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## ▷ Remember the Alamo? Mexicans, Texans and Americans in 1960s Hollywood

### The Alamo and the 1960s

The 1960s are topped and tailed by two movies that deal with a supposedly major event in American and Mexican history (Hadley-Garcia 1990: 161; Rodríguez 2004: 157), an event whose subsequent interpretation and reconstruction has resulted in a notorious and irreducible confusion of myth and historical truth. The event is the siege of the Alamo and the films in question are John Wayne's *The Alamo* (released in 1960) and Jerry Paris's *Viva Max!* (released in 1969). Wayne's film is a conventional veneration of the heroic struggle for freedom by nineteenth-century frontiersmen, as a ragtag militia of soldiers and volunteers fight, against impossible odds, for self-determination and even the principle of a free Republic of Texas, as they face the tyrannical wrath of the mighty army of the despotic Mexican dictator General Antonio López de Santa Anna at a dilapidated fortress in San Antonio de Béxar in 1836. The 1969 picture enjoys a contemporary setting and is a comic satire about a bungling yet strangely winning Mexican general, Maximiliano Rodrigues (*sic*) de Santos, who leads a brigade of clumsy and dishevelled soldiers across the border into Texas in order to retake the Alamo, much to the bemusement of an array of equally buffoonish and incompetent US state and federal officials, National Guardsmen, military officers and right-wing militia members. The twin settings of 1836 and 1969 allow for a revisionary reflection on the relationship between history and modern mythology. More interestingly, the decade that is spanned by both films between 1960 and 1969 represents a massive and highly conflictual development in North American society and values and in attitudes towards Latin America. The changing face of the Hollywood Western (and its variants) in the turbulent decade of the sixties shows how these tensions play out in the popular imagination, as values or affective assumptions shift from and between unquestioned certainties rooted in Christianity and perceived family or community values to Cold War anxiety and cynicism, Vietnam-era alienation and protest, psychedelia and the sexual revolution. Ultimately, though, as these two films from either end of the decade show, history is clearly no linear narrative,

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can never be meaningfully separated from mythification, and is always characterized by a complex interaction of ambiguities and uncertainties.

## Latin Hollywood

In terms of Hollywood's perception, representation and inclusion of Latinity (be it in Latin America or the Hispanic USA), history is once again a stuttering mish-mash of progress, recycling of stereotypes and mixed messages. A broad reading of Latin Hollywood might run as follows (for more detail, see, for example, Hadley-Garcia 1993; Reyes/Rubie 2000; Rodríguez 2004; Swanson 2010). We begin with the vogue of the Latin Look of the 1930s, the rise of the image of the Latin Lover, and the attempted positive portrayal of pan-American hemispheric relations in the Good Neighbor Era of the 1930s and 1940s; only for such affirmative representations to be derailed, as the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s witness the re-opening of post-World War II European markets and transatlantic priorities, the Cuban crisis, the Cold War, immigration and the emergence of gang culture and drugs. Then again, the new economics of the 1980s and the parallel explosion of a US Latino/a population, coupled later in the 1990s and the twenty-first century with a fashionable Latinization of mass culture (aided by the success of transnational pop stars and celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin and Shakira) would be seen to lead now to a new era in which Latin directors and especially stars could easily take centre stage. An emblematic movie is Wayne Wang's 2002 Cinderella-themed Jennifer Lopez vehicle *Maid in Manhattan* about a Hispanic maid who "makes it" in the iconic US city of New York by bagging herself a preppie senatorial candidate and a brilliant career in the hospitality business. Such a narrative, though, is punctured by inconsistencies. Throughout, Latinity involves a collapsing of cultural and geographical specificities with, say, Spaniards, Brazilians, Mexicans, US citizens or even Italians being subsumed into an indistinguishable mush of poorly understood Hispanic identity (or, worse, stratified into Eurocentric categories with "Mexicans" at the bottom). The Latin Look becomes less tolerable with the arrival of the talkies (when foreigners would have to reveal their accents). Even the Good Neighbor movies patronize, stereotype and establish Northern-versus-Southern hierarchies precisely as they attempt to jollify the folk from across the border. And later, despite the coming of a new Latino/a establishment, the fall of the Soviet Union leads to the Russian villains of spy and adventure films being replaced by Colombian (or generically Latin American) drug barons (a notable example is James Bond 007's first real post-Cold War outing in John Glen's 1989 *Licence to Kill*). Moreover, at most stages of this history, Latin Americans have often been portrayed by North Americans or other non-Hispanics (sometimes in brownface), while Latin actors' names have been de-latinized (e.g. Dolores Del Rio) or completely changed into English ones (e.g. Rita Hayworth or Raquel Welch). Even in contemporary times, actors with Latin names and backgrounds do not necessarily strongly project a Latin identity (e.g. Benjamin Bratt, Cameron Diaz, Jessica Alba).

