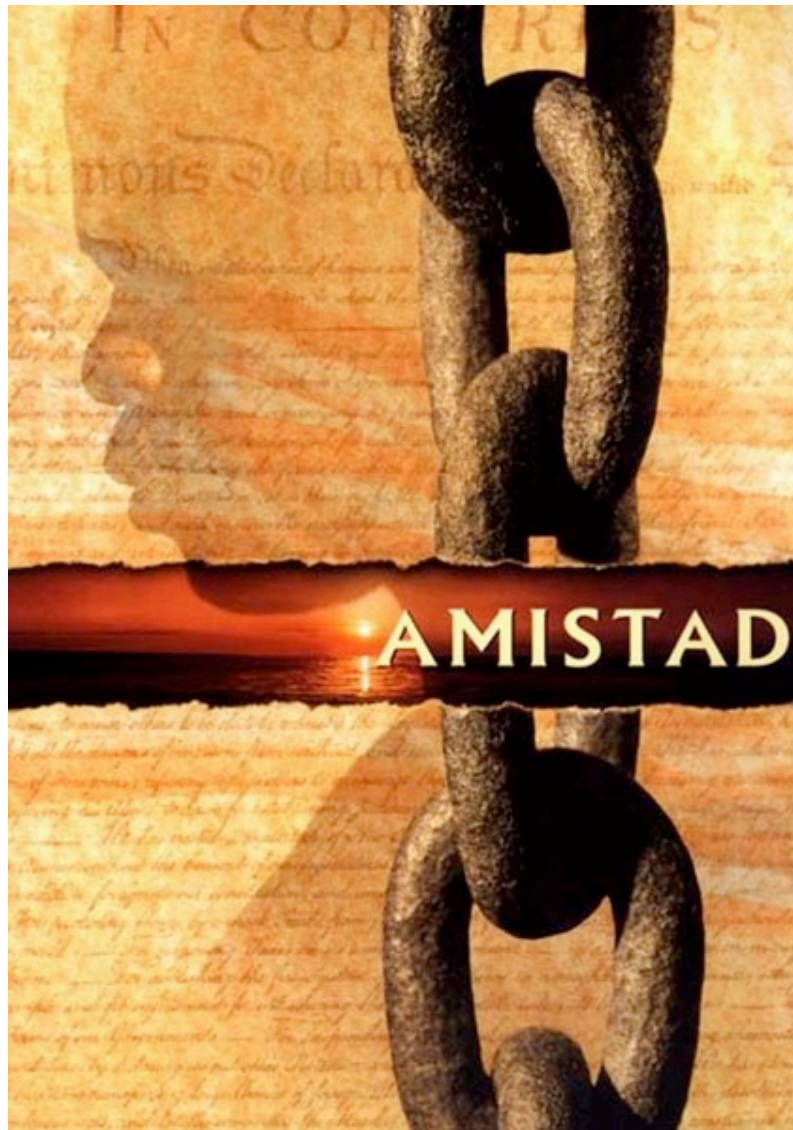


What are the values and limitations of the film “Amistad” to the historian studying the transatlantic slave trade?



[http://www.cinemotions.net/data/films/0082/12/1/affiche\\_Amistad\\_1997\\_2.jpg](http://www.cinemotions.net/data/films/0082/12/1/affiche_Amistad_1997_2.jpg)

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## **A. Plan of the Investigation**

This investigation focuses on the transatlantic slave trade, and how the events surrounding the trade are depicted in the film, “Amistad”. In order to evaluate the validity and purpose of the film and to assess its usefulness to the historian studying the transatlantic slave trade, I have also used other sources, including a biography written by a slave who experienced it firsthand.

I have divided my analysis section into three main parts. The first focuses on the conditions on board the slave ships. The second section focuses on the Amistad trial, and the validity of the scenes in the movie, and the third section of the analysis focuses on the Zong incident, and its relevance to the film.

Word Count: 122

## B. Summary of Evidence

Between the 15th and the 19th Century, European traders moved an estimated twelve million African slaves to the Americas. Many slaves were sent to the “New World”, mostly through coastal trading, but also as a result of raids and kidnappings.

The slave trade has been described as ‘triangular’. The first side involved the trade of European goods for African slaves. Every time a slave was captured for transport to the Americas, the African rulers received European goods. The second side was exporting slaves across the ocean to North America, the Caribbean and South America. Finally, the third side consisted of sending raw materials from America to Europe that had been produced by slaves shipped from Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The more inhumane the trade seemed, the more momentum built to get it eradicated. The slave trade eventually ended as a result of economic factors, as well as campaigns by various people<sup>2</sup>. The main people involved in abolishing the slave trade in England were William Roscoe, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce<sup>3</sup>.

