

The Influence of Polysemy When Teaching History Through Film – The Case of the *Amistad*

Hanna Ehnmark

Films or (recorded) theater plays have been part of language courses at school for quite some time. During the last couple of years though, the use of audiovisual materials for educational purposes has increased significantly (Stoddard & Marcus, “Tinsel Town” 305): Students use the internet, social or other media to gather information and complete their workload at school or university. This is also the case when it comes to history and teaching or learning about history. It is often easier and faster for a student to watch a movie than to read a book about a historical event. Additionally, history feature films are mostly more entertaining than reading said book. They can be loaded with emotion and tension in order to appeal to the masses—and could therefore transmit incorrect messages about the past. To counteract the possibility of misleading information, it makes sense to include historical movies in a teacher’s curriculum. That way, students learn about history not only through a medium they know and enjoy, but also in an environment where mistakes are not overlooked. They gain the ability to analyze such movies considering the context of production and the historical event

shown on screen and therefore manage to extract accurate information. This of course might not always work, as “different students can ‘read’ the same film and its historical messages differently” (Metzger 68). The feature being described here is that of polysemy, an essential part of any written, audiovisual or other text. It can greatly influence the way students understand a movie and think of the history it shows—and, if not properly managed by the teacher, it might transmit the wrong message or false information.

What is polysemy?

The Oxford Dictionary describes polysemy as “the coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase” (“Polysemy” n.d.). It is not surprising that this concept is very often the source of misunderstandings as individuals understand words or phrases differently. A common example are diverging conceptions in the field of entertainment like poems, music or videos. In this case, polysemy can be considered one of the reasons why people discuss various interpretations of a poem or song for hours on

end; why this or that character from a series is one of the good or bad guys (one prominent example is Professor Severus Snape from the *Harry Potter* Series, as the fandom constantly debates whether his actions were fueled by love or self-centeredness), or why some films (such as *Amistad*) spark controversial debates and discussion.

To fully understand the concept of polysemy and its importance when it comes to movies and similar media, it is necessary to place it in the context of Cultural Studies' theory, and especially Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding model. The former sees a person not as part of a passive and uniform public, but understands a person's individuality and his or her personal history (Beck 191). Following that line of thought, individual people can read the same text very differently. Stuart Hall explains these varying perceptions with a person's social and cultural background. For him, already the production of any given text (written or audiovisual) means that certain information is encoded according to the encoder's contextual background (Hall 164-165). While this in itself implies that the same information can be encoded in contrasting ways by different people with varying backgrounds, it only makes sense to expect the same at the decoder's end. This does not mean, however, that every single person understands a text differently, as polysemy does not equal pluralism (169). Instead, the overlying culture of a person "tends, with varying

degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world" (169). Correspondingly, Hall identifies three types of ways to understand the same text: The "dominant-hegemonic position" (171) encompasses people reading the text the way the encoder intends them to, meaning they understand the underlying connotations as well as dominant and hegemonic definitions and accept them (171). The "negotiated position" (172) describes an underlying understanding of connotations and definitions, although not all of them are accepted by those reading the text (172). Lastly, the oppositional position outlines people who interpret the encoder's connotations and definitions contrary to the intended understanding (172).

When applying the concept of polysemy to any audiovisual product, many things allow for misunderstandings, as every decision made by those in charge influences the way the audience perceives and reacts to a scene. Adding to this, history feature films allow for a whole new set of possible mis- or just different interpretations as they deal with varying time frames. The most obvious and important time frame concerns the past, as in what is being represented. Because of this representation, the audience can gather information about the/its past. It should be any movie's aim to make those watching understand why people acted the way they

did and thereby create a “resonance between the past and the present” (Metzger 71). While movies establish this connection, it is up to the audience to understand it correctly and not read the happenings on screen with present-day associations and understandings as they would, for example, read the news. This though, is what mostly happens and explains how people from different cultures will understand the historical ‘facts’ adapted into a story (Hall 164) differently.

Secondly, the time the feature film was produced is equally as crucial, because it is decisive for how the past is represented. This encompasses the decisions made by directors, producers etc. who are in turn influenced by certain economic, political and ideological elements (Briley 4). At the economic level, this influence amounts to the basic need for profit of any Hollywood production (Metzger 68). To make a film a commercial success, those in charge make certain dramaturgical choices possibly leading to historical inaccuracies. This process is further reinforced as the producer’s and/or studio’s ideological or political values seep through to be embedded into the (his)story. They convey important concepts of our present-day lives, which makes movies not only “texts *about* the past, over time, they themselves become documents *of* the past” (70, emphasis in original) and can and should be analyzed as such.

