

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S "AMISTAD": FILM AS HISTORY AND THE TRIVIALIZING OF HISTORY TEACHING

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Enough time has passed now for the ballyhoo and hype surrounding Steven Spielberg's film "Amistad" to have died down. Within the first few months of the film's release, much was written about it and the historical incident that it describes, particularly in the popular press. Most reviews were laudatory. As film, there was much to praise. Historians were more cautious in their responses.

My intention here is to offer a cautionary retrospective, looking at the film from the perspective of the history classroom. There are, in fact, two artifacts to examine: the film itself and a film study guide, *Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, produced jointly by DreamWorks and a private curriculum writer.¹ Together, those artifacts reveal much about the intentions of DreamWorks.

What do teachers and students need to know to use this film in a history class? Of what value is the study guide? I suspect that the answers to those questions, in more general form, are true for many commercial films on historical subjects, and thus my reflections here may have broader application. I do not intend to reopen the question of whether film has any place in the history classroom. That question has been explored elsewhere² and is probably beside the point. Films are being used. The question is, what caveats need to be observed as we use film, particularly "Amistad"?

As entertainment, "Amistad" is good to excellent on most criteria. As history, "Amistad" is deeply flawed. It is not simply inaccurate or incomplete—it is fiction parading as history. In the process of creating dramatic fiction, Spielberg mobilizes

¹*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy* (Stamford, CT: Lifetime Learning Systems, 1997). Although created by Lifetime Learning Systems, the entire learning kit is copyrighted by Dreamworks SKG. The study guide includes the expected "program objectives," a synopsis of the movie, explanations to teachers of the four "activities" for students (with "follow-up activities"), separate activity sheets to be photocopied and used in classrooms, and, for no apparent pedagogical reasons, black-and-white photographs taken from the movie. The guide may be obtained from LifeTime Learning Systems, P.O. Box 120023, Stamford, CT 06912-0023; it was distributed free to schools and colleges when the film was released.

²Harvey H. Jackson, "Can Movies Teach History," *OAH Newsletter*, 18 (1990): 4-5; Michael T. Isenberg, "The Historian and the Myth of the 'Objective Camera': A Critique of Film Reality," *Teaching History*, 1 (1976): 6-14; Thomas Cripps, "Film: The Historians' Dangerous Friend," *Film & History*, 5 (1975): 6-9; Joseph T. Meda, "Questions Without Answers: Towards a Methodological Discussion of the Uses of Audio-Visual Documentation in the Teaching of History," *Studies in History and Society*, 5 (1974): 57-60. See also Earl F. Mulderink, III, "'Pass the Popcorn, Please': Teaching with Documentary Movies in the Introductory Course," *Teaching History*, 21 (1996): 68-74; and Charles M. Dobbs, "Hollywood Movies from the Golden Age: An Important Resource for the Classroom," *Teaching History*, 12 (1987): 10-16.

popular but problematic ideological tenets that should be interrogated in history classrooms, not merely consumed passively. The evidence sustaining those claims will begin to answer my first question above: What do teachers and students need to know to use this film in a history class?

"AMISTAD" AS HISTORY

I suppose most history teachers have their favorite "forgotten stories," the historical incidents, movements, and people that do not make it into the textbooks. If we were surveyed regarding those favorite stories, we might learn much about our individual political orientations, for we are probably more exercised by the silencing of the stories that resonate with our deepest commitments. I have long regretted, for example, that my students know nothing of Helen Keller except for the domesticated, depoliticized figure that emerges from *The Miracle Worker* or the pitiable butt of tasteless jokes; I wish the hero-makers would tell the story of the courage and conviction that led Quaker slaveholders to sacrifice their fortunes to free their slaves in the eighteenth century; I spend hours in social history courses correcting the historical damage done by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The *Amistad* incident would have appeared on my list as well, though probably not among the top dozen revisions I would have favored.

Still, it was heartening to hear, a few years ago, that Spielberg was working on a movie about the *Amistad* incident. "Amistad" was one of those many terms that puzzled my undergraduates: What was it, they asked, and why had they never heard of it before? Yet I wondered how the incident would play out in the entertainment medium of commercial film. Certainly kidnaped men and women revolting on the high seas had the making of high drama, and, handled well, could reveal a ferocious will to be free. But, at one level, the incident's importance in United States history lay in far less dramatic events, in tedious and enervating arguments regarding property rights and international law. At another, higher level, its importance lay in issues not likely to be explored by Hollywood.