Between 1500 and 1870 almost a quarter of all African people were enslaved at some point during their lifetime. Britain and other countries abolished slavery in 1807, but further illegal slave trade continued for sixty years. Most of the illegal trading occurred (as it had previously) to provide labor for the sugar plantations situated in Brazil and Cuba.<sup>4</sup> To fight the illegal slave trade, there was a slave patrol by the British Royal Navy, and ships found to have slaves on board were seized, as a disincentive for other countries

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<sup>1</sup> Equiano, Olaudah. The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. New York: Dover Publications, 1999. Note, page 1. This is often referred to as the “middle passage.”

<sup>2</sup> Walvin, James. (2007) A Short History of Slavery. Penguin Books Limited, page 149. The slave trade’s abolition was aided greatly, when leaders such as Thomas Jefferson turned against the trade, and promoted its abolition. Interestingly, he was still a slave owner for many years, among other American Presidents, including Washington and Madison.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/slavery/eabolition.asp>. See Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> Walvin, Op. Cit., page 69. “despite the dispersal of slaves to all corners of the American economies (from jobs ranging from domestic labour to work as cowboys), it was sugar which pulled the majority across the Atlantic.

who allowed slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The film “Amistad” depicts certain aspects of the slave trade.<sup>6</sup> The film follows the story of a Cuban slave ship by the same name, carrying Africans from one slave port to another. However, the slaves on board revolted, after suffering many ill treatments that were often present on board slave ships<sup>7</sup>, they commandeered the ship, and ordered the crew to turn back to Africa. However, they were tricked, and the slave ship ended up docking in the United States of America. A long trial ensued, to decide if the slaves should be set free, since the cargo had originally been captured against Cuban law. The case eventually ended at the US Supreme Court, where John Quincy Adams fought for the freedom of the slaves.

The film was nominated for four Oscars, and won six other awards. After the production of the film, Steven Spielberg, the director, made sure that over 18,000 leaflets were sent to schools all over the USA, showing teachers how they could use the film to show children the important events surrounding the slave trade.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. page 148. “Benezet was the key figure in abolition [in America]...his tracts against the slave trade, dispatched throughout the English-speaking world were designed to persuade others to confront the brutal realities of the slave trade.”

<sup>6</sup> Other films, such as the recent “Amazing Grace” are also available, covering the events surrounding the trade.

<sup>7</sup> Equiano, Olaudah (1999), Op. Cit. page 32; “on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.”

<sup>8</sup> Thornton, John. Liberty or Licence? History Today Magazine Online, Volume 48 Issue 4, April 1998. Thornton argues that “In doing this, Spielberg makes a powerful statement about his veracity.”

## C. Evaluation of Sources

### Source 1 [appendix A]

Source one<sup>9</sup> is valuable, as it portrays in the film the horrors of the slave trade in its context. The source displays the way in which slaves were thrown overboard. Even though this did not occur onboard *La Amistad*, it is valuable as it aids Spielberg in his purpose of showing the horrors of the slave trade. Spielberg may have thought it necessary to take creative liberties in order to give the audience a truthful perspective on what the overall slave trade was like. After meeting an historian who authored a book on *Amistad*, Spielberg said, “I’m so happy to meet one of the historians who has had the courage to write about such a controversial subject [...] that has enabled me to put the story on the screen.” It is clear that Spielberg, despite finding it necessary to compile various truths, thought that this would not have an effect on the overall purpose.<sup>10</sup>

However, the source also has limitations. Historical records confirm that slaves onboard *La Amistad* were never actually thrown overboard, but rather, such events took place on board the *Zong* slave ship. Spielberg may have taken other liberties with the film, and stretched the truth to make the film more applicable for Hollywood. This could be seen as a limitation as stretched truths have little value to the historian.

Another limitation that should be considered is that Spielberg may have over dramatized events in the film, in order to generate more ticket sales and ultimately more notoriety for him.