This leads to the third time frame, namely that of the audience, as in how a movie is perceived. Producers or directors make specific choices while producing the movie to transmit, for example, certain values as described above. They encode historical facts and produce a story (Hall 164). Following Hall, this story will not necessarily be decoded by the audience in the way its encoders intended them to. This would already be the case shortly after the movie is released (as will be shown later in this essay) but will logically still be relevant many years later. In short, any history feature film has high polysemic potential: It represents something of the past and needs to make its audience understand it. All the while it is deeply influenced by values of the time of production, leading not only to historical inaccuracies but also the possible irritation of a later audience.

The Case of the *Amistad*

The movie *Amistad*, directed by Steven Spielberg and produced by Debbie Allen, was released in 1997 and is an eligible object of analysis because of both its content and reception. It tells the story of a slave revolt aboard a Spanish schooner, called “La Amistad”, in 1839. Most of its screen time focuses on the court trials following the capture of the privateered ship, determining whether those revolting were indeed rightfully

slaves or illegally sold into slavery. Furthermore, many teachers in the US show it to their students to explain concepts like freedom (Stoddard & Marcus, “Burden of Historical Representation” 27) and identity, as the historical event and movie alike focus on it (Osagie xi). Additionally, already before but notably after its release, the movie sparked much controversy and discussion (124-126). While some thought it full of historical inaccuracies and wrong depictions (Foner), others appreciated the director’s choices and the movie’s messages (Fontenot).

Polysemy in *Amistad*?

When looking at the movie as a whole, the most relevant and obvious time frame is that concerning the audience: *Amistad* covers a story from the nineteenth century but represents US-American values from the end of the twentieth century. This already caused controversy after the movie’s release but could obviously also irritate today’s viewers. They have their own social and cultural backgrounds which do not always coincide with the values transmitted in the movie, and could therefore misunderstand what is shown on-screen. The other two time frames are best portrayed when analyzing specific scenes, though the movie’s polysemic quality is already obvious when looking at the first two scenes. The opening scene focuses on one of the captives and

later protagonist named Cinque. He manages to loosen a nail in the bulk of the *Amistad* and opens his shackles with it to later also free the other captives. The second scene shows the mutiny aboard the *Amistad* in gory detail. The Africans kill most of the crew very aggressively and violently, showing no mercy.

The time frame of the past is mostly illustrated by the movie’s alteration of a few proven historical facts. In the opening scene, for example, most sources do not explain how Cinque opened his shackles (e.g. Osagie 5). This makes the nail a fabrication set to aid the actual focus of the scene: transmitting Cinque’s emotions. While this does not necessarily impact a viewer’s perspective when watching the movie, in the second scene, the movie’s screenplay excludes the real reason for the Africans’ brutality during the mutiny: Apparently, the cook aboard of the *Amistad* had taunted the captives by telling them that they were to be killed and eaten. The kidnapped Africans believed this story (5), which is why they in turn killed the crew so viciously. Of course, already the horrid voyage across the Atlantic Ocean and being sold off to the highest bidder (shown in a later scene) could be considered reason enough for many to kill for their freedom, but the savagery illustrated during the mutiny is better explained by the actual historical account. An audience that does not know the real reason behind this violence would look for other explanations and could, for example,

simply attribute it to the Africans' way of being—hence the offence taken by some critics.

Similarly, several choices made while producing the movie add to its polysemic feature: The opening scene begins with a plaintive melody, already telling the audience how to feel (sad, longing for something that was taken—the slaves' freedom) about what is to come. Then Cinque's face appears, but the picture is very dark, a mixture of black and blue, so that it takes a while to realize what is being shown on screen. The audience hears panting but does not know where it comes from. When Cinque finds the nail, the camera focuses on his mouth which is distorted in an aggressive and feral way—probably to show his need to loosen the nail and growing hope while succeeding. This, nonetheless, creates the impression of someone violent and uncontrollable. While the audience still tries to understand what is happening, they only see something dark, glittering with sweat, panting loudly. This description makes it easy to understand how some viewers were offended by the introduction of the most important African in the *Amistad* case: "The facial features of the *Amistad* hero are presented as, and appear to be, animal-like" (Osagie 126). According to Osagie, this presentation plays into an old westernized racial image Americans have of Africans (126): Of the latter living like savages in the dark jungle or melting

into the dark (because of their skin color), or just generally being associated with darkness and therefore other negative things (22). This stereotype is reinforced in the second scene: The violence with which the captives attack and kill everybody while a storm is raging in the middle of the night connect violence once more with darkness and a dark skin color. This impression is emphasized by most of the Africans wearing nothing but a loincloth and being far superior when in battle. Especially Cinque's fight with the *Amistad*'s captain fuels this stereotype and invokes another: That of the violent big black brute (Ferber 15), "a stereotype that is staged repeatedly and therefore resonates as 'natural identity'" (Osagie 127). However, an audience with a different point of view might not realize these associations and might simply be engaged by the emotions transmitted through the scene.

