

Abraham Lincoln in European Popular Culture

by John Dean

This article argues that Lincoln is not a universal hero, but rather an indigenous, U.S., ethnocentric one. Lincoln has generally been absent as a model in European social and public life, rarely emphasized as an essential part of education or in the public forum. Among the reasons given for this difference are inaccurate references to his ecumenical qualities and the often negative attitude in Europe towards a U.S. popular taste culture which is an expression of values, a vital, half-wild, half-tame, communal expression of ‘We, the People of the United States.’ Especially in the 20th century, U.S. popular culture and popular icons have often been regarded in Europe as an expression of lowbrow entertainment. But in the U.S., ‘popular’ is much closer to ‘grassroots’ in the full, Whitmanesque meaning of the term. Some things don’t translate.

- 1 There’s nothing wrong with Lincoln. Like the Pax Americana that reigned briefly after World War II, he’s a superb but limited phenomenon. However, he is not universal. That’s the problem. It’s not Lincoln’s fault. For above all—and especially since his assassination on Good Friday, April 14, 1865, when his presence became as pervasive as the penny that has carried his profile since 1909—Abraham Lincoln is an American national hero. But definitely not the world’s. For Lincoln’s vision of himself and the world isn’t necessarily the world’s vision of Abraham Lincoln and the America he embodies. “The tings dat yo’ li’ble / To read in de Bible, / It ain’t necessarily so” (Ira Gershwin).

Lincoln the Monument

- 2 Americans have a hard time understanding how some people do not see “Him” as the monumental figure he is for America and its history. Many U.S. citizens see Lincoln as the Zeus-like being on his sacred throne in solemn shade at Washington, D.C.’s Lincoln Memorial. Lincoln means America, the United States. But nowhere in European popular culture is Lincoln equally deified.
- 3 Look at that opening scene of Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), when “Mr. Smith” (James Stewart) undergoes a typical Lincoln epiphany as he visits the memorial. It’s a tangible, familiar moment, a mini docudrama experienced by millions to this day. The Lincoln Memorial (only there since 1922) is somewhat of a holy ground from which to claim or launch any profound American reform. European culture, neither one nor united, does not work this way. There doesn’t even exist a common, unifying hero for Europe. Europe is not a nation, but many countries and economic systems.

Lincoln—The Moments

- 4 Culture is filter. Each nation cultivates its members by virtue of what it keeps in and what it keeps out. As the Cheyenne say: As the soil, so the sprouting. Lincoln has generally been absent as a model in European social and public life, rarely emphasized as an essential part of education or in the public forum. Tolstoy’s pretentious claim about far-off Russian peasants knowing and worshipping Lincoln is bosh. Look into the weeds and you’ll find this was no more than jingoistic hoopla from the day’s tabloid journalism (Stakelberg).
- 5 In Europe’s everyday popular existence there have really been only three historical moments when Lincoln has been visible on the daily stage of life: at the time of the U.S. Civil War; in and around the time of WW I; and during and immediately following WW II. And even then he was never as penny obvious in Europe as he was in America. To wit: In the midst of the American Civil War through the time of Lincoln’s assassination, there was a total absence of any concern for this struggle or for the man himself by the greatest popular visual artist and witness of the age, [Honoré Daumier](#). Daumier’s complete works

disclose not a single image about the war or Lincoln although he was fascinated by social reform and politics, the lean and hungry quixotic figure, the repellent hypocrisy of his age, and the horrors of war. Concerning Europe's relationship to Lincoln, the only distinguishing characteristic appears to be his absence. Why?

- 6 Going back to the archives of European popular concern with the U.S. Civil War and Abraham Lincoln in one of America's two greatest repositories of Lincolniana, The Huntington Library in San Marino, California, you'll detect three rare collections: The John Page Nicholson Collection, the Judd Stewart Collection, and the John Hay Collection Manuscripts. Having personally reviewed these Euro-American gatherings of long military report books, personal memoirs, autobiographies and biographies, reference books, lectures (printed or recorded) in the form of personal notes as well as lengthy and deliciously untidy family scrap books, I discovered only intermittent or special-interest use of Lincoln.
- 7 In these collections, the military engineering of the Civil War—its technological mechanics, the nature of military leadership as well as the uses of troop innovation and strategy—is of primary concern for Europeans in the 1860s–1880s period. The last ten or fifteen percent of the collections' writings deal with personal remembrances of battles won or lost and some scant coverage of Lincoln's political importance and tragic ending.
- 8 Moving into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Lincoln increasingly served as a melting pot for Europeans who wanted to Americanize. European "foreigners" would immerse themselves in Lincolniana, using his life story and values as a model of what they'd need in order to become Americans. This was often done via Euro-Americans who provided visual and textual histories—as in the works of the Swiss-German-American writers [Ingri d'Aulaire](#) and [Edgar Parin d'Aulaire](#), or by Hungarian American journalist [Stefan Lorant](#) as in his Lincoln spread in the *Life* magazine issue of January 5, 1942 (Lorant).
- 9 In order to determine the common concern with Lincoln by measuring how much data was produced for popular consumption, consider a quantitative analysis sample from the two-volume *Larousse du XXe Siècle*. This European temple of knowledge in the inter-war era shows [Giuseppe Garibaldi](#) given twice the space of Lincoln, and Lincoln given less space than [Toussaint Louverture](#). Lincoln is almost not there.

