

Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter

Travesty as Historiographic Metafiction

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Political leaders and statesmen have regularly been depicted in the cinema, also American presidents, often as pure fiction as amorously romantic in *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995) or as an action hero in *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1997). When it comes to films about real presidents these films mix the genre biopic (biographical film) with historiography, as the films dramatize authentic historical figures and their personal as well as political lives. Cinematic biographies may create controversies as veracity can have fallen victim to the needs of the film script and the box office, and yet with an absurd title such as *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2012) this film can hardly claim to contain the truth about Lincoln's life and his historical period. The more so, as the vampires of the title are the monsters with the traditional characteristics known from Gothic literature and horror films. The article will attempt to read *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* in the light of narratological theories and it will investigate whether the film's genre hybridity or mashup characteristics as well as its travesty traits have enabled it to climb from meaningless late night entertainment to historiographic metafiction. Its initial and quite basic research question is whether *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* has in any way been able to tell the truth about the past? A part of this question is how apt the signifi-

cation of the vampire monster type is as a vehicle for the film's quite specific form of historiography?

A brief view at the action and characters of the film says no. Based on a secret personal diary he wrote through his life the film follows Lincoln's life from boyhood in 1818 until his assassination in 1865. The film is true to Lincoln biographies and historical records, yet his history is blatantly reformulated by the inclusion of actual vampires, so that for instance the death of his mother in 1818 was not caused by milk sickness, but by a bite from one of the chief vampire villains of the film, Jack Barts, who is also a plantation and slave owner. Young Lincoln, set on revenge, is trained as a vampire hunter by Henry Sturges, a "good" vampire. Lincoln acts as a Paul Bunyan-like, martial arts expert, silver axe-wielding vampire exterminator until his political career culminating in him being elected president puts an end to all this. The problem with slavery in the Southern States is also reformulated in the film, as the slaves are not only a labour force; they are also the main food supply for the concentration of the American vampire population in the South. In this way the film identifies the planter class and the Southern States with vampirism. When the Civil War breaks out it is in other words also a war between the living and the undead. When the South is losing the war Jefferson Davis conspires with the chief vampire to deploy hordes of invincible and invisible vampires at Gettysburg, and the North must face losing this battle and the whole war. But only until Lincoln figures out to let the Northern army use silver weapons against the vampires, and it wins the battle. In 1865 the surviving vampires have left the country, and Lincoln goes to the theatre.

It is a portrait of the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln that adorns the front cover of *An Outline of American History*, which is a book handed out by the International Communication Agency, Embassy of the United States of America in foreign countries (Gray, no date). It is Lincoln that in this way becomes the official face of the U.S.A. abroad. Lincoln, the most admired American president (Lindgren, 2000), is the subject of innumerable biographies and a large number of appearances in film and media since his probably first cinema appearance in 1908 in the Vitagraph silent *The Reprieve: An Episode in the Life of Abraham Lincoln*. The Internet Movie Database lists 56 films and media productions with "Abraham Lincoln" in their titles (IMDb, 2013) and more than

thrice as many with just his surname. The question of historical veracity of Lincoln films, in particular and with good reason of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* is focused on in an article in *The New York Times* with the title "Aside From the Vampires, Lincoln Film Seeks Accuracy" (Cieply, 2011).

Then what is the relationship between history, here the historical president, and fiction, here the vampires? This question is asked in a general sense by Aristotle in his *Poetics*:

...it is not the poet's function to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in circumstances, either probable or necessary. The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse... The difference is that the one tells of what has happened, the other of the kinds of things that might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history; for while poetry is concerned with universal truths, history treats of particular facts. (Aristotle, 1970, pp. 43-44)

Aristotle's claim that the historian writes about what has happened can be applied to the parts only of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* that describes the very existence of Abraham Lincoln, documented episodes from his personal life, actual historical documents such as the Emancipation Proclamation, and locations and certain historical events in the film such as the fact that Lincoln was president and that the American Civil War actually took place. In the film Lincoln's ability to wield the axe to decapitate and kill vampires has some foundation in reality. John Locke Scripps wrote in the first published biography of Lincoln in 1860:

The erection of a house and the felling of the forest was the first work to be done. Abraham was young to engage in such labor, but he was large of his age, stalwart, and willing to work. An ax was at once placed in his hands, and from that time until he attained his twenty-third year, when not employed in labor on the farm, he was almost

constantly wielding that most useful implement. (Scripps, 1860/1900, p. 17)

The fictional, or using Aristotle's term poetic, elements of the film are obviously the inclusion of the vampires into the film's universe. Though it is not so apparently obvious that they are "worthy of serious attention", they can nevertheless be examined and analysed meaningfully. Are there any "universal truths" in the film, and if so, how are they expressed? Though Aristotle stresses that it is not a question of form: "The difference between the historian and the poet is not that the one writes in prose and the other in verse" it is nevertheless pertinent to consider the way narration functions in the film, especially so as both elements historiography and fiction, are merged in one text. Then what is the genre of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*?

