

Amistad

**By Martin Mhando, Murdoch University, Perth, West Australia
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To date many film reviews of *Amistad* have rightly highlighted the essence of humanity in the indictment of American history and justice in the film. Amid fewer critical voices against this particular telling of a 'Black' story, since I guess it is an American story first in the eyes of Spielberg, the film ought to be taken seriously to heart as it discusses an even more ominous issue—that of having or not having a voice. Spielberg has taken up the issue of the freedom of speech to its metaphoric level- that of speaking a different tongue, a different voice hence ones inability to be heard.

The film is one of extraordinary poignancy. It tells the story of Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), and his fellow slaves' attempt at freedom after killing the crew of the slave ship *Amistad*. With only two remaining crew members to captain the ship back to Sierra Leone, as Cinque reckons, the ship is captured in America with its cargo of semi free slaves.

Now imagine this. It is 1839, slavery has been abolished in the North and the South is ready and willing to go to war on the issue. It only needs a spark to fire the bush. Spielberg pits a failed American president against another irascible president culminating into the 'trial of the century'. The slaves have to argue their case against re-enslavement on the basis that they are from Africa and therefore according to American law they are free people, against the argument that since they were on a Spanish ship and because nobody can prove that slave trading continues in Sierra Leone the slaves are the property of Queen Isabella of Spain.

The film follows the efforts of a novice lawyer, Baldwin (Mathew McConaughey), and Joadson, (Morgan Freeman), an abolitionist, to free the slaves and help them go back to Sierra Leone. Except there is a major hurdle: the slaves speak a Mende dialect which no one can understand, making it hard to plead a case, until a Mende speaker, an earlier arrival to the American shores, is able to translate between lawyer and clients. As the case moves to the Supreme court the renowned lawyer and former US President Martin Van Buren (Anthony Hopkins) is drafted to the defense leading to one of the most memorable court scenes in cinema. In a grueling 15 minute speech (the real one is said to have run a total of eight and a half hours) Spielberg risks all and delivers a tour de force of acting, drama and cinema from the legal argument by Hopkins.

The film is in fact a romantic representation of American justice consistent with classical Hollywood's narrative. However, Spielberg is able to bring the deep racial thesis of the film to its appropriate political level denying liberal America their usual site of control of the cultural encounter. By questioning the right of forcing the slaves to defend themselves in a language they don't understand, in a legal system they don't understand, Spielberg is undergoing the Socratic self examination in which one is able to argue for an opinion that

one does not even believe in. He is forcing the viewer towards a narrative imagination: to think how it would be in someone else's shoes and in that way get the imagination going. A hard task indeed. Finally, Spielberg joins Bob Marley's world citizenship by debating together about world issues rather than local issues, suggesting the need to study things quite unfamiliar to one's corner of the world.

Although Cinque doesn't speak English, when he says 'Give us Free' we hear its translation in the myriad of languages of the world and understand its power.

The scenes of violence that others have praised as being 'visceral', 'in your face', 'heartrendingly graphic images committed to film' were to me the weakest cinematic devices in the film. I think the film would have worked just as well without those graphic tear jerking scenes. Further, the animal metaphor in describing both the slave and the slaver does not work for me. It is too convenient, and used a set a set of pre-associated images, generic and stereotypic. There is enough grace and ferocity in the story, in the characters, in history, to enable us to relive those memories. This mythologising of representation affords easy passage to mis-remembering rather than remembering.

As an African I was not totally taken in with the emotional bits of the boat and the massacres. I think I have been inured by such images. However, what impressed me most is Spielberg's identifying of the lowest common denominator of dispossession, of absolute powerlessness that any person can find themselves in. I identify with Cinque through the position of powerlessness that I have often found myself in. May it then be said that *Amistad* rises to the level of a parable of the powerless. May we read in there the story of Africa's powerlessness economically, where no language exists between what the IMF's tomorrow means to many African countries which find themselves in this powerless bind. May we even then read in it the parable of the weak 'Arab' nation, as they watch over their riches and history being turned into a laughing spectacle. Or even the Indonesians who had seemed to do the right thing (knew the language) until when the roof fell on them and rendered them powerless....Which measure of justice shall we use?

It is only through the hegemonic relationship existing between western philosophy (dominating not dominant philosophy) and other cultural philosophies, that we can explain why we seem to agree with the court's decision. The discourse of the law is the discourse of authority. Law is always used as a mediating factor between right and wrong, right and might, truth and falsity. However, Cinque's disruptive associative linguistic windfall supported by a subversive interval within western capitalism (in the form of the historical material time of pre-civil war) won the day for humanity. It is a lesson that needs to be remembered, that the cat might meow but the dog is yet to have its day.