Spielberg's effort should give history teachers pause. Not inappropriately--he was, after all, not creating history but entertainment, exactly what he is paid to do--Spielberg kept the historical incident's superficial plot-line, but wove that plot into a work of fiction. That is, the movie retains the facts of a ship-board mutiny, the subterfuge of the white sailors taking the ship north to the United States, not east and south to Africa, the involvement of abolitionists in the mutineers' legal case, their eventual vindication in the U.S. Supreme Court, and their repatriation to Africa. But little else here has historical grounding, including the most dramatic scenes. As is too often the case, the real history is more dramatic than the sanitized, entertaining story the film tells. Therein lies the problem for the history teacher.

The fabrications in "Amistad" are not incidental. They become central to the movie. Some result in serious distortion.³ By now, probably all viewers have learned that the speech delivered by Anthony Hopkins (playing a John Quincy Adams who inexplicably vacillates between curt indifference, virtual senility, and abolitionist eloquence) was never uttered in the Supreme Court of the United States. The real case before the court hinged on dry, technical issues, not emotional appeals to the rights of man, and was delivered by a skillful defense team with assistance from Adams, not by Adams alone. Further, Cinque was not in the court, but languishing in prison. Whatever its dramatic merits, Spielberg's rendering of the Supreme Court ill-served the civic education of the nation's citizens. In neither form nor content was the operation of the Supreme Court accurately portrayed.

The problems with that pivotal Supreme Court scene run deeper. "Amistad" implies that the court opposed slavery, and that the Roger Taney-led Court's decision changed the direction of American history. Spielberg utterly silenced the fact that, over a decade later, Chief Justice Taney delivered the Dred Scott decision. The latter was far more portentous for African Americans, slave or free, than the decision in the *Amistad* case. The Court and much of the American population were not opposed to slavery; they were opposed to Spain's advantage in international markets for slave-produced goods gained through low prices on slave labor.

There were other distortions and omissions that weaken the film as a tool for historical inquiry. We never learn, for example, that Connecticut was still a slave state in 1839, a fact important for context and for countering the comfortable myth that the North was anti-slavery while the South was pro-slavery. Martin Van Buren, the cunning, intelligent and often unscrupulous "Little Magician" who conspired to have the captives kidnapped and returned to their Spanish "owners," is portrayed as largely incompetent. The film's bungling linguist replaces the real Josiah Gibbs from Yale College who came as close as anyone to authentic acts of personal heroism. It was he, not Joadson and Baldwin, who gained a rudimentary understanding of Mendi and traveled to every port between Massachusetts and New York City to seek out black sailors, finally locating the man who would act as interpreter.

Similarly, it is unclear why Spielberg ignored Theodore Sedgwick, Jr., the capable attorney for the *Amistad* defendants, or why he cast Roger Baldwin as a

³I have not attempted to deal with the many distortions of the legal issues involved in the *Amistad* incident, having little expertise in that area. For a good summary of the problems, see Sally Hadden's review at <http://www.eiu.edu/~history/faculty/waldrep/amistad.htm>. Cornell University Law School and the National Archives and Records Administration offer valuable websites for understanding the *Amistad* incident. The Cornell site (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/amistad>) deals with the legal issues of the case and provides links to other sites, while the National Archives Digital Classroom Website (<http://www.nara.gov/education/teaching/amistad>) contains both original documents and teaching activities. For a scholarly historical look at the *Amistad* incident, see Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

sophomorically ambitious property lawyer. Sedgwick was a committed anti-slavery Democrat, and Baldwin was an abolitionist and a successful defense attorney who defended the *Amistad* mutineers without compensation. The film silences abolitionist antecedents in favor of a fictional Baldwin who grows uncertainly from callow immorality to committed compassion, though certainly not to conscientious abolitionism.

Indeed, the general treatment of abolitionists in this movie is derisive. The principled Lewis Tappan is made to hint that the deaths of the Africans would be a boon to abolitionism. Dwight Janes never makes an appearance, though his fortuitous attendance at the first closed hearing on the *Amistad* captives essentially blocked their return to the Spanish traders. Morgan Freeman's character is not only fictional; worse, the screenwriters never decided exactly what a wealthy black abolitionist might do even fictionally, leaving Freeman to flounder on screen, never finding his voice. The only other abolitionists in the film are a sorry, pallid little band kneeling in the snow outside a jail, earning the contempt of the Africans. For all the presumed anti-racist intentions of the movie, the message is that nineteenth-century anti-racists were either venal or ineffective, while the real struggle against slavery was pursued by great white men on the basis of law and compassion rather than principle, economics, and politics.

