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Film Review

Spielberg's *Amistad* and the Redemonization of the Abolitionists

Lawrence B. Goodheart

The power of Holywood to shape popular images is legendary. With one $75 million holiday film, *Amistad* (1997), Steven Spielberg and DreamWorks Pictures have set public perception on antebellum race relations. With characteristic social concern, Spielberg turned, once again, to African-American themes as he had done earlier in his controversial movie of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. The subject was the successful slave revolt in June 1839 aboard the Cuban schooner woefully misnamed the *Amistad* (friendship). Those dramatic events lent themselves not only to cinematic interpretation but also to a brief for cultural understanding and social justice in present-day America.

Much of the film is well done, particularly for a historical drama. The imagery is powerful; the portraiture intimate; and the emotions raw. The cinematography of Janusz Kaminski pays homage to the dark and somber tones of a Goya. The scenes of the "barracoon" at Lamboko and the middle passage bear a horrific analogy to Nazi brutality against the Jews, the subject of Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. The bloody mutiny, captured in slow motion, is shocking but righteous. With a focus on the Mendi leader Cinque played by the imposing Djimon Hounsou, Spielberg celebrates the heroic and buries the myth of black passivity. The Cuban enslavers were Spanish subjects, so there is conveniently no direct indictment of the United States to upset the audience. Nonetheless two million blacks were enslaved in the South at the time, and white supremacy knew no sectional boundaries.

The civics lesson is clear. The courts freed the fifty-three Africans according to international law despite the efforts of the mendacious and unprincipled. The eloquence of former President John Quincy Adams and the nobility of Cinque set the stage for the Supreme Court to uphold the rule of law. Mingling past and present, Spielberg has sitting justice Harry Blackmun deliver the 1841 decision in a cameo appearance. The machinations of President Martin Van Buren and Secretary of State John Forsyth to placate the South and Spain are thwarted. The intricate legal issues are engagingly and clearly presented (see Jones for the best historical account).

Entirely imaginary, however, is the encounter between Cinque and Adams at the latter's home. Whatever the merits of Barbara Chase-Riboud's charge that David Franzoni's script plagiarized her 1989 novel*The Echo of Lions*, the scene is pivotal to the movie (see "Filmmakers of 'Amistad' Rebut Claim by Novelist"; "Writer Who Cried Plagiarism Used Passages She Didn't Write"). Tension crackles as Theodore Joadson, an African-American everyman, and Roger Baldwin, a callow attorney, behold a frustrated Cinque confronting the crusty but wise Adams. Mutual regard for a resplendent African violet allows both to recognize their common humanity while appreciating their cultural differences, the theme of the movie. The epiphany permits Joadson further insight into his character; Baldwin's respect for the law grows; and the audience is artfully instructed on the evil of racism.

The creator of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.* has a talent for making the alien accessible, even attractive. The African encounter with Yankee mores is shown humorously from the stranger's perspective. The dour hymnists are seen as bad entertainers; the lawyer is nicknamed Dung Scraper. The surmounting of the language barrier becomes a metaphor for bridging human differences. Spielberg's radical goal in *Amistad* is not unlike that eloquently stated by the historian W. E. B. DuBois almost a century ago in speaking for the African American: "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (17).

The *New York Times* dismissed the movie as "an earnestly high-minded historical film that educates more than it entertains" ("Amistad"; see also Maslin). Contrary to *Times's* instructional report card, Spielberg flunks on a crucial aspect of United States history. He gratuitously maligns abolitionism, the momentous struggle for racial justice during the 19th century and precursor of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Spielberg ironically portrays these crusaders as self-interested fanatics, a stereotype that W. D. Griffith gave cinematic life to in his 1915 classic *Birth of a Nation*, a blatantly Negrophobic melodrama.

Hostility to abolitionism well predates apologists for Jim Crow segregation at the dawn of the 20th century. The vocal minority of blacks and whites, women and men who called for racial justice were maligned and mobbed in their own day. They were radicals who recognized after 1820 that slavery, colonization of free blacks, and bigotry contravened fundamental republican ideals and Christian ethics. For their efforts they were outlawed in the South and victims of violence in the North (see Goodman; Goodheart and Hawkins).

Nor have the abolitionists always fared well at the hands of historians. The so-called Civil War revisionists of the 1930s and 1940s, in part disillusioned with the tragedy of World War I, blamed America's own bloody conflagration on "a blundering generation." They faulted fanatics, such as the abolitionists and southern fire eaters, with contributing to an atmosphere of distrust and dissension

that destroyed the Union. Slavery for them did not predestine national breakdown. Instead, leading revisionists, such as James G. Randall and Avery O. Craven, argued that the Civil War was a repressible conflict that could have been avoided if cooler heads had prevailed (see Randall; Craven, *The Repressible Conflict*; Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War*). From a different perspective—that of the institutional instability of the Cold War—Stanley M. Elkins in 1959 castigated abolitionists as "truly men without responsibility" (141).

