Steven Spielberg’s Film Amistad And The Novel Mutiny On The Amistad: Comparative Essay

Steven Spielberg’s film Amistad and the novel Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and its Impact on American Abolition, Law and Diplomacy are both positive and negative mediums that historically represent the mutiny that took place in 1839. Both of these mediums retell the mutiny that took place as 53 African’s who were captured from their home in Africa and were to be sent to Cuba and sold to a couple of Spanish men. That plan was cut short as the ship, La Amistad was eventually overtaken by a crew of American Navy officers. This proceeded a trial involving the African’s and whom they belonged to. Although many may question why there is a novel as well as a film, the film is a great compliment to put the novel into perspective and not seen as a replacement. While both the film and the novel have their shortcomings, these two mediums have effectively created an accurate depiction of events that were ongoing from that period of time.

Both Howard Jones and Steven Spielberg successfully confirm historic events that took place in the early 1840s. There are numerous significant examples throughout the film that take place, that the historical non-fiction book simply fails to provide. The first advantage that you can readily gain from the film rather than the novel is the visual appeal as it arises in various scenes. From students to adults many people tend to comprehend the content better in a visual manner which is presented in this film in a concise way. Within the novel, it is full of detail and can be wordy at times for its readers. Although it is important for academic research, the film provides the moral of the story in an efficient manner. None the less, as the novel was full of political terminology that myself had trouble making sense of, the film was a great medium to compliment the book and fully understand the events that took place. In addition to the visual aspect of the film, another aspect to learn from is the theatrical component. As tensions build up throughout the film, it is finally known that the African’s are not from Cuba as we all were portrayed to believe from the beginning. In the first chapter of the novel, it comes right out and says the blacks are from Africa (p. 15). Then again, the novel is historical non-fiction and the main focus is not on the theatrics like a film tends to be. More importantly, another advantage the film gives the audience is an abolitionist movement. Even though it can be said in the text, which Jones describes; the films contained strong themes of racism and civil right wrongdoings where film presents more significance. An example of this movement is shown in the film and further described in the novel as the blacks were forced to eat rice with insufficient water and if the food was not finished, they were then whipped (p. 15). This is important to note as it being a Hollywood film, many films from there avoid confronting these issues. As these racist and civil rights issues took place and still are a part of society today, the film is a great medium for creating awareness. Lastly, emotional connectivity is something the audience can take out of the film that does not play a factor in the novel. For the most part, Jones contributes facts from a white perspective in the film and how the freeing of the blacks would be a major disadvantage to certain people and countries. An example of this is occurs when as the Cuban planters were worried about losing profit on the African slave trade due to too many freed Africans (p. 19). All in all, the blacks were the center of attention throughout the entire film; yet their side of the spectrum was left out.

Although both mediums being the novel by Howard Jones and Steven Spielberg’s film, for the

most part, tell the same story. Amistad is directed in Hollywood and part of the film business which allows there to be specific scenes and or aspects throughout, which have been distorted to seek an audience and achieve the theatrical side of the film. Within the film that was directed by Spielberg, it has drawn attention to some inaccurate and misleading information. During the book it is easy to tell that it would be of great use to academically as a resource and provides details throughout in a direct manner. An example of the film being misleading is when Roger Baldwin was only there to fight for the Africans at the end of the movie, as he was more concerned about his career path as an attorney earlier on (p. 37). In contrast to the book, Baldwin from the beginning was motivated to free the Africans before the Amistad trial as well as a previous court. Another aspect within the film that does not portray the proper character, but it altered for the film audience is Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman). By Spielberg adding this character, it undermines the role that Lewis Tappan was a part of being the abolitionist movement. In saying that Tappan was known to be religious in the film, but he was a huge factor in bringing attention to the case and not tolerating slavery or racism (p. 39). Another essential point that came to fruition is how Spielberg portrays Cinque as a character. Throughout the film Cinque was known to be the leader of the mutiny, but throughout the film, it indicated that Cinque of heroic status and the mutiny had nothing to do with any of the other Africans that were a part of it. A sufficient reason to argue how the mediums tell different stories is when in history it is known that Cinque bashed the captain to the ground with his knife and let the other Africans kill him; the film depicts Cinque killing him on his own (p. 25). For the better part of the film, the birthplace of where the Africans were actually from played a major role. It was in question throughout if they were from the Cuban plantations or Africa where they were illegally purchased. In the novel, it is said within chapter one about the African's origin, but the film misleads the audience into where the origin was of the Africans until the end where it was revealed. Lastly, the biggest difference between the book and the film was how the procedure of the trial played out. In the end, both mediums reached the same conclusion; however, through the film, the audience was persuaded by the speech of John Quincy Adams and the book conveys a long grueling process in which the African's had to earn their freedom back (p. 191-194).

