opening scene, especially, in which soldiers quote the Gettysburg Address to the president's face, is way over the top. It should have been rendered in iambic pentameter, or not at all.

But more common are scenes that are profoundly effective. Lincoln's explanation for why the Emancipation Proclamation isn't enough is precise, credible, real, and beautifully delivered. And the very best moment—a conversation in the White House kitchen between Lincoln and Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones) reaches through the screen to touch contemporary events in a very direct way. Stevens insists on radical

² Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Henry L. Pierce and Others," April 6, 1859, accessed online at: <http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/pierce.htm>.

reconstruction: strip the southerners of all their land; redistribute it to the slaves; bring the traitors to justice. Damn what people will think; it's the right thing to do. And he's right, of course. Everyone in the audience knows it. Everyone knows that the southerners who began this war to perpetuate the inhuman institution of endless servile bondage deserve to reap the bitter harvest of such cruelty. And Stevens knows that the people generally won't have the stomach for it if justice is delayed. The people are tired of war and if allowed to do so they will capitulate or neglect the demands of justice. Their internal compasses will go awry. Yes, answers Lincoln, but the compass won't tell you of all the terrible things that stand in the way. The straight lines of justice are simply not enough. Man must be dealt with gently, though firmly—not commanded to do right.

This scene—which I have paraphrased only clumsily—ties together our current Middle East crisis with the experiences of past generations by highlighting what Lincoln called “timeless truths, applicable to all men and all times.” And it highlights the really tragic situation of Civil War America—a tragedy truly worthy of a Shakespearean script: that mercy to the one meant cruelty to the other. Lincoln, in his (uncompleted) Reconstruction policy, made the same compromise America's first founders made: In order to gain the support of white Americans, the demands of justice for the slaves would again be pushed to the bottom of the pile of priorities. Later in the film, when Lincoln tells General Ulysses S. Grant that there should be no hangings at the war's end, one cannot resist thinking that in fact there *were* hangings. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Only it was black Americans, not their white persecutors, who swung from vengeful ropes.

Would Stevens's policy have been better? Set up a post-war tribunal on human rights abuses? Redistribute the plantation lands to the freedmen? I honestly don't know. “All experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.” That's doubly true when the justice to be done is someone else's. We often have little stomach for justice. Lincoln wisely knew that, but Stevens was also right that justice delayed is justice denied—and that delay only worsens the inevitable reckoning. The end of Reconstruction was probably inevitable. But it also doomed the black race to another century of slavery by another name. In that sense, the Confederacy won the Civil War.

Lincoln does not dwell too deeply on these perplexities. The audience could probably stand that no better than the nation could have stood a real Reconstruction. But it touches on them in some moving moments, and that is enough. Though at times maudlin, and though it is not as good as *Amistad*, *Lincoln* is an evocative and touching experience, vivid and real while still idealistic and sincere.

Behind us in the theater sat a black woman. At the end of every profound utterance or scene she would say, “Oh! Yes!” or things to that effect. At first, it was a bit annoying. But then I paused to think of how crucial this experience is for America. Citizens have been too long alienated from our

fundamental principles and the greatest spokesmen for those principles. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and even George Washington have had their clay feet paraded around on exhibition every day for decades, now. The same is true with Lincoln, who is unjustly portrayed as a racist and a dictator in various fashionably radical quarters. To sit in the old Confederacy in an integrated theater audience, and hear my fellow citizens cheer on Lincoln's demands that just equality be added to our Constitution is, indeed, a moment like *Henry V's* St. Crispin's Day speech—or like Athena establishing justice in the *Oresteia* at a performance in ancient Athens—when we together reach back through the drama to what connects us as citizens. This is our civic ritual, to worship together the fundamental article of our Constitutional creed. Nobody articulated that creed better than Lincoln:

The doctrine of self government is right—absolutely and eternally right—but it has no just application, as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such just application depends upon whether a negro is not or is a man. If he is not a man, why in that case, he who is a man may, as a matter of self-government, do just as he pleases with him. But if the negro is a man, is it not to that extent, a total destruction of self-government, to say that he too shall not govern himself? When the white man governs himself that is self-government; but when he governs himself, and also governs another man, that is more than self-government—that is despotism. If the negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that “all men are created equal”; and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another. . . . I say this is the leading principle—the sheet anchor of American republicanism.³

Hooper's *Les Miserables*⁴

The new *Les Miserables*, directed by Tom Hooper, is a breathtaking achievement. It captures the full sweep and grandeur of Victor Hugo's novel. It convincingly translates a production originally written for the stage into a motion-picture production (often a difficult thing to do). The directing is brilliant—a perfect combination of realism and romanticism that gives real

³ Abraham Lincoln, “Peoria Speech,” October 16, 1854, accessed online at: <http://www.nps.gov/liho/historyculture/peoriaspeech.htm>.