A Question of Genre

Initially, at least four genre-related terms come into play when considering *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*: biopic, historiography, hybridity or mashup, and travesty.

In *Film/Genre* Rick Altman treats genre as a dynamic concept, and his description of the genesis of film genres as a producer's game is highly relevant for *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* when one considers the fact that the film is based on the Seth Grahame-Smith novel with the same title and the history of his literary production. There are six steps in Altman's producer's game, which he incidentally bases on early biopics:

- 1 From the box-office information, identify a successful film.
- 2 Analyse the film in order to discover what made it successful.
- 3 Make another film stressing the assumed formula for success.
- 4 Check box-office information on the new film and reassess the success formula accordingly.
- 4 Use the revised formula as a basis for another film.
- 6 Continue the process indefinitely. (Altman, 1999, p. 38)

This method is clearly discernible in a double sense when regarding the production of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*. The production motivation for Seth Grahame-Smith's novel can in itself be seen in

the staggering sales success of his earlier novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which became number three on *The New York Times* bestseller list and number 27 on Amazon.co.uk's 300 bestseller list (Flood, 2009). Though Grahame-Smith feared being boxed up as "the mash-up guy" he nevertheless wrote on in this hybrid genre the next year with the combination of Lincoln and vampires, and 20th Century Fox decided to produce an adaptation of it. Grahame-Smith's mash-up formula consisting of merging classical literature or a historically high-ranking personage with traditional monster types was regarded as lucrative. It could be profitably reproduced, and the revised formula of the first novel could be the basis of another film. Now instead of a Regency Jane Austen novel America's most popular leader and president was employed as an ingredient to be mashed-up with not zombies, but with a similar monster type of the category the living dead. This change of monsters seems appropriate in the sense that Austen's protagonists, the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* were gentry and could be threatened by the proletarian zombies, whereas in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* the monsters were aristocratic in so far as vampires since Stoker's Count Dracula have been upper-class. Appropriately, it was the ancient, Southern planter-class that the vampires in the latter film represented, and this brings us to the historiographic aspects of the film.

Hybridity is also found in the historiographic set-up of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*. Large-scale history with the Civil War and Lincoln's presidency is matched by small-scale history in the form of Lincoln's personal life, and his family plays an important, if not decisive role in the plot of the film. Using the definition of a biopic or biographical film that it is the dramatization of the life of an actual person or a filmed biography, it is obvious that when this person is of historical importance, such as a leader or a president, politics and history beyond the personal level must necessarily loom large in the film. In *The Film in History* Pierre Sorlin describes the historical film in a way that allows for biographical elements:

Historical films are all fictional. By this I mean that even if they are based on records, they all have to reconstruct in a purely imaginary way the greater part of what they show. Scenery and costumes similar to those of the period repre-

sented can be based on texts and pictures, but the actors alone are responsible for the gestures, expressions and intonations. Most historical films... combine actual events and completely fictitious individual episodes. It is very seldom that a film does not pass from the general to the particular, and arouse interest by concentrating on personal cases; this is one of the most direct forms of the appeal to identification, an appeal which is in fact not specific to the cinema. (Sorlin, 1980, p. 21)

The personal aspects with their appeal to identification, which Sorlin stresses, are present with much pathos in the Lincoln film. The death of Lincoln's mother, for instance, is accompanied by aesthetics of both underscoring music and slow-motion film speed; but it is not only on the level of audience reception that family matters. In some of the film's first scenes it becomes apparent that it is Lincoln's parents that are the source of his ideology and his sense of justice. It is his mother who in 1818 says that "Until every man is free, we are all slaves", and in 1863 it is his wife who together with members of the Underground Railroad manages to bring the silver weapons to the battlefield ensuring a decisive victory in the war. The film manages in other words to merge the personal story with history, and it manages to transform a biographically authentic detail from Lincoln's life, his dexterity with an axe, into a defining iconic quality in the fictional part of the film. It is a question whether the merging of history with vampires is similarly successful, and to seek to answer this question a look at the travesty genre can be useful.