In the same vein, the movie casts abolitionists as grim Puritans for whom religious zealotry thinly masks their antislavery commitment. Perhaps Spielberg, a Democratic Party partisan, has confused the antebellum crusaders with the current evangelical right wing. At any rate he has mixed up Catholicism with Congregationalism, because the latter had long eschewed the popish crucifix which he has the joyless, hymn-singing abolitionists venerating.

Lewis Tappan, a leader of the evangelical struggle against slavery, seems a premonition for Spielberg of an early-day Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms or others of that ilk whom Hillary Rodham Clinton has recently accused of conspiring against her priapic husband. If Van Buren is Machiavellian and the young Queen Isabella a royal brat in the script, Tappan is a fanatic, not unlike the way Griffith or the historical "revisionists" would have depicted him. Tappan not only fails to appreciate the stranger's culture (a sin against "multiculturalism"), but he is not genuinely interested in gaining Cinque's freedom.

Instead, the doctrinaire Tappan seeks to exploit the captives for his extreme social agenda. Joadson, the level-headed but nebulous abolitionist, is shocked to hear Tappan suggest that a legal defeat may be most useful for the cause. In an aside to the audience, Joadson realizes, "There are some men whose hatred of slavery is stronger than anything—except for the slave himself" (qtd. from *Amistad*). Tappan's extreme inclinations surface again when he plots a jail break rather than let the law take its course. The legally attuned Baldwin sensibly forestalls the plot.

Tappan's movie character is a caricature. A central figure in the development of American abolitionism, Tappan formed the committee on behalf of the *Amistad* Africans and worked tirelessly for their release over a two-year period. No less a historian than Bertram Wyatt-Brown wrote in 1971, "By some peculiar alchemy, Tappan had made the Amistads' case a 'safe' cause. Gentlemen who were silent about more pressing questions of slavery, gentlemen who for years had muttered about the Tappans' [Lewis's and his brother Arthur's] subversive activities, congratulated themselves on their liberality in supporting the Amistads" (209).

Spielberg has perversely demonized a principled man and a courageous biracial crusade that acted upon the nation's highest ideals in the face of overwhelming racist opposition. Tappan was pivotal in first assisting the Africans, guiding the

successful legal appeal, and then at their request aiding the home-coming to west Africa. In addition, his tactful handling of this complex situation secured broad appeal among whites, some of whom increasingly came to realize that the violation of human rights was not bound by color or race.

In the mostly white audience in Portland, Maine where I saw the movie at Christmas time, there was widespread applause at the movie's conclusion. DreamWorks's worthy goal of cultural understanding in a racially divided nation is largely achieved. The significance of *Amistad* is nonetheless diminished by the nightmarish interpretation of Tappan and the abolitionists.

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Film Review

Portrait of a Dove at Washington Square or Henry James at the Movies

Michael Oppermann

The past two years have seen no less than three different cinema adaptations of novels by Henry James: Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady* (1997), Agniezska Holland's *Washington Square* (1997) and Iain Softley's *Wings of a Dove* (1998).

In *Portrait* Isabel Archer (Nicole Kidman) refuses a rich suitor in order to follow a romantic concept of "grand love"; instead, she marries the cold and egotistical Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich), a man who seems to be constantly short of money. Not listening to numerous warnings, Isabel makes the mistake of her life. When she is finally able to confess that fact to herself, she decides to stay with her husband, thus accepting marriage as martyrdom. In *Washington Square* Catherine Sloper (Jennifer Jason Leigh) falls for Morris Townsend (Ben Chaplin) who has gambled his entire fortune away. Mr. Sloper looks through Townsend's real intentions; he warns his daughter that her suitor is only after her money. When Catherine insists on marrying him, she is threatend with disinheritance; as a result, Townsend gradually withdraws from her. Realizing his true intentions, Catherine decides to devote her life to the concept of charity. In *The Wings* Kate Croy (Helena Bonham Carter), daughter of a morally and financially bankrupt Londoner, is raised by her aunt Mrs. Lowder (Vanessa Redgrave) who has promised Kate her fortune if she marries into nobility. Kate, however, is in love with a penniless journalist called Merton Densher (Linus Roache); the two get engaged in secrecy. Being unable to give up her promised fortune, Kate convinces Merton to seduce the fatally ill Milly Theale (Alison Elliot) who is supposed to be quite wealthy. Knowing Milly's character fairly well, Kate calculates that Millie might leave her money to Merton. For that reason Merton accompanies both women on a (highly scenic) trip to Venice where he makes love to Millie who gradually regains strength. Kate, however, feels more and more jealous; finally she decides to act against her own plan by disclosing the secret of her engagement. Millie feels totally deceived and soon fades away, nevertheless leaving her fortune to Merton. Merton challenges Kate by making her choose between him and the money he has inherited. Still being unable to decide, Kate gives up both.

