Amistad Africans on the Abolitionist Stage

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The Amistad revolt of 1839 has become widely known to contemporary Americans since Steven Spielberg’s film Amistad was released in December 1997. As indicated by the film trailer’s last title, “A True Story,” the director aimed at representing the historic slave revolt on screen as realistically as possible.1) In fact, many reviewers have considered the film’s achievement limited to a history lesson.2)
Cinematic representation of a historical event unavoidably raises one question: from whose perspective does the film show the past? Film critics often claim that films about slavery are somewhat racist because non-white slaves cannot help but serve as visual objects for antislavery sentiments rather than subjective agents independent of white spectators.3) *Amistad* is not unsusceptible to this attack. The director was overly ambitious in his attempt to achieve historical accuracy, since few historical records detailing the Amistad revolt have been preserved and those that have been focus narrowly on white abolitionists rather than Amistad African captives. Despite many efforts--using the Mende language, conducting extensive research on the Amistad case, and casting real Africans--to visualize the past on screen, the completed film remains organized primarily around the principle of commercial entertainment. And it entertains by presenting the Amistad Africans as “exotic other[s], as pure and incomprehensible as his [the director’s] beloved dinosaurs and aliens.”4) Not surprisingly, the *London Times* claims that Spielberg’s obsession with Cinque’s naked body turns “history into a black porno flick.”5) This attack on *Amistad* reveals one aspect of the complicated racial relationship between blacks as performers and whites as observers.

3) The film’s writer David Franzoni claims, “Most movies that deal with slavery are unintentionally racist” because white characters weigh “the good fight to liberate the black man.” He emphasizes that Spielberg’s *Amistad*, by contrast, shows how the African captives “would free the Americans.” Quoted in ibid., 81.
5) Quoted in Jeffrey, 78.