*Student - Karthic Harish Ragupathy Instructor – Dr. Pang Yang Huei*

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*02.102 World since 1400*

3. Is Steven Spielberg’s film, Amistad (1997), an adequate dramatization depicting the Atlantic slave trade? Discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

**Introduction**

Slavery was born together with civilization as one of the most controversial and bestial institutions in human history. Since as early as 2500 BC under Egyptian rule, it has been considered a profitable construct of society. Slaves took on a wide variety of tasks, from hard labor and household duties to advisory roles (the former vastly outnumbering the latter). Regardless, every slave that ever existed was simply a means to an end: mass wealth production. The horrific trans-Atlantic slave trade, which saw up to twelve million Africans enslaved and deported between the 16th and 19th centuries, and the events associated with it had a monumental impact on human history. One of the most dramatized events during that period is the slave mutiny on the ship Amistad, which was made into a film by Steven Spielberg. While it may have received awards for the stellar acting performances, in terms of historical content, the film ranks poorly. The following paragraphs will outline the strengths and weaknesses of the Amistad movie in its depiction of the trans-Atlantic slave trade with respect to historical sources.

**Middle Passage**

Spielberg’s shockingly gruesome depiction of life on The Tecora, a novel cinematic experience for moviegoers at that time, is to a large extent endorsed by historical facts. Testament to his meticulous research, Spielberg makes a clear distinction between conditions on The Tecora and La Amistad.

To the average moviegoer, the ghastly scenes are reflective of hardships that all slaves have to undergo on the Middle Passage. On closer scrutiny, however, it’s evident that La Amistad “a sleek black schooner built in Cuba on a Baltimore model for coastal trading” (Davis, 2006), was too small to be a transatlantic slave ship. Here, Spielberg is wary not to extend his macabre scenes on The Tecora to La Amistad as it would not be consistent with Middle Passage journeys in general. Moreover, since the revolt took place within 3 nights of La Amistad setting sail, conditions might not have been as grim as those on The Tecora.

Needless to say, Spielberg was to a large extent accurate in his recount of slaves’ journey through the Middle Passage, illustrated by a sequence of vignettes midway through the film. Once Cinqué and 500 other negroes reached Lomboko on the Sierra Leone Coast, they were loaded like cargo onto the transatlantic slaver ‘The Tecora’; “On the ships slaves were packed in the hold on galleries one above the other. Each was given only four or five feet in length and two or three feet in height, so that they could neither lie at full length nor sit upright” (James, 1963). The scene appears about 68 minutes into the film. Following which, a vivid storm scene shows the slaves vomiting and crying desperately as “in the close and loathsome darkness they were hurled from one side to another by the heaving vessel, held in position by the chains on their bleeding flesh” (James, 1963).

From the whipping scene, it’s evident that “fear of their cargo bred a savage cruelty in the crew” (James, 1963), accentuated by post-Haiti repercussions in the form of rampant rebellions and mutinies throughout the New World. Similarly, slaves were drowned with a load of stones and female slaves were made “to dance” (James, 1963), much to the crew’s appeasement. According to historical records, the inhumane incidents in Spielberg’s scenes were “not rare” (James, 1963). That Morgan Freeman’s character stumbles in shock while inspecting La Amistad does not come as a surprise, as no place “concentrated so much misery as the hold of a slave-ship” (James, 1963). Hence, in addition to faithfully portraying accounts of the slaves’ sufferings on transatlantic slaver ships traversing through the Middle Passage, the film is effective in tugging at the heartstrings of its viewers.

**Christianity**

Although he does a commendable job recounting the transatlantic journey, in his sarcastic portrayal of evangelists, Spielberg severely downplays the main impetus responsible for the end of slavery in America – the 2nd Great Awakening.

In the early nineteenth century, during a period of rapid economic growth and urbanization, many Americans believed that “only a revival of Christianity could save America from a spirit of selfishness, materialism, and the pursuit of luxury” (Davis, 2006). A series of religious revivals pervaded the country, with the aim of spreading the Protestant faith through Baptist and Methodist churches. Thousands were converted through Camp meetings, where evangelists and revivalists raised “fundamental questions about the meaning of human life, justice, and the human ability to rise above sin” (Davis, 2006).

The spirit of abolitionism was born from the question of morality and sin. To the revivalist community, slavery was “the great national sin” (Davis, 2006). Influential figures, like Theodore Dwight Weld who “personally symbolized the fusion of American revivalism with the British antislavery movement” (Davis, 2006), lashed at the sinful act of slavery and its proponents’ wanton disregard for Christian principles, brewing anti-slavery sentiments. Thus grew hordes of abolitionists, to whom slavery’s “only remedy was an appeal to morality based on Christian principles and to individual liberties grounded in natural law.” (Jones, 1998). Negroes both free and enslaved were welcomed with open arms to the Baptist community.

