

Review

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Amistad. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Djimon Hounsou, Anthony Hopkins, and Matthew McCounaghey. Dreamworks. 1997.

Kundun. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Music. Philip Glass. Cinematography. Roger Deakins. 1997.

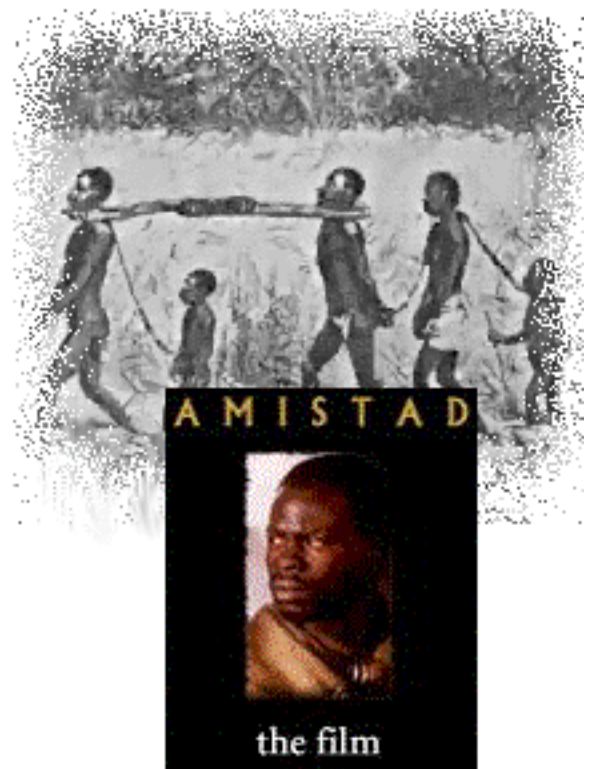
Speilberg and Scorsese Do History

Despite the academic fashion for relativistic thinking, History does exist--discernible, knowable, describable--at least potentially. Something happened. Somebody (some group) did something to somebody else. Yes, it's hard to find the truth--especially if you weren't there. Everything after the fact is constructed, told, narrated, skewed, bent, straightened again.

There's no place you can go to find "history." There's no big book of "facts" in the library--as millions of students seem to think, while undergoing the schoolish ritual of liberal arts' "research"--a process reinforcing key foundational delusions of bourgeois philosophy: false and confusing dichotomies about "fact and opinion" and "objective and subjective." Personal opinions can't prove to be objective, they're told, and objective-sounding words must be true.

People need to know that works found in that library are all written by human beings with a take and a viewpoint. Though it's important to learn that everything is "constructed," having a viewpoint neither detracts from nor confers authority on a writer. Something, ultimately, must be true--however long and winding the search for it.

The accumulation of historical knowledge, in particular, the understanding of centuries' long struggle and transformations, is likely to be fragmented. In evaluating historical films, it's increasingly difficult to discern what exactly a diverse film audience,



of various ages, throughout the world, will take from any single, fictional historical film. It may be that we all put History together, out of bits and pieces, in the context of our particular intellectual development.

Who knows what resonances remain? Maybe someone currently 20 or so saw *Cry Freedom* (1987) or *Glory* (1989) or *Malcolm X* (1992) at the time of their release, maybe with their parents. Perhaps they now have a fuller understanding of the Civil War or the struggle in South Africa or the America which Malcolm lived in and moved. Perhaps they have a larger context for putting all these things together. Perhaps they can critique the point-of-view and the devices (such as the parallel white journalist/ black activist story lines in *Cry Freedom*) of these films. But maybe all that remains are glimpses-- images and feelings emanating from Denzel Washington's great portrayals of Malcolm or Steve Biko or a black Civil War soldier. Maybe they were moved, on some gut level, as someone my age was affected watching the intense and committed Paul Muni fighting for truth and justice in old '30s movies shown on TV in the 1950s. Substitute any other set of hypothetical viewers and the impact on audience consciousness varies greatly.