Impact of Polysemy in a Classroom

When thinking about the possible impact of the polysemic quality of *Amistad* or any historical feature film in a classroom, most arguments lead up to Hall's Encoding-Decoding Model and eventually the capability of the teacher. To produce a history feature film, the historical event it pictures needs to be transformed into a story (Hall 164). It is being encoded according to the production's cultural and social background and

therefore influenced greatly by it. Because of this, many criticized producer Debbie Allen's choice of director as they saw Steven Spielberg, a white man with a lot of Hollywood history, unfit to accurately portray the happenings of the *Amistad* case and therefore the concept and issue of slavery (Osagie 122). Whether Spielberg succeeded in doing so or not is not the focal point of this discussion, but he definitely inserted a few typically American stereotypes that Africans can be offended by—all in the first few minutes of the movie. An inattentive student might on the one hand not realize this and be either influenced or offended without knowing the reason behind it. On the other hand, these inserted stereotypes allow for a discussion in the classroom where historical but also contemporary “attitudes towards race” (Briley 3) could be reviewed. *Amistad* shows different stereotypes, all of which should be spelled out when watching the movie in class. Otherwise, students might take on these stereotypes unconsciously — maybe not from watching only one movie, but with the increased consumption of history feature films in the general population (Stoddard & Marcus, “Burden of Historical Representation” 28), such stereotypes might get adopted. It is an essential part when watching any kind of movie, but especially a history feature film to carefully keep in mind the cultural context of production (Briley 4). Furthermore, the transformation of an historical event into an encoded story

also means that certain historical facts will be left out or changed to suit a more entertaining screenplay, as was done dramatizing, for example, the mutiny in *Amistad*. Any teacher using this movie in a classroom would have to disentangle fact from fiction, and explain these differences to his/her students. To successfully extract historical facts from the movie, the latter need to know about the cultural, social, political and economic context of the time of production but also today.

Concerning the facts shown on screen, the subject of slavery itself is not an easy one, but the way Spielberg chose to present certain events (like the mutiny or Cinque's story about them crossing the Atlantic Ocean during one of the trials) toughens it up even more. As Chester J. Fontenot (1999) writes in his review, even grown-ups were visibly shaken after watching *Amistad*. Some because they were racked with guilt, some because they were identifying themselves with the misery shown in a few scenes (243). *Amistad* is not the only historical movie featuring difficult scenes about past events—almost all of them do. Because of this, a teacher must, for one, manage potentially shocked students, but on the other hand use such movies to pass on central concepts presented in these movies—such as “the black misery signified by the torturous ordeal that Cinque and his fellow Africans sustained and the white guilt symbolized by the Supreme Court victory”

(243) in *Amistad*. As Spielberg chose to emotionalize many scenes, the movie might be better suited to convey the relevant emotions concerning the topic of slavery than a history book. While this makes the movie interesting, it could, however, become dangerous as it envelops the historical event with emotions that are not always called for but should be anticipated by any teacher showing such a movie in class.

Furthermore, it is rather unlikely that all the students sitting in one class will ‘read’ the movie the same way. According to their own cultural, social, and personal contexts, they will decode and understand various scenes or stereotypes differently. Someone decoding the movie from a dominant-hegemonic position will for example be shaken by the violence of the mutiny but accept the brutality because of Cinque’s pain shown in the opening scene. Another student might only see the savagery, be appalled by it and therefore also distrust the revolting Africans in the coming scenes — that is until they reach the visualization of the slaves’ crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, which seems to justify any kind of violence. The list describing different ways to decode the same scene could go on and on. Taken all together in a classroom, they could for one generate a lively discussion and widen the horizon of the students participating. However, when

not channeled well enough by a competent teacher, this might deteriorate into verbal fights between the students — provided they care enough about what they see on screen to talk about it.

Lastly, when considering all of the above, students can take a lot from understanding the principle of polysemy in historical feature films. For one, being able to differentiate between actual historical fact and a producer or director’s choice of interpretation (encoding) indicates not only knowledge on the various time periods or a director’s style but “abstract thought” (Briley 4) and important analytical skills (Metzger 67). Adding to this, because movies have become an important part of most students’ lives (68), learning how to analyze an audiovisual document could give them an impulse to critically reflect on other things they see on screen. In today’s digitalized and globalized day and age, this has become more and more important. To, for example, outsmart possible Fake News or be able to distinguish between different people’s points of view and ways of encoding and decoding is crucial. But even when not considering this current example, learning how to analyze texts, such as movies, and thinking about other people’s perceptions are skills needed in one’s day-to-day life and even more surely in the future.

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