The key aspect being discussed is if the details being omitted from the film historically depict a different story/image than what the novel that Howard Jones wrote. While the film omits many details because that they cannot provide everything like a book version is able to, the film does a great job to create the same storyline with more theatrics due to it being made for an audience and known as a Hollywood film. From the beginning to the end, both mediums show the same story; the African's getting caught and then through the trails to finally having their freedom back one and for all. The story stays the same, where the differences come into play is how the book goes into more detail regarding what the characters are about, their personality, their thought process and true feelings are described. More importantly, the novel has to describe the characters in-depth as they are not capable of revealing emotions through actions, but rather strong wording and detail can help make up for it to give the reader a vivid image of what it is like. It has been shown that even though Spielberg omitted specific details about characters, both the film and novel display the same story.

To emphasize that one medium is more suited for academic study it would be the novel. In the first place, the novel is historical non-fiction that is based on informative information from experts that have done their research on the Amistad topic. Furthermore, the historical information that has been compiled into the novel Mutiny on the Amistad has come from court records archives as well as legal materials as in the preface of the book which is a major

advantage. All of these resources have given Jones the ability to analyse the story around the Amistad as a whole. Rather than watching the film and knowing that there have been parts in it that are changed for audience purposes, the novel gives you appropriate detail that is better suited for academic study. Amistad's book by Jones remains unbiased with his information that he provides on the Amistad case, where he clearly describes how the trial affected the abolitionists fighting for the black people's rights and freedom (p. 27). Throughout the novel, it is noticeably shown in the Van Buren election the divide between the North and South states as well as America and Spain conflicting between countries. As stated earlier, the book is historical non-fiction which means it is fact-based and Jones goes on further in the novel to explain that the trial case was more than just an emotional effect like the film concentrated on. Despite this, if the film had been a documentary, it could be a fitting medium for academic study. The moral of the story is that even though the film presents a true story of the Amistad, many of the details throughout it are inaccurate which makes it more suitable for academic study to read the novel.

The film directed by Steven Spielberg and the novel written by Howard Jones does not use the same sources for their medium. To elaborate on this, the novel is based on professor's research, court records, legal materials and much more; where the film medium sources come from facts within the novel and made up information to make the film a better storyline for its audience. Throughout the preface of the novel, Howard Jones gives many thanks to people's labor work that has helped him create the novel (p. VII). Some of the sources Jones thanked that collaborated with him to make this novel happen were lawyers, archivists, analysts and most important financial assistance (p. VII- VIII). All of these friends, colleagues and acquittances that were used, played a significant role in the release of Mutiny on the Amistad. In contrast to the book, the film uses the novel for factual information to add an element to the narrative. Another source that plays a role in the film is the music that is being played throughout scenes, it creates several emotions like excitement, suspense, and many others. Finally, the cast; using Hollywood actors like Matthew McConaughey and Morgan Freeman playing important roles brings in a better audience and adds a sense of awareness to the principle of the story.

When it comes to teaching history of the Amistad in a university class at first-year level or years beyond, the medium that is superior to use would be the novel because it gives you the ability to educate students with all the facts and nothing else portraying a different story. At the university level, students should be able to comprehend the extensive detail that is put into the novel which explains the exhausting trial for freedom of the African's, the personalities of the characters and many other important scenes. Although the novel is an advantage to teaching a university class, the film is still an accurate portrayal of the general story on the Amistad. The film would be tough to be the primary resource for teaching university students as it is inaccurate with some of the scenes and lacks detail throughout. Nonetheless, it complements the novel by being able to be emotionally connected and adds value to the learning experience. Regardless of what medium is chosen to teach university students the history of this subject, it is important to address the omission and alterations to the details in the film that create a certain image around what the fictional characters are like from the actual story.

In conclusion, Mutiny on the Amistad is a great way to reflect what America was like in the 1840s. In terms of studying the history of the Amistad, the book is a detailed and precise medium for academic study and or research. The film directed by Steven Spielberg, is a shortened version of the main storyline that has its flaws and drawbacks to it but, does not change the story. Both materials are extremely valuable and can complement each other when

learning about the history. One way to describe the relationship between the two mediums is that the film is a great wingman to the novel.

References

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