Historical films are so rare that, sometimes, even the introduction to our consciousness of a person, event or period has a positive effect. As a child, I first learned of John Brown, portrayed by Raymond Massey as a righteous figure, though a raving megalomaniac, in an old film shown on TV. Through the years I learned other things about Brown and the whole Abolitionist movement, and occasionally I wondered what ever happened to that old "John Brown movie." Decades later, while channel surfing, I discovered there was no "John Brown movie." Massey's cameo was actually tucked inside a trashy cavalry yarn (*Santa Fe Trail*) glorifying the exploits of Brown pursuer Jeb Stuart (Errol Flynn) and Gen. Custer (Ronald Reagan).

7Historical films are so rare that it's significant that two of our most accomplished American directors, filmmakers with great mass appeal and in mid-career--Steven Spielberg in *Amistad* and Martin Scorsese in *Kundun*--have fashioned historical films. Both have made films which present incomplete historical stories--films which are purposely limited in their gaze, but which have moments that will live beyond their context, and are definitely worth seeing.

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If Steven Spielberg were an adult in the 30s, he would have made a great director of Warner Brothers' social problem dramas. Spielberg's *Amistad* is the product of classical liberal Hollywood sensibility. In its best courtroom scenes, it echoes the grand cinematic tradition of Paul Muni, in *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), defending Dreyfus or, in another era, Spencer Tracy as Darrow in Stanley Kramer's *Inherit The Wind* (1960) or Tracy as the Chief Magistrate in Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961). These were the kind of liberal films Spielberg and those of us near his age grew up with--on TV and in the movies--movies which made film itself seem "important" and social consciousness (seen as fighting for others) appear "rewarding."

At the heart of this courtroom drama lies the story of rebellion. The 1839 rebellion aboard the Spanish slaver *Amistad*, led by Cinque (played by the impressive Djimon Hounsou), has long been an emblematic event of "hidden history"-- a key part of the project to re-write the American historical narrative. Part of the effort to establish the slaves themselves as main actors in a story too often thought of as North vs. South, slave owners vs. abolitionists. Hundreds of organized slave rebellions, large and small, broke out during the half century before the Civil War. Some--such as those led by Denmark Vesey or Nat Turner or Gabriel Proser--have been recounted in books and films; hundreds more remain unknown. A variety of motives and alliances fueled the Civil War, but the slaves themselves were not passive onlookers.

In *Amistad* the movie, the rebellion itself is prologue. The horrendous conditions of the Middle Passage, leading to the slave revolt with its ensuing rivers of blood, is powerfully enacted in the flickering darkness of the film's jolting pre-title sequence. It's a sequence so powerful that the government of Jamaica, a country overwhelmingly inhabited by descendants of West African slaves, ordered the section cut. Given such an amputation, Jamaican audiences would be plunged directly into a talky courtroom drama, leavened by moments of cross-cultural comedy.

The courtroom drama proceeds in two stages. The *Amistad* slaves, freed by their own hands, had been picked up at sea and jailed in New Haven where the Spanish government sues for the release and custody of its "property." Local abolitionists hire a young lawyer (Matthew McCounaghey) to defend the slaves. Later the case reaches the U.S. Supreme Court where the slaves' position is argued by John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), a former President of the United States.

The slaves' bid for complete freedom or a return home is being argued in a cultural context and a foreign language they don't understand, and it's this nexus of "communications" issues which forms the film's major motif. Unable or unwilling to tell the slaves' story wholly from their perspective, Spielberg brings the problematic of storytelling and historical narration to the forefront, almost co-equal to the substantive issue of the right to rebel.

