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**(Re)presenting the Past: Historiographical and Theoretical
Implications of the Historical Docudrama**

A thesis
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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarship surrounding historical and filmic representations of the past. Moreover, it seeks to further the understanding and practical use of this sub-field in history by examining two films: *Amistad* (1997); and, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006). Building on the insistence of scholars such as Robert Rosenstone and Hayden White, this thesis seeks to evaluate historical films on their own terms as representations of the past that must be judged according to their own conventions.

Cinema's attraction to historical subjects is not a recent phenomenon. However, the past two decades, have seen a marked increase in the academic critique of 'historical films' – most notably Hollywood features and television documentaries. Moreover, the appetite of the general public for filmic treatment of historical topics continues unabated. While it is agreed that historical film cannot be judged according to the criteria used in accessing traditional modes of historical representation, there is little agreement about what criteria, precisely, should be used in evaluating historical films' *historical* attributes and implications. This thesis commences with a general theoretical and methodological survey of the literature in this relatively new sub-field. It then analyses the film *Amistad* and its reception and criticism amongst historical professionals. This analysis, coupled with the findings of the first chapter, forms the basis for an original and independent review of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, a film that has not yet been widely critiqued by historians. The thesis suggests how historical films may be fruitfully evaluated in ways that are sympathetic both to the peculiar exigencies of the medium and the traditional concerns of historical scholarship.

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Introduction

History on film offers a relatively new mode of representing the past. To be sure, history has been rendered on film since the early days of cinema. Following the release of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) one reviewer claimed: 'History repeats itself upon the screen with a realism that is maddening'.¹ Griffith proclaimed that in the libraries of the future, films would replace the history books: 'Instead of consulting all the authorities ... and ending bewildered ... you will actually see what happened. There will be no opinions expressed. You will merely be present at the making of history.'² This notion of film as transparent in its representation of the past is hard to comprehend, and yet extremely interesting. Pierre Sorlin notes that the people who made *Birth of a Nation* and 'most of the people who saw it, regarded it as exact history.'³ Historians who judge historical film with a simplistic notion of the medium are often driven by this consideration: viewers will take what they see on the screen as 'exact history'.

Robert Toplin has pointed out, 'as an omnipresent mode of entertainment' the power of cinema is just 'beginning to be recognized and understood.'⁴ The public's enthusiasm for history on film is likely to continue growing in the decades ahead, and presents a problematic relationship for the history profession that needs to be taken seriously.⁵ As people turn to the visual media as a reference to the past, the possibility that we (historians) are no longer the only 'custodians of our collective past' must be

¹ Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), p. viii.

² Sorlin, pp. viii-ix.

³ Sorlin, p. viii.

⁴ Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 6.

⁵ Toplin writes in 1988: 'expressions of anger and contempt will not make filmed history go away; the public's enthusiasm for it is likely to grow in the decades ahead.' Toplin, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1226. It is clear that in the last two decades we have seen this trend increase.

faced.⁶ Sorlin urged the historian to take an interest in this ‘audiovisual world,’ or they face the prospect of becoming ‘schizophrenics, rejected by society as the representatives of an outmoded erudition.’⁷

Robert Rosenstone observes that film has taken its place as the great temptation. Simultaneously, to the historian – as a medium that is ‘still capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience’, and, to the student of history, and members of the general public – as a medium capable of telling stories that ‘situate us meaningfully in a value-laden world.’⁸

It has been argued that the visual media – television, feature films, docudramas, mini-series, and network documentaries (to name a few) – have become the chief carriers of historical messages in contemporary society.⁹ This observation is clear when we consider that we live in a post literate world, where many people can read but may choose not to; turning instead to other forms of media – especially visual – to gain knowledge and an understanding of the past. Gore Vidal, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Rosenstone among others have suggested that the current state, in which the visual media is superseding the printed word, parallels a time 2000 years ago when the printed word superseded the oral tradition.

How do we – as historians – respond to this challenge as more and more people learn history from film and television? John E. O’Connor answers this question by insisting that ‘better,’¹⁰ historical films be made: achievable if historians are willing to be trained in the analysis and methods of visual media, which, in turn, would lead to the

⁶ Steven Mintz, ‘Spielberg’s *Amistad* and the History Classroom’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 370.

⁷ Sorlin, p. 5.

⁸ Robert Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1175.

⁹ See Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, pp. 1174-75.

¹⁰ John E. O’Connor, ‘History in images/images in history: Reflections on the importance of film and television study for an understanding of the past’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1207.

historian as teacher imparting their skills to their students, and ‘challenging our students to think analytically about...historical films’.¹¹ O’Connor sees an ‘awareness of these concerns’, as integral to our training in history.¹² With the arrival of the twenty-first century it has become imperative that a ‘more general “visual literacy” and the ability to deal thoughtfully with visual images,’ become part of everyone’s education.¹³ Vidal goes so far as to suggest that we ‘concede the inevitable, scrap the existing educational system, and introduce the young to the past through film.’¹⁴ While this sentiment seems somewhat hasty, O’Connor explains that undergraduate students are less likely to subscribe to peer-reviewed journals like the *American Historical Review*, or to read scholarly monographs, or even to look to more popular forms of historical writing: ‘it appears likely that even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television.’¹⁵

Historical films help to ‘shape the thinking of millions’;¹⁶ and, despite the fact that historical film would represent but a small percentage of movie releases, Toplin has observed that they ‘excite inordinate public interest and critical attention.’¹⁷ Paradoxically, in light of the influence and popular reception of historical films, it is at once striking and disturbing that ‘the phenomenon of film as interpreter of history ... remains relatively neglected’.¹⁸ Historical films have assumed such a prominent place in the public’s mind (even in the mind of the university undergraduate), that the state of neglect that this area of scholarship finds itself in requires redress.

¹¹ O’Connor, p. 1207.

¹² O’Connor, p. 1207.

¹³ O’Connor, p. 1207.

¹⁴ Mark C. Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: H. Holt, 1995), p. 9.

¹⁵ O’Connor, p. 1201.

¹⁶ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. vii

¹⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. viii. Toplin laments that only ‘a few scholars, such as John E. O’Connor, Robert A. Rosenstone, and Pierre Sorlin, have examined film’s role as a popular communicator of historical interpretations.’

Why then, as the extent to which the visual media are shaping the minds of the public and students alike becomes obvious, do historians resist, and deride the historical film as an interpreter of the past? The answers to this question are many, and will be addressed throughout Chapter One. One answer, however, relates directly to the preponderance of the visual media in contemporary society – historians are no longer the only (or even the foremost) ‘custodians of our collective past.’¹⁹ Historians antipathy to film thus seems motivated as much by professional jealousy and a realization that the historical monograph can no longer compete with the visual media for audience, as it is by a fear of the past being abused and misrepresented by those who are not adequately trained in academic history.

The emergence of visual media as chief carrier of historical meaning in contemporary society is forcing us to alter and change the nature of our relationship to the past. Rosenstone argues that film, ‘with its unique powers of representation,’ is struggling to find a place within a ‘cultural tradition that has long privileged the written word.’²⁰ For historians the challenge is great, for it would seem that in order to accept and ‘acknowledge the authenticity of the visual’ we must ‘accept a new relationship to the word itself.’²¹ Rosenstone notes:

We would do well to recall Plato’s assertion that, when the mode of the muse changes, the walls of the city shake. It seems that to our time is given this vital question to ponder: if the mode of representation changes, what then may begin to shake?²²

Those filmmakers, (Ken Loach, Oliver Stone), who use the past not as a setting for romance and adventure, but as an exploration of historical processes, themes, questions, personalities, conflicts, or behaviour, produce works that are different from

¹⁹ Steven Mintz, March 1996, ‘Review of Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*’, H-Film, H-Net Reviews, [online], available URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=11257846448377> (12 March 2007).

²⁰ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1185.

²¹ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1185.

²² Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1185.

‘the products of traditional written history’.²³ It is because of this that Toplin believes we ‘may need to entertain new ways of thinking about their contributions,’ and can no longer deny the impact of the ‘cinematic historian’.²⁴ These filmmakers have been praised for their ‘genius in establishing the look and feel of a bygone era and telling stories that communicate important understandings.’²⁵ Conversely, they have been condemned for their sometimes liberal use of artistic license, and for presenting ‘fiction rather than fact, myth rather than history’.²⁶ In either case the ‘cinematic historian’ has provoked a serious response from some academic historians.

This thesis is not the first work to note the potential of studying the historical film. The analysis of films dates back to the birth of the medium itself. In 1971 it was somewhat legitimized as a scholarly endeavour by the ‘creation of a specialist journal, *Film and History*.’²⁷ This journal was the catalyst for the creation of ‘monographs, film review issues in other journals and eventually, the John E. O’Connor prize – awarded by the American Historical Association in recognition of one of the founding editors of *Film and History* – for outstanding achievement in historical filmmaking.’²⁸ The reception of the historical film was, of course, not all positive. In 1978 Ian Jarvie presented his account of the possibility of films ‘doing history’, maintaining that there was no way film could actually do history as the moving image suffers from ‘discursive weakness’ and carries such a ‘poor information load’.²⁹

The 1980s was an important decade in establishing this sub-field in history. Writers moved beyond the view of the medium as imprisoned by its limitations and ‘sought to

²³ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. viii.

²⁴ Toplin explains that a ‘working title for this book drew on Oliver Stone’s reference to himself as a “cinematic historian.”’ See Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. viii-ix.

²⁵ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. 2.

²⁶ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. 2.

²⁷ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (Abington, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 4.

²⁸ Hughes-Warrington, p. 4.

²⁹ Ian Jarvie, ‘Seeing through the movies’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1978), p. 378.

spell out how the medium could best show history.’³⁰ Sorlin and Marc Ferro insisted that films tell us more about the times in which they were produced as cultural artefacts specific to the generation that produced them.³¹ Sorlin defined the historical film as a ‘reconstruction of the social relationship which, using the pretext of the past, reorganizes the present’.³² Ferro saw historical films as divided into those ‘inscribed in the dominant (or oppositional) currents of thought and those that propose an independent or innovative view of societies’.³³ The work of these two scholars has influenced a host of writers with Rosenstone proclaiming them the ‘granddaddies’ of the field.³⁴

Marnie Hughes-Warrington proclaims that the ‘[b]elief in film as something “radically different” was reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s with the production of multiple monographs ... and space at conferences and in journals like *The Journal of American History*, *American Historical Review* and *History Today*.’³⁵ A special forum that explored the theoretical implications of history and film was published in the *American Historical Review* in 1988. Five scholars, Rosenstone, Hayden White, Toplin, O’Connor, and David Herlihy, contributed to the issue.³⁶ For Toplin and Rosenstone, this forum proved the beginning of an output of regular scholarship that has dealt with the historical film.³⁷ Rosenstone, in particular, is one of the few

³⁰ Hughes-Warrington, p. 4.

³¹ Sorlin, *The Film in History*; Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

³² Sorlin, p. 80.

³³ Ferro, p. 161.

³⁴ I use the term “granddaddies,” as it was used in an email I received from Professor Rosenstone to describe the two historians and their contribution to this area of scholarship.

³⁵ Hughes-Warrington, p. 4.

³⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in Images/history in words’, pp. 1173-85; David Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera? Other reflections on film and history’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), pp. 1186-92; Hayden White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), pp. 1193-9; O’Connor, ‘History in images/history in words’, pp. 1200-9; Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, pp. 1210-27.

³⁷ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995); Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995); Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman/Pearson, 2006); Toplin, *History by Hollywood*; Toplin, *Reel History*.

historians who have actually been able to offer productive modes of filmic analysis without simply dismissing filmic representation out of hand. Rosenstone is the leading critic in this understanding of the historical film. This thesis utilizes Rosenstone's work in particular as he offers a 'way in' to understanding and developing this area of historiography, which is vital given the exodus of popular audiences away from traditional modes of disseminating history.

However, despite the activity and interest among scholars, Rosenstone has noted that this 'has hardly led to consensus on *how* to evaluate the contribution of the "historical" film to "historical understanding."'”³⁸ Historians have yet to think systematically about what White has labelled *historiophoty* – 'the representation of history and or thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse.'³⁹ In reviews, books, and essays, 'the historical film is dealt with piecemeal. Yet it is fair to say that two major approaches predominate.'⁴⁰

Rosenstone writes of the 'implicit' and 'explicit' approaches to understanding the message on the screen. The implicit approach views 'the motion picture as a book transferred to the screen'.⁴¹ This means that the filmic text becomes subject to the same conventions used for evaluating written works. This includes 'judgments about data, verifiability, argument, evidence, and logic'.⁴² Rosenstone cites two major 'problematic assumptions' as the reasons why this type of exploration may not be appropriate. First, 'the current practice of history is the only possible way of understanding the relationship of past to present; and, second, that written history mirrors "reality."'”⁴³ While the first of these assumptions may be arguable the second is certainly false. History is constituted and problematic, and 'is never a mirror but a

³⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 47-48. My italics on *how*.

³⁹ White, 'Historiography and historiophoty', p. 1193.

⁴⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 48.

⁴¹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 48-49.

⁴² Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 49.

⁴³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 49.

construction' of the past.⁴⁴ Certainly, to attempt to judge filmic renderings of the past based on written conventions is to misunderstand the very nature of the written word, and to ignore the obvious differences between the media – film and the word.

The explicit approach 'takes motion pictures to be reflections of the social and political concerns of the era in which they were made'.⁴⁵ This was perhaps made most famous by Sorlin and Ferro.⁴⁶ This approach insists that the underlying themes of a film can be read and 'situated "historically."⁴⁷ Which, of course, they can be: '*Rocky* (problems of blue-collar workers), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (conspiracy and conformity in the fifties), *Viva Zapata* (the cold war), and *Drums Along the Mohawk* (persistence of American ideals).⁴⁸ David Ellwood explains that those who view films as 'historical remains or artifacts' will want to examine and analyse each film's production history: 'how it was conceived, organized and financed, [and] the people and approaches used to shoot and edit it'.⁴⁹ While this approach is well within the bounds of traditional historical scholarship, and is an entirely appropriate and fruitful approach, it provides no real space for the specifically historical issues and particulars dealt with in films. This understanding lead Rosenstone to ask: 'Why not treat written works of history in the same way?'⁵⁰ He argues that written works also reflect the concerns and cultural imperatives of the era in which they were made, and yet we are more willing to accept their messages at 'face value' and not as reflections of a bygone era. Historical films are not only mirrors onto past generations, but also documents that have something worthwhile to say about the past.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 49.

⁴⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 48.

⁴⁶ See, Sorlin, *The Film in History*; and, Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*.

⁴⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 48 Rosenstone cites John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson, eds., *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image* (New York: Ungar, 1979) as a typical example of such a work.

⁴⁹ David Ellwood, *The Movies as History: Visions of the Twentieth Century* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), p.

1.

⁵⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 48.

⁵¹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 48.

Rosenstone commented that no work before his own *Revisioning History* had ‘ever taken the historical film on its own terms as a way of seriously thinking [about] the past.’⁵² This is still the case. Chapter One acknowledges this fact, and seeks to synthesise an understanding of the literature that has critiqued historical film’s representation of the past. The historical profession has provided few tools with which to conduct this type of analysis; the problem being that not much in recent scholarship has been done to articulate what constitutes historical criteria; or how we might judge filmic representations of the past. O’Connor wrote in 1988 that much of the work currently being done on film is by those who are trained in ‘cinema studies, literary analysis, or communications theory but not history.’⁵³ Sadly, this is still the case. Fittingly, Toplin points out the irony that a good deal of this work ‘appears in language that is impenetrable to those who are uninitiated in the buzz-words of university-based cinema studies’ – structuralism, semiotics, feminism, Marxism.⁵⁴ This seems odd when ‘films communicate in powerful and exciting ways, yet much of the formal commentary about them obstructs communication.’⁵⁵

Chapter Two seeks to further distil historians’ notions of film history through an analysis of scholarly criticisms of Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* (1997), and an analysis of the film itself. An original analysis of Ken Loach’s *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) is undertaken in Chapter Three which utilizes criteria gleaned from previous chapters.

Rosenstone has written of the ‘challenge of film to history, of the visual culture to the written culture,’ and that this relationship may be like that of the written word to the oral tradition in the time of Herodotus and Thucydides.⁵⁶ Historians must realize that the increased prominence of the visual media in contemporary society does not mean

⁵² Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 3.

⁵³ O’Connor, ‘History in images/images in history’, p. 1204.

⁵⁴ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 3.

⁵⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1184.

that we should give up our pursuit of truth. Rather, it is important to keep in mind Rosenstone's appeal that there 'may be more than one sort of historical truth', or, more specifically, that the truths that are 'conveyed in the visual media may be different from, but not necessarily in conflict with, truths conveyed in words.'⁵⁷ It is up to the historical academy to learn about and understand film so that we may be able to utilise its specific features and ways of telling about the past.

⁵⁷ Rosenstone, 'History in images/history in words', pp. 1184-85.

Chapter One

‘A film is not a book’: Traditional Criticism of Historical Film¹

Robert Rosenstone has written that because the study of film has been in part a ‘search for new ways to express a relationship to the past,’ then it follows that historical works attempting to engage with film may not necessarily be standard essays, but may ‘play with the essay form – avoiding linear argument to move towards fragments that make an argument by agglomeration, inference, collage.’² The ‘fragments’ of this chapter are: traditional criticism; historical veracity, accuracy, and responsibility; the nature of the medium and our notion of history; and some evaluative criteria for filmic representations of the past. Here, I argue for an increased understanding and investigation into exactly *how* film utilizes its specific conventions so that historians might make best use of this powerful medium in order to tell meaningful stories that reconnect them to a shrinking general audience. Moreover, this chapter intends to provide a synthesis of arguments, criticisms, and rationale, for and against, film’s use as a mode for representing the past. This is informed by a growing body of historical scholarship surrounding history and film.³

¹ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 14.

² Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 15-16. Rosenstone is the chief scholar in the small but growing sub-field of film and history. It is fitting then that the approach that marks so much of his work should also be a guide for my own.

³ Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin are the two most prolific authors in this category. Both have penned numerous volumes that address, in some way, the relationship between the visual media (namely dramatic feature films) and the past. Their most recent works include; Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2006); and, Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

Traditional criticism

Film may be shaped by principles that are different from the written word, but, as Hayden White points out, ‘there is no reason why a filmed representation of historical events should not be as analytical and realistic as any written account.’⁴ This is not to say that written works of history and filmed representations of the past are the same thing. Nor is this a concession that film ‘should’ or ‘could’ communicate historical messages in the same way as the written word. Rather, as Rosenstone has noted, history on film ought to be ‘held accountable to certain standards, but these standards must be consonant with the possibilities of the medium.’⁵ The representation of history in a dramatic feature necessarily requires some trade-offs; the amount of traditional historical data is limited, and inadequate when compared to the textbook or monograph. This ‘thinning’ of historical data ‘does not of itself make for poor history.’⁶ In *Visions of the Past*, Rosenstone makes clear the fact that a ‘*film is not a book*’; images and words are not the same thing.⁷ This may be easy to see, ‘but difficult to understand.’⁸ What Rosenstone wishes to explain is that, at the very least, ‘it means that film cannot possibly do what a book does, even if it wanted to do so.’⁹ Alternatively, the same can be said of a book. Rosenstone argues that those ‘films that try most literally to render the past lose the power of the medium.’¹⁰ He cites *The Adams Chronicles* (1971) as the ‘all-time snoozer of this genre’; a mini series that used only words that had ‘actually been written by the appropriate member of the Adams family’ as dialogue.¹¹ The ‘standards’ that historical films are to be held accountable to ‘must come from the medium itself’, from the practices that are

⁴ Hayden White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1196.

⁵ Robert Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1181.

⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1178.

⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 14.

⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 14.

⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 14-15. Also see p. 7 for mention of the problem of those films that remain ‘truest’ to the facts.

¹¹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 7.

common to the filmic discourse, ‘and how they intersect with notions of the past.’¹² This, for the most part, is something that is yet to be achieved.¹³

If, then, film is short on traditional historical information surely film easily captures ‘elements’ of life that can be designated as ‘another kind of data.’¹⁴ David Herlihy writes that films can ‘effectively present the visual aspects of history’.¹⁵ These ‘visual aspects,’ as Rosenstone explains, include landscapes, costume and clothing, emotions, and how they might have been expressed through body language and facial expression, or ‘physical conflicts between individuals and groups.’¹⁶ White reinforces this notion with his assertion that ‘it is obvious that cinema (and video) are better suited than written discourse to the actual representation of certain kinds of historical phenomena – landscape, scene, atmosphere, complex events such as wars, battles, crowds, and emotions.’¹⁷ For the mass audience a film can more easily than a book render the look and feel of the past, and ‘historical particulars and situations’: historical representations that might include captured slaves yearning for freedom in the stinking hold of a slave ship, or first contact between two peoples, or the stench of burning flesh in a hellish death camp, or the reality of desperate people committing unthinkable violence against their countrymen (fig 1.1).¹⁸

¹² Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp.15.

¹³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp.15.

¹⁴ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1179. Rosenstone writes that Pierre Sorlin argued the value of film in giving a feeling of certain kinds of settings in Sorlin, ‘Historical Films as Tools for Historians’, in *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*, edited by John E. O’Connor (Malabar, Florida: R.E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1990). The reference to Sorlin’s work appeared in Rosenstone’s 1988 *AHR* article; this predates the first publication of O’Connor’s edited volume, which was published in 1990. I assume that Rosenstone had access to a manuscript, or an advance copy from John O’Connor.

¹⁵ David Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera? Other reflections on films and history’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1192.

¹⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1179.