Of course, the key idea which emerges in Film Studies approaches to cinema based on this particular history of 'Hispanic Hollywood' is that North American (or, sometimes, European) movies' imaginings of Latin America or the Hispanic experience are really little more than veiled investigations of Northern and Western (essentially American) identity in which the Latin or Latin American is consistently and inevitably "oth-

ered". This happens even in the sort of self-consciously apologetic liberal movies that began to emerge in the 1980s and early 1990s. For example, Roland Joffé's *The Mission* (1986) is clearly meant to be a criticism of a Western "civilization" whose values are rooted in colonialism and slavery, but the European missionaries played by Robert de Niro and Jeremy Irons are undoubtedly the heroes rather than the passive and silent Guaraní Indians (none of the portrayers of whom are actually Guaraní, one even being a Cambodian actor!). Moreover, the positing of the indigenous community as a quasi-Utopia (thereby denying the Guaraní agency of their own) and the dwelling on rainforest imagery marks the film principally as an expression of Northern/Western nostalgias about lost paradise or anxieties about ecology (Jean Franco [1993] performs an effective hatchet job on the film's inaccuracies and limitations). Equally, Sidney Pollack's *Havana* (1990), effectively a vehicle to re-launch Robert Redford's acting career, obviously wants to offer a well-meaning reappraisal of American attitudes to the Cuban Revolution. However, its attempted exposé of the mob-run Havana of Fulgencio Batista's Cuba in the 1950s is undone by both the romanticization of the fifties nightlife and the revolutionaries. The ideology of the rebels is only explained by the goey phrase "It isn't an idea – it's a feeling inside you", while the motivation of the hero, a blond North American, is the universal and chivalric one of love (not politics), as, in an echo of *Casablanca* (1942), he sacrifices everything for the woman he loves by freeing her revolutionary-leader husband from incarceration. Meanwhile, controversially, the female lead is played by a Swede, Lena Olin, while the film's only Cuban-born actor, Tomás Milián, is given the role of the grubby villain of the piece, General Menocal.

Such movies are easy targets for cultural critics. But is it not screamingly obvious that North American versions of Latin America will reveal North American concerns and perceptions of the subcontinent below? Moreover, is not the familiar charge of historical inaccuracy a cheap shot that misunderstands the nature and function of fiction as well as the difference between history and narrative film? And cannot such worthy liberal Hollywood ventures such as those mentioned above be rescued and valued for their attempt to communicate to a wide and mainstream audience at least something of a revisionist understanding of Latin America and its history? And is it not the case that more conservative filmic versions of Latin American history and identity can reveal the same sort of inconsistencies as liberal ones, displaying unforeseen guilt, sympathies, identifications and understandings? In other words, even when considering generic and mainstream (as opposed to, say, self-consciously experimental) films, binary logic is difficult to sustain, and perhaps it is in the very dissolution of that logic or in the gaps between the conflicting sides of the binary opposition that the experience of practitioner and viewer is most comprehensively played out. From this point of view, the Western, the US-Mexico border and the 1960s can be seen as particularly compelling sites of binary tension. The Western is a genre set in the past but reflecting the concerns of the present; it is deeply nostalgic yet becomes increasingly bitter, and it struggles to survive as a genre when contemporary mores increasingly banish it to a fading bygone age. The border has been a porous geographical and imaginary space for two centuries, physically and psychologically mutant, a place of conflict, exchange and cross-fertilization. And the 1960s is the quintessential decade of the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity, a period of struggle between old certainties and chimerical visions of liberation, a period of change that contains the seeds of change's own exhaustion.

## The Western, the Border, the Sixties

The Western is often thought of in terms of a formula. With an almost Propopian verve, Frank Gruber famously reduced the Western to six basic plots, while Will Wright later boiled them down to four (Cawelti 1971: 34-35; Wright 1975 cited in White 2011: 8). In a not too dissimilar vein, Jim Kitses' auteurist study takes the binary approach, seeing the Western as a genre in terms of a series of oppositions that, as John White suggests, ultimately comes down to that between "civilization" and "wilderness" (Kitses 1969 in White 2011: 7) – a cross-border echo here of the classic and ever-morphing Latin American clash of *civilización y barbarie* (Swanson 2003). However, Kitses clearly doubts the validity of generic consistency: "The model we must hold before us is of a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material shot through with archetypal elements which are themselves ever in flux" (Kitses 1969: 19). If belonging to a filmic genre implies, for *auteur*, industry or audience, coherence, it is surely self-evident that the stability of any fictional narrative of reasonable length will never fully hold and that such a narrative, especially a film one, operates in too many environments and contexts (of production and consumption) for generic purity to be maintained. Individual Westerns seldom cohere internally and the genre cannot possibly do so over a changing history.

The relationship between history and the present is one of the keys to the character of the Western. Inevitably, they are virtually always about the past (Frederick Jackson Turner [1996] famously asserted that the frontier was closed back in 1893); yet, to be of any real interest, they must reflect the concerns of the present. In one sense, this duality is about the denial of history and change. As John H. Lenihan (1980: 11) has claimed:

The Western gave substance to the ideal of personal self-determination and responsible freedom that the realities of modern life and institutions seemed to deny. As modern psychology questioned human rationality and self-determination and as science and technology complicated man's relationship with the elements, the Western offered a clearly defined natural order conducive to clear moral choices and the triumph of good over evil.