Likewise, Judge Andrew J. Judson's earlier opposition to abolitionism in the Prudence Crandall case never appears here, though it makes his decision in favor of the captives more dramatic. President Andrew Jackson awarded him a judgeship on the strength of his central role in creating Connecticut's vicious "Black Law," designed intentionally to destroy Crandall's boarding school, on whose board Judson once sat. Judson and others pressed court cases against Crandall, fomented violence against her school, and drove her from Connecticut.

I was disturbed, too, by the film's sanitized version of the horrors of "the middle passage." Only the brutality of chaining together the excess "cargo" and throwing them overboard rang true, and the scene's conclusion, shot from underwater, had a strangely dream-like sense to it. Other shipboard scenes were stylized to the point that they conveyed virtually no sense of the depth of the physical and psychological savagery of slave ships.

Finally, in the worst and most venerable myth-making tradition of Hollywood, "Amistad" reduces a dramatic story of communities and groups engaged in complex, often contradictory struggle, to yet another version of the cowboy western. Two heroes emerge here, though the black hero is ultimately more object than subject. Once again the myth of the individual as hero is affirmed. In historical fact, the *Amistad* incident was not the story of a reluctant Adams fighting for right on behalf of an inarticulate, faceless crowd led by Cinque. It was the story of black men and women with names, many of whom became fluent in English and learned to read and write; one of the women returned to the United States, attended Oberlin College, and sent her son through Yale. It is the story of activist churches raising funds to support

the fugitives and eventually repatriating them to Africa. It is the story of teams of lawyers, not lone Baldwins or Adamses. It is the story of savvy politicians and businessmen scrambling to subvert justice, not a venal Van Buren. It is the story of race and racism and the titanic forces of marketplaces, not white knights fighting injustice.

Spielberg truly believes that "Men like Cinque are always greater than we are" and are "in some fundamental way, perpetually unknowable,"⁴ and it is that myth his movies relentlessly promote. In historical fact, it was women and men such as we are, or are capable of becoming, who engaged in this struggle. They are knowable, and their courage arose in communities and associations, not in private, heroic isolation.

The film study guide raises the right questions, though it never hazards an answer: "How do films like 'Amistad' enhance our knowledge of history? How do they aid the historian in making the legacy of our past accessible to us today?"⁵ In truth, films like "Amistad" are more likely to distort our knowledge of history than to enhance it, particularly when the point is profit through entertainment, not historical inquiry. For there is no other explanation for the fictions introduced in this film than enhancing its profit potential. Carefully crafted documentaries, such as "Eyes on the Prize" or "Civil War," can powerfully "aid the historian in making the legacy of our past accessible to us today," but in their case, profit and entertainment are secondary to educational ends.

Does that mean that films such as "Amistad" should have no place in classrooms? Not necessarily. It does mean, however, that their use needs to be judicious, and surrounded with efforts to educate students toward critical viewing. To its credit, "Amistad" does bring to viewers one of those neglected historical incidents mentioned above. It does so as entertainment and myth-making, however, not as history. It has the virtue of capturing the attention and imagination of students. Yet, while that makes our work as teachers easier, the movie also makes our work more difficult. Countering the distortions and omissions of such a seductive medium as film is, if anything, more difficult than countering simple ignorance.

I will not describe the many ways history teachers could mobilize this film to teach history except that any such effort must involve students in critical research to correct the omissions and distortions. The issues noted above can serve as starting points toward that end. Instead, I want to turn to the second of the two artifacts available to classroom teachers, the film study guide that accompanies "Amistad."

⁴Quoted in *Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, 1.

⁵*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity Four.

"AMISTAD" AS CLASSROOM RESOURCE

None of the objections above would carry much weight if "Amistad" were promoted simply as "historical fiction." However, DreamWorks aggressively promoted the film as history, in part through its film study guide or learning kit.

Many teachers will be tempted to dismiss the kit, *Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, as simply another piece of DreamWorks' publicity material. Its graphics are typical publicity photos from the movie, illustrative of nothing that the film guide claims to be examining. Every page begins with some variant of "'Amistad,' the new film by director Steven Spielberg" Thus, at one level it is little more than a new form of film publicity. Yet we should not merely dismiss it. It is part of the effort to promote fiction as history. Further, because DreamWorks pushed the film guide aggressively, it deserves careful consideration for what it claims to be--a means to "integrate the lessons of this landmark film into your class plans." The guide not only sheds further light on the problematics of film as history, but also reveals the film's trivializing of history teaching.