¹⁷ White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, p. 1193.

¹⁸ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1179.



Figure 1.1: **Top left:** Captured slaves yearning for freedom in *Amistad*. **Top right:** First contact between two cultures in *The New World*. **Bottom left:** The ovens of a concentration camp in *The Grey Zone*. **Bottom right:** Teddy O'Donovan orders the execution of his brother Damien in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*.

Some scholars have claimed that an image of a scene contains much *more* information than a written description of the same scene, and that this information has a much ‘higher degree of detail and specificity.’¹⁹ Rosenstone demonstrates this point by explaining that ‘all one need to do is attempt to render into words everything that might appear in a single shot from a movie’.²⁰ An assignment such as this, he writes, ‘could easily fill many pages, and if this is the case with a single shot, how much more space would be needed to describe what goes on in a sequence of images?’²¹ The issue then becomes not about whether or not films carry ‘enough’ information,

¹⁹ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1177. Rosenstone cites, Seymour Chatman, ‘What novels can do that films can’t (and vice versa)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Winter 1980), pp. 125-26, as a scholar who claims this.

²⁰ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1177.

²¹ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1177.

but whether or not the information that is communicated so efficiently and quickly in film is worth knowing, and ‘can add up to “history.”’²²

It is this notion that continues to challenge the traditional historian – film, with its slick presentation, and typically linear format does not pause for critique, disbelief, or second-guessing. Rosenstone explains that in the movie theatre, ‘we are, for a time, prisoners of history.’²³ For Ian Jarvie, this is the major problem of film: it is a medium that provides no space for reflection or appraisal of the images presented.²⁴ Herlihy observes the great power of film in its ability to make ‘the viewer an eyewitness of the events portrayed.’²⁵ He believes that this ‘great power’ is also the ‘great drawback’ of the medium, explaining that film, like every other kind of dramatic presentation, requires a suspension of disbelief on the part of the viewer.²⁶ He argues that students of history are at once able to recognize the biases and faults in the primary sources they encounter. This also applies, to a lesser degree, to secondary sources. Students can easily recognise them for what they are: ‘a presumably critical reconstruction, on the basis of the primary records, of what actually happened.’²⁷ When viewing a film, Herlihy claims that ‘in order to achieve the aesthetic effect on which the intellectual impact will normally depend, the viewers must pretend that they directly observe the historic happenings’.²⁸ In this way the viewer becomes a contemporary with the happenings on screen, reacting to them, and, in this way, participates in them.²⁹ Herlihy suggests that critical detachment therefore becomes an impossible ideal, and, that for film to work, one is required to believe, and not disbelieve, the implications that are being made.³⁰

²² Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1177.

²³ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1177.

²⁴ Ian Jarvie, ‘Seeing through the movies’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1978), p. 378.

²⁵ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

²⁶ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

²⁷ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

²⁸ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

²⁹ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

³⁰ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

This type of criticism hinges on the idea of the passive spectator who, Natalie Zemon Davis explains, ‘naively’ accepts ‘what comes off the movie screen as fact’.³¹ This belief is problematic as the notion of the passive spectator ‘has disappeared from film theory, and should also disappear from historical criticism of films.’³² It is hard to imagine, in the modern age of abundant movie representations of the past that the viewer of historical film should have such a simplistic relationship with what is on screen: to disbelieve what is on screen is to render the ‘great power’ of film ineffective; to suspend disbelief is to deny critical detachment. And yet, the ‘passive spectator’ troubles many critics of historical film and imbues their criticism with a simplistic notion of viewer reception and the intentions of filmic representations of the past. Marc Carnes finds fault with some filmmakers who proclaim their creations to be historically accurate by the use of certain techniques, such as voiceover narration.³³ Again, as with Herlihy, this is due to Carnes’ fear of the ‘passive spectator’ naively believing the veracity and historical accuracy of the narrative and the possibility of the viewer believing that what is shown on screen is a ‘truthful’ retelling of events as they happened.

This type of criticism becomes even more problematic due to the specific nature of the medium. Consider this: given the relatively short allotment of time needed, a viewer is potentially more likely to re-view any given film time and time again. Contrary to the belief of those historians for whom critical evaluation of film is problematic (Herlihy, Jarvie), there is space for the viewer of historical film to formulate (and reformulate) opinions, to reflect on the historical messages, to critique the implications made and to question the narrative itself. The question then becomes not whether historical film can be viewed critically, but rather, are post-literate viewers capable or even interested in critical readings, and do they even care about

³¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 15.

³² Davis, *Slaves*, p. 15.

³³ Marc C. Carnes, *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), pp.10.

‘historical’ narratives? The answers to this question are unclear. What is clear is that historical films excite and interest the public on a large scale. Viewers should be encouraged to ‘read’ films critically much in the same way we are taught to ‘read’ texts critically.

The underlying cause of anxiety for historians in this respect is surely related to fears of misrepresentation of the past, or, as is often the case with the dramatic feature, complete invention of scenes, characters, and particulars. Imagination and invention are necessary components of the historical film. Carnes believes that Hollywood history is different to academic history for a clear and obvious reason: it is a medium that fills the ‘irritating gaps in the historical record and polishes dulling ambiguities and complexities.’³⁴ In many ways film may have a better chance of representing the desires and motives that drive behaviour; with film we have the luxury to explore these motives in a medium that presents its data both visually and aurally, and where factual veracity of is less important than the exploration undertaken.

On the other hand, following her work as consultant on the film *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Davis felt the way that the film departed from the historical record and created gaps was a cause for alarm. She notes that the ‘Basque background of the Guerres’ was ‘sacrificed’, that ‘rural Protestantism was ignored’ and that the ‘judge’s inner contradictions were softened.’³⁵ She explained that the filmic narrative left out important explanatory factors. This was due in part to certain restrictions of the medium that included time constraints and audience considerations. Davis’ solution was to write a treatment of the case and to include the “‘perhapses,” the “may-have-beens,” to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing’.³⁶ Thus, addressing the historical inaccuracies that appeared in the film by publishing a book on the subject is one answer to some of the problems that

³⁴ Carnes, p. 9.

³⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. viii.

³⁶ Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, p. viii.

historians have with film. This is surely a workable compromise; as it is obvious that lambasting historical representations of the past in film for failing to convey the same messages as the written word is unhelpful in our understanding of film, and a step-back in terms of reaching a larger, more divergent audience with our messages.

This type of compromise should be especially appealing to those historians who call into question the simplistic, linear, and singular interpretative nature of the ‘typical’³⁷ historical film. Robert Toplin identifies problems inherent in the dramatic feature – or as he often terms it, the docudrama – as film that has a closed, fixed analysis. Consequently the conclusions they make are not open to argument, and rich opportunities to explore ‘some of the important questions that animate historical scholarship’ are lost.³⁸ Toplin identifies John Brown, the civil-war era abolitionist who has been represented in numerous books published since the Civil War, as a pertinent example.³⁹ According to Toplin, Brown:

has been described as a violence-prone lunatic, as a sensitive, Christ-like hero fighting for the oppressed, as a clever conspirator who believed he could promote abolitionism even if his immediate goal failed, and as a foolish fanatic who could not recognize the obvious flaws in his plan of attack – to name a few of the popular characterizations.⁴⁰

When translated into film the rendering of Brown’s character is often simplistic. Toplin discusses two films that were contemporary to his *AHR* article in 1988, *The Blue and the Gray* (1982) and *North and South* (1985). Toplin believes that in both of these films, this ‘complex and fascinating man appeared as a one-dimensional figure’

³⁷ By ‘typical’ I mean to refer to those dramatic features that most closely follow Hollywood conventions and modes of representation, I would like to make a clear distinction between this type of feature, and ‘The New History Film,’ that Rosenstone discusses. See Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, pp. 4-5.

³⁸ Robert Brent Toplin, ‘The Filmmaker as Historian’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1221.

³⁹ Toplin identifies two such historians who have researched Brown: C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, La., 1968), pp. 41-68; David M. Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, 1968), pp. 201-18.

⁴⁰ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1221.

and as just a ‘dedicated abolitionist.’⁴¹ Toplin fears that any viewer who is ‘unfamiliar with the literature on Brown’ will come away from these films with ‘absolutely no sense of the larger questions asked about his behavior by historians’.⁴²

As is the case with much of the literature on history and film, Toplin tends to amplify the problems inherent in historical film and ignores how such problems affect our historiography. When examining two films that chronicle the life of Lyndon Johnson – *LBJ: The Early Years* (1986), and *Lyndon Johnson* (1987) – Toplin argues that the films ‘failed to reflect the multiple dimensions of life.’⁴³ This type of sweeping statement works to conceal the often inefficient and singular nature of much of our written history. Toplin does concede that the ‘written history that inspired these films also reflected points of view, but the docudramas significantly amplified the single-minded perspective.’⁴⁴ While making a semi-conciliatory remark regarding the difficulties inherent in written history, Toplin more overtly chastises film for its simplistic tendencies. He does not consider the nature of the specific conventions of the medium, although he does inadvertently point towards one. When explaining the two different portraits of Lyndon Johnson in *LBJ* and *Lyndon Johnson* – the former ‘accented ugly elements in Johnson’s character,’ the latter ‘offered viewers a lovable president who cared deeply about issues and people’ – Toplin argues that ‘valuable insight into the challenges of interpretation by watching both programs’ can be gained.⁴⁵ It seems that Toplin’s chief concern is the notion that the viewer may view only one version and be drawn toward ‘simple conclusions.’⁴⁶ This notion echoes some of the criticisms and fears of Herlihy: that the viewer, in order to render film useful, cannot disbelieve, or question the narrative.⁴⁷ If anything, with his multiple case-studies, Toplin displays the possibility of multiple available filmic

⁴¹ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1221.

⁴² Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1221.

⁴³ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1222.

⁴⁴ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1222.

⁴⁵ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1221.

⁴⁶ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1221.

⁴⁷ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

representations of any one subject and topic. In this way he inadvertently shows us that there is variation, complexity, and depth in the historical film.

Film can operate in much the same way as traditional historiography: as a larger construct that contains debates and perspectives to which we can refer and cross-reference data. This can be achieved by viewing different individual films that deal with similar historical processes, themes, questions, personalities, conflicts, and behaviour. This ‘historiophoty’ can even refer and relate to the historiography of certain historical themes. The historical film can work in conjunction with the historical monograph or book to contribute to our sense and understanding of the past. The movie *300* (2007) – based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller – utilizes the past in presenting an exaggerated account of the battle of Thermopylae, where 300 Spartan hoplites and their allies defended the pass at Thermopylae and inflicted heavy casualties on the invading Persian army. This seemingly pseudo-historical drama is, at first glance, no more than an example of a film using the past as a setting for an embellished telling of an historical event: a framework for invention, fantasy, and adventure. *300* does, however, communicate important historical features of Spartan life. In particular the over-emphasis on the ‘tough-life’ of a Spartan citizen, whose society relied on eugenics and breeding programs to create a strong warrior elite, and the depiction of a small, close community of citizens – read and understood in conjunction with the historiography – easily communicates the special function of the adult male Spartan warrior in Spartan society.

When I first heard of the 120 Spartan hoplites captured by Athenian forces near the island of Pylos during the First Peloponnesian War, I found it difficult to understand the significance of such a small group of soldiers to Spartan society. The Athenians, using this small group of soldiers as leverage, almost forced the Spartans to surrender the entire war effort. The fact was that Sparta’s slave population (the Helots) outnumbered their citizens ten to one. The elite Spartan citizenry was a small group and the 120 captured hoplites were most likely part of Spartan elite and almost

everyone in Sparta would have had a connection to at least one of those soldiers.⁴⁸ Although depicting a separate historical episode, *300* works as a vivid and striking portrayal of Spartan society and its reliance on warrior elites. The representation of the actual historical event is not important here. What is important is the historiographical assertions made in and by the aesthetic that can be related to a totally different event by the imaginative historian. Moreover, the depiction of the Persians as beast-like, crazed and monstrous also communicates an important perspective of the time. The Spartans had most likely never seen a Persian in their lifetime. The two cultures were vastly different so this representation, while totally fictional, easily communicates the differences between them – Persian and Greek – and how foreign they may have appeared to the Greeks.

In one sense, the nature of filmed history does not allow for it to be as efficient at transmitting traditional historical data. Toplin suggests that a ‘book is vastly superior to a feature film as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis.’⁴⁹ White and Rosenstone have both questioned the written word and asked how we might judge the appropriateness of length, and detailed information, in written historical works. White asks, are ‘short books about long periods of history in themselves non-historical or anti-historical in nature? Was Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* ... of sufficient length to do justice to its subject?’⁵⁰ These questions are important to our understanding of exactly *how* films can add up to history. Typical criticism of film highlights its inability to ‘live-up’ to expectations applied to written history. White wants to know the proper length of the historical monograph, how much information is needed to support any historical generalization, and, to what extent does the amount of information vary with the scope of generalization. Is there a ‘normative

⁴⁸ For information on this event see, N. G. L. Hammond, *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 367.

⁴⁹ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 1.

⁵⁰ White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, p. 1195. This is an argument that was followed closely by Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1179. ‘Jean-Denis Bredin’s recent book, *L’Affaire* (1983), although four times as long, is no more “historical” than Nicholas Halasz’s earlier *Captain Dreyfus* (1955), and Leon Edel’s one-volume biography of Henry James (1985) no less “accurate” than his full five-volume version.’

scope against which the propriety of any historical generalization can be measured?’⁵¹ This question is especially important to our understanding of film: how is one to assess ‘the preference for an account that might take a hour to read’, or in this case, view, ‘as against that which takes many hours, even days, to read, much less assimilate to one’s store of knowledge?’⁵² Film, therefore, has every chance of delivering complex data, and should not be faulted for its rapid transmission of this data. In fact, due to the efficiency of the medium, it is entirely possible that the presentation of data is just as complex as a written work that would take days to read.

The notion of history as constituted and problematic is not new, especially in light of recent critical debates which have featured in narratological and post-colonial studies for instance. However, this notion needs to be stressed if we are to move away from views which presume an opposing or adversarial dynamic assumed inherent to written and filmic histories, and to ‘include in our new frame the larger realm of past and present in which both sorts of history are located and to which both refer.’⁵³ Much of the criticism directed at the historical film centres on its equivalence to traditional written history. A consensus among film critics would provide arguments that include the word’s superiority as a source of detailed information and abstract analysis, the self-reflexive nature of the word, and the necessity for film to conform to the conventions of fact and verifiability required of our written works.

This thesis in part agrees that the ‘word can do many things an image cannot,’ but, the reverse must also be applied – ‘images carry ideas and information that cannot be handled by the word.’⁵⁴ The expectation of the historical film mimicking or generating the same type of representation of the past as textual history is indeed problematic; primarily because film captures ‘other’ elements of our existence, another type of data that clearly cannot be handled by the word. There is a sense, in

⁵¹ White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, p. 1195.

⁵² White, ‘Historiography and historiophoty’, p. 1195.

⁵³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 5.

comparing filmic representations of the past with those produced by the word, of the superiority of presentation in traditional historical forms. This hardly seems appropriate when each medium has its own unique powers and modes of representation. Film loses its dramatic appeal and its ability to sustain the attention of the viewer when it attempts to be too dense and complex in its representation of the past. It is because of this sensitivity to audience that film does not satisfy the historian ‘who searches for a sophisticated analysis that recognizes ambiguity and complexity.’⁵⁵ It would seem that while many academics may have ample reason to express some disappointment over perceived poor efforts to portray history on film ‘their suspicions about the fundamental handicaps of filmed history vis-à-vis written history appear exaggerated.’⁵⁶

Historical Veracity, Accuracy, and Responsibility

Those scholars – many of whom fill the pages of scholarly journals that review film, including the *American Historical Review* – who wish to judge filmic representation of the past against a written document, may wish to consider how divergent these two media are. Film communicates in rapid moving images at ‘twenty-four frames a second’; the strength of ‘good’ historical film, indeed film in general, can be found in the economy of presentation and in the detail and specificity particular to the features of the medium.⁵⁷

Toplin and Daniel Walkowitz have both observed that ‘particular details may be negotiated in a historical drama “so long as the overriding conceptual framework remains inviolate.”’⁵⁸ Film is perhaps a form or medium in which factual veracity is less important than the historical and historiographical assertions implied by and in

⁵⁵ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1213.

⁵⁶ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1226.

⁵⁷ Ed Benson, ‘Martin Guerre, the historian and the filmmakers: An interview with Natalie Zemon Davis’, *Film and History*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 1983), pp. 49-65. This interview is a good source for an explanation of Davis’ experience with filmmaking and for her insight into ‘good’ historical film.

⁵⁸ Daniel J. Walkowitz, ‘Visual history: The craft of the historian-filmmaker,’ *Public Historian*, vol. 7 (winter 1985), p. 60; cited in Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1224.

the film's overall aesthetic. Consequently the important question of historical film is not, 'Does film convey facts or make arguments as well as written history?'⁵⁹ Instead, the important questions, which remain unanswered by recent scholarship, are: 'How does film construct a historical world?' By what rules, strategies, and codes does it bring the 'past to life?' And, 'what does this historical world mean to us?'⁶⁰

According to Toplin, film is limited when it 'displays significant inadequacies' that do not 'communicate some of the ambiguity and complexity of life.'⁶¹ Toplin feels that film tends to explain cause and effect in often simplistic terms. This is obviously problematic for the historian, but, as Toplin suggests, light can be thrown on historiographical debates, and audiences can be exposed to multiple perspectives.⁶² Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950) is a favourite for the traditional historian as it achieved this multiple perspective. The film itself centres on the rape of a woman and the murder of her husband. It is based on two stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa – *Rashomon*, which provides the setting, and *In a Grove*, which provides the characters and plot. Toplin appreciates the film for the way it communicates the impossibility of obtaining the 'truth' about an event when there are conflicting eyewitness accounts. Kurosawa managed to present the story from the point of view of the rapist-murderer, the murdered man, the man's raped wife, and a witness. Toplin notes that '[i]nstead of choosing a specific explanation for the event' Kurosawa 'left audiences to reach their own conclusions.'⁶³

⁵⁹ Robert Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁶⁰ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 4. While these questions remain unanswered, attempts have been made; by Rosenstone himself in his most recent work: *History in Film*. Outside of a small group of scholars; Robert Rosenstone, Robert Brent Toplin, John E. O'Connor, Marnie Hughes-Warrington; no one else is taking on this challenge: that of the visual media as a legitimate way of interpreting the past.

⁶¹ Toplin, 'The filmmaker as historian', p. 1220.

⁶² Toplin argues that *Rashomon* achieves this and it is possible for historical films to achieve this type of multi voiced perspective also. Toplin, 'The filmmaker as historian', p. 1220.

⁶³ Toplin, 'The filmmaker as historian', p. 1220.

Much of what Toplin writes in this regard is considerably insightful, but in demonstrating his belief that historical film would be well served to follow the *Rashomon* blueprint, he inadvertently points to the fact that audiences – even without the *Rashomon* blueprint – can, and do, reach their own conclusions. The viewer of historical film need not necessarily be led to a variety of conclusions, rather, they can engage in multiple perspectives by ‘casting the net wide,’ so to speak, and viewing as much as possible. The reality is that those viewers who trouble the historian, and take what is on screen as unmitigated fact, are likely to approach the written word in much the same way, if at all.

Rosenstone, in writing of his experience with *Reds* (1981) and *The Good Fight* (1984), explains that both these films contained obvious and striking virtues: they both evoke the past ‘through powerful images, colorful characters, and moving words’.⁶⁴ However, ‘neither of these motion pictures can fulfill many of the basic demands for truth and verifiability used by all historians.’⁶⁵ *Reds* indulges in overt fictions: ‘by putting John Reed in places where he never was’ and, by ‘having him making an impossible train journey from France to Petrograd in 1917.’⁶⁶ *The Good Fight* equates memory with history; allowing veterans of the Spanish Civil War to speak about events that occurred four decades in the past, without questioning their memories.⁶⁷ While both films engage in fictions, and the questionable use of evidence, do we simply write them off as ahistorical as works of history that bastardize the past? The answer is most assuredly no; not when scholars such as Rosenstone have discussed at great length the specific relationship of historical film to traditional historical veracity. The identification of fictions alone does not in itself

⁶⁴ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1174.

⁶⁵ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1174.

⁶⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1174.

⁶⁷ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1174. Rosenstone also cites two sources of his own for a fuller discussion of each film; *Reds*: ‘Reds as history’, *Reviews in American History*, 10 (1982), pp. 297-310; *The Good Fight*: ‘History, memory, documentary: ‘The Good Fight’ fifty years after’, paper delivered at a symposium entitled ‘The Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Spanish Civil War: History, Memory and the Politics and Culture of the 1930s’, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., December 5, 1986.

make for poor history. It is up to the historian to engage with the medium in order to more fully understand the fictionalizing and to present possible reasons for it.

Toplin questioned where the limits may be: ‘How should appropriate questions about accuracy and responsible representation apply to the loose treatment of fact evident in historical dramas?’⁶⁸ The answer here lies in the understanding of the medium; granted, there are limits of responsibility, especially when dealing with possible historical revisionism. For example, any films that engage in Holocaust denial should be censured, and certainly attacked by the profession at large. However, it is entirely appropriate to offer an alternative view of history where there are genuine grounds for contesting notions of the past. In a similar way to Toplin’s acknowledgment of the *Rashomon* blueprint, I believe that certain historical films, taken collectively, can work as myriad versions of perspective and possibility.