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<sup>9</sup> Photo taken from: <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/moviedetail.cfm?i=02E019DA-0255-49A8-242A7ECE67D5E990>

<sup>10</sup> Thornton, John, (1998), Op. Cit. “Liberties have been taken with some of the facts to heighten the narrative drama, though with little overall effect on the veracity of the general history”

## Source 2 [appendix B]

This source<sup>11</sup> can be seen as valuable, as its origin is a first hand account of the conditions on a slave ship. There are very few versions of the transatlantic slave trade that were written by slaves, giving the reader insight into the other side of the story. Most versions are written by historians studying the slave trade, who study documents written by American and British people involved in court battles such as the one in “Amistad”.

However, this source also has limitations. There has been some debate as to whether or not Olaudah Equiano was actually a slave who endured the slave trade.<sup>12</sup> Brycchan Carey stated that “if Carretta’s<sup>13</sup> evidence - Equiano’s baptismal records, and a naval muster roll - is accurate, there is a possibility that Equiano never visited Africa. The early parts of his autobiography may reflect the oral history of other slaves, combined with information Equiano gleaned from books he had read about Africa.”<sup>14</sup> This would mean that he could have based his book on the experiences of other slaves. At the beginning of his biography, it states that “most major dates in Olaudah Equiano’s life should be considered approximate; they vary from source to source.”<sup>15</sup> It is therefore possible that Equiano was never a slave, but, was related to one, or rewrote his own version of stories he heard.

However, assuming that Equiano was a slave and therefore uneducated, would his language skills have been extensive enough to portray the events he saw? As well, although having been present at the time, it is possible that Equiano would never have known the full circumstances of the slave trade, and therefore his account would have been a single testimony, and not necessarily what the whole of the slave trade was like. I

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<sup>11</sup> Equiano, Olaudah. (1999), Op. Cit., page 32. See Appendix B.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. Note, Page 1. “Most major dates in Olaudah Equiano’s life should be considered approximate ; they vary from source to source, as do the more general time frames of some of the factual information.” This may be used as evidence against the idea that Equiano may not have been a slave.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent Carretta is the author of *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self Made Man* (University of Georgia Press, 2005) and argues that Equiano was not a real slave.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm> “Carretta’s evidence, a baptismal record and a muster roll, is compelling. It strongly suggests that the young Equiano told people that his birthplace was South Carolina. Yet this evidence doesn’t seem to be quite enough to settle the matter, and historians and critics are divided on the question.”

<sup>15</sup> Equiano, Olaudah. (1999), Op. Cit. Note, Page 1.

think that it is most likely that the book was "ghost written" for him, following interviews.

Word Count: 569



## **D. Analysis**

The Amistad case was important in history because it made people realize that slaves could not simply be treated as cargo. It was therefore a major milestone in the development of the Abolition movement. Spielberg's overall intention was to show audiences today that many do not know the difference between law and justice, and that laws are not necessarily just.

### **i. Conditions on the slave ships**

In "Amistad", we see the inhumane conditions on the slave ships, an example being their clothes. Many of the slaves are seen wearing just enough to cover themselves.

Further examples are contained in the classic autobiographical primary source of the time, "The Life of Olaudah Equiano". Equiano recalls in a disturbing account that "one white man in particular ... flogged so unmercifully ... he died consequently of it." In the film, slaves are seen on the floor below deck with chains hanging from the ceiling, suggesting they were chained together. One slave is seen trying to get out of an empty barrel. Equiano also discussed the scarcity of food on board. "one day they had taken a number of fishes, and when they [the crew] had killed and satisfied themselves ..., rather than give any of them to us to eat ... they tossed the remaining fish back into the sea." Although there have been suggestions that Equiano's account was exaggerated – even fabricated – it does not contradict the general picture.

In terms of secondary sources also, the film seems accurate. Walvin<sup>16</sup> says "slaves were shackled below ... in small groups. They fed from communal supplies, and shuffled, in chains ... but when sick, they relieved themselves where they lay, their faeces soiling and contaminating themselves and their fellow prisoners." Sherwood's book also discusses the slave ship conditions saying "in the America's, ... they were treated as expendable subhuman laborers,"<sup>17</sup> referring to how the slaves were treated as cargo rather than

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<sup>16</sup> Walvin, Op. Cit. page 73

<sup>17</sup> Sherwood, Marika. After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, Page 5

people.

Despite depicting life on board a slave ship, it would be wrong to say that the film is completely accurate. Films usually last about two hours, and in films based on true events it is impossible for directors to include everything. It may be possible that not all of the horrifying conditions were present on La Amistad. Spielberg may have taken liberties with the truth, and 'truth' is a broad word. It could be questioned whether the movie can still be considered within the realm of the truth if certain actual events are taken out and others, gleaned from records of other ships, are added in.

