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“The Alamo” of Myth, Propaganda, And Utilitarian Mediatization The Construction/Consecration of A Unilateral, Distorted Memory

The myth of “The Alamo” as the great epic battle in the history of the United States—not only of Texas—has been consolidated by all manner of means: paintings, engravings, comics (like *Texas History Movies*), diverse memorabilia (plates, knives “of the era,” press articles, handguns, etc.), films, television series, documentaries, and books (with contradictory perspectives and based on a good number of cases). The most important may have been the construction of the physical infrastructure that has become a space of civic worship, ideal for the construction of citizenship, to forge feelings of identity and belonging, and, ominously, for the systematic exclusion of the “others” (Native Americans, Afro-descendants, and Mexicans), who also belong to this history

that white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, racists and supremacists have appropriated for themselves and exploited as “their legacy” to systematically manipulate and utilize as a powerful ideological weapon, giving rise to the racism, marginalization, and demonization of the “others” from 1836 until today, based on distortion.

The United States is home to 35,000 museums and memorials to render permanent homage to the artifices of its warmongering, interventionism, and expansionism based on the myth of its “Manifest Destiny.” It has used them to attempt to impose the narrative that all its wars have had as their sole aim the expansion of the values of democracy, justice, and freedom throughout the world. The case of “The Alamo” is a particularly significant example of this.

Its physical infrastructure (the fort, the museum, the monument to the dead, etc., in San Antonio) has remained the tourist attraction of the same name since it was erected, mainly because the installations are owned by

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the state of Texas and managed by its administrations. Other facilities have not had the same luck: the “Alamo Village” set of the 1960 John Wayne film *The Alamo*, located in Brackettsville, Texas, became a tourist attraction and the site of the production of almost a hundred media products. This has happened in other similar complexes, such as that of Old Tucson, in southern Arizona, or Big Bend National Park. The last opening of Wayne’s *The Alamo* tourist/film complex, auctioned off objects stored in its museums, among them, the John Wayne Western Museum, plus other memorabilia from its Celebrity Gallery, the cantina, restaurant, church, prison, etc. That is, they sold off all the scenery and props that made up the cinematographic infrastructure of *The Alamo*.

Comparing the two tourist complexes related to “The Alamo” seems useful because it may be a metaphor for what can happen to the relationship between historiography and the promotion of nationalism/patriotism/jingoism by those in power and from “particularly interested” civic organizations like the Texas Public Policy Foundation, The Alamo Committee of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the Texas State Board of Education, and the Texas State Historical Association, among others. It also shows up what happens when there is no organically solid integration of the political, economic, and ideological powers that can impose and maintain practically immobile a long-term perspective, even if it is a distorted one.

In the case of “The Alamo,” some Mexican and U.S. historiographers, fully aware of how harmful the distortion of history can be, have promoted a narrative that is closer to reality and denounced this episode. Among them are Randolph Campbell in *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (1989); Phillip Thomas Tucker in *Exodus from the Alamo: the Anatomy of the Last Stand Myth* (2010) and *America’s Forgotten First War for Slavery and Genesis of the Alamo* (2017); Andrew J. Torget, in *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas*

Borderlands, 1800-1850 (2015); and Bryan Burrough, Jason Stanford, and Chris Tomlinson in *Forget the Alamo. The Rise and Fall of an American Myth* (2021), to cite just a few.

The traditional Anglo narrative of “The Alamo,” with its heroic pretensions, maintains that the “heroes” were fighting for “liberty” and for “honor” and “bravery” against a tyrannical country like Mexico and its government officials —and Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794-1876) in particular. As simple and concrete as that —but just as false— is the assertion about a history that is not the exclusive property of the United States, but also of Mexico.

Over time what was systematically hidden has come to light: the excesses of speculators, who used land to impose and maintain a regime based on slavery in a country that had already banned it. This was the main driving force behind people like the supposed “father of Texas,” Stephen F. Austin, Samuel Houston, and all their brethren (Henry Smith, Branch T. Archer, and Robert M Williamson), who carried forward an enterprise that began as an occupation and ended with the plunder of Mexico in 1836.

Given this situation, any effort to denounce the Anglo Texans’ supposed struggle “for freedom” from 1835 to 1836 is disqualified by the argument that only absurd, useless, and impractical “revisionism,” old-fashioned anti-American sentiments seek to demystify Texas’s heroic figures, etc. What is actually behind that effort is the fight against erroneous information, the disinformation generated by the media culture, by “white,” Anglo mythology. The latter erases any non-whites from the story, whether Native Americans, Afro-descendants, or Mexican Texans. Above all, it has had a tremendously pernicious effect on today’s Hispanic-Latinx communities.