The Nature of the Medium, and Our Notion of ‘History’:

Rosenstone and Herlihy both equate the historical profession with a ‘kind of priesthood’. To Rosenstone, writing in 1988, it was not ‘farfetched to see a time’ when historians would act as ‘commentators on sacred texts and performers of rituals’ for a public ‘little interested in their meaning but indulgent enough (let us hope) to pay for them to continue.’⁶⁹ Herlihy utilizes the analogy in a different way, attempting to urge historians to ‘pursue any means that makes our message stronger’, saying we are ‘duty-bound’ to remind our society of the past.⁷⁰ It is almost as if Herlihy wished to convert the disbelievers of *our* powerful message to the priesthood; even if that means changing our notion of what we mean by ‘history’.

History is a series of conventions that creates abstractions – such as Marxism, post colonialism, structuralism – with which we make meaning of the ‘remains of the

⁶⁸ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1224.

⁶⁹ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187; Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, pp. 1174, 75.

⁷⁰ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1187.

past.⁷¹ Even after the repeated methodological breakthroughs in history in recent decades, there appears to be a rapidly shrinking general audience for history.⁷² There is a real fear that despite these breakthroughs the academy may lose our audience altogether. It is film that is changing the ‘rules of the game’, with its own sort of truths that ‘arise from a visual and aural realm’, difficult to capture in words.⁷³ The long oral tradition of history has imbued us with a ‘poetic relationship with the past,’ while tension has arisen from the ‘increasingly linear, scientific’ world of written history.⁷⁴ Rosenstone contends that this ‘new historical past’ on the screen is potentially more complex than the written word; arguing that this is due to the multiple ways in which film can ‘simultaneously’ present its data – in ‘image, sound, language, even text’.⁷⁵ These elements intertwine, and ‘work against one another’ to render and present meanings of the past as divergent from one another ‘as written was from oral history.’⁷⁶

History can be put onto film, and it can be interpreted by historians in a meaningful way without losing our ‘professional and intellectual souls’.⁷⁷ Certainly, film needs to be understood in terms of the advantages in representation it offers over the word – films are outstanding at representing the visual and aural ‘textures of the past’, these are values that are almost ‘impossible to convey in written words.’⁷⁸ Peter Davis – the producer of the academy award winning documentary, *Hearts and Minds* (1974) – maintained that ‘films work well, not in presenting a complete chronology of events ... but in exciting feeling and emotions.’⁷⁹ In the best of films the ideological message, or the ‘truths’ of the representation are communicated through the visual

⁷¹ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 4.

⁷² Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1175.

⁷³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 15.

⁷⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 15.

⁷⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 15.

⁷⁷ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1175.

⁷⁸ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1191.

⁷⁹ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1213.

textures of the production and the juxtaposition of images.⁸⁰ The major difference between the written word and film is the tradition of objectivity that exists in written notions of the past. To accept film as an interpreter of the past is to acknowledge the idea that film is a medium that must be taken on its own terms. It is a rendering of the past, Rosenstone suggests, that has ‘less to do with fact than with intensity and insight, perception and feeling’ than with showing the viewer ‘how events affect individual lives, past and present.’⁸¹ Paradoxically, academics who find the most fault with film – with their familiar negative assessments based on the obvious failings of the visual medium to live up to the conventions of the written word – fail to identify the shortcomings of the written word.

It is in this way that the notion of film and the written word as *wholly* divergent in nature may be somewhat overstated. Filmic and written works of history are certainly different: one is written, the other visual. Toplin, however, drawing on White, argues that ‘historical discourse shares much with novelistic discourse.’⁸² Seen in this way the two modes of representation *share* similarities. The question becomes this: can connections to film be drawn from White’s assertions too? Toplin states White’s argument that contends historians are influenced by the perspective of Leopold Von Ranke. The traditional historian’s approach proposes an objective, scientific, empirically based search for ‘reality’. Too easily do they ‘distinguish their own search for truth from the poetic fabrications of the fiction writer.’⁸³ The process of organizing diffuse and divergent facts into a comprehensive argument is a poetic process. History and literature both create a “literature of fact,” establishing the interconnectedness of evidence and providing a verbal (and now a visual?) image of

⁸⁰ John E. O’Connor, ‘History in images/images in history: Reflections on the importance of film and television study for an understanding of the past’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988) p. 1206.

⁸¹ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 7.

⁸² Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1225. Toplin draws on Hayden White, *Tropics in Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 121-130.

⁸³ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1225.

truth.’⁸⁴ Toplin ends by rearranging what he sees as ‘history’ and ‘reality, when he concedes that if ‘these ideas have application to film’, which it would seem they most certainly do, then ‘it is appropriate to conclude that there are many ways to seek reality, and the perspective of the dramatic filmmaker may not be as far removed from that of the historian as is often assumed.’⁸⁵ Rosenstone contests:

First, neither people nor nations live historical “stories”; narratives, that is, coherent stories with beginnings, middles, and endings, are constructed by historians as part of their attempts to make sense of the past. Second, the narratives that historians write are in fact “verbal fictions”; written history is a representation of the past, not the past itself. Third the nature of the historical world in a narrative is in part governed by the genre or mode (shared with forms of fiction) in which the historian has decided to cast the story – ironic, tragic, heroic, or romantic. And, fourth, language is not transparent and cannot mirror the past as it really was; rather than reflecting it, language creates and structures history and imbues it with meaning.⁸⁶

In some ways literary artists operate with an advantage over the traditional historian, one that must be considered peculiar to film also: the ‘artist is permitted to deal with the *internal* currents of men’s minds, with the emotions and ideas and motives that run beneath the masks that men assume’.⁸⁷ The conventions of fact and verifiability used by historians do not permit an exploration into the ‘internal currents’ of the minds of the past if there is no evidence to support such a venture. Film’s perceived tendency to engage in speculation violates even Rosenstone’s notion of history. The nature of the medium is what concerns Rosenstone. Each film compresses a complex past into a closed world, telling a single linear story, with a single interpretation, thereby denying ‘historical alternatives,’ and doing ‘away with complexities of motivation or causation,’ and banishing ‘all subtlety from the world of history.’⁸⁸ Of course, this type of criticism is specific to those films that submit to the typical

⁸⁴ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1225.

⁸⁵ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1225.

⁸⁶ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, pp. 1180-81. Rosenstone points out that Hayden White has made this point in a number of works, he cites *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973); and in various articles in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*.

⁸⁷ Russell B. Nye, ‘History and Literature: Branches of the Same Tree,’ in *Essays on History and Literature*, edited by Robert H. Bremner (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 145.

⁸⁸ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1174.

conventions of Hollywood, and is peculiar to the historical film in the singular, and not when taken as a collective argument on any one subject or theme. Rosenstone himself has discussed at length the possibility of a new type of film that works to represent multiple meaning and causation of the past.⁸⁹

There is substantial evidence for feature film's treatment of historical subjects in a poor and inadequate fashion; this does not, however, negate its potential for making contributions to historical study. When considering the nature of the medium we need to ask 'what kind of historical understanding do historians expect to achieve from film? ... [a]nd how do filmmakers approach the task of interpreting history through images and words?'⁹⁰ The history that finally appears on screen can never truly satisfy the historian as historian; something happens along the way that alters and 'changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work in words.'⁹¹ To borrow the priesthood analogy used by Herlihy, if the historian is to remain in a position of power over the followers of their historical message, then the priesthood needs to collectively realize that the public no longer knows or cares about history in the way they do. As Rosenstone has indicated, traditional modes of history – 'scholarly, scientific, measured' – no longer 'fulfills the need for that larger History, that web of connections to the past that holds a culture together, that tells us not only where we have been but also suggests where we are going.'⁹²

Some Evaluative Criteria

As we have seen, feature film has taken its place alongside television and documentary formats as the chief carriers of historical messages in our culture. Through an understanding of the conventions peculiar to the medium – fact and verifiability, presentation and format, communication of data and responsibility in

⁸⁹ Rosenstone has labelled this the 'New History Film,' Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, pp. 4-5. The book itself is an examination of a new kind of film that deviates from Hollywood conventions, and in fact has arisen in opposition to them.

⁹⁰ Toplin, 'The filmmaker as historian', p. 1211.

⁹¹ Rosenstone, 'History in images/history in words', p. 1173.

⁹² Rosenstone, 'History in images/history in words', p. 1175.

presentation – feature film can seriously engage with the remains of the past and present this encounter in a format that works to reach a larger general audience than the word could ever hope to. It seems that certain criteria are applicable to judging any filmic representation of the past. As already stated, it is the intention of this thesis to glean these criteria from the literature that has been discussed thus far, and in doing so to apply them to two case-studies – *Amistad* (1997), and, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006). Rosenstone asks: what ‘criteria are applicable for judging visual history? How does film contribute to our sense of the past?’⁹³ With these questions in mind, and at this stage of the chapter, it is prudent to acknowledge some criteria that recur often enough throughout the literature to convince one of their worth.

For the historian to be able to attempt to judge and understand visual history it would seem that certain features of the medium need to be accepted first. Firstly, visual media are not the same as books. This means that the ‘implicit’ approach that Rosenstone has explored is of limited use to us.⁹⁴ The two media are radically different in form, potential, and the ways they present the past. Second, feature film and its relatively inadequate presentation of ‘facts’ and verifiable data may trouble and upset the historian. It is, however, crucial that film’s relationship to fact be explored and accepted. In order to express meaning of the past, feature film creates proximate, appropriate characters, situations, images and metaphors. In this way, the historical success of historical film has to do with ‘how well films create and interpret a meaningful and useful history,’ and ‘how adequately they embody its ongoing issues and insert themselves into the ideas and debates surrounding a historical topic.’⁹⁵ It is only when these two conventions are accepted that the criteria for judging filmic representations of the past become valuable and relevant.

⁹³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 7.

⁹⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 48-49.

⁹⁵ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 7.

The most obvious of framework would ask ‘what sort of historical world does each film construct and how does it construct that world?’⁹⁶ How can we judge it? The film needs to be judged as a whole document; what *type* of film is it? Does its presentation submit to the conventions of Hollywood cinema – with a linear, seamless story of romance and adventure – or does it fit more easily with those films that Rosenstone calls ‘the new history film’? This thesis looks solely at the mainstream dramatic feature film. As such it is important that the codes of representation for this type of feature are explained.

Rosenstone has argued that mainstream films ‘want to make us think they are reality.’⁹⁷ Yet the ‘reality’ that we are presented on the screen is ‘neither inevitable nor somehow natural to the camera’.⁹⁸ It is instead a ‘vision creatively constructed out of bits and pieces of images taken from the surface of a world.’⁹⁹ Yet, even though most of us know this, we forget it in order to participate in the experience of cinema. Something that may not be as obvious to us as viewers is the fact that ‘these bits and pieces are stuck together according to certain codes of representation, conventions of film that have been developed to create what might be called “cinematic realism”’.¹⁰⁰ Realism is made up of sequences of edited shots which seamlessly merge with one another and are underscored by an accompanying sound track. This gives the ‘viewer a sense that nothing (rather than everything) is being manipulated to create a world on screen in which we can all feel at home.’¹⁰¹

Rosenstone points to these codes of cinema to ‘emphasize the fundamental fiction that underlies the standard historical film’: that the film can somehow act as a window through which we can look directly at the world, present and past.¹⁰² This

⁹⁶ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 50.

⁹⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 54.

⁹⁸ Rosenstone, *Visions*, P. 54.

⁹⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, P. 54.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, P. 54.

¹⁰¹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, P. 54.

¹⁰² Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 54, 55.

fiction ‘parallels a major convention of written history: its documentary or empirical element, which insists on the “reality” of the world it creates and analyzes.’¹⁰³ The mainstream historical film creates its world according to certain criteria, which Rosenstone has refined into six points.¹⁰⁴

i. This type of film ‘tells the past’ in a linear format with a ‘beginning, middle, and an end.’¹⁰⁵ The message is inevitably uplifting and contains a moral lesson. This view of history is, as Rosenstone suggests, ‘almost always progressive’ even when the subject may seem to be a counterexample; slavery or the Holocaust for instance.¹⁰⁶ The message, or ‘big picture,’ is that things are ‘getting better or have gotten better or both.’¹⁰⁷ Rosenstone explains that even though *Glory* (1989) ends tragically, with the main characters meeting their death and the ‘decimation of the regiment’, the audience recognizes that ‘they died in a just cause that would (or should) eventually triumph.’¹⁰⁸

ii. Film presents history as ‘the story of individuals, men or women’ who are well-known or ‘who are made to seem important because they are singled out by the camera.’¹⁰⁹ Of course, it is not always famous or even historical figures who are represented. Those that fit in this category are often ‘common people who have done heroic or admirable things, or who have suffered unusually bad circumstances of exploitation and oppression.’¹¹⁰ The reason for putting individuals in ‘the forefront of the historical process’ is, of course, to make the film more accessible to the individual

¹⁰³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ Discussion of these six points and a more extensive explanation of the mainstream dramatic film can be found in two of Rosenstone’s works. *Visions*, pp. 54-61. And, *History on Film*, pp. 32-49.

¹⁰⁵ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁶ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 56

¹⁰⁸ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹¹⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 57.

film-goer, and because the ‘personal becomes a way of avoiding the often difficult or insoluble social problems pointed out by the film.’¹¹¹ Rosenstone explains:

In *The Last Emperor* the happiness of a single “reeducated” man stands for the entire Chinese people. In *Reds*, the final resolution of a stormy love affair between two Americans becomes a way of avoiding the contradictions of the Bolshevik Revolution. In *Radio Bikini*, the fate of a single sailor stands for all those who were tainted with radiation from the atomic bomb tests of Operation Crossroads.¹¹²

iii. The mainstream dramatic feature film offers us the story of a ‘unitary, closed, and completed past.’¹¹³ Some films try to subtly point towards historical alternatives, but, as Rosenstone explains ‘more typical is what we see in *Glory*, which provides no alternative possibilities to what is happening on the screen, admits of no doubts, and promotes each historical assertion with confidence.’¹¹⁴ Herlihy complained that while warnings of the interpreted and limited nature of historical film would work to ‘maintain critical detachment’, they ‘cannot easily be photographed’.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Herlihy asserted his perception that doubt ‘is not visual.’¹¹⁶ This sentiment is, to some extent, true. However, there are certain types of films that do foreground complexity and doubt in their interpretation of events. Again, *Rashomon* is a classic example. Generally doubt can be, and is, visual. Through the communication of a ‘visual’ language – the facial expression and emotive performance of the actors, in the utilization of metaphor and allegory by the writers, and the camera angles, cuts, and sequences of the cinematographer – doubt is communicated effectively. The issue then becomes whether or not the viewer can identify the ways in which doubt can be communicated. Mainstream drama is most likely to ‘smooth over’ any doubts, and, as Rosenstone suggests, admit of none. The most likely scenario where doubt may become apparent in this type of feature is when ‘a subtle film like *The Return of*

¹¹¹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 57.

¹¹² Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 57.

¹¹³ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹¹⁴ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹¹⁵ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1189.

¹¹⁶ Herlihy, ‘Am I a camera?’, p. 1189.

Martin Guerre may hint at hidden historical alternatives, at data not mentioned and stories untold, but such possibilities are never openly explored on screen.¹¹⁷

iv. Rosenstone claims that film ‘personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the past. It gives us history as triumph, anguish, joy, despair, adventure, suffering, and heroism.’¹¹⁸ Film utilizes the features that are specific to the medium – colour, emotion, drama, juxtaposition of images, music – in order to ‘transport’ us to the past; to immerse us in the drama, and ‘to create the feeling that we are not watching events, but experiencing them.’¹¹⁹ A film like *Schindler’s List* (1993) allows us to feel the fear of those caught up in the Holocaust, or, at least, as much as one could feel or comprehend the Holocaust.

v. Film is visual history, allowing us to see things such as how landscapes may have looked in the past. Moreover, film also allows us to see how common, everyday objects may have been used and how they ‘were part of people’s lives’.¹²⁰ The clothing of the period represented ‘confines, emphasizes, and expresses the body at rest and in motion.’¹²¹ Implements of the day such as ‘utensils, weapons, furniture are not items on display, but objects that people use and misuse, objects that can help to define livelihoods, professions, identities, and destinies.’¹²² This feature of the mainstream drama slides into the ‘myth of facticity’.¹²³ This notion sees mimesis as everything, and is a ‘mode on which Hollywood has long depended.’¹²⁴ This presents *things* as history, rather than things becoming history because of their meaning to the people of a ‘particular time and place’. That is, if the ‘look’ of the past is right then

¹¹⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 57-8.

¹¹⁸ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹¹⁹ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹²⁰ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹²¹ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹²² Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 47.

¹²³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 60.

¹²⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 60.

characters, incidents, and interactions can be manipulated to make the story more interesting.¹²⁵

vi. Despite criticism of its linear format and presentation, film ‘shows history as process.’¹²⁶ For analytic purposes the world on the page often divides causality into distinct groupings – ‘[e]conomics, politics, race, class, and gender’.¹²⁷ Daniel J. Walkowitz explains that written history regularly compartmentalizes ‘the study of politics, family life, or social mobility.’¹²⁸ In contrast, film ‘provides an integrative image. History in film becomes what it most centrally is: a *process* of changing social relationships where political and social questions – indeed, all aspects of the past, including the language used – are interwoven.’¹²⁹ For instance, Rosenstone explains that a character like Bertrande de Rols in *The Return of Martin Guerre* ‘is at once a peasant, a woman, a wife, a property owner, a mother, a Catholic (but possibly a Protestant), a lover, a resident of Languedoc, a subject of Francis I of France.’¹³⁰

An understanding of the type of representation on offer is a vital and necessary part of any filmic analysis. What external pressures and influences exist with each film? An exhaustive analysis of production notes, press releases, and expected box-office takings is not needed here. What is needed is an understanding of possible pressures. For instance, the more mainstream Hollywood feature would tend to do away with ambiguities, particularly behavioural, that may alienate the audience; if the audience relates to the characters, the film will likely be successful. This understanding will help the historian to explain any factual ambiguities that exist in the film and work as a point of discussion for ‘setting the record straight,’ so to speak.

¹²⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 60.

¹²⁶ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 48.

¹²⁷ Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 48.

¹²⁸ Walkowitz, p. 57.

¹²⁹ Walkowitz, p. 57.

¹³⁰ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 61.

Davis believes that films can speculate on ‘how the past was experienced and acted out’ by showing a representation of what might have happened.¹³¹ Understood in this way, film can communicate possibilities of experience and events. John E. O’Connor considered the opening sequences of *The Return of Martin Guerre*, where Martin and Bertrande de Rols are married in the small parish church of Artigat and return home for the execution of the marriage contract. O’Connor notes that much of the detail and historical particulars that make up this scene were based on research and consultation provided by Davis – ‘the finger on which to place the ring, the vows to be spoken, the red wedding dress.’¹³² An enormous amount of serious historical research went into the production of this film. Even so the viewer may take different symbolic meaning from each of these details:

The subdued lighting in the interior of the house was intended to duplicate a candle-lit sixteenth-century interior, but twentieth-century audiences might think it a romantic touch. One might or might not notice that, as the camera approaches the house where the two families are facing off in legal negotiations, we see two dogs fighting in the street. The decision of the producers to have one woman tend a fire while another kneads bread dough and a third plucks a chicken, all in the same room where the contract is being drawn, was significant. In addition to evoking the aura of a life in a sixteenth-century peasant household, the *mise-en-scène* communicates a message about the importance of marriage and the extended family in the everyday life of the time.¹³³

Even those works of filmic history that employ a rigorous research element in the hope of faithfully recreating events not as they actually happened or looked, but as they ‘could’ have looked, succumb to the reality of viewer interpretation of the messages being portrayed on screen.

Finally, we need to ask, what does this historical construction mean to us? What messages are communicated by the analysis of *Amistad*? The imperative of freedom, and the agency of the black man in history? The cruelty and inhuman nature of the slave trade? These sorts of questions should be of eminent concern to the historian

¹³¹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 7.

¹³² O’Connor, ‘History in images/images in history’, p. 1204.

¹³³ O’Connor, ‘History in images/images in history’, pp. 1204-05.

who undertakes any kind of serious analysis of film as history. Only after all of these criteria are explored may we wish to ask a final question: ‘How does the historical world on the screen relate to written history?’¹³⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the need for film to be judged on its own terms: as a medium that is capable of telling about the past in a way that is radically divergent to the way written works communicate history. It has questioned dominant understandings that continue to view filmic representations of the past as written histories ‘translated’ to the screen. Viewing historical film provides more than just an insight into the past generations in which an individual film was conceived, produced and consumed

This chapter has offered a reading of the literature in this area in order to gain an understanding of the theoretical and methodological implications of any filmic rendering of the past. Moreover, it has attempted to engage with the typical negative assessments of film’s potential for telling the past, and offered some counter arguments to the more common assessments of film as limited in possibility and scope. Film is a medium where notions of fact and verifiability are distorted and experimentation with the details of the past takes place.

These conclusions work to reinforce the notion of film as a popular communicator of historical ideas. Chapter Two looks to the literature critiquing Steven Spielberg’s film *Amistad*. This film offers an appropriate arena for research as many historians have chosen to critique and review the film.¹³⁵ From a close analysis of the themes used by those historians who have attempted to review or analyze *Amistad*, I hope to offer further insight into the type of criteria appropriate for filmic analysis.

¹³⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 50.

¹³⁵ When selecting the feature film to analyse in Chapter Two, Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1993) was considered. Much has already been written on his works. It became apparent that the scope of research was too wide, and *Amistad* fit within the constraints of the MA Thesis more appropriately.