The Western hero, then, is a consoling myth of clear values and American greatness at a time of rapid socio-economic, political and technological change. There is something of this atemporality in the films of John Wayne, including *The Alamo*, as we shall see later. The Cold War probably intensified this sense of ahistoricism as essentialist values needed to be asserted in the face of a barely digested external threat. Moreover, the Western, with its key trope of settling the interior up to the west coast, in some ways probably recalled American expansionism at a time of fear of Soviet and possibly Chinese aggrandizement. One wonders, too, if the Western in and around the sixties served as a salving reminder of American exploration and mobility in a Cold War era defined for many by the space race and following on from the successful Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the putting of a man into orbit in 1961. Yet even in a classic Western of the early 1950s, Fred Zinnemann's now iconic *High Noon* (1952), Gary Cooper's Marshal Will Kane is surely an embodiment of anti-McCarthyism, as he takes a lone stand against evil as the other townsfolk cower or flee. Kane tossing his marshal's badge into the dust after fulfilling his terrifying moral duty has to be seen as a challenge to the direction of organized society. As the 1960s progresses, the Western changes markedly

with society. At a time of social unrest, the moral hero disappears and violence takes centre stage, the most famous examples being the films of Sam Peckinpah and, in particular, his emblematic *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Peckinpah's meditation on "the passing of the old west and the difficulty of adapting to changing times" (White 2011: 28) is really the beginning of a trend for the Western to reflect a twentieth-century decade characterized by global panic, the Vietnam War, a nuclear arms race, state and federal corruption scandals, huge urbanization (especially in the South and West), ethnic variation, racial tension and the Civil Rights movement, youth culture, anti-war protests, the sexual revolution and the growth of alternative lifestyles and drug use culminating in the hippie extravaganza of the Summer of Love in 1967. *Viva Max!*, a Western spin-off, comes at social change from a more celebratory angle; but the arrival of the Spaghetti Westerns in the 1960s and 1970s seems to be more a sign of cynicism and amorality. More significantly perhaps, fewer and fewer Westerns were made, the perceived nostalgia for certainty no longer sustainable. The dramatic flop of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* in 1980 (one of the biggest box-office disasters of all time) is often seen as marking the end (or, better, temporary bottoming-out) of the genre, as the Reagan era effectively, in the words of one historian, began the process of "repealing the 1960s" (Jenkins 2007: 288).

A rather less commented-on feature of Westerns of this period is the subliminal significance of the border with Mexico. Though by definition, the genre is about the conquering of the West from the East, many examples concentrate on the American Southwest, that is, in the nineteenth century, Mexican or former Mexican territory. Some films, like *The Alamo*, have a historical focus and deal specifically with the breakup of northern Mexico and the founding of future North American states. Others, like, say, *The Professionals* (1966, starring Burt Lancaster, Lee Marvin and Robert Ryan), use the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution. However, this film, for example, is about American soldiers of fortune, and the main Mexican character (a villainous *bandido*) is played by Jack Palance. More generally, Mexico is dehistoricized and simply used as an amorphous foil for the exploitation of North American heroisms or anxieties. Thus, Mexicans are usually portrayed as peasants or bandits – as either passive and helpless or dark, dirty and dangerous. In *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), only two of the (fundamentally noble) mercenaries who cross the border to free a peasant village from bandit terror are Mexican, while in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1967), the "ugly" one is a Mexican *bandido*, Tuco, played by a spectacularly grizzled Eli Wallach (a meaner reprise of his role as Calvera in *The Magnificent Seven*). Mexican actors in major roles (even as Mexican characters) are few and far between, and when they do appear it is often in demeaning circumstances. The hugely influential Mexican director and actor, Emilio Fernández, for instance, would appear in films like *The Wild Bunch* (with the hispanicizing accent helpfully removed from his name in the cast list) as vile bandit warlord (Tierney [2007] offers a brilliant study of Fernández's career and significance in Mexico). In the "Mexican" Western, then, the South becomes a place of adventure or threat for North American protagonists and the culture they represent, an imaginary space of potential redemption or contamination – a binary that persists across the history of Hollywood imaginings of Latin America.

Obviously, these films about a blurred US-Mexican territory of the mind are a reflection of contemporary concerns about immigration and the increasing hispanicization of the United States as well as the Cold War threat from America's "own backyard", partic-