Lincoln Goes to the Movies?

- 10 Within European culture, the general lack of interest in Lincoln has long been institutionalized. Witness European cinema: Until the celebrations of the Lincoln bicentennial in 2009, there is no record of Lincoln ever having been present in a European movie or used and presented on European TV. The 2009 highlight was an *Arte* cultural TV special evening when the film *Lincolns letzter Tag* (Lincolns Last Day) was broadcast.
- 11 In America up to the very late 20th century, Abraham Lincoln is present in approximately 400 U.S. feature films, TV plays and movies—with an equally huge visual presence as a walk-on in Civil War dramas, holiday comedy and variety shows as well as news and public information programs. "Lincoln is the most frequently portrayed American historical figure in the history of film and television arts," M. S. Reinhart proudly noted in *Abraham Lincoln on Screen* (2). Note that Reinhart implied this happened in *all* film and TV programs. It's like U.S. baseball's World Series which excludes the eighteen other odd nations in the world where baseball flourishes. But then heroism is a very ethnocentric phenomenon.
- 12 The screening of [Steven Spielberg's](#) *Lincoln* in European theaters in the winter of 2012–2013 was symptomatic of how Europeans have seen—or not seen—Abraham Lincoln himself over the years. Watching a biopic subject of stellar significance, critics and intellectuals, broadsheet journalists, and academic historians praised man and media. But not the European general public or the box office take, the Internet commentators and bloggers—in short: the people who voted by buying tickets.

- 13 The European vox populi failed to be fired by the central spark, by Abraham Lincoln himself. How odd from the U.S. viewpoint, especially when the historical figure was brought to life anew, embodied by the Irish-American actor, [Daniel Day-Lewis](#). Day-Lewis' acting created one of Lincoln's greatest cinematic surrogates ever of voice, body language, and a translation of the moment of live theatrical dramatic light and human presence transformed into the spectacular fragility of the electrical-digital screen. Which turned out to be a European dud.
- 14 European tabloid-level assessments from Spain called Lincoln a "small unremarkable" movie packed with "boring movie moments" (Salgado). A Russian reviewer found the power of Spielberg's film lay in the director's creation of an "image of Lincoln as a tribute to his own trademark," that is, just another Spielberg@Lincoln action toy (Korney). In sum, they didn't get it, and the questions that seems to loom in the European viewers' mind is: Why a movie about *him*?
- 15 First box office impressions of Spielberg's *Lincoln* say a lot. By the end of January 2013, its first month on global screens, *Lincoln* had made \$275,293,450 worldwide— of which only \$93,085,477 was non-USA. *Lincoln* quickly recouped its costs from an initial estimated budget of \$65,000,000 ("Lincoln"). But the big green feed-in was not from the global market, and especially not from Europe. Indeed, among Spielberg's total of 23 worldwide, moneymaking films from 1979 to the present, *Lincoln* ranks only 17th with *Jurassic Park* at No. 1 ("Steven Spielberg").

National Identity and Empire

- 16 Identity is continuity over time. It lies in cultural otherness, the nature of our individual self as a member of a nation. Why must Lincoln be universal? Well, this is an idea first sensed and promulgated by Lincoln himself. In the course of his presidency, he grew to cherish the idea that "he was fighting a war on behalf of all mankind," as the British Cultural Historian [Jan Morris](#) noted (124). As an experienced attorney, Lincoln knew that by emphasizing his self-importance in certain key actions, he could advance his own ends. As he says in the Spielberg film in his reedy voice while pounding his cabinet table: "I can't accomplish a goddamn thing of any worth until we cure ourselves of slavery and end this pestilential war! [...] We've stepped out upon the world stage now. *Now!* With the fate of human dignity in our hands. Blood's been spilled to afford us this moment now! *Now! Now!*" (Cabinet meeting scene [00:43:57–00:42:44], *Lincoln*).
- 17 Lincoln had a profoundly ethnocentric vision of America's centripetal Civil War against slavery spinning out a cosmos of liberty and justice for all mankind from a U.S. center. Lincoln's mystical impulse for union, for nationalism, was edged "into imperialism: not patriotism [...] but a more grandiose notion of national identity" (Morris 200). He was an American [Caesar Augustus](#) who could claim like Augustus in his *Res Gestae*: "I have revived many exemplary practices of our ancestors, which in our age were about to fade away, and myself transmitted to posterity many models of conduct to be imitated" ("Res Gestae" 137).