Chapter 2: Amistad

For African descendants in the United States, the *Amistad* story remains a mnemonic trope for African heroism and for the possibility of victory over oppression, as well as a tome for collective liberation.¹

Diedre L. Badejo explains that the *Amistad* story ‘[i]n both its historical context and its symbolic meaning, reveals the crucible upon which African humanity and the global commodification of the black body became ensconced.’² Historically, the story of *La Amistad* ‘illuminates the contradictions inherent in the nineteenth century, as a few European powers jockeyed for global economic and political ascendancy at the expense of lower-class, disenfranchised Europeans and disempowered non-Europeans.’³ For others, the *Amistad* affair also represents ‘unbridled nineteenth-century capitalism in serious conflict with the coming-of-age of the American rule of law.’⁴ The story of the *Amistad*, her seizure at the hands of its captives, and the subsequent capture of the vessel by the US navy and trial of the mutineers, is an important moment in history for a multitude of reasons. When Debbie Allen approached Steven Spielberg with the story of the *Amistad*, it started in motion the process of rendering onto film a story that presented African Americans with an emotionally powerful narrative about their own holocaust.⁵

¹ Diedre L. Badejo, review of Iyunolu Folayan Osagie, ‘The *Amistad* Revolt: Memory, Slavery, and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone’, *African American Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2/3 (Summer 2003), p. 435. This article makes no mention of Spielberg’s *Amistad*; rather, it provided useful, vivid, and impassioned reasons for the importance of the *Amistad* story.

² Badejo, p. 435.

³ Badejo, p. 435.

⁴ Badejo, p. 435.

⁵ Debbie Allen co-produced *Amistad* along with Spielberg, and was really the ‘driving-force’ behind getting the *Amistad* story onto the big screen. She optioned the rights to William Owen’s novel, *Black Mutiny*, in 1984 and approached Spielberg ‘in 1994, after seeing *Schindler’s List* about the Holocaust.’ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 72.

It would seem that this episode in history has sparked uncommon interest amongst the public, critics, and historians alike. It is fitting then that one of Hollywood's most influential personalities would choose to undertake a representation of this moment of the past. The story of the *Amistad* has been embroiled in controversy ever since 27 August 1839, when a US custody surveying brig seized *La Amistad* and incarcerated her rag-tag crew. Frederick Dalzell notes that '[b]efore the week was out...a dramatized version of the event was staged in New York City, even though the authorities had yet to talk to the Africans, then held in the New Haven Jail.'⁶ The '*Amistad* incident', Dalzell explains, 'was a remarkable event and a complex media sensation then, in 1839, and it remains so today.'⁷ Even before *Amistad* was released in 1997, Julie Roy Jeffrey tells us that a 'heated debate about the film and its use of the past erupted.'⁸ The novelist, Barbara Chase-Riboud instigated a lawsuit against the then fledgling DreamWorks Studio 'claiming that the film had plagiarized parts of *Echo of Lions*, her 1989 novel about the mutiny.'⁹ Chase-Riboud argued that DreamWorks had not only borrowed fictional characters as well as fictional events from her book but also alleged that the 'film had based its depiction of the mutiny's actual leader, Cinque, on her portrayal of him in *Echo of Lions*.'¹⁰

Amistad has received its fair-share of reviews, critiques and discussions amongst historians and scholars from various disciplines, as well as in the popular media. This has hardly led to a consensus on reception. Chester Fontenot Jr. has remarked that '*Amistad*...opened to tempered favorable reviews from film critics, African American filmmakers, and scholars in the field of African American studies.'¹¹ Robert Toplin,

⁶ Frederick Dalzell, 'Dreamworking *Amistad*: Representing slavery, revolt, and freedom in America, 1839 and 1997', *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (March 1998), p. 128.

⁷ Dalzell, p. 130.

⁸ Julie Roy Jeffrey, 'Amistad (1997): Steven Spielberg's 'true story'', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2001), p. 77.

⁹ Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen co-founded the studio on October 12, 1994. *Amistad*, along with *Mousehunt*, and *The Peacemaker*, were the studio's first releases in 1997. Jeffrey, p. 77.

¹⁰ Jeffrey, p. 77.

¹¹ Chester Fontenot Jr., 'Black misery, white guilt and *Amistad*', *MELUS*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring 1999), p. 235.

however, maintains that the film's 'abundance of small difficulties added up to a vote of no confidence from various historians and media critics' and that '[p]ositive observations about *Amistad's* handling of history were largely drowned out by the critical remarks.'¹² Division amongst historians has led to a plethora of interpretations and understandings. This range in argument and critical reception has created fertile ground for analysis.

Chapter One of this thesis has demonstrated the need to judge filmic representations of the past not as books translated to the screen, or as mere reflections of a bygone era, but as works of history that are to be judged and critiqued by standards consonant with the medium. This has been achieved through an examination of the literature which explored, critiqued and argued – for and against – the use of film as a text that tells us something worthwhile about the past. This chapter offers a case study of Spielberg's *Amistad*. It analyses the literature penned by historians that have addressed this film and provides an original analysis of *Amistad* itself.

***Amistad*: Plot**

Lightning cracks across the sky illuminating a man's face; evident in his eyes are feelings of anxiety and dread. Slowly, as a malevolent storm lifts in intensity, mimicking our character's own increasingly heavy breathing, a crescendo builds; the peak of which is signalled by the slow, painful extraction of a long nail, pulled from the wooden surroundings (Fig 2.1). The camera now reveals the powerful frame of a captive slave, desperately picking at the shackles that bind him (Fig 2.1). With a powerful flash of lightning, he is free. A collage of images reveals more freed slaves, arming themselves, preparing to murder their captors. As Toplin has observed, some docudramas 'open with a shocking event, attempting to engage the audience's interest in the subject quickly.'¹³ What follows certainly is shocking, as Cinqué (Djimon

¹² Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), pp. 70, 74.

¹³ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 20. Toplin remarks that this is a feature of some Spielberg films. Specifically, he cites *Jaws* (1975), and *Jurassic Park* (1993).

Hounsou), a captive aboard *La Amistad*, leads his fellow slaves on a frenzied revolt, and fight for freedom. John David Smith is no doubt right in assuming that the ‘powerful opening scene of Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad* mesmerized many viewers.’¹⁴

The scene is one of chaos: the rain drives down uncontrollably, the lightning and thunder intensify, the sea is wild, and blood stains the sails as the Africans kill off the crew (fig 2.1). The crew’s shock and terror abound. Cinqué approaches the captain; even as a gun is aimed at him, Cinqué is unwavering in his determination, walking, not running, sure of the outcome before it even takes place. He clashes with the captain, takes control, and seizes his gun. Cinqué wrestles his foe to the ground, and slowly plunges a sword into his gut. As Gary Rosen describes, we ‘watch him linger in quivering, vindictive fury over the prostrate body of the captain of the *Amistad*, whom he has just killed.’¹⁵ Rain falls down, as we are presented with an up-angle shot of Cinqué retrieving his sword from the lifeless body of his enemy (fig 2.1). Cinqué’s frame is a powerful silhouette as the rain drives down uninterrupted: the name of the boat is revealed. *Amistad*.

¹⁴ John David Smith, ‘Exploring *Amistad* at Mystic Seaport’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (September 2001), p. 749. Smith’s article is primarily a review of the *Mystic Seaport* website; however, in his opening paragraph he does give a brief plot-summary of the film.

¹⁵ Gary Rosen, ‘“*Amistad*” and the Abuse of History’ in *The Films of Steven Spielberg: Critical Essays*, edited by Charles L.P. Silet (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2002), p. 240.



Figure 2.1: **Top left:** Cinqué extracts a nail from the ship. **Top right:** Cinqué is nearly free. **Bottom left:** The mutiny is violent and bloody. **Bottom right:** Cinqué is finally free.

We now follow Cinqué and another male aboard the ship as they attempt to return themselves to Africa (fig 2.2). Two of the crew members not killed during the uprising are instructed to sail east, back to Africa (fig 2.2). In a display of his intelligence, Cinqué suspects the men are attempting to deceive him by changing course in the evening. Cinqué, however, has been observing the stars and changes course. The conversation between the Africans is in Mende, without subtitles. Six weeks pass by, and supplies have run out. There is no water; the ship is ragged and unkempt with sails torn and ruined. Land is spotted; a life vessel is deployed with a small crew that includes Cinqué. Their mission, presumably, is to find water, and to decide where they might be. As a white man on a bicycle rides past Cinqué and his group realize that something is terribly wrong. They flee back to their vessel, but a ship has pulled up on *La Amistad*; it is the United States Navy. Cinqué and his

compatriots attempt to row back to the ship. There is confusion in the air as the European captives aboard *La Amistad* call out to the navy (fig 2.2). Gunshots and hopeless shouting fill the air, Cinqué jumps over board; he is swimming for dear life. Towards the rising sun he swims, in one last desperate attempt to return to Africa. The music is dramatic and desperate. The sun dips under the horizon, and with it Cinqué's chances of freedom disappear as he surrenders to exhaustion and hopelessness, letting go and sinking into the ocean. We follow Cinqué under water, calm, free; he is conscious and aware of his actions, for the moment he has no fight left in him. Suddenly, he bursts into action as he ascends to the surface, giving in to the inevitable. A white hand reaches into the water and pulls him from the water and into incarceration (fig 2.2).



Figure 2.2: Top left: Cinqué and his companion argue about their options. Top right: Back to Africa, towards the sun. Bottom left: Help has arrived. Bottom right: Cinqué is no longer free.

From these moving, graphic, and violent opening scenes Spielberg, as Toplin suggests, slows the action down ‘and the audience receives a fuller introduction to the people and the problems.’¹⁶ John Thornton explains that the ‘*Amistad* captives were tried in court as various claimants to the rights of salvage or ownership clamoured for their share’.¹⁷ The principal characters – Roger Sherman Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey), Lewis Tappan (Stellan Skarsgård), Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman), Cinqué, Ruiz (Geno Silver) and Montes (John Ortiz), Secretary of State John Forsyth (David Paymer), Holabird (Pete Postlethwaite), James Covey (Chiwetel Ejiofor), John C. Calhoun (Arless Howard), President Martin Van Buren (Nigel Hawthorne), and John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins) – ‘each argue for their respective rights to represent the Africans on the basis of property rights.’¹⁸ Initially, Baldwin, who is represented as a young, upstart attorney, is commissioned by Tappan to represent the Africans. He argues, not for acquittal based on their humanity as free-people, ‘but on the proposition that since slavery was abolished in 1808, if the Africans were born in Africa and not in a slaveholding territory, they were illegally captured, and therefore were not the property of anyone.’¹⁹

Following the success of Baldwin’s argument, Thornton explains that ‘[f]urther attempts by the US government to placate Spanish demands as well as those of the slave-holding South landed the case in the US Supreme Court in 1841’.²⁰ The defense, headed by Baldwin, enlists the assistance of former US President, and then-congressman John Quincy Adams. Adams’ argument rests upon the notion that the Africans were not simply property, but human beings. This conclusion is framed by Cinqué’s narrative, which he relates in court and Spielberg shows us ‘in a nightmarish flashback’ that takes the viewer through ‘the unspeakable horror’ of the

¹⁶ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 20.

¹⁷ John Thornton, ‘Liberty or license?’, *History Today*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (April 1998), p. 58.

¹⁸ Fontenot Jr., p. 240.

¹⁹ Fontenot Jr., p. 240.

²⁰ Thornton, p. 58.

“middle passage”.²¹ Adams, in a final, impassioned address to the Supreme Court, convinces the presiding authorities that this is indeed the case. The film finishes in January 1842, with the return home of Cinqué and thirty-four other survivors of the *Amistad* mutiny.

Fictions and Misrepresentations

In making a movie about the *Amistad* incident, Spielberg’s task was a mammoth one. He not only bore the weight of heavy public expectation, but also felt the scorn of those scholars who sharply disagreed with his representation and concluded that the public exuberance the film had received was unwarranted.²² Spielberg claimed to have enlisted the help of several distinguished scholars in an advisory role – Louis Henry Gates Jr., John Hope Franklin, Howard Jones, Rebecca Scott, Clifton Johnson, and Arthur Abraham. This is a dubious claim at best, as many were “consulted” in order to ‘help legitimize the project.’²³ Jones was invited to visit the Dream Works set where he watched the shooting, met Spielberg, and was told by Debbie Allen how much his own work had been appreciated and used. His advice, however, was not sought about the film itself.²⁴ Two other advisors, ‘Johnson and Abraham, objected to the movie’s depiction and complained publicly that Spielberg had not taken their recommendations seriously.’²⁵

In any feature film whose narrative is grounded in historical reality, dramatic license is taken by the filmmaker, and must, in turn, be accepted by the viewer, and reviewer. This can be problematic for both. Thornton argues that the historian who ‘evaluates historical film has to accept that directors need some liberty to change the details to

²¹ Rosen, p. 240. Rosen identifies the ‘unspeakable horror of this ... “middle passage”’ as ‘the packing of naked, chained men and women into a narrow hold; the merciless whipping of insubordinates; the starvation and execution by drowning of the weak and the sick.’ (p. 240).

²² Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

²³ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 72.

²⁴ Howard Jones, ‘A Historian Goes to Hollywood: The Spielberg Touch’, *Perspectives*, Vol. 35 (December 1997), pp. 25-28.

²⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

fit dramatic requirements, so long as the big picture is right.’²⁶ The problem here is that the notion of the ‘big picture’ being right may seem arbitrary and difficult to define. Robert Rosenstone has explained, however, that the dramatic feature is a linear story that contains a morally uplifting view of the past whose historical message is usually progressive.²⁷ The ‘big picture’ that Thornton refers to is this moral message. In *Amistad*, despite the often traumatic and difficult representation of slavery and violent revolt, the message is that slavery has finished and things greatly improved. Symbolic of this is the destruction of the slave fortress at Lomboko and the return to Africa of Cinqué and his fellow former slaves. The uplifting moral message can also be found in Cinqué’s agency and the representation of the abolitionist movement as a collaborative effort made between African-Americans and white Americans. As Dave Yamamoto has opined *Amistad*, even ‘with all of its problems of dramatic license ... calls the viewer to think about that time in our nation’s past when freedom for every person was not universal.’²⁸ It is because of this that *Amistad* is such an important movie, and is the main reason for its success in bringing the past to life in a meaningful way.

Amistad’s somewhat tenuous relationship with historical veracity – at least the kind we would expect of a written work – has both troubled and interested historians. Responses to the fictitious elements of the film vary; it is safe to assert, however, that most have noted of the movie’s factual ambiguities, while some have decried Spielberg’s efforts altogether. Gary Rosen even accuses Spielberg of ‘revisionism’ with respect to Tappan and Baldwin, complaining that this serves a ‘wider purpose: namely, the denigration of Christianity, especially of the white, Protestant variety.’²⁹

²⁶ Thornton, p. 58.

²⁷ Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 56. And, Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman/Pearson, 2006), p. 47.

²⁸ Dave Yamamoto, ‘Don’t blame the teachers for not including *Amistad*’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 397.

²⁹ Rosen, p. 243.

The most glaring factual ambiguities come, not in the ‘historical veracity of the actual Amistad case,’ but in the misrepresentation of certain key characters.³⁰ As Fredrick Dalzell points out:

DreamWorks dreams up the figure of the African-American abolitionist Theodore Joadson, badly misrepresents both Lewis Tappan and Roger Baldwin...puts Van Buren on a train campaigning and even kissing babies, sends Secretary of the State John Forsyth up to Connecticut to attend the district court trial, empanels a jury for the first round of legal proceedings (no jury was ever involved), has the president actually remove a judge from the case, and so on.³¹

Clearly then, *Amistad* has its problems with veracity. But which of these misrepresentations does *real* violence to the past? Do any? Do all of them? And, what is the potential meaning for the viewer that exists behind these characters? As Toplin has asked: how can ‘we weigh...conflicting assessments of *Amistad*’s treatment of history? Which complaints represent powerful indictments of the movie; which pertain to defensible exercises in artistic license?’³²

The portrayal of Baldwin is often chastised by historians and is a chief concern for those evaluating the historical veracity of the narrative. Clifton Johnson, ‘executive director emeritus of the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University’ heavily criticized the movie following its release.³³ Toplin explains that Johnson saved his most scathing remarks for the misrepresentation of Tappan, who ‘had done more to win the case than John Quincy Adams had.’³⁴ Johnson argued that “[o]ther characters in the story are misrepresented in the film ... none more than Lewis Tappan and Roger Sherman Baldwin.”³⁵

³⁰ Fontenot Jr., p. 235.

³¹ Dalzell, p. 131.

³² Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 74.

³³ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

³⁴ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

³⁵ Clifton H. Johnson, ‘*Amistad*: Steven Spielberg as historian’, (presented at the conference of the Historical Society, Boston, May 29, 1999). Cited in Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

Baldwin first enters the film during the initial court hearing with two US Navy seamen claiming salvage rights of the *Amistad* as private citizens. Ruiz and Montes claim ownership of the Africans following the revelation of a writ of purchase that states the slaves were indeed purchased in Cuba, making the slaves their property, and not that of Queen Isabella II. The attorney then walks over to the slaves, hostility in his voice, and claims that they are the property of Ruiz and Montes, and not of anybody else. All of this creates obvious tension for Tappan, and he is clearly disappointed and no longer confident. Baldwin is waiting for Tappan on the steps of the court room, he introduces himself as Roger Baldwin, attorney. This scene is fictitious, as is the portrayal of Baldwin “as an ambulance-chasing, fee-hungry attorney”.³⁶

It is this fiction that has irked so many professional historians. Natalie Zemon Davis explains ‘Baldwin was not an unknown young property lawyer, but a forty-six-year-old defender of fugitive slaves and black education.’³⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown attests that ‘Baldwin was already a well-established, middle-aged attorney with long-standing antislavery convictions.’³⁸ While the misrepresentation of his age is fictitious, it does help towards communicating a wider truth or a greater achievement on the behalf of Baldwin. It is a coming of age for him; he does not appear greedy and the motivations for his interest in the case are far from clear. What is clear is that he feels he can win this case, and help to free the Africans from their bondage. Baldwin feels he knows the key to getting them off, which he sees as a property and ownership dispute. On some level it is understandable that scholars saw him as an ambulance-chasing attorney: one reviewer complained that ‘[t]he movie’s characterization of Roger Sherman Baldwin would be comical if it were not so serious an issue.’³⁹ He argued that ‘no scholar of American legal history would

³⁶ Johnson, ‘*Amistad*: Steven Spielberg as Historian’; cited in Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 73.

³⁷ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 79.

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, ‘*Amistad*’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (December 1998), p. 1175.

³⁹ Paul Finkelman, ‘On Cinqué and the Historians’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (December 2000), p. 944.

imagine Baldwin handing out his business card on the steps of a courthouse. Such things simply did not happen.⁴⁰ However, there are specific aspects of the scene that suggest a nobler cause. The music in particular is hopeful and grandiose. It is reasonable to assert that Spielberg wanted to hint at Baldwin's promise as a key character in this episode of history. Baldwin does not mention money at all. He is, in fact, portrayed as an honourable man, and he believes the law is in favour of the Africans. Therefore, it is his duty to offer his services to Tappan in order to fulfil natural justice.

Toplin gives Spielberg's misrepresentation of Baldwin an acquittal, claiming that 'one of the dramatic conventions of cinematic history is to show the evolution of a central figure's personality.'⁴¹ Toplin justifies this by explaining that it is 'much more interesting to watch Baldwin learning to appreciate the wisdom of the abolitionist cause than to see him as a fully formed antislavery crusader in his first appearance on the screen.'⁴² This may have been a moral trajectory followed by many Americans of his time. Seen in this way, Baldwin's character represents a developmental process, especially for Northerners who might not have thought about slavery in quite the same way as the historical Baldwin did. In effect, Baldwin represents a greater trend in American society. This notion certainly fits, as we follow Baldwin while he works tirelessly to free the *Amistad* Africans, simultaneously building a close relationship with Cinqué. Although the representation of Baldwin may not be in line with historical reality, any harm that is done to the historical register occurs in order to portray a more important historical truth. The same cannot be said for the representation of another major character in the historical instance – Lewis Tappan.

For Toplin, the handling of Tappan was unforgivable; particularly, the 'portrayal of Tappan as an abolitionist who would sacrifice the slaves as martyrs'.⁴³ This scene

⁴⁰ Finkelman, p. 944.

⁴¹ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 74.

⁴² Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 74.

⁴³ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 74.

occurs during a meeting between Baldwin, Tappan, and Joadson. In an attempt to explain the case to the two men, Baldwin uses an analogy of livestock. This clearly upsets Tappan. Baldwin explains that the only way they remain captives is if they were indeed plantation born. If they were African born then none of the claims could hold. He urges Tappan and Joadson to ignore everything ‘but the pre-eminent issue at hand; the wrongful transfer of stolen goods.’ Tappan returns to explain that the ‘war must be waged on the battlefield of righteousness.’ Here we have a very clear differentiation between Tappan and Baldwin. Baldwin wishes, by any means necessary, to free the enslaved. Tappan, on the other hand, wishes to make a statement while doing it. Tappan comes across here as a crazed, evangelical minister who will do anything to make his point.