ularly in the wake of the Cuban Revolution. However, the idea of “South of the Border” as a locus of both primitive innocence in peril and threatening otherness tells us something else about the contemporary context. These films from in and around the 1960s are, in some ways, not really about Mexico at all. John Ford’s 1950 cavalry movie *Rio Grande* is, in part, about the political limitations placed on the military as they wage war with an enemy (the Apaches) which can simply retreat to safety by hopping across the border to Mexico. When a cavalry colonel is given the off-the-record order to ditch diplomacy and make an incursion across the border to burn the Apache out, critic John White (2011: 27) is forthright about its implication: “The film takes a clear position: the United States has to be prepared to cross borders even to resort to clandestine operations [...] to deal with enemies to the American way of life.” This is a prophetic moment, for the real subtext of many films from the 1950s to the late 1970s is US foreign policy during the Cold War, from the Korean War and, increasingly up to and including, the Vietnam War. Indeed, it is probably the Vietnam quagmire, especially after the period between 1966 and 1968, that accounts more than anything for the increasing cynicism and violence of the Hollywood Western as well as its eventual decline after the late sixties to mid seventies. Can films about North American militaristic intervention across foreign borders to rescue a defenceless peasantry really be taken seriously in the light of the United States army’s catastrophic record in Vietnam? By the early 1970s, film Westerns like *Soldier Blue* (1970) and *Little Big Man* (1970, directed by Arthur Penn and with Dustin Hoffman in the lead) were being seen as explicitly anti-Vietnam movies (Lenihan 1980: 49-51). The Western had changed forever.

### The Battle of the Alamo

So, what is the Alamo all about? As with the versions of history and geography alluded to above, what it might represent is as important as what it might have been. Thomas Ricks Lindley’s historical investigation of the Alamo is based on the following premise: “No other event in American history is as clouded with myth and historical error as the siege and storming of the Texan Alamo of February and March 1836” (Lindley 2003: 297). Phillip Tucker is even more blunt: “Almost everything Americans have been taught, or think they know, about the Alamo is not only wrong, it is nearly the antithesis of what really occurred on the early morning of March 6, 1836”; he goes on to argue that story, song and cinema have created a “mythical Alamo” based on the fantasy of a heroic “last stand” (2010: vii). Lindley and Tucker are amongst a number of forensic historians who tenaciously seek out the details of an elusive historical truth. However, historical truth can never be separated from its narration and interpretation, and most people, of course, know only or mainly the myths. It is almost always myths (or at least received and recycled versions of history) that shape our perception and therefore understanding of reality. And it is this non-binary interplay of history and myth that makes the story of the Alamo such a compelling one.

The Alamo began life as a Franciscan chapel and associated buildings, and was known as the Misión San Antonio de Valero. The mission was established to convert the native population to Christianity, but was secularized and abandoned in the late eighteenth century, to be occupied and fortified by the Mexican army in the early nineteenth

century. The name “Alamo”, referring in Spanish to cottonwood trees, was given by the soldiers of an earlier Spanish cavalry unit stationed there, who renamed the mission after their home base, Alamo de Parras in Coahuila. In 1821 Texas was opened up to white settlers (many famously led by Stephen F. Austin) and they quickly came to outnumber native Mexican inhabitants. However, under General Antonio López de Santa Anna, who came to power in an 1833 coup, Mexico retreated from federalism, and the dictator sought to assert his authority over all Mexican territory, in the face, of course, of Texan resistance. A provisional Texas government was set up in 1835 and an interim republic declared in 1836. As part of the so-called Texas Revolution, a group of Texian and Tejano (Texan Anglos and Mexicans together) volunteers took over the fort in December 1835. On 23 February 1836 Santa Anna’s huge army arrived at San Antonio and the siege of the Alamo began, as a small band of militia and volunteers sought to defend the fort in order to buy time for the Texas military commander Sam Houston and others to assemble and organize an army capable of challenging the might of the Mexican dictator. Amongst a number of famous names, three legendary figures stand out as defenders. Colonel William Barrett Travis was the relatively inexperienced commander of the garrison, while the volunteers were led by former Tennessee congressman and self-styled frontiersman David (Davy) Crockett and landowner James (Jim) Bowie (famous or infamous for gutting a man with a knife in an 1821 fight in Louisiana, though the famous “Bowie knife” was probably “invented” by his brother Rezin P. Bowie [“James Bowie” n.d.]). The rebels held out for 13 days, but Santa Anna’s final ruthless attack on the fort came before dawn on 6 March. All the defenders were killed, apart from a few women and children. The mythical dimension of this noble failure takes shape by what happened next. The story goes that the brave defence of the Alamo allowed Houston to ready an army capable of outflanking and defeating Santa Anna. He defeated the Mexican “tyrant” at San Jacinto on 21 April, allegedly rallying his men with the inspiring battle-cry “Remember the Alamo!”. Texas now became an independent republic and some years later, 1845, the 28<sup>th</sup> state of the United States of America. Thus Houston’s cry, an exhortation to myth and memory, becomes a foundational moment in American history.