The genre of Grahame-Smith's bestseller novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* was travesty, perhaps with some respectful pastiche elements, all within the literary domain (Christensen, 2010, pp. 76-77). The genre-specific characteristics of this novel were the addition of a traditional monster type to a canon-worthy literary Jane Austen novel. In the case of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* the continuous genre-redefinition as described by Altman consists of transference from the literary domain into the historical and political one, where Austen is substituted by Lincoln. As in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* the classical pre-existing text is retained in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, i.e. a Lincoln figure and his biography, and in the same way as a zombie infestation was added to the Jane Austen novel, a

Southern vampire population was added to the historical Lincoln figure and his world. In Gérard Genette's treatment of the travesty genre he defines it as a hypotext with amplification in the form of an addition to it. One form of travesty is the classical or burlesque one, in which the added element is at a lower stylistic level than the hypotext thus producing an amusing and comical effect, and another is the modern travesty, in which the addition consists of an updating of an earlier classical text to a modern audience (Genette, 1982/1997, p. 260). Though vampires and the horror genre are at a lower level with regard to taste and cultural capital than history writing and biographies of great leaders, it is difficult to define *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* as burlesque travesty. It is more rewarding to consider the question whether the film can then be characterized as a modern travesty? A closer look at the way the film itself combines the past and past persons and events with modern times, i.e. today can give answers. First of all, it must be stressed that the added vampires in themselves belong to the past. They are representatives of a slaveholder economic system that was abolished by the Civil War. It is the modern rather obvious and politically correct ethical and ideological disgust with slavery that is a travesty addition to the historical, biographical text that comes into focus, as slaveholder mentality by the film is characterized as monstrous. The slaveholders are depicted as cannibalistic, blood-sucking vampires. In a more subtle way, the past and the modern present are tied together in the film's prelude and by its coda. The first 15 seconds of the actual film consists of a travelling shot around the Washington Monument in present-day Washington with modern buildings in the background. Then there is a slow dissolve that brings the film into the past. The Monument is now being built, and it has only reached halfway up to its present-day height. A caption is superimposed: "April 14, 1865". In the coda the opposite movement in time takes place. As Lincoln's coach is driving off to Ford's Theatre in front of the White House, the camera tilt up so that a finished Monument becomes visible, lit by electric lights and in the far background cars can be seen driving. A helicopter then descends, the camera moves back, and now it becomes apparent that this picture is displayed on an iPhone and again captions and graphics are superimposed on it: "Fox 5 News" and "Live". The iPhone is in the hands of a bar guest (a cameo appearance by Seth Grahame-Smith), who is then approached by the

immortal, “good” vampire Henry Sturges in exactly the same way and with the same words as he approached Lincoln in a bar back in 1827. This connection between the past and the present are placed or isolated in a frame story, and one can claim that the merging of the past with the present in the film remains rather external.

Vampires as a Semi-motivated Sign

The crucial travesty element in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* is the Southern vampire population. This is not the first time that the monster type, vampires have been employed as a metaphor for a historical and economic category. Already in 1867, 30 years before Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was published Karl Marx used the vampire metaphor to characterize an economic system as when he describes capitalism’s incessant need to extend the working-day: “The prolongation of the working-day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night, only acts as a palliative. It quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour.” (Marx, 1867/1974, p. 245) or “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” (Marx, 1867/1974, p. 224) Also in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and in *Grundrisse* excessive capitalism is described by Marx with the vampire metaphor (Neocleous, M., 2003/2006). Among others, Francis Moretti (Moretti, 1988) has developed this economic reading of the vampire figure into describing Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* as a metaphor for monopoly capitalism, which threatened the era of earlier Victorian liberal capitalism. Moretti struggles somewhat with the fact that the vampire *Dracula* is a count, a representative of a historical stage earlier than capitalism, namely feudalism: “the nineteenth-century bourgeois is able to imagine monopoly only in the guise of Count *Dracula*, the aristocrat, the figure of the past, the relic of distant lands and dark ages.” (Moretti, 1988, pp. 92-93) This historical problem is not present when Grahame-Smith identifies Southern slaveholders with vampires. He retains the original Stoker-based, feudal characteristics of the vampire with the planter class, and in the film’s scene with the ball at the Southern mansion of the baronial chief vampire Adam, the vampire delivers an illustrated apology for slavery through the ages: “Men have enslaved each other since they invented gods to forgive them for doing it...”, and he combines his aristocratic mode of living in this historical period of a war between the

South and the industrialized North with the pre-feudal economic formations during his 5,000-year-old personal life. The fact that Grahame-Smith situated the vampire population in the South is not without recent precedents. Anne Rice's vampires in *Interview with the Vampire* (novel 1976, film 1994, director Neil Jordan) are Southern gentlemen; the *True Blood* television series adapted from *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* series of novels by Charlaine Harris series takes place in Bon Temps in Louisiana.