All three film plots have one common denominator: they focus on the psychological development of a woman. Moreover, they present love as hopelessly entangled with the concepts of money and fortune, an aspect of Henry James's novels that seems to be extremely modern. James was no longer able to believe that

love and money should either go together effortlessly or should not be mixed at all; he was essentially an anti-romantic writer who seems to have anticipated a key experience of our modern world. This element comes across especially well in Catherine Sloper's fate; disappointed and crushed both by her father's and her lover's inability to separate love and money, she decides to walk a totally solitary road in life. Whereas Jennifer Jason Leigh's portrayal of Catherine's character clearly renders a sense of psychological growth, Nicole Kidman (in *Portrait*) fails just in that regard; her performance does not generate any idea of development. Instead, Kidman is totally overpowered by the physical presence John Malkovich who manages to turn Osmond's character into a portrayal of stunning complexity. 100% calculating, totally cold and a superb role player, Osmond seems to have escaped from a Shakespeare drama. In one of the film's best moments, the seduction scene, he sinks down on Isabel like a greedy insect. A little bit later the gates of Isabel's Roman palace close behind her like the mighty wings of a coffin.

It is in scenes like this that Jane Campion's adaptation reveals its superiority, as only her film makes some attempts to transfer Henry James's metaphorical prose into a visual language of its own. Nevertheless, all movie versions of Henry James's novels fail in one principal aspect. Not even a superior adaptation such as the classical Ivory/Merchant production of *The Bostonians* (1984) manages to find a visual equivalent of James's stylistic innovation, the famous "*style indirect libre*" which implies that the fictional world is entirely seen/filtered through the mind of a character. This is all the more surprising since a far more difficult technique such as the famous "stream of consciousness" has been translated fairly well into a visual mode of expression, for example in Marleen Gorris's adaptation of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997). Henry James, however, has been filmed entirely for his plots; for that reason even the best adaptations have a tendency of turning into yet another *Wings of a Dove* ; into a film which comes dangerously close to a pleasant "photo novel."

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Film Review

Violence is a Funny Game: Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* and Wim Wenders's *The End of Violence*

Michael Oppermann

In 1997 two films have systematically dealt with the subject of violence. Both of them were made by German directors; Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* was produced in Germany, whereas Wim Wenders's*The End of Violence* is an American production. Haneke's film found its way into international movie houses due to a unique scandal in Cannes while that of Wenders film was met with considerable critical acclaim in the US after having flopped at the Cannes film festival. It seems to me that both films contribute enormously to an understanding of violence and the inherent problems of its aesthetic reflection.

In Haneke's opening sequence an upper-middle class family is on its way to some kind of boring lake in Germany, their jeep towing a sailing boat. They arrive and exchange a few routine lines with some neighbours. The neighbours have two visitors (Arno Frisch and Frank Giering), nice boys apparently: youngsters with white gloves who must have been raised on their fathers' gold cards. Father and son (Ulrich Mühe and Stefan Clapoznyski) prepare the sailing boat for a trip while their mother (Susanne Lothar) starts preparing lunch in the kitchen. Business as usual, as it seems. Then one of the two strangers appears in the garden, asking for eggs in the most polite and friendly manner. He receives them, drops them (apparently in an act of clumsiness), asks for more eggs, breaks them again (while constantly apologizing), and finally drops the woman's cellular phone, which happens to lie on the counter, in a washbasin. As the family gradually realizes, this was the overture to an incredibly sadistic and murderous "funny game." A game which the boys have been playing for their daily entertainment. Once the game is started nothing is the same anymore. At the end, the entire family will be dead, killed one by one, gradually and systematically. It seems that the youngsters exercise a kind of satanic cruelty, which was raised on thousands of cheap videos and video games. Once a game is finished, the two strangers move on to another summerhouse and another garden, asking for eggs in the most polite manner. It is time for another "funny game."

Instead of concentrating upon violence itself, however, the film focuses on the suffering of the victims by showing the agony in their faces in long close-ups. In this manner, Haneke tries to eliminate the "sales factor" which is always inherent in *any* representation of violence. Simultaneously, Haneke presents the massacre of

an entire family in a highly playful manner, which deliberately undermines all existing concepts of Heaven and Hell, Good and Evil. Asked why they are doing it, the youngsters just repeat the question: “Yes, why are we doing it?” The two adolescent killers use violence without any explanation; for them it seems to equal an act of absolute freedom and self-fulfillment. The result is a highly striking inversion of the famous Cartesian turning point to “I kill, therefore I am.” Causality rests entirely in itself. At the same time, the youngsters constantly chat and use logical deductions and moral argumentation in order to make up for the apparent lack of “reason.” They construct a guilt in the name of which the victims have to be tortured more and more. They also engage in bets. “Shall we bet that all of you will be dead by tomorrow morning?" Basically these are bets on the killers’ omnipotence. The final increase to the victims’ agony comes when the strangers ask the mother to send a child’s prayer to her “personal God” so that she can choose her own mode of dying freely. The result is a kind of semiotic hell into which audience and victims alike are drawn. The film equals a process of complete moral inversion, which leaves only the principles of accuracy and timing intact. Fulfilling a certain time schedule and not deviating from it seems to be the killers’ one and only concern.