### *The Alamo* (1960)

John Wayne’s *The Alamo* is another rallying cry. At a time of change and nascent social and political unrest, Wayne’s film is a call for steadfast adherence to traditional American values. In making this call, though, the film inevitably collapses history into myth. The historical inaccuracies are rife. George Hadley-Garcia (1993: 161-162) inventories a number of examples. Crockett is filmed fighting to the last, but it is unknown if he died fighting or was shot after surrendering. Bowie is a highly active leader in the film, but in reality was too sick to fight. Though Houston is depicted anguishing over the fate of the Alamo, it is known that he had already instructed Bowie to blow it up. In a moving scene, Bowie receives a letter about the death of his wife, when in fact she had died many years earlier. But, in a sense, historical inaccuracy is essential for the film to function as myth. Indeed, specificity has to be suppressed so that otherwise unsustainable universal values of decency and goodness can be made to appear synonymous with Americanness. The caption that opens the film tells the audience that the defenders of the

Alamo “were faced with the decision that all men in all times must face... the eternal choice of men”, while Crockett later opines: “There’s right and there’s wrong. You’ve gotta do one or the other. You do the one and you’re living. You do the other, and maybe you’re walking around, but you’re as dead as a beaver hat.” The “eternal choice” is, of course, political: it is whether “to endure oppression or resist”. Yet the caption’s simplification of the conflict as a stand against what is unproblematically described as Santa Anna’s “tyrannical rule” depoliticizes that conflict into a clash between good and evil, or right and wrong as Crockett calls it. Nonetheless, this moral abstraction is repeatedly linked to a version of American political values built around a notion of freedom. In a woozy speech to Travis about the real political motivation of the stand at the Alamo (the creation of a Republic of Texas), Crockett says:

“Republic” – I like the sound of that word. It means people can live free, talk free, go or come, buy or sell, be drunk or sober, however they choose. Some words give you a feeling. “Republic” is one of those words that makes me tight in the throat... Some words can give you a feeling that makes your heart warm. “Republic” is one of those words.

Of course, in a star system, Davy Crockett is also John Wayne. And, as White has pointed out, “Wayne’s personal opposition to Chinese communism was well documented and he was a famous advocate of what he saw as Texan values that were at the ideological heart of his version of patriotic Americanism” (2011: 94). The suggestion is that Wayne (who obsessively took over twelve years to bring this highly personal movie project to fruition, used his own company Batjac, stretched himself to the limit during shooting, and cast his own children in supporting roles) is driven by his own right-wing political agenda, which he (consciously or unconsciously) sells as the natural order of things – as “good” or “right”. There is in fact a strong sense of knowingness about this in the portrayal of Crockett. In his first film encounter with Travis, Crockett describes his previous career as “congressifyin” and admits that he only sports the deerskins and (ra)coonskin hat (which associate him, one assumes, with the land and the natural order) to please his men. Travis assumes Crockett will be “persuasive”, and the former congressman actually tricks his volunteers into signing up for the defence of the fort by producing a bogus letter in Spanish, purporting to be from a bossy Santa Anna though dictated to a translator by Crockett himself, which fires up the men with its peremptory orders and threats of “chastisement unto death”. The self-awareness of the Crockett myth is made even more obvious in John Lee Hancock’s 2004 remake of *The Alamo*. Though this version strives for greater historical accuracy, it probably lionizes and emblemizes Crockett even more than the earlier picture. Here Billy Bob Thornton’s Crockett admits to Bowie (Jason Patric) that he only started wearing his famous coonskin hat after James Hackett’s stage vehicle for James Kirke Paulding’s *The Lion of the West* popularized the figure of a buckskin-clad frontiersman and congressman from the American South based on Crockett. Indeed the man called David Crockett hints that the identity of “that Davy Crockett fella” is no more than an invention and a pose. The myth, it would appear, is essential for a slanted political agenda to be made to seem self-evident and eminently palatable.

The assertion of American righteousness has, of course, to be seen in the context of the 1960s, as societal values loosen and liberalize at the same time that the Cold War



begins to take a firmer grip and the Vietnam War starts to lumber towards escalation. In the same way, the 2004 remake has been seen as a post 9/11 movie: it is, as Jon Beasley-Murray (2005) notes, about an enemy attacker who plays dirty and whose attack is used (in this version we see Dennis Quaid-Sam Houston's assault against Santa Anna prefaced by the call to "Remember the Alamo!") to justify retribution. Of course, in the Latin American context, what both films unwittingly imply through the imbalanced siege story is that one American is worth a thousand Mexicans (Reyes/Rubie 2000: 41). Wayne's movie boasts no Mexicans in main roles and few Mexican characters. The Tejano Captain Juan Seguín is, especially compared to the 2004 version, extremely undeveloped and is, in any case, played by a Maltese, Joseph Calleia. Continuing the trend of generic Hispanic othering, the cameo love interest, Graciela or "Flaca" as Crockett calls her, is played by an Argentinean (Linda Cristal), and Santa Anna's messenger, Lieutenant Reyes, is impersonated by the Spanish bullfighter Carlos Arruza. Yet Wayne used over 1,500 Mexican extras as anonymous enemy soldiers, townspeople and some defenders (Reyes/Rubie 2000: 40). And if Wayne's and scriptwriter Edward James Grant's Mexican Santa Anna is a cipher for despotic tyranny, Emilio Echevarría's 2004 Santa Anna (at least the actor is Mexican) is a conspicuous personification of oleaginousness and cruelty. Yet, returning to the point about ambiguity, the familiar knee-jerk dismissal of Hollywood movies on Latin American themes as thoughtlessly othering is not wholly defensible. Wayne was known for his love of Mexicans and was determined not to appear to disparage Mexico (the Mexican government banned the film anyway) (Reyes/Rubie 2000: 41). In the movie, Crockett, in an early scene, helps out a young Mexican boy and a vaguely imperilled (albeit conveniently beautiful) woman. And Richard Widmark as Jim Bowie waxes lyrical about "wonderful" Mexico. Though his real motivation may be land-grabbing, he says his real love is for "the people", because "they got courage and they got dignity". It has to be acknowledged that this positive attitude is not free of patronizing stereotyping. It takes an American to rescue the hapless Mexican woman and child, while Bowie's elegy is based on a sorry cliché of easy-going supineness: "They [Mexicans] ain't afraid to live. Today's important to them, not the dollar tomorrow might bring." Nonetheless, the enemy troops at the siege are presented with great dignity. Travis congratulates Santa Anna on his "gallantry" in allowing an evacuation, while the ordinary volunteers praise the enemy soldiers' bravery and commitment and even claim to be "proud" of the chance to engage with them. Moreover, the reality of Mexican losses is not glossed over, and there is an arresting scene in which the enemy combatants dignifiedly remove their dead from the field of battle.