It is a disappointing, and wildly misleading portrayal of a man who worked selflessly to rid the world of slavery. Tappan *was* a man who would do almost anything for the emancipation of the *Amistad* Africans, and generally, for the abolitionist cause. Yet it is a gross misrepresentation to suggest Tappan was a man who would want the *Amistad* Africans to die as examples to further such a cause. Wyatt-Brown has decried Tappan’s representation in *Amistad* as the worst in the film, stating that the ‘historical Tappan was no callous hypocrite, but rather an ardent planner for the return of the Mende as missionaries to convert the heathen continent, as he saw his Christian duty.’⁴⁴ Tappan was ‘founder and spokesman for the *Amistad* Committee’.⁴⁵ His tasks included raising funds for the defence, taking care of the prisoners’ needs, and managing and writing all of the publicity. Tappan also ‘set legal policy, initiated the Cuban slave owners’ arrest for slave trading, and enlisted all attorneys, including ex-president John Quincy Adams.’⁴⁶ For Tappan, the abolitionist cause was a noble and vital one.⁴⁷ Following the High Court’s decision that the Africans be freed,

⁴⁴ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁴⁵ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁴⁶ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁴⁷ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175. So dedicated to its cause was Tappan that following the death of his daughter Eliza, to tuberculosis, he declined to ‘accompany the body to the gravesite in Brookline’, as the ‘*Amistad* Committee was staging a fund raiser; he felt obliged to attend.’ (1175).

Adams wrote to Tappan, expressing his gratitude, “The Captives are free! But thanks, thanks in the name of humanity and justice, to *you*”.⁴⁸ Davis explains that the ‘filmmakers could not think of a way to convey Tappan’s ceaseless activity.’⁴⁹ Even so, the representation of Tappan is a poor one. It is an example of how a historical film *can* do violence to the past when there is no legitimate historical reason for the misrepresentation of historical reality. It does not, however, derail the significance of this film, and does not affect the ‘big picture’.

From the misrepresentation of a pivotal figure in the *Amistad* case, to the complete invention of another: Spielberg’s Joadson enters the film as the ‘counterfoil’ to the ‘self-righteous’ Tappan.⁵⁰ In a rather cynical attack on the integrity of *Amistad* Paul Finkelman has exclaimed that the creation of Joadson ‘is an attempt to create a role model for blacks’, but ‘all it does is mislead the public and create a false record.’⁵¹ In fact, as Davis has pointed out, ‘Joadson, as the filmmakers have said, is a composite character, drawn from actual black abolitionists.’⁵² Davis suggests that, while the historical Tappan’s ‘immediate associates on the *Amistad* committee were two whites, Rev. Simeon Jocelyn and Rev. Joshua Leavitt’, he did associate with ‘James Pennington, a black Congregational minister of Connecticut.’⁵³ Joadson’s role in the film makes the entirely valid point that ‘abolitionism was a biracial reform movement.’⁵⁴ Debbie Allen claimed that the character was “fact-tional”, and that he stood for the successful, even affluent, African Americans in the antebellum United States.⁵⁵ Moreover, Allen claims Joadson embodied “the African-American abolitionist movement of the day”, which ‘allows us to see how black people were at

⁴⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), p. 212.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Slaves on Screen*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁵¹ Finkelman, p. 944.

⁵² Davis, *Slaves*, p. 79.

⁵³ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 79.

⁵⁴ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁵⁵ Elisberg (ed.) “Interview with Franzoni; Harris, Voted most likely to succeed; Hollywood online: casting history,” no date. http://www.scruffles.net/spielberg/movies/amistad/amistad_article_3.html (This web no longer exists), cited in Jeffrey, p. 82.

the core of these movements”, thereby, more fully illuminating the nature of abolitionism in general.⁵⁶

Wyatt-Brown suggests that Joadson ‘presumably ... represents Robert Purvis and James Forten, wealthy mulatto sailmakers of Philadelphia.’⁵⁷ For Wyatt-Brown ‘Joadson’s exaggerated role distorts the abolitionist story’, as he writes while Purvis and Forten ‘contributed funds’ they ‘otherwise had little to do with the *Amistad* cause.’⁵⁸ Spielberg used Joadson’s character, presumably, to explain the black contribution to the abolitionist cause and to further emphasise African American agency in their own emancipation. Yet as social history that explains the conditions of the day, the film is misleading: by having Joadson treated as a ‘social equal in every scene where he appears’, Spielberg misrepresents the ‘intensity of northern prejudice’ that was then still great.⁵⁹

While the inclusion of the fictional Joadson does distort the abolitionist story, it does not do so in a way that renders his character of no historical use. As an explanatory tool for the inclusion of black faces and voices within the abolitionist cause, Joadson achieves much. For one scholar, however, Joadson represented a much more sinister agenda. Gary Rosen accuses Spielberg of ‘reverse racism’ in response to his invention of Joadson: an amplifying of African culture and concurrent downplay of the captive Africans’ rapid conformity to western ideals.⁶⁰

Rosen’s attack on Spielberg’s perceived ‘reverse racism’ centres on the director’s attempt at creating a racial balance between the black and white characters.⁶¹ Rosen believes that certain black characters, Joadson in particular, were ‘paired with Cinqué

⁵⁶ Elisberg (ed.) “Interview with Franzoni; Harris, Voted most likely to succeed; Hollywood online: casting history,” no date. http://www.scruffles.net/spielberg/movies/amistad/amistad_article_3.html (This web no longer exists), cited in Jeffrey, p. 82.

⁵⁷ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁵⁸ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁵⁹ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

⁶⁰ Rosen, p. 244.

⁶¹ Rosen, pp. 244-45.

in order to balance Baldwin and Tappan (whose exit from the movie neatly coincides with the arrival of John Quincy Adams).⁶² Rosen argues that this balancing act is taken to such a ‘grotesque length ... that at no point in *Amistad* – in stark defiance of historical reality – do we see the white protagonists alone plotting the defense of the captives.’⁶³ This is an interesting point. However, as we have seen, the notion of ‘historical reality’ differs considerably between the two media – film, and the written word. It would be a mistake to assume that the ‘historical reality’ presented on screen is the same as that presented by the word. Or that text creates the only type of historical reality to which all subsequent representations must refer and pass scrutiny. *Amistad* has also been heavily criticized for its denial of black agency. Jessie Lemisch dismisses Spielberg’s attempt at racial equality complaining that this ‘atrocious movie denies agency to the rebels, having them more or less passively standing by while benign whites make them free’.⁶⁴

Lemisch is not the only scholar who sees the Africans as secondary characters in *Amistad*. Thornton criticized Spielberg, and claimed that while the film has its success in ‘telling its main story of the legal struggles of the *Amistad* captives,’ it is far less effective ‘in presenting the African players as fully human.’⁶⁵ Thornton clearly sees the Africans as taking a ‘back seat’ to ‘the efforts of abolitionists and right-thinking lawyers to rescue them’.⁶⁶ Spielberg was in an unenviable position. On the one hand, were he to reflect archival reality and present the *Amistad* case as the story of Tappan, Baldwin, and the abolitionist movement, he would have ignored the African voices that help explain their role in their own destiny. Dissenting voices, like that of Lemisch, would have been louder. On the other hand, if Spielberg were to heavily ‘overstate’ African American involvement in this case he would have severely misrepresented the historical and social reality that African Americans

⁶² Rosen, p. 244.

⁶³ Rosen, P. 244.

⁶⁴ Jessie Lemisch, ‘The Question of Agency’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 386.

⁶⁵ Thornton, p. 58.

⁶⁶ Thornton, p. 58.

experienced in 1840s United States. With this in mind it would seem that Spielberg achieved success at simultaneously presenting the dual historical realities of white and black involvement in the case; albeit at the expense of Tappan. Joadson then, is a character devised in order to explain the greater truth of black agency in their freedom. This agency is something that may have been difficult to 'show' if Spielberg were to rigidly stick to the historical record.

When Baldwin firsts meets with Cinqué he is shackled and in jail; nevertheless, there is a powerful embrace between the two men. Cinqué converses with Baldwin in Mende, and likewise Baldwin to Cinqué in English. Somehow, the two men work together to understand one another. This is a pivotal scene in the film, it gives Cinqué, and, by extension, his fellow Africans some sort of control over their own destiny. That is, their freedom, or the possibility freedom, is not just a by-product of actions by the 'white characters' of the film. Baldwin begins to draw a map in the dirt; he is attempting to find out, from Cinqué, where he is from. He draws the US, Cuba, the *Amistad* and Africa. He shows Cinqué that he believes he came from Africa. Cinqué looks on, confused, concentrated, concerned. Baldwin is willing him to understand. Cinqué wanders off into the corner of the cell and Baldwin fears he has confused Cinqué. However, Cinqué, from the corner of the room, exclaims, 'this is how far I've come', indicating his perfect comprehension of Baldwin's line of questioning. Important chemistry between the two characters is visible here, they share a connection early on in the film and their respective drive to get to the 'bottom' of the case is clear.

Reflected in this scene is the common theme of Baldwin and Cinqué working together. Cinqué's voice is strong and clear. First, when he talks to Baldwin in this scene. Again, in the court-room when he cries out in frustration: 'Give us free!' And finally, as Adams' aide in preparation for the final trial, it is Cinqué's influence that guides the final speech. Cinqué's story is at the heart of the narrative. It is, however, the final sequences of the film involving Cinqué and Adams that have concerned

historians the most, and raised questions about the veracity of the representation. Dalzell believes the film becomes more ahistorical as it approaches its conclusion. In particular, he explains, this happens ‘as the figure of John Quincy Adams joins Cinqué on centerstage’.⁶⁷ In an otherwise positive review, Joseph Adjaye argues that *Amistad* does have its limitations. For Adjaye the limitations revolve around the veracity of the narrative in general, but of particular concern also was the ‘warm relationship between Quincy Adams and Cinqué,’ which he sees as ‘more a matter of the film director’s creativity than of historical reality.’⁶⁸ Toplin rightly points out that Cinqué never assisted Adams in his final speech, as is the case in the film: ‘Cinqué was not in Washington, D.C., at the time of the Supreme Court hearing, and only seven of nine justices were present during the court’s deliberations, not the full complement shown in the film.’⁶⁹

Cinqué and Adams were far from equals. They encountered each other ‘across a profound social divide.’⁷⁰ *Amistad* presents Cinqué and Adams as equals in order to show Cinqué ‘freeing himself in court just as he did aboard the slave schooner.’⁷¹ As Davis has remarked, like ‘the invention of Joadson, the interchange between the two has a useful symbolic function in the film.’⁷² The symbolic function of Cinqué is intended to point towards, and indeed show, African agency. Interestingly enough, the same dynamic drives the representation of Adams, ‘who – alone among the white characters – has his role ennobled.’⁷³ Rosen explains that this is framed throughout the film by ‘patriotic symbols’.⁷⁴ Adams is represented as a gardener on several occasions in the film: when Joadson, Baldwin, and Tappan initially meet in Washington and again when Cinqué travels to his home for a meeting (fig 2.3). This

⁶⁷ Dalzell, p. 131.

⁶⁸ Joseph K. Adjaye, ‘*Amistad* and the lessons of history’, *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (January 1999), p. 457.

⁶⁹ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 71.

⁷⁰ Rosen, p. 246.

⁷¹ Rosen, p. 246.

⁷² Davis, *Slaves*, p. 81.

⁷³ Rosen, p. 246.

⁷⁴ Rosen, p. 246.

association of Adams with gardening recalls famous dialogue in William Shakespeare's *Richard II* between two gardeners in Act Three, Scene Four, where the state is compared to a garden. The association of Adams with gardening confirms his role as an American patriot: his cultivation of the African violet works as a metaphor, or trope, which indicates that he endeavours to nurture the nation, including the *Amistad* Africans. Adams represents a 'pristine America just as Cinqué embodies a pristine Africa'.⁷⁵ Together, Adams and Cinqué collaborate in order to achieve equality; and to show that both black and white Americans worked towards emancipation.



Figure 2.3: Top left: Adams tends to a garden. Top right: Adams and Cinqué meet. Bottom left: Adams shows Cinqué his African violet. Bottom right: Together, Adams nurtures his violet like he would the state.

⁷⁵ Rosen, p. 246.

For some scholars, the representation of these two was not so clear-cut. There were small misrepresentations of Adams – Toplin asserts that Adams ‘was not as committed an abolitionist as the movie suggests’ and that his speech before the Supreme Court ‘ran eight hours over two days’.⁷⁶ While Spielberg badly misrepresented Tappan’s role and minimized his tremendous impact on, and volume of work for, the abolitionist cause, Adams has his role ‘overstated’ and inflated dramatically. The sense here is that this ‘overstating’ is intended to amend the negative portrayal of Tappan and downplay of white involvement in the abolitionists’ cause in general. Rosen, however, identifies Adams’ final speech as further proof of Spielberg’s ‘reverse racism’; something he sees as inherent in *Amistad*.⁷⁷ The problem for Rosen is the content of Adams’ final speech, in particular ‘the deliberate overlay of the African-style ancestor worship.’⁷⁸ For Rosen, Adams’ exclamation ‘in Cinqué influenced-words’, that “Who we are, is who we were”, is deeply contradictory.⁷⁹ For many of the American founding fathers, “who we were,” ‘was slaveholders – or...in Southern opinion, slavery was acceptable precisely because it could be traced (to use Cinqué’s pious words) “far back to the beginning of time”?’⁸⁰ In intoning the memory of his ancestors, Adams is in a sense justifying slavery itself, showing that he, and by extension white Americans, were not ‘open to the ways of the Africans.’⁸¹

What this view fails to acknowledge, however, is the fact that the compression of Adams’ speech is inevitable. Much of the criticism of Cinqué and Adams’ meeting, and Adams’ final speech, are in response to the abbreviation of the known in order ‘to fit the exigencies of feature film narrative form.’⁸² Steve Lipkin argues that such

⁷⁶ Toplin, *Reel History*, pp. 70-71. Rosen further argues that Adams speech also ‘fails to do justice to the full obsessive eccentricity of Adams’s actual *eight-hour* performance.’ (P. 246.)

⁷⁷ Rosen, p. 246.

⁷⁸ Rosen, p. 246.

⁷⁹ Rosen, p. 246.

⁸⁰ Rosen, pp. 246-47.

⁸¹ Rosen, p. 247.

⁸² Steve Lipkin, ‘When victims speak (or, what happened when Spielberg added *Amistad* to his list?)’, *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Winter 2001), p. 27.

questioning of the ‘historical validity’ of the film ‘on the basis of its main characters equates history with biography.’⁸³ With Cinqué’s words guiding Adams in his final speech, ‘the cinematic Cinqué through his representatives demonstrates that articulation allows empowerment.’⁸⁴ Spielberg’s *Amistad* views the struggle for freedom from bondage of the *Amistad* Africans ‘as a matter of victims progressively attaining empowerment through articulation.’⁸⁵

So what are we to make of the fictional aspects of *Amistad*? Davis has argued some of the ‘fabrication, perhaps intended to increase suspense or character development ... seems arbitrary and unnecessary.’⁸⁶ *Amistad* contains a number of historical inaccuracies, some of them are considerable (the representation of Tappan). Some inaccuracies are minor - for instance, critics pointed out ‘that men did not wear beards and mustaches in the United States in the early 1840s Historians noted, too, that there could not have been snow falling on Long Island (as the movie shows) when U.S. naval forces seized the *Amistad*.’⁸⁷ Ronald Briley points out that it is important not to argue over ‘such historical details as whether Adams presented his case before seven or nine judges.’⁸⁸ In fact, in a review of *Titanic* for the American Historical Association’s *Perspectives*, Toplin argued:

When screen-based historical fiction is good, it powerfully combines fact and fiction to establish a strong feeling for a distant place and time. An effective historical drama leaves audiences with a sense that they were briefly witnesses to the past and experienced its emotions.⁸⁹

In *Amistad* the liberties that have been taken are to heighten the narrative drama, to wrest a portion of agency back into the African characters’ hands, and to represent the

⁸³ Lipkin, p. 28.

⁸⁴ Lipkin, p. 27.

⁸⁵ Lipkin, p. 28.

⁸⁶ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 79.

⁸⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 70.

⁸⁸ Ronald F. Briley, ‘The study guide *Amistad*: A lasting legacy’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 394.

⁸⁹ Robert Toplin, March 1998, ‘*Titanic*: Did the maker of *True Lies* tell the truth about history?’, *Perspectives*, [online], available URL:

<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/1998/9803/9803FIL.CFM> (15 March 2007)

African American element in the abolitionist movement. These have had ‘little overall effect on the veracity of the general history.’⁹⁰ Thornton exemplifies this point by clarifying that the scenes in the film where the Africans, and Baldwin attempt to convince the court that they were in fact born Africans, are, more or less, false. There was never any document found aboard the ship that corroborated their claims of being born in Africa. ‘In real life, the point was argued rather prosaically on the basis of statements made by their captives themselves as well as their obvious cultural and linguistic state.’⁹¹ At one point ‘the judge even stopped the testimony of more than one witness, saying “he was fully convinced the men were recently from Africa, and that it was unnecessary to take up time in establishing the fact.”’⁹² This invention works to increase the drama by having Joadson and Baldwin board the ship and search for the manifest. The main disappointment for Thornton appears to be how Spielberg ignored the pamphlet published in 1840 by John Barber, which details the case. Of most concern to Thornton is the notion that Spielberg ‘misrepresented’ the captive Africans by ‘making little use of this material to describe the captives, drawing instead on stereotypes.’⁹³ In *Visions of the Past* Rosenstone examines two films together, *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Glory* (1989). Both use invention, and play with the veracity of the record. Rosenstone displays how *Mississippi Burning* ‘misrepresents’ the past, while *Glory* creates inventions but does not do harm to the past. In particular, Rosenstone talks of how *Glory* implemented stereotypical characters for the African Americans, which can be applied to the characterization of the Africans in *Amistad*:

the country boy, the wise older man, the angry black nationalist, the Northern intellectual. The filmic reason is obviously dramatic: such diverse individuals create a range of possibilities for tension and conflict that will reveal character and change. The historical reason is that these four men stand for the various possible positions that blacks could take toward the Civil War and the larger issues of racism and black-

⁹⁰ Thornton, p. 58.

⁹¹ Thornton, p. 58.

⁹² Thornton, p. 58.

⁹³ Thornton, p. 59.

white relations, topics that are not solely “historical” – or that, like all historical topics, involve an interpretation of past and present.⁹⁴

The general acceptance and acclaim of *Amistad* by Thornton and Jones, experts in their respective fields, as a film that has historical inaccuracies, but is not ruined by any of them certainly drowns out claims by Toplin that *Amistad* stretches ‘the truth in ways that undermines’ its interpretations ‘of history.’⁹⁵ If the historian is serious about resolving the problems associated with dramatic license in the feature film, then perhaps an approach similar to that of Davis and Joseph Adjaye should be taken?

Adjaye, in his review, attempts to explain further contextual data that surrounded the events of the *Amistad* incident; for instance, the ‘plight of the *Amistad* rebels, who were free but stranded and lacking the money to go home, continued even after their final legal victory.’⁹⁶ Adjaye suggests that further scenes may have been added to the film to show that the ‘repatriated Africans were accompanied by five American missionaries who established mission schools in southern Sierra Leone, schools that were ultimately to produce many of the country’s future leaders and nationalists.’⁹⁷

For Davis, the opening scenes where Cinqué breaks free and incites the revolt aboard the ship could have been explained more clearly. Davis notes that Cinqué, using sign language, ‘had asked the cook on the *Amistad* what was going to happen to the Africans’. The cook gestured that their throats were to be cut ‘and they would be chopped, salted, and eaten.’⁹⁸ Davis explains:

Fear of white cannibalism went way back among the Africans. Young Olaudah Equiano wondered when he boarded his slaver whether “we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair.” When his ship docked at Barbados, the Africans lay in the hold in “dread and trembling” lest they “be eaten

⁹⁴ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 74.

⁹⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 62. John Thornton is an American historian specializing in the history of Africa and the African Diaspora. And Howard Jones is the author of *Mutiny on the Amistad* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁹⁶ Adjaye, p. 457.

⁹⁷ Adjaye, p. 457.

⁹⁸ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 85.

by these ugly men.” They stopped their cries only when some old slaves were brought on board to tell them they were not to be eaten, but made to work. For the historical Cinqué, as he recalled events later, the cook’s prediction was the last straw, and it was then that he hid a nail to use for picking the lock on his chains.⁹⁹

Davis rationalizes that this omission centres on the ‘particular features of Atlantic life in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’¹⁰⁰ This may, Davis argues, have less to do with time constraints as it does with a desire ‘to smooth away the idiosyncratic, the unmodern in one’s heroes, anything that would make them too unpalatable’ for the contemporary audience.¹⁰¹ However, this omission may not be just about time constraints and audience considerations. The omission gives agency to the *Amistad* Africans because it takes away their fear of being eaten and replaces it with the noble ideal of freedom from being a slave.

The point of audience reception goes further than is made clear by Davis: filmmakers – particularly someone of Spielberg’s reputation – have constant mitigating considerations whenever they make a film, especially potential audience size, which, in turn, forces them to consider audience desires. Potential audience size is – at the very least – a major driving force for a film like *Amistad* in production, and validates such a large budget.¹⁰² Without audience at the box-office, there would be no producers willing to take a loss, just to make such a film. Audience consideration is paramount, and can often have a large say in the shape of the narrative. This consideration can restrict the narrative, and restrict the types of representation on offer. Toplin has argued, however, that if historical interpretation is not ‘married effectively to entertainment, audiences will not show up for the history lesson.’¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 85.

¹⁰¹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 85.

¹⁰² *Amistad*’s budget was US\$40 million.

¹⁰³ Robert Brent Toplin, ‘Book Review: *Slaves on Screen*’, *Cineaste*, Vol. 26, No. 3, p. 57.