In contemporary curriculum inquiry, the first question always is, what does the learner already know, or think she knows, about the immediate issue and about issues contingent to the immediate issue? About the *Amistad* incident, the question would be, what does the learner know about not only the *Amistad* incident itself, but also about American slavery, African Americans in United States society, the political and economic history of the period, and particular individuals and groups? Answers to those questions are essential as the primary precondition for determining what needs to be learned, what needs to be unlearned, and what connections already exist that can be built upon.

Significantly, *Amistad: A Lasting Legacy* is innocent of any such questions. The "kit" appears to be predicated on theories of learning that take the learner as a blank slate upon whose consciousness ideas and images might be simply impressed with lasting results. Neither the learner nor the teacher are offered opportunities to explore prior understandings, either of this historical incident, or, more importantly, the larger context into which the learner must integrate this incident. Rather, throughout the exercises prescribed in the guide, it is assumed that the film itself provides all the information needed, and the task is simply to extrapolate certain limited insights from the film. The film's veracity or accuracy is never questioned, though its "authenticity" is asserted.⁶

⁶*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity Four, asserts, "The filmmakers who brought the story of the *Amistad* to the screen took great care to make every detail of this historical drama authentic." It goes on to note that the actors playing the part of the captives learned their dialogue in Mende, costumes and locations were researched, "and scholars were called on to review every aspect of the production."

Nowhere are students challenged to question the film. They are not even asked to query historical motivation, to understand historical dynamics, to probe historical cause and effect, or to ponder contradiction or change, though those sorts of issues lie at the heart of historical study. Rather, students are asked to "profile two American heroes" (in two lines), to explain (in one paragraph) "whether you think Americans are prepared to recognize Cinque as a true hero of our history today," or to consider three episodes selected by the guide's author and "explain how each one marks a step in Cinque's self-discovery of his own unrecognized heroism."⁷ Not only the movie, then, but also the learning kit, is pressed into the myth-making task, reasserting the view that history is made by lone heroes.

Historians will differ regarding the significance of the *Amistad* incident. Arguably, however, they would define the significant issues as race, sectional conflict, slavery, the Constitution, or international law. Students working from the film guide will not consider such issues. Race, racism, and racial justice are never mentioned. They are safely transmuted into the trendy discourse of "differences," and then deflected into activities in which students identify differences between youth groups.⁸ Sectional conflict and slavery merit a single note in the guide, in the dubious assertion that the Supreme Court's *Amistad* verdict "marked a turning point in the struggle to end slavery."⁹ At no point are students or teachers invited to investigate the accuracy of the assertion, or to engage in any activity that would lead to a consideration of slavery or sectional conflict in the context of "Amistad." Legal issues are similarly silenced in the guide. Indeed, even with one full set of activities devoted to "History," the learning kit is astoundingly ahistorical.

The four topics covered in the kit are "Heroes," "Differences," "Justice," and "History." I have indicated briefly how the first two are handled. "Justice," a promising title, is nearly as disappointing as the others. Its primary thrust, as indicated in its introduction, is that "the American system of justice prevails" in "Amistad." Yet the activities themselves do not sustain that claim. Nor do they engage students with questions about the meaning of justice, or the competing theories of justice at the heart of this particular historical episode. Instead, the activities engage students in trivial questions about the fictionalized actions of Roger Baldwin as a lawyer, thereby reducing questions of justice to questions of the work of lawyers.¹⁰

⁷*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity One.

⁸*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity Two, assignment 1.

⁹*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity One, introduction.

¹⁰*Amistad: A Lasting Legacy*, Activity Three, quotation from assignment 3.

The film guide claims to be appropriate "for use with college and senior high school students as a supplement to courses in American history, African American history, history, sociology and law." As one who has been engaged in teacher education for over two decades, I can say confidently that the activities offered in the kit would be appropriate only at the middle-school level, but I would not recommend the kit even there. This is the sort of material that gives American education a bad name. Significantly, it was not created by teachers in American schools, but by an agency in the highly touted "private sector." There are lessons to be learned there, too.

"Amistad" is entertainment, not history. DreamWorks has attempted to cast its product as history, however, and to push it into the history classroom. Its learning kit trivializes history and history teaching. Ironically, the last of the "program objectives" presumably pursued by the learning kit is "to encourage critical thinking about the value of history." There is much to think about critically in the version of "Amistad" that Steven Spielberg presents, but this film guide deflects that critical thinking rather than encouraging it. As is always the case, critical thinking arises in the dialogical encounter between informed teachers, thoughtful students, and multiple texts. Entertainment will never substitute for any of those.

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