The ambiguities and even contradictions in *The Alamo* are, though, revealing, understandable and even necessary. This is, after all, film and not history, and the eliding of difficulties is an essential part of promoting identification with an unproblematically patriotic version of fair and inclusive Americanness. Hence, for example, the occlusion of the issue of race in a North American 1960s context (the 2004 version is compelled to address the issue more directly, though only briefly). Blacks are rarely seen in Wayne's movie. Bowie is effectively a slaveholder (though slavery was technically illegal in Mexico, the acceptable system of contracted labour was essentially the equivalent), but he is still a hero in the movie. His black "slave", Jethro, is released from servitude by Bowie before the final assault, yet he chooses to stay and dies trying to save his master (the 2004 servant wisely heads off when he gets the chance, and it is made clear in an

earlier exchange between two contracted labourers that this is not the black man's war). At a time of increasing racial unrest in the USA, especially in the South, the issue is simply made to go away in the 1960 film. And denial more generally is a feature of this movie, and the remake too. North America's relationship with Latin America is not just about Manifest Destiny, it seems, but destiny itself. As Wayne's Crockett enjoys a bucolic interlude with Flaca, he refers to a beautiful tree as the "kind of tree Adam and Eve must have met under". This is God's own country and America has a divine right to it. Moreover, everything really comes down to fate in the end. The 2004 film opens with a caption alluding to the Alamo's cyclical history, putting it down to "location, proximity to settlers and perhaps even fate", and later a local woman performs a syncretic religious ritual which reveals that the ailing Bowie "is already dead and this is the place he has been sent". Similarly, when Flaca, who is being sent away to safety, tells Wayne's Crockett that they may never see each other again, he responds: "If that's what's written, that's what's written. When it's time, it's time." The idea of fate reinforces, in a loose sort of way, the idea of natural order. The mythical values that *The Alamo* projects are, despite the scale of the tragedy, made to feel soothingly right, the way things should be.

### *Viva Max!* (1969)

The advance of the 1960s would severely test the mythical notion of a natural order. By the end of the decade, the mythology of patriotism, national unity and the universal significance of the American Way was, for many, a subject for ridicule. 1969's *Viva Max!* captures this spirit of irreverent scepticism. Though not strictly a Western, it is a spin-off which presents itself as a kind of comic antidote to Wayne's *The Alamo* (film critics, incidentally, have often drawn attention to the adaptability of the Western to other genres [e.g. Cawelti 1971: 32; Lenihan 1980: 18-19; Langford 2005: 20; White 2011: 171]). The hyperbolically improbable story of a portly and incompetent middle-aged Mexican general retaking the Alamo in 1969 is in itself a wilful foregrounding of fictionality and the falseness of myths. The film's opening caption, mocking perhaps the earnestness of Wayne's epigraph, reads:

All persons mentioned in this story are completely fictitious except for:

Davy Crockett  
Colonel William Barret Travis  
James Bowie  
John Wayne  
And  
Richard Widmark

Actors are as real as the people they portray, and in some ways more real. The tour guide at the restored Alamo (located in Alamo Plaza in downtown San Antonio and managed by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas) shows off a picture of the battle, featuring portraits of John Wayne and Richard Widmark. Amusingly, the password and countersign set up by the occupiers are later revealed to be "John Wayne" and "Richard Widmark". The folksy guide also shows her visitors out into the courtyard where they can experience the

sensation of “real scenes where the actual scenes took place”. Movies and stories are being made to stand in for history. Hence the centrality in *Viva Max!* of the famous story of Travis’ line in the sand, often seen as the key symbolic moment in the Alamo tale. The guide tells of how Travis drew a line in the sand and invited all those who wanted to abandon the fort and leave for safety to walk across it: no one crossed the line. This account is doubly wrong: the conventional version is that Travis invited those willing to join him to cross the line and, in any case, the “line in the sand” story has been largely dismissed as untrue by serious historians. In fairness, Wayne’s film surprisingly does not use the literal image of the line in the sand, but it does stage Travis’s legendary appeal to the defenders in every other respect as one of the film’s pivotal scenes. The 1969 movie attempts a hilarious revision of the “line” story. When General Santos draws a line in the sand and invites anyone who wants to leave to cross it, his reluctant soldiers are all too keen to try and rush across the line (in practice, the “line” scene is played out twice with slightly different comic variants). This is an astounding mockery of a much-loved central myth about the defence of the Alamo. Indeed, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas complained vociferously, and the film-makers were forced away from the Alamo shrine and had to continue shooting in a reconstructed interior on a soundstage (at Cinecittà Studios in Rome).