***Amistad*: Strengths**

The historical strength of *Amistad*, as is suggested by Davis, can most visibly be seen in its ‘portrayal of the Africans, and most strikingly in its representation of the seizure of Cinqué, the Middle Passage, and the revolt.’¹⁰⁴ These painful scenes are recounted by Cinqué in court. His story begins as he has been captured and begins his journey across the Middle Passage on the notorious slave vessel the *Tecora*. His remembrances are not only hard to watch, but heart-breaking in their invocation of the horrors of the slave trade, and ferocious in their portrayal of the brutalities of the journey across the Atlantic.

Consider the scenes where Cinqué, following his capture, is taken from Lomboko – the slave fortress – on a life raft to a ship, which is revealed as the *Tecora*. The shrieks of women and children fill the air; the Africans are naked, exposed, and manhandled. The music frames the scene; it is harrowing in nature. The captives are being splashed with water, whipped, and beaten, while wealthy merchants can be seen smoking cigars and talking amongst themselves. The slaves are being shackled; a female has been shot, she falls to the ground, lifeless, blood spills from her mouth. In the stinking hold the naked captives are packed on top of one another, there is incessant screaming. They are all being forced into the hold; livestock would not be treated as poorly. The idea is to fit as many in as possible. This creates mayhem, people are being crushed, and if they fall, they will be trampled to death. Cinqué is being dragged in chains, the music comes in again, harrowing and tragic, and the sounds of women, children, and men crying overlap to create a density of sounds that causes goose bumps (fig 2.4). The camera now shows us a long shot of the *Tecora*, engulfed by an angry sea; barely visible above the crest of each gigantic wave. In the hold all are sick as lightning pierces the darkness of the scene. These scenes are reminiscent in look and feel of the earlier revolt aboard the *Amistad*; the music is the same, and fills out the scene with dread. As the storm continues the throng of people chained together, submissive to the movements of the ship, begin to crush one

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 81. For Davis’ own explanation of the ‘historical strength of *Amistad*’, pp. 81-83.

another (fig 2.4). One woman realizes she hasn't a chance of saving herself and passes her new-born child to the surface of bodies, helpful hands guiding it along the way (fig 2.4). Cinqué takes the baby to safety; the music reaches its crescendo signifying that the scene is coming to an end.



Figure 2.4: **Top left:** Cinqué is dragged in shackles. **Top right:** the captives aboard *Tecora* are crushed. **Bottom:** A child is lifted to safety.

It is a new day aboard the *Tecora*, the sea is calm, the sun bright and hot. Those slaves that perished the night before are cast overboard to rest in a watery grave. A man is shackled and whipped; blood soaks the deck (fig 2.5). The rest of the slaves are forced to watch as a woman slips overboard to die with her child. Cinqué, having watched the woman and child – possibly reminding him of who he has lost – stares at

the space where they were a moment before; blood from the beaten man splashes on his face (fig 2.5). The *Tecora* charges forward. In the hold a little rice is slapped into reaching hands, ‘the hungry vie for food and lick it from each other’s faces.’¹⁰⁵ Unlucky and sick individuals are not fed, an indication of waning supplies: a foreshadowing of the unimaginable horror that is to come. Back on deck, the crew readies the solution amidst screams of terror. A bag of rocks attached to a chain is cast overboard, men, women and children, together fight, hopelessly, against the weight of the rocks and each other as they are dragged into the ocean. Cinqué has to be restrained as he looks on; he fights, but to no avail (fig 2.5). We follow as the camera reveals the bodies fighting beneath the water, ‘so film viewers will never forget’ (fig 2.5).¹⁰⁶



Figure 2.5: **Top left:** A slave is whipped. **Top right:** Cinqué is unmoved by the man’s blood that has splashed on his face. **Bottom left:** Cinqué has to be restrained while less fortunate captives are thrown overboard. **Bottom right:** The camera follows the bodies underwater.

¹⁰⁵ Davis, *Slaves*, pp. 82-3.

¹⁰⁶ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 83.

These scenes serve a dual purpose. First, they offer a sense of historical verisimilitude. Second, and perhaps most important, they offer an agglomeration of Middle Passage historiography. The events portrayed in Spielberg's *Amistad* may not have all happened in Cinqué's voyage; but they did happen. Take the harrowing scenes where the sick and weak are thrown overboard; this type of thing has been documented. In 1840 the English Romantic landscape painter Joseph Turner first exhibited his representation of slave traders who would throw their 'cargo' overboard in order to claim insurance in a painting titled *The Slave Ship* (Fig 2.6). The subject of the painting is an incident that occurred in 1781 aboard the slave ship the *Zong*. The captain of the ship, having taken on more slaves than they could handle, realized that he would be unable to claim insurance for those slaves who died on route, and only for those that were lost at sea. The sick and the dying were thrown overboard. The prominent abolitionist Thomas Clarkson produced an extensively read book of the time that reported the incident, and probably influenced Turner's decision to represent the massacre.¹⁰⁷ As far as documentary evidence for the horrors of the crossing, Davis explains that in memoirs the most 'graphic portrait of these episodes [Middle Passage crossing] is one of the earliest.'¹⁰⁸ In the 1789 *Interesting Narrative: The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 'the former slave described the crossing: the "stench," "the galling of the chains," the "filth," "the shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying."' ¹⁰⁹ This description is certainly represented in these visually traumatic scenes.

¹⁰⁷ Richard G. Tansey, Fred S. Kleiner, Christian J. Mamiya, eds., *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: Eleventh Edition* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), p. 877. Thomas Clarkson, *Abolition of the African slave-trade, by the British Parliament* (Augusta: Brinsmade, 1830).

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 70.

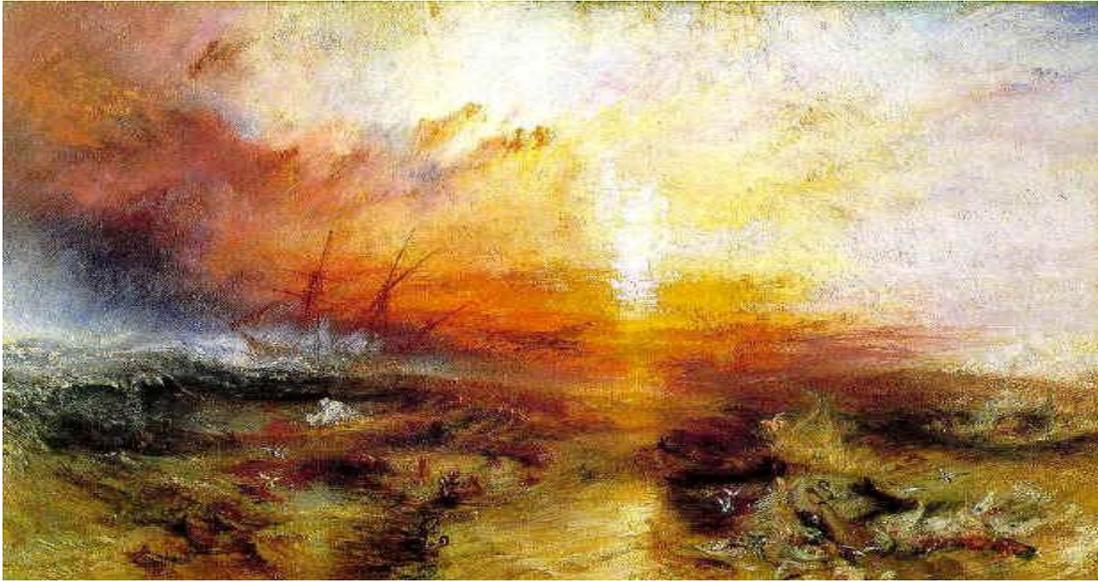


Figure 2.6: Joseph Turner's *The Slave Ship*.¹¹⁰

These scenes take place in the form of a flashback in the court-room, following the appointment of a Mende translator that allows Cinqué to tell his story. This shift in narrative perspective from 'third person observer to first person participant places the audience in the slave fortress, aboard the slaveship in the "hole" where the captives are crammed, and on the auction block awaiting a bid from the group of potential slaveholders.'¹¹¹ It is 'Cinqué's collective voice' that 'weaves a graphic narrative that has become a trope within American culture that signifies both against the group pain of African Americans and the social guilt of whites.'¹¹²

It is in Cinqué's collective voice, and his actions throughout the movie, that we hear and see Cinqué's 'passion,' and his 'indomitable will'.¹¹³ It is through the characterization of Cinqué that *Amistad* helps in 'debunking the myth of the unintelligent African slave.'¹¹⁴ Cinqué's intelligence is evident throughout the movie;

¹¹⁰ Richard G. Tansey, Fred S. Kleiner, Christian J. Mamiya, eds., *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: Eleventh Edition* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), p. 877.

¹¹¹ Fontenot Jr., p. 238.

¹¹² Fontenot Jr., p. 238.

¹¹³ Adjaye, p. 458.

¹¹⁴ Adjaye, p. 458.

from his use of the stars for navigation in the opening scenes, to ‘the ease with which he acquired facility in the English language, and his comprehension of complex legal issues, for instance, rightly insisting to Quincy Adams, right from the beginning, that his case was one of jurisdiction.’¹¹⁵

Through Cinqué, Spielberg managed to provide an African character who, in the historical instance, became ‘for African-American abolitionists in particular ... a symbol of black manhood and African heritage.’¹¹⁶ Numerous scholars have identified the film’s emphasis of the ‘Africanness’ of the *Amistad* Africans as a major strength.¹¹⁷ The use of the Mende language – which was not translated in the early stages of the film – is, as Dalzell explains, a mimetic device: ‘we have to work to understand the Africans, and sometimes understanding breaks down.’¹¹⁸ It is this break-down of understanding that proves to be so important. Davis contrasts this verisimilitude of language and accent with *Spartacus* (1960) and *Burn!* (1969): ‘[i]f there are gains in portraying interaction through the convention of a common language in those films, there is another advantage in hearing Mende and English side by side and watching the struggle for communication.’¹¹⁹ This verisimilitude of language has a dramatic effect in the opening scenes, easily communicating the ‘profound cultural differences that divide the Africans from their American captors and benefactors.’¹²⁰ It also acts as a shrewd reminder that ‘unseasoned slaves did not at once assume the subservient gestures and differential lingo that whites would soon demand by force of threat and lash.’¹²¹ *Amistad* makes clear the argument that the Africans who were transported across the middle passage come from a place that is

¹¹⁵ Adjaye, p. 458.

¹¹⁶ Dalzell, p. 129.

¹¹⁷ Jeffrey, p. 85; Davis, *Slaves*, p. 86; Dalzell, p. 130; Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

¹¹⁸ Dalzell, p. 130.

¹¹⁹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 86.

¹²⁰ Dalzell, p. 130.

¹²¹ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

rich with an authentic culture and way of life, ‘that on film, has an almost idyllic quality.’¹²²

Jones also extols the virtues of *Amistad* stating that ‘[i]n a point that has, unfortunately, drawn little deserved praise, Spielberg has emphasized the power of communication among races in relieving imagined fears and removing the barriers to freedom.’¹²³ Jones sees *Amistad* as a powerful tool for a nationalist history that can right the wrongs of America’s collective troubled past.¹²⁴ Spielberg manages to powerfully dramatize a historical event ‘whose recognition by the public is long overdue.’¹²⁵ In doing so, Spielberg brings to the public’s attention, an issue that has not been given enough attention in popular media, ‘that enslaved Africans fiercely resisted slavery throughout rather than passively surrendering to it.’¹²⁶ Spielberg powerfully and emotionally addresses the question of black agency in the *Amistad* case, and more generally on the road to emancipation. The film succeeds, on some levels, by rearticulating African agency within the dominant Anglo-American tradition. Spielberg demonstrates that enslaved Africans were not ‘passive in their captivity,’ managing to maintain their ‘humanity,’ and that their ‘dignity’ and ‘identity’ was not lost ‘in refusing to become slaves.’¹²⁷ More generally, Spielberg has shown the extent to which enslaved peoples ‘will go to win liberty.’¹²⁸

Amistad pushes the boundaries of personal lived experience and forces all of those involved – the viewer, actors, director – to explore emotional responses outside of their own probable lived experiences. Djimon Hounsou explained that:

There was no experience in my life that I could draw on to play this part. ... My life ... doesn’t come anywhere close to the pain that they suffered on the *Amistad*. If I

¹²² Jeffrey, p. 85

¹²³ Howard Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 381.

¹²⁴ Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 381.

¹²⁵ Adjaye, p. 457.

¹²⁶ Adjaye, pp. 457-58.

¹²⁷ Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 381.

¹²⁸ Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 381.

used what I had gone through in Paris, I would be limiting myself to my own emotions.¹²⁹

Amistad, in its representation of the Middle Passage and the revolt, presents the viewer with the opportunity to explore possibilities of response, experience, and incident. Film provides us with a representation of history that, through the specific conventions of the medium, stimulates responses from a wider, or divergent, array of responses from that of the written word: it is something that connects us visually and aurally with the past. One scholar pointed out that it is ‘one thing to experience this American tragedy vicariously through our intellects and quite another to witness it as close to first-hand as possible through its graphic depiction on screen through the narrative voice of an “authentic African;”’.¹³⁰

For Jones, *Amistad* is a success, not in terms of it being a black history movie, or a white history movie, but as an ‘American history movie that places the *Amistad* story within the nation’s mainstream account of itself.’¹³¹ The fact that ‘Spielberg’s efforts have already promoted a dialogue over race ... demonstrates ... that the struggle for equality is not over.’¹³² The fact that this film has no romantic sub-plot and dealt with a topic that is unfamiliar to the majority of the film-going audience (white middle-class Americans) is a great achievement indeed. African Americans and white Americans together worked to achieve ‘what might be argued the first civil rights victory in the United States – all within the American system.’¹³³

On a more practical level, due to the fact that this type of docudrama provides contemporary society with so much of its historical knowledge, it is understandable that Steven Mintz would proclaim that ‘films can provide viewers with a sense of the

¹²⁹ Davis, *Slaves*, p. 73.

¹³⁰ Fontenot Jr., Pp. 238-39.

¹³¹ Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 380.

¹³² Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 380.

¹³³ Jones, p. 380.

look and atmosphere of the past in a way that no lecture can convey.’¹³⁴ It is this type of conclusion that led Jesse Berrett to conclude that he would ‘recommend the film itself for teaching American history’, opining that ‘[i]ts vigor and vivid sweep do convey historical context effectively’.¹³⁵

Amistad ‘presents Hollywood’s most memorable view of the slave trade.’¹³⁶ It surpasses other representations of the slave trade by Hollywood because it manages to display the African characters not only as agents in their own freedom, but as humans, complete with their own distinctive culture that was not abandoned easily. Toplin exclaims that the *Amistad* Africans helped shape their own experiences ‘by taking bold action,’ and ‘risking their lives in a bloody rebellion.’¹³⁷ The film succeeds in dramatizing the ‘fundamental yearning of all persons to be free,’ simultaneously bringing the ‘painful condition of enslavement’ to the ‘forefront of the public imagination.’¹³⁸

Jones succinctly sums up the achievements of *Amistad*:

Steven Spielberg’s movie *Amistad* deserves high praise for its original and creative direction, its courage in dealing with controversial features of human behavior, its starkly realistic portrayal of Joseph Cinque by Djimon Hounsou, and its impact on racial and educational matters off the silver screen. Spielberg has succeeded in bringing a little known event before Americans that has already had and will continue to have lasting repercussions.¹³⁹

Historical Weaknesses

While this review of *Amistad* takes a mostly positive position, the film does have some obvious and glaring weaknesses. Many scholars have taken a rather dim view

¹³⁴ Steven Mintz, ‘Spielberg’s *Amistad* and the history classroom’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 371.

¹³⁵ Jesse Berrett, ‘Use the film, not the guide’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 396.

¹³⁶ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 75.

¹³⁷ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 75.

¹³⁸ Adjaye, p. 458.

¹³⁹ Jones, ‘*Amistad*: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards’, p. 380.

of Spielberg's attempt at representing the *Amistad* incident.¹⁴⁰ Toplin's claim that '[p]ositive observations about *Amistad's* handling of history were largely drowned out by the critical remarks' is debatable.¹⁴¹ It is more appropriate to argue that scholars' opinions have been divided. This has mostly been due to the various ways in which each reviewer has understood feature film's relationship with factual veracity. Most concerning, in terms of factual veracity, is the portrayal of Tappan. This representation by Spielberg, as we have seen, is grossly misrepresentative of such a champion of the abolitionist cause, and has rightly drawn the ire of many reviewers.¹⁴² Moreover, the handling of Tappan seems to serve no legitimate filmic purpose other than the denigration of Evangelical Christianity and, by extension, the increased prominence of Joadson and Black input into the abolitionist movement.

For Toplin, and others, the depiction of Evangelical Christianity was severely misleading.¹⁴³ He complains that the abolitionists are shown 'waving crosses, looking like religious zealots'.¹⁴⁴ This view of the abolitionists as reformers or fanatics seems to contest the outlook of modern scholarship, and 'reflects an old, conservative viewpoint that has been strongly challenged'.¹⁴⁵ The depiction of abolitionists wearing crosses also breaks the verisimilitude that Spielberg strived for, making it seem as if the 'Pope and not John Calvin held sway in puritan New England.'¹⁴⁶ This type of representation would be forgivable if it did not misrepresent the prominent role that Christian groups played in the release of the *Amistad* captives, and the central role Christianity played in their lives upon landing in America.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁰ Jessie Lemisch; Robert Toplin.

¹⁴¹ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 74.

¹⁴² Wyatt Brown, Toplin.

¹⁴³ Wyatt-Brown, Rosen.

¹⁴⁴ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁵ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁶ Wyatt-Brown, p. 1175.

¹⁴⁷ Rosen, p. 244.

Toplin remarks that no other ‘Hollywood film before *Amistad* displayed African mutiny or the Middle Passage more realistically.’¹⁴⁸ The problem for Toplin is that these scenes occupy but a small portion of the film. For the most part, *Amistad*’s focus is on the ‘legal maneuverings in New England,’ which, Toplin explains, caused the film to come ‘under sharp criticism’.¹⁴⁹ The movie is certainly less exciting, and moves at a much slower pace during the court-room scenes, as opposed to the recounting of the Middle Passage and the revolt. However, the movie is not the dramatic and historical failure that Toplin argues it to be in these scenes. One of the major strengths of *Amistad* is to be found in the articulation of Cinqué and, by extension, his fellow Africans, during the court-room scenes, and meetings with Baldwin and Adams. It is during these scenes that we see how the freedom of the Africans was a collaborative effort, and the viewer receives a general introduction to the various claims, and legal positions of all involved.

Of greater concern, perhaps, should be the way that slavery could be interpreted as a ‘figure associated with the silly, moribund, reactionary, monarchical, and anti-republican despots of the Old World rather than as a fundamental economic, social, and ideological component of American society.’¹⁵⁰ Rael is correct in his assertion that the film lends itself to an understanding of slavery that is fixed and negative. That is, the importance and even necessity of slavery in the context of the Atlantic World, even world history, is ignored. Slavery was, however, an evil that, while a necessity on many levels, remains an embarrassment to the western world, and to those involved in the trade, both as slave, and slave-master.

The negative aspects of any interpretation of *Amistad* as history are far out-weighted by the positive assertions that can be made by analysing Spielberg’s vision. As such, the negative assessments of *Amistad* can easily be remedied by approaching negative

¹⁴⁸ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁹ Toplin, *Reel History*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁰ Patrick Rael, ‘Why this film about slavery?’, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), P. 387.

conclusions with the intention of fleshing out further contextual data that the film may have left out or may misrepresent. Rael has successfully identified the fact that *Amistad* presented a view of slavery that is perhaps not as complex and plural in its explanation of causality as that which can be found in the historiography. For Adjaye, it was obvious that ‘educators should take advantage of Spielberg’s film to teach the history of other notable revolts’, citing those of ‘Boukman in Jamaica and Toussaint Louverture that created the independent nation of Haiti, the first Black nation in the Western Hemisphere.’¹⁵¹ Adjaye identifies the limitations that are found in *Amistad* as a springboard to learning more about the cursory details of the narrative.¹⁵²

Conclusion

Amistad is a film told in two main parts; as a signifier to the ‘status of slavery in American law and American history’ and, secondly, as the ‘story of the African slave trade.’¹⁵³ The film is successful on both counts. Naturally, *Amistad* has its share of problems with veracity, and indulges in invention, fictions, and misrepresentations. But, as we have seen, barring the representation of Tappan and Christianity, it succeeds in bringing to life a painful story in America’s past.

All too often historians’ complaints are levelled at a perceived lack of reliable historical information in film. Jeffrey writes that ‘[a]lthough films can be packed with good history and fail dramatically, historians, of course, have often taken the position that it’s not too much history but too little that makes a film mediocre.’¹⁵⁴ Rosenstone argues that those films that stick most closely to the archival or historical record and attempt to mimic conventions of traditional history become ‘dramatically inert’ and fail to fulfil the potential that the filmic medium presents for communicating the past.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Adjaye, P. 458.

¹⁵² Adjaye, P. 458.

¹⁵³ Thornton, p. 58.

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey, p. 78. See Jan Lewis’ discussion of historians and this film in the *Washington Post*, 15 February 1998.

¹⁵⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 7.

