



Ancestral Voices

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I wrote this review for the [Spielberg Film Society](#) in December 1997, following the release of Spielberg's Amistad. Back then, rumor had it there was another Spielberg picture on the horizon, a World War II story that was going to eclipse this slave rebellion movie, which many critics dismissed as a talky courtroom drama. I didn't know about that, but I recall staggering out of the Hollywood Cinerama Dome feeling quite shaken and moved by Cinqué's story. Today, I think it's one of Spielberg's least appreciated works, sandwiched as it was in between his two giant Oscar winners, and I still find it to be a fascinating film.

Amistad: Spielberg's Ancestral Voices
by Joe Fordham (February 1998)

First you hear a single voice. Then you see a face, but you can hardly see it's a face, we're so close and it's so dark and contorted, it takes awhile for your eyes to make it out. Then we see the gouging and the pulling of a nail, ragged fingers working at a blood stained piece of wood. Cinqué is the man pulling out the nail. He's a desperate man, a terrifying monster, skewering the captain of the ship that has enslaved him, and then pulling out a sword from his victim's guts in a primal expression of cinematic rage. When a naval salvage team arrives, he leaps into the ocean and strikes out for the rising sun, the place from

which he came, and sinks and almost drowns in an oblivion from which it seems he will never emerge.

So begins Spielberg's 16th movie, *Amistad*. It would be easy to place this in the vein of *Schindler's List* -- another historical drama, an epic period tale after the big box office dinosaurs of *Lost World*. This time, the setting is earth tone 18th Century



America instead of black-and-white, war torn Poland. Instead of Schindler the calculating opportunist trapped inside a moral nightmare, our focus is on Cinqué, an alien adrift, an inarticulate heart bursting at the seams, torn by everything he knows and loves.

A parallel then with *E.T.*? Or maybe *Close Encounters*? As he did with the surreal desert opening and discovery of the planes from Flight 19, Spielberg demands our attention from the opening frame, dancing around overlapping dialects of an unfamiliar language, bombarding us with African and Spanish and the occasional subtitle. The images (Janusz Kaminski, Michael Kahn), the music (John Williams), the performances give us all the information. Or how about another reference, *Empire of the Sun*? After the African slaves briefly regain their freedom, lost in fog, they float past the borders of a bizarre new world, another ship drifts by bearing the gentry from a strange new world who can only stare in wonder and not a little fear at the faces passing by.

Amistad is all of the above. It's first and foremost Cinqué's story, a lost man seeking home, but it's also about language and its inadequacies when it comes to communicating between two worlds, and it's also a story about common bonds and ancestral values that



can transcend cultures. The actual slavery and racial cruelty are the backdrop to the story, they are depicted in vivid detail, particularly in one sequence, but they are not what this film is all about.

Cinqué is choked with rage. Djimon Hounsou plays him with an immense physicality that collapses into lethargy when all hope is gone. He finds his voice through the young attorney Baldwin (Matthew

McConaughey) forced on him by the black chief in white man's clothing. Morgan Freeman plays Joadson without condescension and with a detachment that says more of its passivity than any of the wailing, tub-thumping evangelical abolitionists. It's much to Spielberg's credit that the goons here are the do-gooders, although he pokes fun without

ridiculing, a case in point the use of imagery as one of Cinqué's pals looks up at the masts of a passing ship as they are marched towards their courthouse: three crucifixes glide by behind the houses lining the street, paralleling the illustrations from the strange 'picture book' (Holy Bible) the Africans have been browsing in the cell. It's a strange and perplexing moment, beautifully done.

The real heart of the movie lies in two relationships: the moment where Baldwin finally makes contact with Cinqué in his cell in the beginning (as with Elliott and E.T., it's a moment expressed in simple learned gesture of greeting). When Baldwin communicates with Cinqué by sketching in the prison courtyard mud their friendship and the movie both start to blossom. But, beware. No

one is prepared for Cinqué's real story, where he's come from, who he is, and the real horror of the events that brought him to the opening of our movie. In a sequence that begins with basically three people standing talking in a tiny room, we are dropped before we know it into a screaming hell of barbaric degradation, recalling the Middle



Passage rituals of the African slave trade, where captives were manhandled like livestock. Spielberg took a similarly risky diversion into expository montage in the only really powerful sequence in *Hook*, where Pan recalls his childhood and remembers how to fly; but no comparison can be made here. This centerpiece of *Amistad* is a shattering montage.

From this point on, the second relationship begins to take precedence. It's a difficult maneuver, but it works, as Anthony Hopkins' character is allowed to move from the wings to center-stage for the final act, and here Spielberg story comes towards its real final point. If McConaughey's character allowed Cinqué to reveal his story, Hopkins' John Quincy Adams allows him to open his heart as the two worlds come together. At this point in the story, Cinqué is by now convinced he is going to be killed but has gained the strength to retain the belief that he can call upon the spirits of his ancestors to see him through, based on the notion he is the product of their being. It's a simple faith that resonates in Adams



who, as an ex-president, would like to believe a chief can only ever be a chief. Adams is the seer, the wise old soul advising Morgan Freeman's Joadson from the start, but he's also safe in the knowledge he can dote on his plans and remain completely untouched by the insane world of politics that he's retired from. When he invites Cinqué into his chambers to listen to an inquiring mind, he

discovers a fellow leader.

Adams and Cinqué share a mutual respect as chiefs of their respective tribes. Spielberg holds the shot on Adams as he listens to Cinqué explain his ancient heritage. With America on the brink of Civil War, Cinqué's words -- finally relayed through an interpreter and, still, the occasional subtitle -- have great portent for Adams. Adams' final summation, speaking in Cinqué's defense, is a tour de force of language and performance: American history is 'just a story,' the words of the Constitution are 'just a story,' our history as a human race is 'just a story; abide by them as you will. It's a very humanitarian view of history. Disregard your past and you disregard your personal freedom -- a very powerful sentiment; a very powerful film.



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