Ever mindful of entertainment value, Spielberg loosens up the audience with a series of cross-cultural jokes which, as products of a 90s "enlightened" liberalism, try hard not to be at the expense of the Africans (though, unfortunately, they're often at the expense of other groups). Beginning with the New Haven scenes, the audience begins to understand the Africans' discussion through sub-titles. At first, the Africans see their lawyer as an incomprehensible figure whose function and "status" is so unapparent that they associate him with the village dung cleaner back home. Entering the courthouse every day, the captive Africans are greeted by a hymn-singing, austere, pinched-looking religious group. Who are these folks, they wonder. Why "they're entertainers," says one of the captives. "If so," says another, "why do they look so miserable?"

During their long imprisonment in New Haven, Cinque and his friend Yamba look through an illustrated New Testament they're been given by the hymnists. Through the

pictures, they construct the narrative of Jesus' activities. They decipher a text which they suspect is sacred and value laden by studying the visual narrative. It's not so mysterious, Cinque explains, because "it's just a story, Yamba." Of course, these Spielbergian touches have nothing to do with the historical story; they are but part of some meta-commentary about filmmaking, storytelling and point-of-view--enlightened liberalism discussing its own limitations.

When local lawyer McCounaghey first meets Hopkins' John Quincy Adams, Adams lectures him that all that lawyers really do is tell stories. "What is their story?" Adams asks. For the first time, McCounaghey launches a serious effort to find out, to find translators, and, only then, in the midst of the New Haven trial, in another flickering flashback, does Spielberg show the story of the Middle Passage, the slavers drowning captives with weights, and other captives committing suicide. This is a powerful movie within the movie, memorable, engrossing and heartfelt, the movie Hollywood liberalism cannot make even though there's no old studio boss to please in this Dreamworks S(pielberg)K(atzenberg)G(effen) production.

The New Haven stage concludes on an emotional high as Cinque, who has been studying "us" so carefully, utters the cry of "Give us free!"--pure corny Spielberg that nevertheless works--and the young judge, a political appointee expected to accede to the government's wishes to return the captives to Spain, rules that they are, indeed, free. The courtroom explodes with cheers, and you feel the joy and release of the captives. Tears of joy, tears of sadness, tears of rage--these cathartic elements of film language are, often, what truly remain with us.

Yet the Africans are not yet free. With the case appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, the ever eloquent Adams/Hopkins takes over, telling the court that when you've been captured in your village, taken to a slave fortress, chained to the hold of a cross-Atlantic slaver, when you've been beaten and fed mush, seen comrades and kin murdered, thrown overboard, even forced to kill themselves, and all you want to do is go home, that it's right to rebel, right to kill your captives and oppressors. And the court (which, with somewhat different personnel, would rule, seventeen years later, in *Dred Scott*, that a slave, taken up North to "free soil" by his "master," did not even have the right to sue) frees these Africans to return home. (In real historical time, the court ruled more narrowly that, under Spanish law, the mutineers were not legally slaves.)

"What words did you use to persuade the court?" Spielberg's Cinque asks Adams. "*Yours*," Adams replies. Underlined, underscored. In addition to acknowledging whose story is primary, as well as his own unwillingness to narrate from that point-of-view, Spielberg also highlights both the historical necessity of alliances and the existence of other contradictions (U.S. vs. Spain, rival American political parties). After all, the captives didn't fully free themselves--as the slaves of the South didn't free themselves--as the Jews of Europe under Fascism didn't free themselves. Allies are crucially important.

Will contemporary and future audiences come away believing in the ameliorative qualities of the American "justice" system? Will they pick up on the motif about

storytelling and cultural perspective, learning that cultural artifacts like film are "constructed"? Whatever the spectrum of reaction, in the end, millions should at least learn of the existence of an important, hidden and emblematic historical event whose inherent theme is that, given oppressive conditions, it is right to rebel.

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Whereas *Amistad* is about rebellion in the face of oppression, Martin Scorsese's *Kundun* examines pacifism as a response to aggression. The style of this film by the brilliant chronicler of mean streets and wiseguys (and the far from brilliant chronicler of robed New Testament figures in *The Last Temptation of Christ*) is far more dazzling, far more consistently emotive, than the more conventional Hollywood theatrics of *Amistad*. In many ways, this is Scorsese's most daring film. Its cinematography and other formal properties approach the near perfection of Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990).