A good historical film finds a balance between ‘art and history’.¹⁵⁶ As Rosenstone has pointed out, film history and academic history are two divergent ways of interpreting and representing the past and both employ different conventions to achieve their goals.¹⁵⁷ The inventions that are inherent in *Amistad* fulfil a serious historical role since their consideration adds to the ‘audience’s understanding of the past.’¹⁵⁸ Spielberg utilizes the filmic medium in such a way that both distorts certain data and privileges other factual insights; information which cannot ordinarily be conveyed in words. It is possible that the way in which the narrative (especially the scenes of the revolt, and the Middle Passage) was represented is in essence closer to the experience than the archival records can portray. This presentation of data comes across with more immediacy and is more relatable to us as a viewing audience. In an age in which images from across the globe of genocide, murder, war, famine, and disaster proliferate it is all too easy to disconnect from the terror and horror presented to us in our historical written records. It may have become more difficult for us, when reading accounts such as that by Olaudah Equiano, to relate to the raw emotion that would have been felt by the participants in such acts as the revolt aboard the *Amistad*.¹⁵⁹ In the jarring opening scenes of *Amistad*, it is impossible for us to escape. We are presented with real life horror that cannot be ignored.

To be certain, many educators and scholars would ‘prefer that our students be less attuned to video sources of learning,’ however, this is simply not the reality for the modern educator.¹⁶⁰ This has led John E. O’Connor to argue that ‘a more general “visual literacy” and the ability to deal thoughtfully with visual images, should be a

¹⁵⁶ Jeffrey, p. 78.

¹⁵⁷ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 14, 31, 35, 67, 69, 126.

¹⁵⁸ Jeffrey, p. 78.

¹⁵⁹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano Written by Himself*, edited by Robert J. Allison (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), pp. 55-56.

¹⁶⁰ Briley, P. 390.

part of everyone's education.'¹⁶¹ It is also hoped that film, in bringing 'a subject to the attention of people who did not know much about it before,' will 'encourage them to ask questions and seek further information through reading.'¹⁶² Moreover, feature films 'can arouse popular interest in the past and familiarize viewers with neglected historical issues.'¹⁶³ Most importantly, film offers a realistic alternative to academic history 'as a way of representing, interpreting, and finding meaning in our shared past.'¹⁶⁴

Spielberg's *Amistad* compels us to engage in a dialogue with the past, 'to interrogate and confront slavery and its legacy.'¹⁶⁵ Cinqué is a character that all can draw lessons from; his 'unquenchable yearning for freedom from oppression and abuse by authority' promotes an uplifting narrative in the face of terrible adversity.¹⁶⁶ If we were able to reach such a conclusion, 'the sacrifices of Cinqué and all other victims of the brutalities of slavery would not be in vain.'¹⁶⁷

The final word on *Amistad* belongs to Jones:

Spielberg's movie has brought focus to the timeless issue of human versus property rights. In further exposing the great chasm between morality and the law, between the natural rights doctrine undergirding the Declaration of Independence and the property rights in slavery guaranteed in the Constitution, he has underlined the point made clear in the historical event – that the United States as a self-professed republic confronted the profound dilemma of supporting both liberty and slavery.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ John E. O'Connor, 'History in images/images in history: Reflections on the importance of film and television study for an understanding of the past', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1207.

¹⁶² Robert Brent Toplin, 'The Filmmaker as Historian', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1213; this view is one shared by Briley, P. 390; and, O'Connor, p. 1208.

¹⁶³ Mintz, pp. 370-71.

¹⁶⁴ Mintz, pp. 370-71.

¹⁶⁵ Adjaye, p. 459.

¹⁶⁶ Adjaye, p. 459.

¹⁶⁷ Adjaye, p. 459.

¹⁶⁸ Jones, 'Amistad: Movie, history, and the Academy Awards', P. 381.

Chapter Three: The Wind That Shakes the Barley

I sat within a valley green
 Sat there with my true love
 And my fond heart strove to choose between
 The old love and the new love
 The old for her, the new that made
 Me think on Ireland dearly
 While soft the wind blew down the glade
 And shook the golden barley
 Twas hard the mournful words to frame
 To break the ties that bound us
 Ah, but harder still to bear the shame
 Of foreign chains around us
 And so I said, "The mountain glen
 I'll seek at morning early
 And join the brave united men"
 While soft wind shook the barley
 Twas sad I kissed away her tears
 Her arms around me clinging
 When to my ears that fateful shot
 Come out the wildwood ringing
 The bullet pierced my true love's breast
 In life's young spring so early
 And there upon my breast she died
 While soft wind shook the barley
 I bore her to some mountain stream
 And many's the summer blossom
 I placed with branches soft and green
 About her gore-stained bosom
 I wept and kissed her clay-cold corpse
 Then rushed o'er vale and valley
 My vengeance on the foe to wreak
 While soft wind shook the barley
 Twas blood for blood without remorse
 I took at Oulart Hollow
 I placed my true love's clay-cold corpse
 Where mine full soon may follow
 Around her grave I wondered drear
 Noon, night and morning early
 With aching heart when e'er I hear
 The wind that shakes the barley.¹

¹ Robert Dwyer Joyce, 'Wind That Shakes the Barley', Makem.com, [online], available URL: <http://www.makem.com/discography/recordings/lyricpage/windthatshakes.html> (23 November 2007).

This poem, by Robert Dwyer Joyce, brother of notable Irish writer Patrick Weston Joyce, is a traditional Irish rebel song and provides the inspiration for the title of Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006). Its sombre tone and tragic subject matter reflect the message inherent in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*: that gain and loss go hand in hand in the struggle for freedom. The film, however, is far from being just 'a misty-eyed tale of nationalist struggle';² it is instead a view of the Irish struggle for independence embodied by a group in the local Flying Column, under the guise of the Irish Republican Army. Loach's efforts do not attempt to present the struggles from the perspective of the Black and Tans, and by extension often vilifies them as purveyors of violence and harassment of the Irish people. By his own words, however, this 'is a story of a group in a Flying Column, how *they* fought for independence, how *they* won partial independence, and the legacy of what happened after the treaty. Every point of view is there within that.'³ For this representation of a controversial portion of British colonial rule Loach has received severe criticism.

When Ken Loach won the Palme d'Or at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival for *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* 'it provoked a furious response from the right-wing British press.'⁴ Irish historian Ruth Dudley Edwards explains that in a 'memorable phrase, the then Tory MP Ivan Stanbrook described the movie as "the IRA entry at Cannes".'⁵ This type of accusation is nothing new for Loach. His 1990 thriller *Hidden Agenda*, 'which highlighted the connection between state forces and loyalist murder gangs in Northern Ireland, was [also] dubbed the "IRA entry to Cannes"'.⁶ The negative reception of Loach's work has indeed focused on its perceived pro-IRA stance. In *The Times* the 'Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Cove argued

² David Archibald, 'Correcting historical lies: An interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty', *Cineaste*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 26.

³ Archibald, p. 28. My italics.

⁴ Archibald, p. 26.

⁵ Ruth Dudley Edwards, 'Why does Ken Loach loathe his country so much?', *Daily Mail*, 30 May 2006, p. 13.

⁶ Archibald, p. 26.

that “films like Loach’s that glamorize the IRA give a retrospective justification to a movement which used murderous violence to achieve its ends.”⁷ This statement seems paradoxical given the colonial record of the British Empire. Many countries are struggling to adequately deal with their colonial past. With sentiments such as Cove’s, the process will be even more difficult. David Archibald rightly points out, however, that the controversy that has surrounded this film since its release highlights the ‘inability of many British commentators to engage honestly with the country’s problematic colonial past.’⁸

The Wind That Shakes the Barley certainly engages with this problematic relationship as it views the Republicans struggle against their British occupiers. The British come out of the telling as the villain, as the oppressor; something that was intended by Loach: ‘the British stood for opposition to democracy, for oppression of the people, for the brutal destruction of their homes in many cases and their lives.’⁹ For Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty this was never to be a film sympathetic towards the British, although Laverty did remark that he ‘would have enjoyed writing this story from the point of view from a young Tan.’¹⁰ This story, however, is about a small Flying Column who embody the range of political and ideological responses and actions that would have been felt and experienced by those that lived through and engaged in the wider historical context of the era: the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921), the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (December 1921), and the resulting Civil War (1922-23).

The Wind That Shakes the Barley: Plot

The film begins with a country scene. A lively game of hurling takes place in a field, in rural 1920s Ireland. The landscape is given privilege by the camera as the title is superimposed on the screen (fig 3.1). A disagreement between brothers Damien

⁷ Archibald, p. 26.

⁸ Archibald, p. 26.

⁹ Archibald, p. 28.

¹⁰ Archibald, p. 28.

(Cillian Murphy) and Teddy O'Donovan (Padraic Delaney) erupts foreshadowing the future division between them and in Ireland itself. The game comes to an end. Some of the players have gathered, and walk back to their village. This is poor, rural Ireland. A woman is sweeping the steps outside her cottage. The boys go their separate ways.



Figure 3.1: The Irish countryside provides backdrop for the opening credits.

Damien is speaking with a lady from the village (Fig 3.2). We discover that he has recently graduated from university and has been accepted to become a doctor in London. Suddenly, and without warning, a group of Black and Tan soldiers enter the village barking orders, and forcing their will upon the villagers. Shouting, arguing, and confusion fill the air. The villagers are forced against a wall; the women flee into houses (fig 3.2). The leader of the Tans explains their actions as a response to the game of hurling earlier. This is due to the rule that all public meetings are banned. The leader demands names, addresses and occupations. The soldiers are in a belligerent mood, interpreting any sort of disobedience as serious disrespect. It is as if the soldiers want the men to disobey, so as to give them an excuse for retribution. One boy, Micheail (Laurence Barry) is proving difficult. He gives his Gaelic name, instead of his English. The leader interprets this response as tantamount to aggression. Micheail continues to reply in Gaelic, which further enrages the leading

officer. Micheail's mother intervenes, urging her son's obedience to the orders of the officer. They are now ordered to undress. All comply with the order; all, except for Micheail. The officer has pulled him away from the wall and punches him; Micheail retaliates, punching the officer back. The guards pounce on him, beating him with the butts of their rifles, dragging him through the mud into the nearest room. The music intensifies, the others are arguing now. Micheail's mother runs towards the room where her son has been taken, but is restrained by the soldiers. Damien argues with the soldiers, urging them to release the seventeen year old boy (fig 3.2). Finally, two guards exit the room, hands covered in blood. The Black and Tans reform and leave the village. We are now shown the inside of the room; Micheail is tied up, bloodied and lifeless. Everyone now realizes what has happened: Micheail is dead (fig 3.2).



Figure 3.2: Top left: Damien greets a woman from a small Irish village. Top right: The men of the village are held at gunpoint. Bottom left: Damien protests in vain. Bottom right: Micheail is dead.

In a similar way to *Amistad* (1997), Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* opens with a shocking event that serves to engage the audience's attention. Unlike *Amistad*, however, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* does not linger on the bloody details of the violence. In fact, rarely is blood seen throughout the movie. This opening is the first in a string of violent and heart-wrenching scenes as two brothers' fight for their freedom from British oppression.

Neither the murder of Micheail nor the insistence of his family and friends is enough to deter Damien from following his dreams in London. Damien's change of heart comes at the train station as he is leaving to follow this dream. A group of Black and Tan soldiers beat first a station attendant and then the driver for refusing to allow them on with their weapons. Damien wants to help his countrymen but cannot intervene; it is here that he realizes he must stay behind and join in the fight for freedom.

Damien joins Teddy in the local Flying Column, a guerrilla group operating under the central leadership of the Irish Republican Army. From here the story progresses at a frenetic pace. Damien and his allies grow from being inexperienced trainees to frontline soldiers. They raid the local police station for weapons, exact revenge on a small group of Black and Tan soldiers for their indiscretions, and resist torture and escape imprisonment. All along the way tragedy follows Damien and Teddy; first, when Damien must execute one of his own men, and finally when the two brothers are forced apart on opposite sides of the fight.

This division between the two brothers occurs following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 and represents an important shift in the main characters' struggle for freedom. Teddy decides to ratify the treaty, while Damien, who becomes more radicalised as the movie progresses, rejects it. This puts the two brothers against one another as Damien continues to fight with the Irish Republican movement, while Teddy becomes the local commander of the Irish Free State group,

who take the place of the Black and Tans as the enemy. All of this comes to a head as Damien is arrested by Teddy for killing two of his soldiers. Teddy has no choice but to execute Damien as he refuses to give up information. The final sequences of the movie end with no resolution or uplifting message. Instead we are left with the anguish of Sinead as Teddy gives her the news of her lover's death.

Analysis

The Wind That Shakes the Barley is a linear story with a beginning, middle, and an end; but its ending is not obviously progressive. As Robert Rosenstone has suggested, however, some dramatic features may act as a counterexample to this notion of an uplifting moral narrative.¹¹ The film explores the pain of foreign occupation from a Republican perspective, and ends with the tragedy of civil violence; an experience which is represented so clearly by the execution of one brother (Damien), on the orders of the other (Teddy). The overarching message appears to be that we are much better off today, but the progressive nature of the message is muddied by the contemporary reference to the occupation of Iraq. *Amistad*, with its obvious uplifting moral message is much more typical of the mainstream dramatic feature film. Nevertheless, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* does contain a concluding moral message even if it is less obvious than that of *Amistad*.

The 'big picture' in *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* is the representation of British colonial rule in 1920s Ireland from the perspective of the Irish. Ken Loach has certainly got this right; even an attempt at such a representation is commendable when, as one critic noted, 'many of us know nothing about how Ireland came to be divided into a free state and a part of the United Kingdom.'¹² As was pointed out, Loach received serious criticism from right-wing media in Great Britain for his attempt; but perhaps none were more damning than *The Times*' Tim Luckhurst who

¹¹ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 56.

¹² Larry Williams, 'The Wind That Shakes the Barley', *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, 4 September 2007.

compared Loach to Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl. Luckhurst wrote that during the period of ‘de-Nazification of postwar Germany’ Riefenstahl, ‘Hitler’s favourite film director, was classified guilty of the lowest degree of complicity with the regime.’¹³ It was concluded that Riefenstahl ‘did not fully understand the evil cause to which her work contributed. Ken Loach does not deserve such indulgence. He knows precisely what he is doing.’¹⁴ This type of criticism, as appalling and misleading as it may be, does illuminate the fierce opposition that Loach faced upon release of his film. Loach has labelled such articles as penned by ‘weasel journalists who apologize for every British brutality’ and called them the ‘whores of imperialism.’¹⁵ This type of opposition that the movie faced in some sections of the media clearly shows that Loach’s work has succeeded in thrusting his subject matter into the forefront of the English public’s mind.

Luckhurst’s article is written from the perspective of someone who has seen the film; he claims that ‘*The Wind That Shakes the Barley* is not just wrong [but that] ... [i]t infantilises its subject matter and reawakens ancient feuds.’¹⁶ At the time of its publication, however, the film had not yet been released, leading one journalist to check with the production company who had no record of Luckhurst attending a screening.¹⁷ Luckhurst is not the only critic to pan the film without even seeing it. Ruth Dudley Edwards severely criticized Loach’s work in her May column of the *Daily Mail*, and again in a June column for *The Guardian* in which she explains the ‘reason why I won’t be going to his film (which I couldn’t see before I wrote about it as it had been shown only at Cannes) is because I can’t stand its sheer predictability.’¹⁸ Edwards argues against the portrayal of Irish republicans as

¹³ Tim Luckhurst, ‘Director in a Class of His Own’, *The Times*, 31 May 2006, p. 20.

¹⁴ Luckhurst, ‘Director in a Class of His Own’, p. 20.

¹⁵ Archibald, p. 30.

¹⁶ Luckhurst. ‘Director in a Class of His Own’, p. 20.

¹⁷ George Monbiot, ‘If we knew more about Ireland, we might never have invaded Iraq’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2006.

¹⁸ Ruth Dudley Edwards, ‘What about making Black and Tans: the movie?’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2006.

‘tormented idealists who sometimes do things they shouldn’t’, while the British are portrayed as ‘cynical, brutal and despicable’.¹⁹

While criticizing Loach as a Republican apologist, these writers seem to be ignoring the fact that the kinds of events and actions that are portrayed in the movie did happen. George Monbiot, writing in *The Guardian*, explains that reprisals ‘by members of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Auxiliary division are documented by historians of all political stripes.’²⁰ Moreover, ‘policemen visited homes in places such as Thurles, Cork, Upperchurch and Galway and shot or bayoneted their unarmed inhabitants.’²¹ Monbiot goes on to argue that no historian denies that the constabulary ‘fired into crowds or threw grenades or beat people up in the streets or set fire to homes and businesses in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Bantry, Kilmallock, Balbriggan, Miltown Malbay, Lahinch, Ennistymon, Trim and other towns.’²²

Loach’s work, far from romanticizing the Irish Republicans as freedom fighters with no other options but armed resistance, shows us the stark reality of the historical context while humanizing the participants in order to more fully explain their political positions. Let us not forget that it would be a crude generalization by Edwards to claim that *all* Irish Republicans were savage murderers who did not think there was a mandate for rebellion. This movie does not attempt to apologize for the violent actions of the Irish Republican Army. Rather, it is an insight into the experience of occupation. Loach’s film is but one possible perspective. As has been noted, the special function of filmic representations of the past is that they can (and do) contribute to a multiple perspective when taken as a whole with varying representations of similar themes. If a movie is made that takes a sympathetic viewpoint of the Tans then in this way both films would contribute to a less problematic, fuller view.

¹⁹ Edwards, ‘What about making Black and Tans: the movie?’.

²⁰ Monbiot, ‘If we knew more about Ireland, we might never have invaded Iraq?’.

²¹ Monbiot, ‘If we knew more about Ireland, we might never have invaded Iraq?’.

²² Monbiot, ‘If we knew more about Ireland, we might never have invaded Iraq?’.

This view of the occupied can certainly be seen as a comment on more contemporary situations, most obviously, the British invasion of Iraq. As Loach suggests, however, ‘it has parallels at every point in history where there is an army of occupation, where there is an empire trying to stamp out an independence movement’.²³ The lesson that should be learned from such a treatment is that occupations lead to violence perpetrated on and by both the occupiers and the occupied. It is this understanding that led Monbiot to conclude ‘[i]f we knew more about Ireland, the invasion of Iraq might never have happened.’²⁴

Overall, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* has received mostly positive reviews.²⁵ The British press proved the film’s harshest critic. This is unsurprising given the film’s sharp criticism of British colonial rule in Ireland. The international media was more forgiving in its outlook. One critic proclaimed it as ‘another fine film by the gifted Ken Loach, whose *Hidden Agenda* (1990) also condemned British treatment of the Irish.’²⁶ Another critic praised Loach for his film’s success as the 2006 Cannes Film Festival which he explained as a ‘testament not only to its craftsmanship, but also to the way its themes continue to waft through you long after the movie ends.’²⁷ With the two opposite viewpoints expressed by various members of popular media clear, how exactly does this film work to portray the past and tell the lives of two brothers caught up in a world of civil strife?

As we have seen, Rosenstone explains that a characteristic of the mainstream dramatic feature is to present history as the story of famous individuals. Unlike *Amistad*, all of the characters in this film are fictional. The only exception made is for

²³ Archibald, p. 30.

²⁴ Monbiot, ‘If we knew more about Ireland, we might never have invaded Iraq’.

²⁵ http://au.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_wind_that_shakes_the_barley and <http://www.metacritic.com/film/titles/windthatshakeshebarley>

²⁶ Williams, ‘*The Wind That Shakes the Barley*’.

²⁷ Phil Villarreal, ‘The awful cost of freedom: *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* a contrast in visual beauty and violence’, *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, May 24 2007. pg. 1

the occasional reference to certain historical personalities that were prominent at the time: Michael Collins, Winston Churchill. The reasoning for this appears to be Paul Laverty's desire not to be 'bogged down by the biographic detail of historical characters.'²⁸ In this way the fictional characters can embody the responses to the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the degrees of opinion held. In other words, if Loach had picked actual historical personages to represent wider events and themes then it would be expected that the specific details of their lives would be more closely followed, making it difficult for him to represent the overwhelming tragedy of the time. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* has a distinct advantage over a film like *Amistad*: its representation of fictional characters will not be so heavily scrutinized by historians and reviewers. It is easier for the filmmaker to present historical truths with fictional characters: 'On the screen, history must be fictional in order to be true!'²⁹ Loach at once shows the interconnectedness of small rural Ireland. The members of the Flying Column are friends, lovers, brothers, and family. All of this serves to make the civil strife that erupts following the Anglo-Irish treaty all the more tragic and exemplifies Ireland at large. It is not just this family that is represented, but the whole country. The film is clearly intended to be a history from below. This is confirmed when Laverty explains the influence of 'the wonderful historian Howard Zinn' on his view of the past.³⁰ The movie is intended to be about the 'lived experience of ordinary people.'³¹ It is fitting therefore that we should examine the main characters involved.

²⁸ Archibald, p. 27.

²⁹ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 70.

³⁰ Archibald, p. 27. Howard Zinn is famous for his publication *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (London; New York: Longman, 1980). His work is History from below as it examines American history from the bottom up; It focuses particularly on the effects of government policy on the poor, women, and non-whites throughout US history, documents labor movements and equality movements in more depth than one normally sees, and points out the mixed and disappointing records of US cultural heroes.

³¹ Archibald, p. 27.

Damien O'Donovon

Damien has just completed University and has won a place in London to train to become a doctor. This would have been no small thing for someone from rural 1920s Ireland as poverty was common while opportunity was not. Damien has an opportunity that no one else in the film has – to escape the oppression of foreign occupation and to educate himself in order to help his people. This is why he is resolute in his decision to leave, even following the murder of his friend in the first scenes of the film. It is also what makes his decision to stay all the more difficult and shows just how much Damien cares about helping his people. Damien is the smart one in a group of shady men deemed by the prevailing authorities to be criminals. He has opportunities the others do not: a chance to live his life free of bloodshed and suspicion. Damien spends the entire movie trying to come to grips with the idea that ‘it is easy to know what you are for, quite another to know what you are against.’³²



Figure 3.3: Damien O'Donovon (left).