By excluding those from history and emphasizing the “white” narrative of heroes and villains (the Texans and Mexicans of the past) by repeating a lie, it becomes much easier to deprive Texans of Mexican descent residing in Texas today of their identity and feelings of belonging. But the damage is even greater: that falsified historiography not only poisons relations among the Texans of today, but also degrades the diplomatic relations between the two countries. It creates practically permanent displays of xenophobia, racism, and exclusion by today’s Texan governments against Mexicans and migrants in general. All of this is based mainly on the ritual of “remembering the Alamo,” as a symbol that the struggle against tyranny, injustice, and “Mexican evildoers” waged in the past must continue.

These erratic and ill-intentioned approaches, and even the reality of a historic figure such as Santa Anna—who, in effect, refused to recognize the 1824 Mexican Constitution in 1835, became an atrocious dictator in the years after the 1836 Texas episode, up until the prelude to the second French intervention in Mexico beginning in 1861—are no justification for denying what was perpetrated in Texas by its “Founding Fathers.” The latter carried out the “revolution for independence” in order to impose slavery as the economic system, and, after independence, to strip and displace Mexicans of their lands and properties in a kind of “clearing of the land” and ethnic cleansing that turned into lynchings and segregation of our countrymen and women until well into the twentieth century.

As a result, the war against Mexico by the Anglo Texans and the Mexican Texans (*texanos* and *tejanos*, respectively) who also lived in the region was not sparked by any “passion for liberty,” since, in the last analysis, they fought for what they thought was their right and their freedom, that is, to enslave people in a country that already forbade it. To do that, they had to separate to impose the slave regime first in an independent Texas (1836-1845), later annexed into the United States (1845). Therefore, the Anglo Texan “heroes” were actually the instigators of a revolt against the country that had taken them in, to later dispossess it of part of its territory.

That particular combination of fighting to impose slavery (of Afro-descendants on cotton plantations) and the dispossession (of the Mexicans who lived in Texas in 1836 and against Mexico itself), represented as an epic tale of “honor,” “valor,” and “freedom” of the Anglo Texans—both past and present—has been kept alive for almost 200 years, recycled as “legend” in film and television.

The film historiography of “The Alamo” began, perhaps, with the most popular of the “Holy Trinity”: Jim Bowie, William Travis, and David Crockett. They were depicted in films such as *Davy Crockett* (directed by Frank Boggs in 1910); *Davy Crockett* (directed by William Desmond Taylor in 1916); and *With Davy Crockett at the Fall of the Alamo* (directed by Robert N. Bradbury in 1926), advertised in some countries as *David Crockett en el fuerte de la muerte* (David Crockett at the Fort of Death). This trend peaked with the Disney television series *David Crockett: Indian Fighter* (by Norman Foster, 1954), colored and recycled as *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (by Norman Foster, 1955). Both of the latter were unprecedented hits in the mid-1950s, spur-

ring the first big sale of merchandise and memorabilia linked to the story and characters in “The Alamo.” This marked an entire generation of television viewers in the United States and around the world.

Perhaps for the U.S. imaginary, the films that exalted the “immortality” of the historic episode and the “martyrdom” and heroism of their protagonists in the face of the Mexican siege, etc., were more significant. Among these films are *Immortal Alamo* (William F. Haddock/Georges Méliès, 1911), *The Fall of the Alamo* (Harold Matthews, 1913), *The Siege and Fall of the Alamo* (Ray Myers, 1914), and *The Birth of Texas (Martyrs of the Alamo)* (by Christy Cabanne, 1915). Cabanne’s film presents the Mexican Texans as disrespectful of the Anglo Texans and as rapists of “their” women: the ultimate cause of the struggle of the “Arians” against the sinister, “dark” Mexicans. The film exists and circulates even today on DVD as a cinematographic rarity worth reviewing, as one of the most significant historic film distortions of the Silent Era.

Other characters of “The Alamo” were alluded to in films like *The Conqueror* (Raoul Walsh, 1917), advertised as a “a titanic drama of American History” or the description of the life of Sam Houston: “soldier, statesman, patriot, and one of the founders of the Republic of Texas.” The remake of this story about the first president of Texas, titled *Man of Conquest* (George Nichols, Jr., 1939), almost turned into a diplomatic incident between Mexico and the United States. It was promoted as “a cavalcade of Americanism,” with peculiar slogans like “America First, Last — Always!” The confrontation concluded with the film being banned in Mexico and other Latin American nations after Mexico’s diplomatic request; Hollywood tolerated the ban at the White House’s behest because the United States needed Mexico and Latin America as allies on the eve of World War II. William Dieterle’s *Juárez* (1939) was released then, inaugurating for the same reasons a “good neighbor film policy.”