To understand these different meanings attached to the vampire figure it may be necessary to return to the indisputable fact that vampires do not exist. Yet they appear frequently in literature, film and other media. One may then ask what they represent and what they signify. In other words we need a semiotical rephrasing of the question, and here a very brief discussion of the arbitrary nature of the sign seems useful. Basically, a sign refers to something other than itself, but there is no one-to-one relationship between a sign, which has a physical form, and a physical object in the world. The relationship between a sign and its referent, i.e. what it represents, is differently perceived. Most semioticians agree that the signification of the sign is based on the referent being a mental concept. (Fiske, 1982/1990, pp. 41-60), and both Peirce and Saussure see this relationship between the sign and its referent as placed between two poles. On the one hand, the sign is entirely arbitrary, as when for instance what is referred to as "tree" in English is called "Baum" in German. On the other hand, the sign may be iconic (Peirce's term), so that the form of the signifier is determined to some degree by what it represents, i.e. the signified. Another term for this is that the sign is motivated, so that for instance when an Englishman or a German depicts a tree visually as in a drawing or in a photo, the two signs that result have much more in common than "tree" and "Baum". The motivated sign is not arbitrary, but it is determined by a certain physical likeness between signifier and signified. With their point of departure in visual semiotics, later semioticians such as Kress and van Leeuwen regard signs in general as having some form of motivation, as Kress and van Leeuwen concentrate on the various physical media of representation and reproduction, which carry the sign (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 159, p. 163).

The vampire as a sign has no referent in the real world. It has only a mental concept as a referent. Because signifieds which solely refer

to mental concepts are highly dependent on the culture in which they are used, they are labile and unstable, the more so as they do not have any referent in the real world, so to speak. The vampire, then, is open to different significations. Vampires are not arbitrary signs. In the (inter)textual and cultural history of the vampire all vampires share certain characteristics, but as it has been seen above in the example of the vampire sign being employed in an economic sense, this sign is open to variations in its signification (Christensen, 2012, p. 45), and this article suggests that non-existent monsters like for instance vampires can semiotically be characterized as a semi-motivated sign open to signification, and this signification is changeable through cultural history.

Conclusion: Travesty as Historiographic Metafiction

Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter is so obviously a composition. The film explicitly stresses the artificiality of itself through its mashup construction with its unlikely combination of discourses, such as for example the action scenes and their martial arts aesthetics with verbatim voice-overs of the historical Abraham Lincoln's authentic speeches, and the overall conglomerate concept of historiography and vampires is certainly striking. Also as we have seen, the film's attempt in its frame story at tying the past and the present together draws the audience's attention to the fact that it is watching a film with mashup characteristics. The whole film from the duality of its very title to its interplay of history and vampire monsters can be characterized as the kind of metafiction that though its combination of discourses becomes explicitly self-reflexive in its treatment of its subject and questions the mimetic relationship between itself and reality. It follows that the argumentation of the film is that as it is a textual construction, so its depiction of the past is also a construction, and not a straightforward rendition of past events as history. In fact, the film is more story than history, yet it does contain a historiographic discourse as part of the mashup. The meeting point between the entirely fictitious vampire discourse and the historiographic discourse is significant in the literal sense that it is here that the signification of the film is created, which is epistemological as it debates knowledge about the past. In the film the concrete meeting point is Lincoln's personal and secret diary and record, which becomes a dominant part of the film's voice over, and which is pre-

sented as a fictitious historical document. It is this record in particular that is both story and history. This fake historical document stresses the lesson that can be learnt from the film that it is always impossible to recreate a true past, or as Linda Hutcheon expresses it about a tendency in literature: "Its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and rewording of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon, 1988/2000, p. 5), and so the artificiality of past history of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* is ostensibly apparent. This old topic about the postmodern text that it renounces to access truth about history, or reality for that matter, since history and reality are constructed discourses, is so obvious in the case of *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* that it borders on the obvious to re-state it here, yet in this case there is a point to be made about these epistemological and ontological postmodern themes, as it may be claimed that the film through its commercial goals has banalized them. It seems to be no coincidence that the mashup form of the film has manifested itself not in pastiche, but in travesty. Genette characterizes the style of travesty in this way: "it means transposing the consistently noble (*gravis*) style of its narrative and of the characters' speeches into a familiar, indeed, vulgar style" (Genette, 1982/1997, p. 58). The postmodern discussion about the impossibility of the search for the truth about history is there in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, yet it may be said to have become vulgarized or trivialized in the film.

We can now return to Aristotle's distinction between the historiographer and the poet and his separation of story from history. In *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* these two have been included in the same text, but not merged. There is the story about vampires, and there is the history of the American past leader Abraham Lincoln. This way of combining history and fiction has been called historiographic metafiction. Historiographic metafiction is a textual type that thematizes this split between fiction and historiography and its union, or historiographic metafiction may be defined as texts that have an intention of depicting (parts of) history in an explicitly self-reflexive manner. In this way the form of the text (the way history is depicted) becomes part of the text's thematics, and again we have returned to Aristotle's remarks about textual form: "the one writes in prose and the other in verse". It is the conclusion of this article that

Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter can be regarded as a trivialized example of historiographic metafiction. Seth Grahame-Smith's method of hybridity and mashup can be regarded as a popular form of historiographic metafiction with travesty as the feature that questions historiography, and this is its special trade mark.

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