## **ii. The Trial**

In the film, Cinqué<sup>18</sup> and the other slaves are present in the courtroom during the trial. Cinqué is given a chance to speak, and begins to chant with the other slaves. This is inaccurate.<sup>19</sup> Also, Spielberg implies that the slaves present wouldn't have had any idea how courts worked during the time of their trial.<sup>20</sup> This is also untrue.<sup>21</sup> Thornton stated that the slave's experiences in their courts in Africa "might have been woven into the story ... to let the audiences see that Africans had a legal system of their own" rather than making them appear as though they had no idea what was going on.

The director's job is to provide a representative picture of what happened during the trial in order to display the "truth." If the director limited himself to the actual details known today, it would be harder to depict the whole story of the slave trade.

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<sup>18</sup> Cinqué is one of slaves on board. He is the main slave in the film, and represents the other slaves when talking to the Americans.

<sup>19</sup> Taken from: Thornton, John. (1998), *Ob. Cit.* At the time, it would be impossible for slaves to be allowed into the court for the trial. The trial would take place while they sat in their cell, waiting to find out what the verdict was.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> In fact, three of the slaves captured on the Amistad had been considered 'gentlemen' at home, and it is quite possible that they would have overseen court proceedings and trials. Many others would have been in trials at home as well, for various things such as being in debt, or adultery.

### **iii. The Zong Incident**

One scene shows some fifty slaves chained together, and thrown off the ship into the ocean. This is historically incorrect. No such event ever occurred on board La Amistad. However, it did occur on another slave ship, the Zong.<sup>22</sup> Collingwood said “it would not be so cruel to throw the poor sick wretches into the sea, as to suffer them to linger but a few days.”<sup>23</sup>

Because this event never occurred on La Amistad, I think the director is taking liberties with the truth, in order to portray the whole story of the slave ships. It would be worse to not display something so horrific, as people would not see what true horrors ensued.

Word Count: 696

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<sup>22</sup> The Zong sailed from the island of St Thomas in late 1781, with four hundred and forty slaves on board, along with seventeen white crew members. However, disease and sickness spread throughout the boat, and in late November, the crew members began to throw the sick slaves overboard, in order to save the lives of the rest.

<sup>23</sup> Walvin, Op. Cit. page 86 and 88. Luke Collingwood was the master of the ship Zong.

## **E. Conclusion**

It could be argued that it was necessary for the director of “Amistad” to take creative liberties whilst making the film. By omitting events such as throwing slaves overboard and chaining them up below deck, the audience would have been unable to see the horrors that occurred on board some of the slave ships. By compiling truths from various similar or related events, Spielberg has the ability to show audiences the true horrors of the slave trade, rather than just focusing on one particular event. If Spielberg had wanted to show a certain incident he could have chosen any number of specific cases, e.g. the Zong, but by incorporating elements of many ships, Spielberg depicts an accurate consolidation of the slave trade and the difference between law and justice. In conclusion, it seems although the film may not be historically accurate, the ideas behind the film, as well the historical events that took place, lend themselves well to the historian studying the transatlantic slave trade.

Word Count: 166

Total Word Count: 1,997

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Brycchan Carey, (19<sup>th</sup> December 2007). <http://www.brycchancarey.com/index.htm> ©  
Brycchan Carey

## **Appendix A.**

Taken from: <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/slavery/abolition.asp>.

“The most prominent abolitionists, notably Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, were great publicists. Wilberforce led the British parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade and slavery. Opinion in Europe was also changing. Moral, religious and humanitarian arguments found more and more support. A vigorous campaign to achieve abolition began in Britain in 1783 and also developed in North America and the Caribbean, often led by the Black churches. In Britain, Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) was another prominent campaigner who was principally responsible for collecting evidence against the trade. Clarkson was a founder member of the society for effecting the abolition of the slave trade in 1787. In Liverpool, William Roscoe was one of the best known abolitionists. He wrote poetry and pamphlets in favour of abolition. Opinion in Liverpool was generally pro-slavery and like other abolitionists, Roscoe tended to work behind the scenes rather than openly declaring his views.”

## Appendix B



## Appendix C

"I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I was then a little revived, and thought if it were no worse than working my situation was not so desperate. But still I feared I should be put to death [...] for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty [...] One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged [the slaves] so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast that he [the white man] died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute."