

This is mentioned in the film but not dwelt on: the *Northern* judges ruled *against* the freedom of the *Amistad* captives. The Supreme Court, with a majority of slaveholding *Southerners*, rendered the proper decision: the Africans had been illegally seized and were *freed*. Then, according to American law, they had to be sent back to Africa. In addition, a law professor tells me that the movie badly distorts the legal issues and proceedings of the case, though these take up most of the film.

Here is the real clincher. Samuel Eliot Morison, one of the leading American historians of all time, wrote in his *Oxford History of the American People* (1965 edition, p. 520) that Cinque, the leader of the *Amistad* captives, went back to West Africa and became a slave trader himself! Being from Boston, Morison did not have to give any source for this statement. Some writers have affirmed, others have denied, this story, none of them having cited any source. In fact, except for the court record, everything that has been printed about the *Amistad* case is in the realm of romance rather than historical scholarship. The court record is full of lawyers' and diplomats' lies, but at least it's a document.

Morison's story is inherently likely. He was well connected in New England maritime circles. New England ships frequently went to the coast of West Africa to sell rum and buy slaves and could have easily heard news of Cinque. Morison could have had the story word of mouth from an old man who had been there, or his descendants. That Cinque became a slave trader is highly plausible. What else could the man do? His native village had been dispersed. West Africa had little else to trade for European goods except its people. It would have been the best entrepreneurial opportunity open to him. The region's economy and politics consisted largely of competition between chiefs for market share.

To further develop the hokeyness of *Amistad's* portrayal of American life and politics, let me review the little-known history of another slave ship case. In 1858, a U.S. Navy vessel intercepted a suspicious looking ship near the Cuban coast. It turned out to be the *Echo*, out of Providence, Rhode Island, with over 400 Africans on board, many of them in very miserable condition. The officer who captured the slaver was John N. Maffitt, who a few years later would be famous as

the commander of the Confederate raider *Florida*. The captain and owner of the slaver was Edward Townsend, a well-educated man from what passed for a good family in Rhode Island. He alleged that the Africans were all war captives or families of executed criminals and that he had saved them from certain death. He also said that had he completed his voyage, he and his silent investors could have cleared \$130,000, a staggering sum in those days.

Maffitt took Townsend to Key West to be prosecuted. The Northern-born federal judge, later a Unionist, refused to take jurisdiction. Maffitt then had him sent to Boston, where the court had jurisdiction on the presumed point of origin of the *Echo*. There the federal judge also refused to proceed, and Townsend walked free, though guilty of a crime equivalent to piracy in American and international law. (To avoid confusion, it should be pointed out that there was another New England slave ship named *Echo* that was captured in 1860, shortly before the Lincoln crisis in America. Almost two years later, the captain, a man named Gordon from Maine, was hanged by the U.S. government when it was most expedient to convince Europeans that the Union cause was justified by antislavery. As far as I know, this is the only one of thousands of Northerners engaged in the slave trade who was ever punished.)

The *Echo*, its crew, and captives were taken to Charleston. The people of Charleston provided them with food, clothing, and other necessities and treated them with sympathy. The U.S. District Attorney in Charleston was James Conner, who a few years later would lose a leg fighting in the Confederate Army. Unable to get hold of Townsend, he vigorously prosecuted the crew. However, the juries felt (probably correctly) that the miserable polyglot lot were as much victims as criminals, having been shanghaied or tricked into the voyage. The mortality rate of the *Echo* captives was over 30 percent. The survivors were returned to Africa, though it was reported that many of them did not want to go. (The story of the *Echo* case comes from the research of my former student, Dr. John C. Roberson.)

I recount this case to provide some contrast to the cartoon version of American history given in *Amistad*. The movie presents a distorted picture and very possibly will arouse hatred at a time when it

is the last thing needed. The rehearsal of ancient guilt and outrage is not a healthy activity for Americans, African- or otherwise. It requires selecting out a few scapegoats to blame for all the long record of the crimes, misfortunes, and follies of mankind. Psychologists call this projection. Its purpose is to save us the trouble of examining our own problems and sins.

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The Titanic 90's by Egon Richard Tausch

Titanic

*Produced by James Cameron
and Jon Landau*

*Directed by James Cameron
Screenplay by James Cameron
Released by Paramount and
20th Century Fox*

The umpteenth movie about the sinking of the great ship finally meets modern standards. James Cameron's Academy Award-winning *Titanic* may be the "movie of the year," but it is just as dishonest, immoral, cowardly, vulgar, and historically ignorant as our own age is. The true story of the *Titanic* is the stuff of tragedy (in the Greek sense), heroism, and history. So Hollywood has decided to skip it; the young wouldn't understand. Instead, we are given a three-hour melodrama of post-adolescent lust, combining the philosophical depth of 1970's *Love Story* ("Love means never having to say you're sorry") with the epic grandeur of a lemming migration.

Some older people might remember the elegant, 1953 Barbara Stanwick-Clifton Webb drama of the same name, which provided a moving love/hate story, with surprising twists and sparkling dialogue, ending in self-sacrifice and transcendent glory, while never forgetting the saga of the sinking ship. Florence King accurately predicted that Hollywood would never again permit such a film with its powerful ending, because "If I can respond emotionally to a full-throated rendition of 'Nearer My God To Thee' with every atheistic fiber of my

ing, imagine the effect it would have a millions less warped. The resulting ritual rejuvenation would bankrupt the sex-and-violence business overnight." Other people will remember the 1958 film *A Night to Remember* (based on Walter Lord's historical report and analysis) in which the ship is the whole story, and nothing is lost by the absence of a subplot. These were movies of another age, if not another planet.

The excuse usually offered for a degrading movie re-make is that it is a more accurate description of the historical events. Although this lie is less harmful than philosophical dishonesty, it must be dealt with at the outset lest one be accused of seeking to perpetuate pretty myths. The errors in this movie range from anachronistic howlers to blind modern hubris. A few of the former: Only two classes—first class (bad), steerage (good); second class must have played hooky. The obligatory (if cynical) church service with the old Episcopalian hymn for protection from "peril on the sea," strangely includes the entire verse added in 1937 (25 years after the *Titanic* sank) about "peril in the air." (*The Flying Titanic?*) The prologue of modern divers resurrects the old debate among survivors concerning whether the ship broke in half while upended and trots it out as a "new discovery" revealed by computer graphics (if it's on the monitor, it must be true). Yet there is no mention of the new discovery—that the *Titanic*'s steel was sulfuric and inferior, making the hull as brittle as glass in icy water.

Slightly more serious is the film's suspension of the laws of physics: the suction from the huge, vanishing ship only mildly tumbles those people (including our lead couple) hanging onto the stern. All the floating survivors are thickly coated with glittering ice in 40 degree water and calm, 60 degree air. Earlier, however, our leads swim throughout the interior of the sinking ship, in their skivvies, with no apparent discomfort. Interestingly, the higher the deck, the deeper the water. Stacked dishes start to slip only when the ship is nearly vertical. The passengers on the outside decks are sliding (tobogganing?) down the entire, steep length of the ship, while those inside are still ambling along horizontal passageways.

The next step down, for the show as well as society, is the vulgarity cheered throughout. It could thrill only those teenagers who think that "hawking" onto

well-dressed matrons and other strangers is the height of wit. The bratty leads delight in it.

Since the weak "love" plot—boy meets betrothed girl, they copulate in the backseat of an auto stored in the hold, then devote themselves to insulting everyone else on board—can't fill out the film, scraps must do: an evil and cuckolded villain who would have been an embarrassment in a 1912 music hall; a motionless 20-minute death scene, with mumbling; a ubiquitous, priceless navy blue "diamond" with nary a sparkle (perhaps plastic was expensive in 1912). The "best friend" of the male lead is flogged on board by him, then forgotten 15 minutes from port, never to be seen or heard from again. The Second Officer, guilt-ridden from having to protect a lifeboat with a firearm, blows his brains out. The villain shoots at the fleeing fornicators until he's out of ammo, but he can't seem to hit anything, however close. (His butler also is armed and incompetent.) And here we thought the cold water was the real threat.

Now we come to the danger of this movie as cultural icon, the reason for producing it and for its critical acclaim: the total deconstruction of history, virtue, society, and taste. Some of this just shows off the filmmaker's attitude problem: Picasso's and other modern artists' canvasses are dragged in merely to offend the rich philistines and to be praised by the oh-so-hip "hero"/artist (whose charcoal sketch of his nude lover, a tiresomely repeated plot device, reveals that his own style runs more to old Vargas *Playboy* nudes, or the Betty Grables on World War II fuselages, sans swimsuit).

The female lead is, of course, the only person to count the lifeboats and passengers and discover the discrepancy, as soon as the *Titanic* is at sea. Says our sensitive hero, "You're the finest girl . . . uh . . . woman I've ever known." Quotes attributed to Freud are used to bludgeon male passengers. A major theme is that in the bad old days women could advance only by marrying rich husbands, while men had it made. The historical fact is that up until the "greedy" Victorians almost all European and American super-rich, male and female, got that way by marriage or inheritance, at least since William the Conqueror. Even today, ambitious male executives must court their superiors as assiduously as any desperate spinster. The heroine of this

movie scorns the rich men as "Masters of the Universe"; perhaps she read Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*. In the epilogue, framed photographs show that this female survivor, formerly a betrothed bride cruelly oppressed by thoughts of future wealth and "cotillions," becomes a penniless but liberated aviatrix, horse-master (-mistress?), and, judging by one fuzzy picture, head of a top law firm. But that's to be expected from a finishing-school girl who decks burly sailors on the *Titanic* and can cut handcuffs off with one blow of a fire-ax.

Add to this mess slanders against the individuals whom history and survivors recorded as acting heroically: Guggenheim is shown as a selfish stuffed-shirt for dying with dignity; the officers take cash bribes from the "Masters of the Universe" for berths on lifeboats; the "Unsinkable" Molly Brown is a useless coward (bullied and defeated by a male, of course); Captain Smith is a buffoon, brow-beaten into dangerous speed by the greedy rich; John Jacob Astor is a cardboard fop; and the Strauses, who in real life deliberately chose to die together, are shown only silently stuck in a floating bed. The orchestra members who gave their lives to calm the passengers are portrayed as fools who actually increase the panic. The sop to religion is in the person of a droning priest, who, in skillful closeups, shows us more of his tonsils and fillings than of his faith.

It would be forgivable to turn the sinking of the *Titanic* into a mere misfortune rather than a tragedy, but to make it trashy is not. The overall theme of this movie is the negation not only of those values illustrated in history and in previous films, but of virtue itself, and any human capacity for it.

The characters, from leads to bit-parts to extras, without even one exception, are so repulsive or irritating that one feels like cheering their deaths, if not actually throttling them. But that would be a waste of energy, because during the epilogue the passengers are resurrected into the ship's grand hall to applaud deliriously the reunion of the iceberg-crossed lovers in the afterlife, 80 years later.

And this movie cost a mere \$200 million to make—the most expensive in history. Truly a film for our time and culture. Shuffleboard, anyone?

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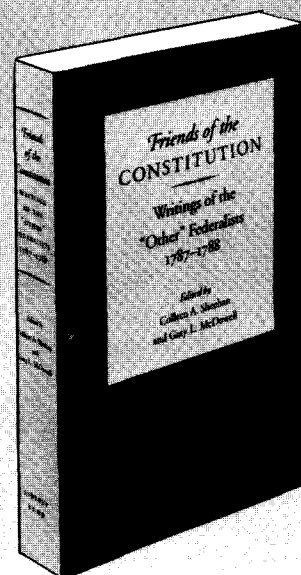
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