Amistad And 12 Years A Slave: Comparative Essay

The climax of 12 Years a Slave begins when Epps orders Northup to whip Patsey. There is hatchet lighting on Northup as he holds the whip in his hand because he is unsure if he is going to whip his friend Patsey. Northup's face is not moving, yet the audience sees his whole life, which is written in his eyes. The sympathy and horror grow inside of him. Northup forces viewers to acknowledge his eyes, which are full of pain, revealing the inherent nature of slavery. There is beautiful lighting on both Epps and Mrs. Epps, who are watching Northup whip Patsey from the side. There is non-diegetic sound playing before and during Northup's whipping of Patsey, which causes a dramatic effect. Each time Patsey is whipped, she screams and pants, until after the tenth whip, she starts to cry. The camera moves in a semi-circle and there is another close-up of Patsey as she is by whipped by Northup. The whipping is all in one continuous shot, which gives the audience no relief. The continuous shot heightens the drama with the complexity of emotions and violence going on. By not having any cuts, the audience is not subconsciously reminded that they are watching a film. Cinematographer Sean Bobbitt avoids using jump cuts between perspectives of the characters because it gives viewers a sense of jumping into individual characters' heads. The camera includes multiple perspectives of the victim, the perpetrator, and other slaves witnessing the whipping. This scene was filmed with handheld cameras, as it takes on the actions of a bystander. The use of handheld cameras introduces realism and sets the tone for documentary-style films by showing that the scenes are less crafted. Handheld cameras also keep viewers on their toes by including camera movements that keep a raw, real feel. The climax of Amistad begins when Cinqué defiantly stands up in court, chanting "Give us, us free!" Before speaking, every face and image that was focused on was shown in a muted light. The dim mood reflects the uncertainty in the outcome of the case and the dark music reinforces this feeling. The nervous glances of the other slaves are mimicked by directing the camera at different objects within the courtroom, such as Theodore Joadson's cane and the attentive faces in the crowd, creating suspense leading up to Cinqué's words. The courtroom is silent as the camera slowly zooms in on Cinqué. His facial expression is dramatized as each drip of sweat and stutter are illuminated as he starts chanting in a soft whisper. The camera tilts down as confused faces fill the courtroom. His volume increases with growing confidence until he stands up, with his arms outstretched, and begins shouting. African music starts playing and increases in volume as Cinqué starts shouting, making his speech appear divine. The camera stays still on Cinqué during his chant, which contrasts the previous scene where several different images were focused on. This isolation creates a powerful backdrop for his outburst. There is a low angle shot of Cinqué at the end of his chant, emphasizing his power.

In the third act of 12 Years a Slave, a Canadian laborer named Samuel Bass expresses his opposition to slavery by sending a letter for Northup to New York. It begins with an establishing shot of Northup and several other slaves working in a planting field when the local sheriff arrives in a carriage with two men after receiving the letter from Bass. A man from the carriage asks "Platt" come forward and if he knows the man standing by the carriage. The camera stays still as there is a long point of view shot of Solomon as he looks at Mr. Parker, allowing his emotional thoughts to drive the narrative. Northup is framed between Epps and Parker as they argue for his life. There is an over the shoulder shot of Patsey as Northup is getting into the carriage, which conveys the distance between the two. Northup stops for a brief goodbye

embrace with her, allowing for emotional resonance and gratification as they share a bittersweet farewell. There is a shallow depth of field, drawing the attention of the audience to them. As the carriage carrying Northup leaves Epps' plantation, the depth of field becomes increasingly more shallow as Patsey falls to the ground in a miserable heap. Despite Northup's happy ending, Patsey reminds the audience of slavery's power to make humans into beings that can merely exist. The tightly edited sequence of shots and a moving score highlights the emotional impact of the scene. The third act of Amistad opens with an impassioned plea by John Quincy Adams to the Supreme Court on behalf of the Africans. Adams's lengthy speech confronts several relevant issues today including the role of the government, the importance of identity, and race relations. The camera slowly pans left as the judge is speaking to the courtroom. The shallow depth of field indicates that the judge is the only important person in the courtroom. As the judge is speaking, there is quiet African music playing in the background which increases in volume after the judge hits the sound block with a gavel, ruling in favour of the Africans. The uncuffing of Cinque's hands and the low angle shot as he looks at his uncuffed wrists symbolize his freedom. The bright lighting contributes to the mood of this scene as the Africans have just gotten released.

Through the use of cinematography, sound, and editing, Steve McQueen artfully tells Solomon Northup's story of how he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in 12 Years a Slave, while in Steven Spielberg's Amistad, the revolt of Mende captives aboard a Spanish slave ship causes a major controversy in the United States when it is captured. Both films show viewers what a first-hand account of slavery looks like through realist images of suffering and torture. In McQueen's words, "the past is absolutely about the present for me."