

# Amistad's failings

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Steven Spielberg's subject in *Amistad* is a worthy one, but the artistic treatment it receives at the director's hands is, for the most part, dreadful.

The African slaves are painted in such heroic colors that very little life comes through the performances of the actors, who are obliged to be relentlessly militant, outraged and pure of heart. They are rarely allowed to be real human beings caught in a terrible historic tragedy. Clichés and artistic shortcuts abound. Anthony Hopkins as crotchety John Quincy Adams is unwatchable for much of the film. He comes to life to a certain extent in the scene of his final, stirring argument before the Supreme Court.

There is something cartoonish about a great deal of the film. If social malefactors in real life had evil, cunning and opportunism so obviously stamped on their features, broad layers of the population would have no difficulty, as they unfortunately do, in sorting out their friends from their enemies.

Several processes seem to have been at work in producing this unhappy artistic result.

No one has ever suggested, in the first place, that Spielberg was a profound thinker or an artist of unlimited talent. It is not the director's fault, naturally, but the phenomenal success of his films over the past two decades has undoubtedly been bound up with social and artistic processes of a rather retrograde character. The radicalization that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s was on the wane and a different social atmosphere was beginning to emerge when Spielberg directed his first feature in 1974.

The enormous success of his second film, *Jaws*, released in June 1975, profoundly changed the manner in which American film studios viewed their own products. The era of the modern "blockbuster" had arrived — no doubt facilitated by the new apolitical mood — and with it, the "regular production of genre films: films that could be most easily packaged, and

sold on a mass scale to audiences around the world." (Douglas Gomery, *The Oxford History of World Cinema*.) Spielberg, despite, or rather because of, his intellectual limitations, combined with a considerable knowledge of film technique, a certain flair for storytelling and an intuitive feel for the illusions of his audience, became the pre-eminent commercial filmmaker of the 1970s and 1980s.

One need only list his box-office successes to get some sense of the climate of the past twenty years: *Jaws*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Jurassic Park* and so forth.

Spielberg has attempted, with varying degrees of success, to make more demanding films: *The Color Purple* in 1985; *Empire of the Sun*, one of his better works and a commercial failure, in 1987; and, of course, *Schindler's List*, a genuine achievement, in 1993. *Amistad* too presumably falls into this latter category.

One commentator describes "the inner mind of the director's personality" as that of "the eternally wonder-struck, precocious child who would rather go on dreaming than finally grow up." To which one can only reply that too many of Spielberg's films and the conceptions they embody are childish, rather than child-like.

But there is another critical element which must be added into the mix when considering the specific failings of *Amistad*: the truly deleterious impact of so-called "political correctness" on artistic work. Spielberg, of course, came under fire from certain nationalist-minded blacks for daring to make the film in the first place. According to the prevailing wisdom, a white male, a Jew, could not possibly direct such a story. To his credit, Spielberg went ahead and made his movie, but one would be naïve to think that such pressures, in these unenlightened times and on such a

limited figure, would not make themselves felt in one fashion or another.

Nearly every aspect of the film reveals a desperation, a mania almost, to satisfy his actual or potential critics—an impossible task, of course. It is in this light that one has to view the film’s idealized portrayal of the Africans. The treatment of slavery itself as an historical phenomenon also suffers. The general tone of moral outrage obscures more than it clarifies.

In Schindler’s List Spielberg, who obviously felt relatively confident about his knowledge of and attitude toward the Holocaust, was not obliged to dwell on the details of mass extermination to underscore the nature of Nazism. He proceeded, in the best parts of that film, to consider some of the moral and personal consequences of living under such ghastly circumstances. Very little of that sort of matter-of-fact analysis occurs in Amistad. The director is determined to focus the spectator’s attention on the horrors of the situation at every moment for fear of being accused of insensitivity to the suffering of the slaves.

Under those conditions, where events and people are depicted as they “should” have been and not as they were, the possibility of an objective historical accounting, as well as the possibility of the artist being honest with himself and true to his own vision of things, goes out the window. We are left with a stilted, distorted picture, arranged so as not to offend. We have said it before, and we will say it again, nothing but intellectual harm has come from the influence of petty bourgeois identity politics.



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