Haneke’s approach aims directly at the audience. The director wants us to realize that an element of voyeurism is always part of any representation of violence. This is most obvious when one of the strangers is shot by the mother. His friend simply rewinds the video recording of the scene and starts the tape anew. Then the youngster smiles directly into the camera and asks us to participate in his bets. Violence, it seems, does not only exist for the entertainment of the killers but for the viewer’s pleasure as well. If the youngster had really died during that scene, his untimely “departure” would have deprived us of a lot of “funny games” to come. Haneke’s aesthetic basis is a kind of conspiracy theory, which presents itself as a very strong critique of the representation of violence in mainstream film. Basically the entire movie can be summarized by two central messages: all violence is horrible for the victims, and any visual reflection of violence is voyeuristic by nature. Thus, the director aims at the education of his audience by using film as a means of moral purification. In that respect, *Funny Games* combines elements of a left-wing critique of consciousness with the moral impact of the Enlightenment.

Wim Wenders’s *The End of Violence* is also a film with a very specific “message.” Based on a series of narrative “Short Cuts,” the film presents a kind of cinematic dystopia reminiscent of Orwell’s *1984*. A huge network of cameras records virtually everything that is happening in the city of Los Angeles. Former NASA scientist Ray Bering (Gabriel Bryne) tests the system at an observatory overlooking the city. By chance he becomes witness to an assault on Holywood producer Mike Max (Bill Pullmann) during which the two assailants are shot by an unknown hitman. Fearing further attacks on his life, Max escapes and hides with a group of Mexican immigrants while his wife Page (Andie MacDowell) gradually takes over

his business matters. A detective (Loren Dean) falls in love with one of Mike's stuntgirls (Tracy Lind), and Bering has an affair with his Latin American maid.

Wenders's cinematic patchwork is based upon the assumption that violence is an inseparable part of modern life, as it is conveyed by a rap poem at the centre of the film. It seems that the road to an "end of violence" leads to a life somewhere at the fringes of society, as it is exemplified by Mike Max. Living in the company of the Mexicans, he gets acquainted with a completely different existence based upon solidarity and human kindness. As a result, Mike gradually learns to question his former existence so that he finally leaves the name of Mike Max behind. His wife shows the opposite development. Having initially dreamt of a simple life in Guatemala, Page gradually abandons the idea and turns into an extremely tough and ruthless businesswoman. Here Wenders reiterates a pattern which has been running through all his early German films from the 70s; becoming part of the "system" equals a loss of identity whereas withdrawal and rejection of established role patterns means being on the road to self-fulfillment. The same pattern is at work when Bering's maid, who has been used by the FBI to gather information about the scientist, risks her life by publicly abandoning her role as informant. It seems that Wenders regards this act of refusal as a moment of liberation; for him, the way to an "End of Violence" is inevitably connected to a change of consciousness which leads the individual to a process of questioning his/her former existence.

However, Wenders's cinematic meditation upon the "end of violence" is even more effective in its inherent critique of mainstream film. Wenders, a former icon of German independent cinema, has managed to retain an enormous degree of independence *within* an established Holywood apparatus; unlike his character Mike Max, he tries to subvert the system by challenging predominant modes of representation. Although Wenders "tightened up" his various "short cuts" by re-editing the film for the American market, his patchwork aesthetics still challenges dominant modes of representation. The same holds true for the director's tendency not to represent violence *at all*; for example, we watch the attack on Mike Max with Bering's eyes whose monitor only shows black silhouettes acting against a greenish background. Representing the viewer at the cinema, Bering gradually learns to make sense of the images by placing them within a narrative context, which can only be created in his mind. Violence, which seems to be the ultimate message, is also the outcome of a certain type of visual domination leaving no room for our creative imagination.

It seems to me that Haneke's and Wenders's approaches have one common denominator. Haneke aims at a moment of recognition, which makes the viewer realize that the depiction of violence requires a voyeuristic accomplice. Wenders tries to subvert existing narrative conventions by emphasizing the role of the viewer in the creation of a film. However, both directors regard film as a means of

visual liberation; they put forward the notion that violence is not only a social problem but a question of the conventions of its aesthetic representation as well.