European and American Popular Culture Heroes

- 18 Popular culture is the folklore of industrial man with folklore ruling high as a power surge of ordinary interests. It is a son of the soil, deeply local. Europeans were burned raw by this power in the 20th century. For them, in terms like "the popular," "the folk," "the mass" suggest the subordination of the individual to the crowd and of the mass to the will of the leader. The danger in Europe is that the force of industrialized folklore becomes mass culture, mindless crowd culture—as confirmed in the Third Reich by the shrieking, long-echoing claim of the Nuremberg Nazi party rallies, "One people. One leader. One country." With popular culture come the great waves that lift everyone off their feet, whether they want to or not. Core central to popular culture are risky generalizations. Yet, in the USA there is a democratic exhilaration in this "popular" as well. Populist in the USA can swing left, right, or middle. There's a thrilling, life-joining, profitable current, and when a thing is current, it creates currency.

- 19 In the American cultural context, this force has a delicious relish to it; “myself multiplied” as [Walt Whitman](#) proclaimed. A “barbaric yawp” (or [Allen Ginsberg](#)’s poem “Howl”). In addition, the popular in its American context offers choice. The force of the popular, the general, does not mean that the wave encompasses the whole ocean. Immense though it may be, “no generalization is wholly true, not even this one,” as Justice [Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.](#) once remarked (Shapiro 368). Embrace the paradox.
- 20 Lincoln exists in an American heroic context foreign to most Europeans. He diverges both from what they know and are comfortable with as greatness. A European hero is “not based on self-sufficiency but on social recognition” argued the European *américaniste*, Bernard Poli. A European hero must belong to a social or intellectual aristocracy and be separated from the crowd—moral values have little to do with this promotion (226). The “paradox of the hero in the United States is that he must be a common man,” for in the American heroic mold the ordinary becomes heroic. It’s a rare quality achieved through a process of natural selection by a person “with a noble mind, enterprising, full of self-trust [...] looking toward the future, also inwards, toward the inner self [...] shared by everybody” (228, 230).
- 21 Distinguish European and American popular culture on this basis, and you’ll end up with a contrast of gold as opposed to wood, the palace of Versailles as opposed to a log cabin, the ornate and baroque versus the direct and plain. Here lie the cultural models. Over time they have been honored in the breach, of course. But they have also been historically attested to by the character and achievements of Abraham Lincoln.

As Miles Davis Said

- 22 In sum, to figure out Abraham Lincoln in Europe one should—in the words of [Miles Davis](#) on jazz: “Don’t play what’s there. Play what’s not there” (Zwerin). Look closely and you’ll find that Lincoln in general is absent from Europeans’ common institutions and monuments. The explanation key is the difference between elite perception and the popular, common culture. And the exceptions prove the rule.
- 23 Genial aspects of Lincoln the man, politician, leader, and healer of his nation was his all-American humor, the folksy contents and twang of his back-country style, a style too vernacular for most Europeans to embrace or understand (not unlike Artemus Ward or [Mark Twain](#)). Especially in World War I and World War II, Lincoln’s image and words were used abroad as a U.S. propaganda tool—a use which subsequently tainted his embrace by many non-Americans. When the European press, visual media, or popular consciousness paid attention to Lincoln it was because they had a dog in the fight—as with the interest in Lincoln by Germans, English, Irish, and occasionally the French and Italians who had invested in America with manpower, money, or status.
- 24 Thus, there exist vicious caricatures of Lincoln drawn by [John Tenniel](#) (1820–1914) and others in Britain’s *Punch* magazine during the Civil War. Done for and by the British who favored the Confederacy in the “War of Northern Aggression” and who wanted to get hold of the cotton trade (Boritt). But no Honoré Daumier. When a subject is studied and venerated long enough—in the manner of [Walter M. Miller](#)’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*—it creates its own critical mass that justifies and perpetuates its existence. Lincoln swiftly became such an object of veneration and industry in the United States and occasionally elsewhere. Our very effort in publishing the *American Studies Journal* special issue on “Lincoln in Europe” attests to this ironic truth. Which is not said to deflate the glory of the man. Just to point out that even a god has limits.

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