One of the most influential figures in the Baptist negro community is ‘Black Harry’ Hosier, a freedman who preached at Baptist churches at the early stages of the Great Awakening. He inspired throngs of slaves and free negroes to establish Baptist Congregations, invariably stoking the fires of the abolitionist movement. The infamous black slave Gabriel Prosser’s planned rebellion was the outcome of a revival meeting. Nat Turner, whose uprising killed nearly 60 white citizens, claimed that “his directive was singularly from God” (Osagie, 2000) and justified his actions “in terms of a mandate from God and as part of his prophesied calling, which was nurtured by his unshakeable belief in the human dignity of black people” (Osagie, 2000).

Those examples are merely a small sample drawn from the deluge of revolts that resulted during the revivalist movement, which induced the abolitionist movement in America to subscribe to immediatism in the 1830s; “One could not abolish slavery gradually, any more than one could abolish sin gradually.” (Osagie, 2000)

However, Spielberg’s Amistad hardly acknowledges this crucial historical precedent. Evangelists in the film are present merely to offer comedy value; a group which sings prayers outside the prison is mildly ridiculed by Cinqué and his friend, who think they’re sick and in need of help. The height of Spielberg’s disregard for Christianity’s influence is apparent in the conversation between Joadson, Tappan and Baldwin in a tavern. Tappan opposes Baldwin’s view of the case as a matter of property by retorting that “this war must be waged on the battlefield of righteousness” (Spielberg, 1999) and that “it is our duty as Christians and abolitionists to save these people” (Spielberg, 1999), to which Baldwin dished out sarcastic replies such as “The what?” (Spielberg, 1999) and “but Christ lost” (Spielberg, 1999). Tappan’s motives, much like other abolitionist lawyers, were wholly evangelical:

“Lewis Tappan's feelings toward slavery were indicative of the strong evangelical strain running through the abolition movement. He was a puritan who constantly faced the problem of wanting to change the world while having to live in it. An admitted Christian abolitionist, he would not compromise with either slavery or racial prejudice.” (Jones, 1998)

Thus, it is evident that the abolitionist movement was bolstered by, if not intertwined with, the religious revivals defined by the 2nd Great Awakening. The film fails to dramatize this crucial fact.

**Saint Domingue and other revolutions**

The film also misleadingly depicts the Amistad case as an isolated, monumental incident that would take America ‘one long step closer to civil war’. Clearly there’s more to it than meets the eye. The outcome of the trial ought to be considered with regards to significant historical movements that precede it. Either due to film length constraints, or an oversight of historical facts, Spielberg failed to explain the driving forces that catalysed anti-slavery sentiments in the New World, chief among them being the Saint Domingue Revolution (also known as the Haiti Revolution).

The Haiti Revolution, led by L’Ovuerture against Napolean’s army, “remains significant to the Amistad story and other slave revolts because it was an event that provoked and precipitated the debate on slavery”. (Osagie, 2000). For both proponents and opponents of slavery alike, the Haitian Revolution had massive repercussions for it was a great leap in the path towards emancipation.

For black slaves everywhere, it imbued them with the hope of reclaiming their identity as free human beings deserving of equal opportunities. For American abolitionists, it strengthened their advocation for Immediatism and was frequently “cited as the reason why it was necessary to extend constitutional rights to the slaves.” (Osagie, 2000). For colonizing powers such as France, Britain and Spain, the broken shackles at Haiti strangled the balance of power in the New World. Essentially, the revolution reinforced each party’s raison d’etre and served as a bedrock for their respective arguments.

In America, the bugle call for emancipation had rung loudly, triggering a series of revolt attempts led by slaves who had heard it. In 1800, a black slave named Gabriel Prosser crafted a plan of insurrection to take over his owners’ plantation. Although foiled by betrayers, it sent ripples of fear across the slaveholders’ community, who were struck by disbelief that “a slave could contrive such a politically charged insurgence” (Osagie, 2000). Prosser wanted to instigate a far-reaching rebellion and went so far as to conceive a slogan – “Liberty or Death”. (Osagie, 2000)

Following Prosser’s bold attempt, Denmark Vessey used his status as a free, educated, well-travelled, negro to rally supporters to rebel against the institution that flagrantly violates principles of the US Constitution. His capacity as a leader was evident in that “even the skeptical and fearful were captivated by his stories of Saint Domingue” (Osagie, 2000), and that “many slaves were persuaded by Vesey's impassioned appeals from the Bible” (Osagie, 2000). Emboldened by his predecessors and frustrated by wanton Southerners, Nat Turner staged a massacre of 55 whites in a mere 48 hours, explaining his actions as a divine calling from the Bible, a feature of the revival discussed earlier.