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Naturally, outstanding in the filmography were titles alluding to Texas's great motto, with titles like *Remember the Alamo* (Ira Genet, 1934), *Heroes of the Alamo* (Harry R. Fraser, 1937), *The Alamo: Shrine of Texas Liberty* (Stuart Patton, 1938), *Land of Liberty* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1939), *The Man from the Alamo* (Budd Boetticher, 1953), *The Defense of the Alamo* (Sidney Lumet, 1953), *The Burning of the Alamo* (Philip Bosco, Walter Cronkite, and Héctor Elías, 1953, for television), and *The Last Command* (Frank Lloyd, 1955). Perhaps *The Man from the Alamo* is salvageable because it deals with a relatively unknown hero, John Stroud, apparently the only Anglo survivor of the siege of the fort. This is probably the only film that tempered the anti-Mexican stances of almost the entire filmography of "The Alamo" and contained arguments against racism, significant in the persecutory paranoia of the McCarthy period when any progressive position was branded communism.

In general, all the movies stuck to the official and cinematographic story and promoted those beliefs. With renewed fervor, this was repeated in films like *The Alamo* (John Wayne, 1960), shot at the height of the Cold War, attempting to strengthen the values of the "American Dream" when nuclear tensions, the fight for civil rights, and the Vietnam debacle were already causes for severely questioning U.S. "democracy," making ultra-right supremacists think the United States was on the verge of disappearing.

Naming all the movies and television programs, works of fiction, and documentaries that have been produced about "The Alamo" after what Wayne considered his great film epic about the United States would make for a huge list. It would include *Houston: the Legend of Texas/Gone to Texas*, by Peter Levin (1986), also known as *La independencia de Texas* (The Independence of Texas); *Alamo... The Price of Freedom*, by Kiet Merryl (1988); and *Seguín*, by Jesús Salvador Treviño (1981), the only movie about a Mexican Texan who fought against Mexico as a member of a Mexican family allied with the Anglo Texans, and, as such were, like them, firm defenders of slavery.

To a certain extent, Wayne achieved success mainly due to the strength of the myth maintained from on high in the heavens of power and to the hugely expensive advertising campaign that preceded the movie's premiere. However, one small thing is of note: the revision of history, the discussion of the facts, and the political evolution of the United States have led to a relative abandonment of the cinematic and television jingoism. This

was perceptible in the last two attempts to impose the fake history in audiovisual media: in 2004, *The Alamo* (John Lee Hancock), the last blockbuster produced dealing with the event, failed miserably. Seemingly, audiences were no longer very convinced of seeing a new version of that story with even more flagrant ideological and propagandistic intentions, which used the episode as a psychological tool to promote or justify U.S. warmongering. Director Michael Eisner of the Disney-produced film said that the new version of "The Alamo" would capture the rising U.S. patriotism following the events of September 11, 2001. They made their beds and now they had to lie in them: just as the makers of *Forging Texas*, a 2021 television project, did: it was practically ignored and perhaps suspended and therefore will most certainly go unnoticed in the film history about "The Alamo" and Texas.

In 1931, amidst the early days of European fascism, the years that were precursors to World War II, French poet Paul Valéry would lament how history was manipulated for political ends, saying that it is the most dangerous project that the intellect had developed. Its properties are well-known: it makes you dream; it intoxicates peoples; it creates false memories, exaggerates its reflections; and it leads to delusions of grandeur or persecution. History justifies what needs to be justified. That is precisely what has happened, originating in those in the political, economic, and ideological powers that be in Texas. "The Alamo" is not actually the only aberration that has given rise to gleaming white marble monuments honoring personages who were only dishonest, racist, slave-owning land speculators against Mexico. Almost the entire U.S. South suffered from this same "peculiarity" until the brutal murder of George Floyd returned a large part of the citizenry back to reality, and the monuments to racist, slave-owning members of the Confederacy were cleared away. Without going to those extremes, there should be a possibility for the history of "The Alamo" to also be reviewed. It requires a profound and sincere reflection by all of us, Mexicans and U.S. Americans, not in a culture war like the one we have been through until now, but a reflection that honestly and responsibly looks at the facts and not the myths. The future of the new generations require it, and it cannot be postponed in today's context of racism, supremacism, neofascism, and hatred for migrants and the neo Naziism ominously on the prowl in the world once again. **MM**