Another aspect of the film’s mockery of the Alamo myth is the suggestion that its validity is also undermined by crass commercialism. The tourists are hastily diverted to the gift shop so that they can acquire a “remembrance” of their visit, and the shop is a locus of a number of essential scenes. One tourist is seen mulling over whether to purchase “The Battle of the Alamo” war game for her nephew. The nephew turns out to be a crackpot adult from (prophetically?) Waco, who runs an extreme right-wing anti-communist armed militia – despite the comedy, the suggestion is that the mythification of history can have dangerously pernicious effects. Moreover, the scenes of the National Guard’s attempt to take back the Alamo are filmed against the mundane background of Alamo Plaza’s shops, especially Woolworth’s and National Shirt Shops. American capitalism, it seems, has outstripped the neighbourly community values of the defenders of the Alamo. Moreover, that capitalism has gone global. Its infection of the rest of the world (including Latin America) is a species of neocolonialism. At the beginning of the film as Santos and his men prepare to leave Mexican territory, they march past a huge billboard featuring a brassiere-sporting female bullfighter and the slogan “Soñé que toreaba en mi Maidenform”. This is an allusion to the 1950s and 1960s ad campaign of the American underwear company Maidenform, specializing in bras that supposedly enhance the female form. The campaign (referenced in 2008 in Episode 6, “Maidenform”, of Series 2 of the hit retro 1960s advertising agency set TV series by AMC, *Mad Men*) pictured the fantasies of ordinary women who repeated variations on the phrase “I dreamed I [e.g. “went shopping”, “rode a streetcar”] in my Maidenform bra”. Some of the fantasies were relatively racy, and there is actually one that reads: “I dreamed I was a Toreador in my Maidenform bra”. The ad in *Viva Max!* not only alludes to the Americanization of Mexico and Latin America, it also suggests the pervasive association of Latin-ity with sexuality in Northern and Western culture – an example of a different kind of othering in which Latin America becomes the unspeakably dark and libidinous cultural unconscious of the “developed” world (see, for example, Beasley-Murray 2003).

The quotation of Maidenform also points to the context of mid-century social change. The ad suggests the acquisition of identity through consumerism, but also

invokes the sexual revolution. The risqué English-language “toreador” ad was actually from 1950, but it is already implicitly challenging “notions of middle-class decorum and restraint” (Howard 2001: 201), notions that would be much more comprehensively interrogated as the sixties progressed. Sergeant Valdez barks, “Eyes to the front!”, as the military marching band mess up their formation as they pass the Maidenform billboard. This is the first of a series of sexual references that situate *Viva Max!* in the context of undeveloped notions of sexual freedom which are often more akin to mere titillation. Indeed, though the movie echoes something of the tone of popular 1960s TV comedies like *Hogan’s Heroes*, *F Troop* or *Gilligan’s Island* (Valdez is played by John Astin, best-known for his turn as Gomez in *The Addams Family*), it is more reminiscent of *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*, whose title is taken from the “love-ins” (and their numerous variant “-ins”) that were part of the hippie culture of sixties America. Moreover, Pamela Tiffin’s performance as Paula Whitland has something of Goldie Hawn’s celebrated teasing kooky blonde routine from *Laugh-In*. Tiffin was something of a pin-up who appeared in a *Playboy* pictorial called “A Toast to Tiffin” and moved to Italy to star in sexploitation movies (this is why the crew later relocated to Cinecittà). Here, the pretty, blonde, long-legged, mini-skirted Paula catches the eye of Peter Ustinov’s bumbling General Maximiliano Rodrigues de Santos, whom she rechristens as Max. When Valdez arranges for a potential tryst, because it is what the men would expect of their leader, the viewer is treated to a comic scene based on misunderstandings and double entendres such as “Can we do it in here?” (Paula actually wants to interview Max for her college dissertation, not make love to him – though she does think he’s “kinda cute”). All this implied sexual licence is a long way off from the chaste, motherly and wifely homemakers who appear briefly in the earlier *The Alamo*. However, the frisson of liberation is very limited. The Maidenform ad campaign, as Howard has suggested, is really “advising married women to play the role of ‘glamour girl’ for their husbands” (2001: 201). Paula is pretty much objectified. Though she is a keen student of politics, she is shown to be naïve, and her sexiness is what is foregrounded. She is first introduced via the cliché of the buxom blonde hiding behind a pair of demure spectacles, while the accompaniment of Tiffin’s name in the opening credits with a graphic of a winking eye marks her out as eye candy. The ambivalent state of 1960s America is in some ways encapsulated in the use of Tiffin. Sexual freedom is in the air, but women are still mainly there for display.