A true master of structure, point-of-view and camera-eye narrative perspective, Scorsese has a thorough and commanding knowledge of film, film history and the boundaries (and intermingling) of fiction and documentary. He's not just immersed in genre. In *Kundun*, which follows the story of the Dalai Lama's ascension to the theocratic throne in 1937 until his overthrow by armed Chinese invasion in 1959, Scorsese has set out to make a cinematic film, with a message. *Kundun* is a film in the classic mode--an attempt to structure an original film appropriate to the material, giving serious thought to the consciousness of the audience and the elements of composition.

Scorsese has seemingly made all the right decisions. He has cast all non-professional actors, real Tibetans familiar with the cultural traditions, behavior and history. Philip Glass contributes one of the finest scores in film history, with none of the Hollywood schlock of John Williams' *Amistad* score. A two-hour raga-like composition, it rises and falls with every visual image gloriously photographed by Roger Deakins. *Kundun* doesn't proceed via conventional narrative form or clues or plot. Rich in visual language--propelled by such recurring imagistic motifs as a sand mandala and the glasses of the former Dalai Lama--the film's meaning is conveyed through the orchestration of cinematic elements (story, cinematography, music, words)--elements montaged by Scorsese and his longtime collaborator, editor Thelma Schoonmaker. It is an Eisenstein-like film, employing what Eisenstein called "the image of an embodied viewpoint on phenomenon."

In short, it has all the elements of a great film--except it doesn't have a great script, or even a very good one. One wishes Scorsese had come upon a different script than the one by *E.T.* scriptwriter Melissa Mathison, one developed in collaboration with the Dalai Lama himself. *Kundun* is more a homage than a history; it is the Dalai Lama's story, not necessarily that of the masses of Tibetan people who have lived through and endured

throughout this historical period.

The decision to locate the film entirely within the Tibetan world and perspective--without the usual Hollywood trope of a sympathetic outsider telling the story--contributes to both the majestic feel of the film and, ironically, the incompleteness of its historical narration. Scorsese takes the Dalai Lama's view of historical events as a given. Scorsese has decided not to paint the broad historical canvas, analyzing the contending social forces. He has intentionally restricted his gaze and seems most motivated in taking us inside an intriguing culture where a small child can be divined by palace monks as their re-incarnated spiritual and political leader (as in Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*), and to follow his education (as in Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*) until he is faced, in his twenties, with the overthrow of his society by the Chinese government (which proceeds from occupation, with the Dalai Lama in place, to such brutal oppressions as the slaughter of the monks and the destruction of temples).

Scorsese has said he was attracted to the Mathison script for its portrayal of the moral dilemma of upholding principles of non-violence in the face of armed invasion. But this is a most difficult concept to get across since this isn't even the more familiar pacifism of the Gandhian, mass movement, political action type. It's something more akin to resignation.

The Dalai Lama who emerges on the screen is an inexperienced, hesitant, weak and vacillating (re-incarnated) feudal monarch, surrounded by a sycophant court, cut off from any real contact with the people of that society, though himself "born" into a rural peasant family. Scorsese cannot get around certain elements of historical materiality. He cannot "re-write" the feudal king into a more contemporary figure, although he does allow the Dalai Lama on the screen one throw-away, revisionist line of regret that he wouldn't have the opportunity to make "reforms" (though this is the first the audience has heard of such plans).

What will viewers emerge with? Outrage against Chinese policy? A sense of the feel and pace of a unique culture? A glimpse of the possibilities of creative filmmaking, far from the Hollywood molds and genres? Possibly all. Though a more kinetically exciting film than *Amistad*, ultimately *Kundun* offers fewer usable historical lessons. But let us hope that filmmakers continue to make serious historical films, providing bits and pieces of the historical narrative--the story of our travails and struggles as people of the world and, sometimes, as with the rebellion on the *Amistad*, the triumphs born of necessity.

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