Teddy O'Donovon

Teddy is presented as a natural leader; he has all the attributes necessary: charm, charisma, and a strong will. Finbar may be the leader of the Column, but the men

³² Quote from the movie.

seem more inclined to gravitate towards Teddy. Initially, Teddy is quiet and barely speaks, but it is obvious that Damien looks up to him. As the situation becomes more complex, Teddy begins to talk more and explain his position certain issues. Teddy is a man of principle ‘who really believed that the treaty was the best possibility, that it was, as Michael Collins argued, “the freedom to achieve freedom.”’³³ By the film’s end Teddy is a hardened soldier who has seen a lot of action, which proves to be the undoing of his relationship with his brother.



Figure 3.4: Teddy O’Donovon.

Dan (Liam Cunningham)

Damien witnesses Dan receive a beating at the hands of the Black and Tans at the beginning of the film, which is the final straw for Damien as he cancels his trip to London to stay and fight. Dan and Damien’s relationship is a pivotal one throughout the film. In many ways Dan is an older, more mature version of Damien. Dan embodies Damien’s values and beliefs. When Damien and Teddy first disagree in a pivotal scene in a Republican court-house it is Dan who echoes what Damien believes. The relationship is so pivotal because ‘while Damien has only had these

³³ Archibald, p. 29.

ideas in his head, Dan has lived them.’³⁴ Dan’s road to his political standpoints came following an extensive strike in Dublin in 1913. Following this lockout he became involved in John Connolly’s Citizen Army. Loach explained that even though the ‘Connolly strand wasn’t that strong in the south west, in the rural areas ... it was a significant element in the [R]epublican movement as a whole – that’s why we wanted to have a character such as Dan.’³⁵ Dan was born in Dublin and was uneducated, ‘until he was deported to Frongoch camp in Wales after 1916, where he learned to read and write.’³⁶ Dan is a socialist and embodies the viewpoint of the poor worker.



Figure 3.5: Dan.

Sinead (Orla Fitzgerald)

From the beginning of the film Sinead and her family experience tremendous suffering. Her brother Micheail is the young boy who is murdered in the opening scenes. Her family’s farm-house is burned down in later scenes, and the film ends

³⁴ Tom Behan, 10 June 2006, ‘Ken Loach on the Wind That Shakes the Barley’, *SocialistWorkerOnline*, [online], available URL: http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=8973 (29 November 2007).

³⁵ Tom Behan, 10 June 2006, ‘Ken Loach on the Wind That Shakes the Barley’, *SocialistWorkerOnline*, [online], available URL: http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=8973 (29 November 2007).

³⁶ Information from the official website, available URL: <http://www.thewindthatshakesbarley.co.uk> (29 November 2007).

with her painful grief upon hearing the news of her lover Damien's execution. Sinead's character is very important. She not only represents the women that were involved in the Republican struggle but provides the strength that Damien needs to continue fighting for his ideals when his own strength wavers.



Figure 3.6: Sinead.

The countryside and tragedy

These characters play out their relationships as civil unrest unfolds around them, and is indeed often spread by them. They personalize the drama; their pain is our pain throughout. The tragedy inherent in the narrative of the film is emphasized by the manipulation of the specific features of the filmic medium. The countryside plays an important role in the film throughout juxtaposed with the terrible violence that occurs at regular intervals, effectively transporting us to the past and immersing us in its drama. The country is serene, exquisite, and seemingly created for peace, not war. The contrast between the serenity of the countryside and the stark reality of the brutal violence of the film are clear in the scenes following the capture of Damien, Teddy and fellow members of the Flying Column.

A young member of the column, Chris Reilly, is a stable hand for a wealthy Anglo-Irish landowner Sir John Hamilton (Roger Allam). Sir John interrogates him, threatening his family (fig 3.7). Chris gives up the information the men require and the Flying Column is arrested. Teddy is tortured; all are beaten and scheduled for execution (fig 3.7). The men are saved by a young guard sympathetic to their cause, all except for three who are in a cell for which the guard does not have the key. They are forced to leave the men behind as they flee for their lives. The men retreat to the security of the countryside (fig 3.7). A safe house awaits them. They regroup and Damien tends to the wounds Teddy received from his torture while imprisoned.

The group pays a visit to Sir John's estate. They storm into Sir John's office; shouting and barking orders. Sir John is instructed to recite a letter given to him by Teddy (fig 3.7).

Sir John: I feel duty bound to inform you of my suspicions concerning a member of my staff. Recently, I have observed some unsavoury characters trespassing on my lands; most of them a trumped-up bunch of rustics, shop-hands, and corner boys with delusions of grandeur. I am now certain my own employee, Chris Reilly, takes orders from trench coat thug, Teddy O'Donovan; who I know is a top priority for you.



Figure 3.7: Top left: Chris is questioned. Top right: Teddy faces torture. Bottom left: Teddy and the men flee to the safety of the country. Bottom right: Sir John is threatened.

From here Teddy and Damien find Chris and take him with them along with Sir John. The scenes that follow are vitally important at communicating themes that are prevalent throughout the film. The scenes are important for the “development” of Damien’s character in terms of a progression of acts that become more and more extreme – stealing guns, murdering soldiers, breaking out of prison, and now, executing his friend. They are equally important at conveying the continual theme of loss and gain: the men were broken out of prison, but had to leave men behind; now they must kill one of their own. The victories are never complete. They don’t want to kill Chris, but they know they must. Information was leaked, a standard must be set. This hardly seems like a ‘romantic’ representation of the IRA. The tragedy here is to be found in the interconnectedness of everybody present. They come from small villages in rural Ireland; they know each other. They know each other’s families; they

are each others families. This is a difficult task. The music frames these scenes; it is slow, tragic and contemplative.

A horse arrives carrying a young girl with a message, which she hands to Damien (fig 3.8). The message explains those that were left behind have indeed been executed, and orders are issued to execute all spies. One of the group exclaims, “not Chris as well!” There is silence among the group until someone expresses their feelings regarding the orders. Conversation erupts; most are against killing him and division exists. Damien is silent, signifying that he knows what must happen. There is no way around it; they have been given their orders. Chris must die. He readies his gun. Damien is visibly upset as they lead Sir John to a spot on top of a hill. Damien wonders how he got to be in this situation when he studied anatomy for four years. This is a crisis for Damien; from this point he will not return. He holds out hope that this is all worth it – the loss for the gain. Damien asks Sir John for his letters; one is for his wife, the other for his children (fig 3.8). Damien moves into position, turns and faces Sir John; Sir John cries out, “you’ll never beat us, ever!” Damien shoots Sir John.

Chris now finds himself being led up a hill. The scene is a sombre one, with a heavy tone. No one is speaking; not to each other, not to Chris. They move in silence, the only sound that can be heard is the whistle of the wind speeding through the grass. Chris, following Damien’s instruction, moves to the top of a hill. He asks for Chris’ letters; he didn’t write any not knowing what to say. His mother cannot read; all he asks is that Damien tells her he loves her. The dialogue that follows leads to us to Damien shooting Chris (fig 3.8).

Chris: Promise me, Damien. Promise me you won't bury me next to him? [points to Sir John]

Damien: The chapel. Do you remember, on the way up? Do you remember?

Chris: Yeah.

Damien: In there.

Chris: Tell Teddy I'm sorry. I'm scared, Damien.

Damien: [sighs] Have you said your prayers?

Chris: Yeah.

Damien: I'll protect you.



Figure 3.8: Top left: A message is delivered. Top right: Sir John hands over his letters. Bottom left and right: Damien prepares to shoot Chris.

Conclusion

Loach's decision to make poor rural Ireland the background for his representation of the destruction wrought in the wake of partition works on several levels. It acts as a peaceful, natural contrast to the unnatural nature of an unwanted foreign occupation; and as a contrast to the hard, cold nature of murder and warfare that these characters experienced. The country scenes also serve to show the scale of local support, without which guerrilla efforts such as the local Flying Columns would not exist. The farmhouses that Damien and Teddy visit on numerous occasions throughout the film would have been vital bases for food and rest for IRA volunteers (fig 3.9).



Figure 3.9: One of the farmhouses that Damien and Teddy visit during the course of the film. Such safe houses would have been vital bases for rest and food for rural Republicans.

The Wind That Shakes the Barley is a successful historical drama because it deals with a contentious and controversial portion of the Irish and colonial British past. It is most potent as an insight into the lives, political views, struggles and moral failings of those that helped form the IRA. The claims of Edwards that this film ‘romanticizes’ the members of the IRA are unfounded. Damien O’Donovon is a deeply flawed character who makes painful and inevitably destructive decisions in the name of following his lofty ideals. The film ends in terrible tragedy as Teddy orders the execution of his own brother; powerfully symbolizing the destructive nature of the Civil War that raged around them. The movie offers no message of hope in its narrative, but a lesson of the brutal nature of foreign occupation. The movie does have its flaws; as a complete and balanced telling of the conflict from multiple perspectives – outside of merely the Republican point of view – it fails. This movie, however, was never intended to be such a story; Loach meant to accentuate the Republican voices, and to minimize those of the British. This is the nature of the mainstream dramatic feature: linear and singular in its interpretation. *The Wind That*

Shakes the Barley does, however, give us ‘history as process.’³⁷ Damien is at once a man, a socialist, a lover, a brother, a friend, a Catholic, a member of the IRA, a medical student, a murderer, a local hero. The film is well served by Loach’s ability to convey a range of sophisticated information within the confines of a linear story. Ultimately this film presents us with a powerful story that tells the past in such a way that forces us to face the reality of the brutal nature of foreign occupation in any time and context.

³⁷ Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), p. 48.

Conclusion

This thesis has acknowledged the fact of the visual media in contemporary society as popular transmitter of historical ideas and particulars. The mainstream dramatic feature film is but one form of the visual media that have become such a popular mode for representing the past. In light of this, and due to the insistence of scholars that visual analysis skills are ‘underutilized’ by the historian, this thesis has presented an understanding of the concerns and issues raised thus far by those scholars that have contributed to this growing sub-field in history. With this synthesis of ideas and the case-studies of *Amistad* (1997) and *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006), this thesis has attempted to ‘convince you that the world of history on the screen is one worth attending to, one that can render an important past, [and] do a kind of history that is complex enough so that we must learn how to read it.’¹

Chapter One engaged primarily with literature that has argued for and against the historical film as a legitimate representation of the past. It noted the importance of the visual media in contemporary society, highlighting the potential of the visual media for reaching a large general audience. The traditional criticisms of historians who have critiqued the historical film were considered, as well as the notion of historical veracity and historical ‘responsibility’. The answer to many of the critical remarks regarding the potential of film can be found in the nature of the medium itself and in an exploration of our (historians) understanding of the notion of ‘history’. More than anything, the mainstream dramatic format troubles the traditional historian because of its linear presentation and its often singular interpretation of events and causality. Moreover, the potential for an audience’s ‘passive’ reading of the images on the screen is troubling. This notion, however, is something that can be addressed by the

¹ Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2006), p. 2.

teaching of visual analytical skills to undergraduate and graduate students and even to established historians themselves. This is, in part, the fundamental rationale for this thesis: to further our understanding and engagement in visual analysis.

Chapter Two focused on Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad*. This film was chosen as it had received sufficient criticism from historians to make it a fruitful case-study. Historians' focused their reviews primarily on the limitations of *Amistad* and perceived misrepresentations inherent in its presentation of the past on screen. These conclusions were often based on wildly divergent criteria amidst myriad understandings of the historical film itself. Most common among the criteria employed by reviewers was the 'implicit' approach that Robert Rosenstone has identified.² Many of the reviews struggled to come to terms with the fictionalizing that occurs in the film; the representations of Lewis Tappan, Roger Sherman Baldwin, and the fictional character Theodore Joadson received the most attention. Judgments about 'data, verifiability, argument, evidence, and logic' prevailed, with only a few reviewers attempting to understand why exactly Spielberg chose the portrayals he did.³ This thesis suggests that Spielberg's *Amistad* is a success in the end for the way it gives voice to the captive Africans and their yearning for freedom. *Amistad* vividly displays the traumas of the Middle Passage and the evils of slavery. It is a film that confronts the dark past of the United States and the paradox inherent in its coming-of-age as a republic that supported 'both liberty and slavery.'⁴

Chapter Three analysed Ken Loach's film *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. It is a film that received much criticism from right-wing commentators in the United Kingdom upon its release, mainly for its portrayal of the IRA, which opponents of Loach's vision claimed to be a sympathetic viewpoint. Far from being sympathetic to

² Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 48-9.

³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, pp. 48-49, 50. (Check this reference for accuracy).

⁴ Howard Jones, 'Amistad: Movie, history, and the academy awards', *The History Teacher*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (May 1998), p. 381.

the IRA Loach instead focused on the human tragedy of foreign occupation, choosing to portray the British occupation of 1920s Ireland from the vantage point of a local Flying Column in rural Republican Ireland. The film examined the grim reality of civil war in an occupied nation with clear contemporary reference to the invasion of Iraq. It works on many levels as a piece of history that observes the high human cost of foreign occupation. One of the criticisms levelled at the film identified its representation of the Black and Tan soldiers as brutal thugs who terrorized the local population. While this view of the Tans simplifies historical reality, Loach intentionally downplayed their role in the film as he intended *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* to be about the occupied and not the occupiers. The Tans are certainly portrayed in a disparaging light, but the fact that atrocities were committed by them on the Irish population is not in dispute. Given the constraints of the mainstream dramatic format, the solution here would be a separate film that looked at the situation from the perspective of a young Tan soldier, or regiment, in order to more fully explain the circumstances that informed their experience.

This thesis has looked primarily at the dramatic feature, or, more precisely, the mainstream dramatic feature, which is governed by the conventions of Hollywood cinema. Certainly, Hollywood does produce films that deserve the serious attention of historians – *Reds* (1981), *JFK*, *Schindler's List* (1993), *Amistad*, to name but a few – and it has been the intention of this thesis to understand the medium of film itself in a broad sense. It is, however, exactly this submission of the dramatic film to the conventions of Hollywood that has troubled Rosenstone. For Rosenstone, the form or structure of the 'standard historical film' was too rigid and started to reflect 'the standard written history ... in its conventions of realism'. It incorporated the 'aesthetic values of the nineteenth-century novel'.⁵ The dramatic feature presents a past that is different 'both from fiction and from academic history', This is a past that

⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 11.

does not depend solely or entirely upon data or historical veracity ‘for the way it asserts truths or engages the ongoing discourse of history’.⁶

Moreover, the dramatic feature, perhaps even better than the documentary format can permit ‘us to speculate on a historical character’s motivation’.⁷ Dramatic film allows the filmmaker to imagine an ‘individual’s association with friends and adversaries’ in a medium where the ‘gaps’ in the archival record are not an impediment to telling about the past.⁸ Despite the virtues of the dramatic feature, film has a much harder time than the written word in easily communicating the complexities and ambiguities of the past. Producers of the dramatic feature are often ‘reluctant to portray ambiguity in character development’ for fear of alienating the audience, or, more seriously, rendering the characters un-relatable to the viewer.⁹ The particular considerations of the producers of the dramatic feature – audience reception, and box office takings for example – often limit its scope and perspective to the ‘great man’ theory of history; strong personalities create events in the dramatic feature.¹⁰

Currently, the dramatic feature and the documentary are the most common forms of history on film. Rosenstone has noted, however, that it would be a mistake to consider these as the only types of history on film. In recent decades filmmakers from a variety of countries have ‘begun to make movies that convey some of the intellectual density that we associate with the written word’. These films propose imaginative new ways of dealing with historical material.¹¹ Subsequently, Rosenstone

⁶ Robert Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 13.

⁷ Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 5.

⁸ Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, p. 5.

⁹ Robert Brent Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December 1988), p. 1220.

¹⁰ Toplin, ‘The filmmaker as historian’, p. 1220.

¹¹ Robert Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words: Reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (December, 1988), p. 1181.

has coined the term ‘The New History Film’.¹² The best of these films ‘present the possibility of more than one interpretation of events;’ in some respects following the *Rashomon* (1950) blueprint rendering the world as ‘multiple, complex, and intermediate, rather than a series of self-enclosed, neat, linear stories.’¹³ This type of film has arisen from ‘Western radical and Third World filmmakers’ who, in their struggle against Hollywood conventions and ‘codes of representation’ have utilized ‘modernism (expressionism, surrealism) ... even post-modernism, as modes of representation’ for depicting and dramatizing the significance of historical data that are particular to ‘their own social and historical realities.’¹⁴

In the last three decades there has been a considerable change in the form and practice of the historical film. Rosenstone notes that this applies to both ‘dramatic and documentary’ features.¹⁵ He writes of filmmakers all over the world struggling during this period to ‘find new ways of coming to grips with the burden of the past.’¹⁶ The result has been films that have tended to ‘grow out of communities that see themselves in desperate need of historical connections’. These include nations where ‘political systems are in upheaval’, societies that are in recovery from ‘totalitarian regimes or the horrors of war’, in ‘postcolonial nations’, and amongst ‘ethnic,

¹² This term first appeared in Robert Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, pp. 4-5. The book is an examination of a new kind of film that deviates from Hollywood conventions, and in fact has arisen in opposition to them.

¹³ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, p. 1182. Rosenstone believes that the names of these filmmakers will not be well known within the United States, the first example he gives is ex-pat American Chris Marker’s *San Soleil* (1982). This film juxtaposes images of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands with images of Japan. Marker does this in order to understand what he calls “the poles of existence” in the late twentieth-century world. Jill Godmilow’s *Far From Poland* (1985), is a self-reflexive, multi-level work that utilizes a variety of visual sources to create a highly unusual “history” of solidarity – it includes footage smuggled out of Poland, images from American newscasts, “acted” interviews from original texts sourced from the Polish press, “real” interviews with Polish exiles in the United States, voice-over dialogues of the filmmaker with a fictional Fidel Castro.

¹⁴ Rosenstone, ‘History in images/history in words’, pp. 1183, 1184. Rosenstone cites: Teshome H. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1982), and Roy Armes, *Third World Filmmaking and the West* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), especially 87-100; and, Hayden White, ‘The burden of history’, *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), pp. 110-34, especially 126-27, 131. This article is also reprinted in White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 27-50.

¹⁵ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 3. Rosenstone notes that this change has taken place in the ‘last quarter-century’, given that *Revisioning History* was published in 1995, it is appropriate that we expand this time-frame to include at least three decades.

¹⁶ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 4.

political, social, or sexual minorities involved in the search to recapture or create viable heritages.’¹⁷ Efforts that have sprung from such conditions are, ‘in form and content,’ diametrically opposed to the conventions imposed by Hollywood ‘costume dramas’ that use the past ‘solely as a setting for romance and adventure.’¹⁸

The phenomenon of ‘The New History Film’ has resulted in a creation of a past that ‘is not the same as the past provided by traditional history’.¹⁹ Moreover, Rosenstone asserts that it should certainly ‘be called history – if by that word we mean a serious encounter with the lingering meaning of past events.’²⁰ It has even been noted that these films have been produced so readily in certain regions that it is possible to conceptualize them as ‘counterhistories to the usual nationalist narratives. In some cases the visual historiography preceded parallel changes in written historiography.’²¹

This type of film is certainly an answer to those historians who chastise the typical Hollywood motion picture as linear, seamless, and complete; it may in fact prove to be the harbinger of a change in the way Hollywood presents its historical data. The new history film is a work that refuses the pretence that the screen can somehow be an ‘unmediated window onto the past’.²² Rosenstone explains that these works stand ‘somewhere between dramatic history and documentary, traditional history and personal essay,’ utilizing the full capabilities of the media in order to ‘create multiple meanings’ of the past.²³

This thesis has engaged with and assessed literature that has taken on the challenge of defining the relationship between history and film. Along the way questions have arisen that concern the very nature of what we mean when we use the word history.

¹⁷ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 5.

¹⁸ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 5.

²⁰ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 5.

²¹ Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 5.

²² Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 12.

²³ Rosenstone, *Visions*, p. 12.

The result of this examination has been to advocate a more serious engagement on behalf of historians with the appropriation of visual analysis skills. The future research areas in this field are numerous. The new history film in particular provides a format that is more closely related to academic modes of historical representation – both in its output of works that contest popular accounts of the past and in its representation of the past as complex and constituted.

List of Sources

This list of sources is set out under the following headings:

Secondary Sources

- I. Books
- II. Journal Articles and Chapters in Books
- III. Films
- IV. Online Sources

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- Amistad*, motion picture, directed by Steven Spielberg, DreamWorks, USA, 1997
- Burn!*, motion picture, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, Europee Associate SAS, 1969
- Far From Poland*, documentary, directed by Jill Godmilow, Beach Street Films, 1984
- Glory*, motion picture, directed by Edward Zwick, TriStar Pictures, USA, 1989
- Hearts and Minds*, documentary, directed by Peter Davis, BBS Productions, USA, 1974
- Hidden Agenda*, motion picture, directed by Ken Loach, Initial, UK, 1990
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, motion picture, directed by Philip Kaufman, Solofilm, USA, 1978
- JFK*, motion picture, directed by Oliver Stone, Warner Bros. Pictures, USA, 1991

LBJ: The Early Years, television, directed by Peter Werner, Louis Rudolph Productions, USA, 1987

Mississippi Burning, motion picture, directed by Alan Parker, Orion Pictures Corporation, USA, 1988

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Reds, motion picture, directed by Warren Beatty, Paramount Pictures, USA, 1981

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