⁴ A slightly different version of this piece appears on Timothy Sandefur's blog *Freespace*, December 27, 2012, accessed online at: <http://sandefur.typepad.com/freespace/2012/12/les-miserables.html>.

life to Hugo's message. And the performances are stunning. It would be an injustice if Anne Hathaway does not get the Oscar for her performance as Fantine.⁵ Her "I Dreamed a Dream" is one of the most amazing things I have ever seen in any movie, ever. No, the movie isn't perfect—Russell Crowe's singing is a bit weak (though his acting is fine) and there are some scenes that do not quite succeed (Marius's return home is very short and difficult to follow), but the flaws are miniscule in a film that otherwise is positively stunning.

Les Misérables is one of the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century romantic literature, that is, a literature about values and moral choices. It is about whether people can change, what it means to remain loyal to your values in the face of overwhelming odds, what it means to redeem yourself after you and your forefathers have committed terrible wrongs. It's a novel about the interactions of justice and mercy, about revolution and transcending your past. It is one of the great masterpieces of a kind of art rarely seen today—an art that takes values seriously, and in which the characters take themselves and their ideas seriously. The musical, and this film, manage to convey that kind of idealism without a trace of the sarcasm, self-deprecation, shrugging, or ridicule that is typical of today's cinema. It believes in itself in the way that each of us ought to believe in ourselves, and that, when we work hard enough, we sometimes manage to deserve. It has not learned the skill of derogating its own highest values.

Unsurprisingly, the critics—all much too sophisticated to believe in things—are falling all over themselves to sneer and roll their eyes.⁶ The *Huffington Post*'s critic, who has never read the novel and proudly declares that he won't, calls it "the kind of middlebrow melodrama that passes for profound on Broadway."⁷ He never quite tells us why a story about the most important parts of living—one's dedication to those high values that make life worthwhile—is anything *short* of profound. He just ridicules the "wrung out" feeling the audience experiences as being "the point." I guess that's his way of saying that we should *not* take things like admiration, longing, joy, love, and redemption too seriously. *The Arizona Republic*'s

⁵ Hathaway was awarded the Oscar for her performance as Fantine; accessed online at: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004266/awards>.

⁶ Stanley Fish is an exception; see his "'Les Misérables' and Irony," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2013, accessed online at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/28/les-miserables-and-irony/>, which is discussed by Timothy Sandefur, "Stanley Fish on *Les Misérables*," *Freespace*, February 14, 2013, accessed online at: <http://sandefur.typepad.com/freespace/2013/02/stanley-fish-on-les-miserables.html>.

⁷ Marshall Fine, "Movie Review: *Les Misérables*," *The Huffington Post*, December 26, 2012, accessed online at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marshall-fine/movie-review-iles-miserab_b_2365324.html.

reviewer is even more snide. He at least recognizes that the story is one of “humanity and depravity” and “law and its trickier cousin, justice.” But . . . well, that’s fine *if you go for that sort of thing*: “How much you enjoy the film is going to depend greatly on your capacity for having these ideas pounded against your head, time and again.”⁸ Notice that the alleged flaw in the film is that it is about truly crucial values, and treats them as crucial. I guess we’re supposed to prefer small, petty, and pointless, to enormous, idealistic, and important.

Hugo is not dated today because there is nothing so radical as the art of ideas, an art that contemporary intellectuals do their best to shove under the couch. In a world where critics praise the trivial, the bizarre, the nihilistic, the anti-life, and the plainly stupid, I am happy to cast my lot in with the moviegoers who still know how to cry at tragedy and celebrate triumph.

I suppose there will always be people who *can* bring themselves to scoff, for whatever reason, at the profundity and seriousness of *Les Miserables*. But to do so in the face of *these* performances is especially shameful. Hathaway’s Fantine is something like I have never seen in a film. And when artists like Victor Hugo, Claude-Michel Schönberg, Tom Hooper, and Anne Hathaway are able to express the universal human commitments that the audience members rightly take with such seriousness—to give those values a voice and an expression that will stay with them for the rest of their lives, which people will leave the theater thinking about for days and years afterwards—when a group of artists is able personally to touch the hearts of millions of people, for the right reasons, and to give them the gift of expressing something true and genuine and to make their hearts soar—that is what truly *great* art aspires to. And it is something that deserves our thanks and praise—not sneering by ants too tiny to recognize the sculpture on the base of which they crawl.

To Hell with small critics with small ideas. *Les Miserables* is a superlative accomplishment. If “high brow” means to look down, I will stay with the “middle brows” who can still enjoy looking up. Hugo’s novel, and this faithful adaptation of it, are about the Most Important Things. Ignore the critics and see it.

⁸ Bill Goodykoontz, “Les Miserables, 3 Stars,” *The Arizona Republic*, December 24, 2012, accessed online at: http://www.azcentral.com/thingstodo/movies/articles/20121220les-miserables-review-goodykoontz.html?nlick_check=1.