The abolitionists’ fervor had already reached fever pitch at that point. Hence, in light of these events, it’s patent that slavery was already an ailing institution in America in the 1930s. Thousands of rebellions in every form, led by a thousand different Cinqués, had pushed slavery closer and closer to the grave. Fortuitously, the Amistad trial served as the final nail to be driven into the coffin. It’s a hardly delusional claim that had the Amistad been captured near other unforgiving shores instead, Cinqué and his people would have been swatted like flies and the story would not have earned even a cursory sentence in history books.

Therefore, in failing to discuss the implications of the Haiti Revolution, and other uprisings in America that furthered the Abolitionist Movement in America, the film is merely a tunnel view of reality that does not fully capture the effect of historical precedents to the Amistad story.

**Cinqué**

While the Amistad story features an eclectic troupe of characters, all of whom are integral to the Amistad story, none is more central and influential than Joseph Cinqué. His enigmatic, strong-willed, heroic on-screen personality captivates the audience. However, Spielberg deliberately omits a part of Cinqué’s legend, which might threaten to tarnish his reputation as a sanctimonious leader of his people. A hotly debated rumour continues to rage among historians that Cinqué “became an international slave trader upon his return to Africa in 1842” (Jones, 2000).

The source of this rumour is attributed to a novel by William A. Owens. Owen writes that upon abandoning the mission at Sherbro Island Station shortly after his arrival from America, “Cinque had collected a band of Mendi stragglers on the coast opposite Sherbro” (Owens, 1997). Subsequently “his growing strength led to conflict with other chiefs, to building fortifications for protection, to taking and selling slaves to pay for all the things he wanted. Stories drifted back that he was living like a white trader, like Pedro Blanco, profiting from his experience in New England, buying goods and power with the gold of the slave trade.” (Owens, 1997).

Owens’ account is controversial due to the nature of his sources. In the afterward section, he reports that “he had placed all "typescript copies" of documents he used in the "Amistad collection" of the New Haven Colony Historical Society Library in Connecticut.” (Jones, 2000). However, according to the executive director of said library, “when I asked for the Owens documentation, there was a folder but it was empty. However, no one there at the time remembered his removing it or even depositing it.... I left with the impression that the documents had been there and [had been] removed by someone” (Jones, 2000). Owens also claimed that “in his research during the early 1940s he had found "letters" stating that "Cinque had become a slave trader" among the papers of the American Missionary Association” (Jones, 2000). Yet again, no such papers were found.

Owens is not, however, the only perpetrator. Many other historians reported that Cinque renounced his Christian faith and became a slave trader. As with Owen, all had failed to produce physical documentary evidence. Nevertheless, it’s a plausible assertion in view of his past.

Cinque’s capture at Mende could have been due to his reputation as a slave trader. “Cinqué suspected that he had been seized to pay a debt he owed to a business associate.” (Davis, 2006). During the courtroom scene where the prosecution questions Cinque, it comes to the viewer’s attention that Cinque’s Mende tribe, like some others in Africa Leone region, “for hundreds of years – thousands, perhaps – have owned slaves.” (Spielberg, 1999). The lawyer proceeds to insinuate that Cinque might have been one of the elite Africans who persecuted their own kind to obtain arms and other supplies from the Spaniards - as shown in a scene on the Lomboko Coast - by asserting, “And how many men are indebted to you?” (Spielberg, 1999). Cinque, with his confident, strong-willed personality, could very well have been a prime contender for a spot among the elites. Perhaps the business associate Cinque referred to was a slave trader whose betrayal led Cinque to his ironic fate.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned allegations about Cinque are easily felled for want of documentary evidence. Yet this facet of Cinque’s ironic past and post-Amistad life is something worthy of discussion, which Spielberg wisely steered clear of. Thus, the movie is biased in that it lionizes Cinque’s triumphs without making the slightest reference to the allegations against him.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Amistad was more of an entertainment flick than an educational piece as it lacks depth in historical content; much of the period’s rich history is sacrificed perhaps to placate Hollywood’s audience. At face value, the Amistad merely does well in outlining the Amistad trial in chronological fashion, peppered with courtroom drama and impassioned speeches.

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