If ambiguous and even confused, the film is nonetheless fairly coruscating in its very sixties assault on American conservatism. Paula Whitland also embodies youth, and she is radicalized at university (she is fond of sit-ins, has been arrested many times, and is happy to be incarcerated with Max so he can provide material for her dissertation on “The Twentieth-century Revolutionary Hero”). In the late sixties context, youth and university “provided the very stuff unrest was made of” (Sorensen 2007: 6), though here Jerry Paris’s direction and Elliott Baker’s screenplay do patronize Paula and present her as rather fickle as she trots out leftist rhetoric and lights on Max because “everyone’s doing Che Guevara” (Paris would become most regarded for his direction of the far from revolutionary TV series *Happy Days*, and is still best known to many for his acting role as the neighbourhood dentist in the hugely mainstream *The Dick Van Dyke Show*). Nonetheless, the movie does lambast American anti-communist paranoia. Hettie, the souvenir-shopping tourist, yells at the Mexican troops: “You’re not fooling me. You’re working for the Chinese communists. My nephew and I have been trying to warn people

for years. We knew you'd be coming!" She calls Max a "lousy Chinese" and a "pink chink", and warns him: "Don't try that inscrutable stuff on me!" The theme that "the Chinese communists have taken over the Alamo" is continued throughout the movie, culminating in the bussing-in of Hattie's nephew's militia known as the Sentries. The Sentries eventually disperse in cowardice. However, the American National Guard is seen to do the same thing. A substantial part of the film's comedy comes from its withering focus on the parochialism and incompetence of the National Guard. The military is not spared either. The madcap General dispatched to oversee the crisis is virtually never seen without a martini in his hand (while an array of representatives of the police, border security and government are also mercilessly satirized). During the attempt to retake the Alamo, the hapless and jittery soldiers are filmed next to a recruiting placard bearing the legend "Your Flag.../Your Future/ Join the American Army" (the subtext seems to be: "who would want to join these bozos?").

The Latin American dimension of all this is important, given the implied post-Cuban Revolution Cold War context and the fact that the anti-Chinese invective amounts to xenophobia. This was also, within the United States, an era of the growing organization of Chicano (Mexican American) civil rights groups. The notorious East Los Angeles Walkouts or Chicano Blowouts had only just taken place, in 1968. The accusation by Hattie that these "Chinese communist" Mexicans are "barbarians" underscores a generalized inward-lookingness and fear of foreign contamination. The US-Mexican border is already becoming a potentially potent symbol of that contamination. In the film though, it is the casual North American sense of superiority that is emphasized. The State Department official Quincy assures General Santos that "amicability is the cornerstone of our policy towards every small nation". Such an assurance, it is implied, should be taken with a pinch of salt. But Max is mainly offended by the tagging of Mexico as a "small nation": he retorts that the USA is not exactly the Soviet Union, or even China! Yet Mexico (and by extension Latin America) is seen as an underdog. In one of the "line crossing" scenes, Max tells his men that they are "completely surrounded by *norteamericanos*" who have access to atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, missiles and secret weapons, while they have only one gun with six bullets. And Paula's words to Max do contain a wealth of truth. She comments on how the "gringos" have treated Max's country badly through history and asserts: "Your thinking is positive. You're sick and tired of seeing your country pushed around. That's why you took back the Alamo!" The climax comes when one of the Sentries shoots and wounds Max in the arm. This is the last straw for the far from virile or bellicose Max. He exclaims: "They think nothing of us! If that's the way they want to treat us..." Enraged, he exhorts his men to attack. Now, in stark contrast to the "line in the sand" scenes, the soldiers rush forward and the final Sentry flees. Max, who, it was earlier revealed, only embarked on this mission to prove wrong the woman back home who spurned him because he could not get his men to follow him, is now reassured by Paula: "The men followed you – every last one!" This is a moral triumph for Mexico, and Max, on his white steed, now leads his men back across the border, to the sound of martial music and cries of "Viva Max!"

Unfortunately, the equivocalness which characterizes the 1960s raises its head once more. Despite the implicit sympathy for the southern neighbour, a number of Latin American countries banned *Viva Max!* and Mexican-American groups raged about the use of non-Mexicans to play the members of Santos's brigade. It has to be recognized, too, that a

considerable element of the film's humour is dependent on the comical portrayal of Mexicanness. Almost all of the soldiers adopt exaggerated or unconvincing accents. Ustinov's representation of Max involves a cod (European) Spanish accent, and is embryonically reminiscent of his humorous performances as a raconteur and his later incarnations of figures such as Charlie Chan and Hercule Poirot in films like *Death on the Nile* (1978) and *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* (1981). Moreover, the Mexican characters are often presented in situations of clumsiness, pratfalling, dithering and inarticulacy. Yet, as has been seen, the Americans are just as bad. Indeed, in some ways they share a common human experience. Max's motivation is after all the universal one of unrequited love. He is also compared at one stage to a porky Don Quixote, suggesting he is no more than a misguided idealist, an innocent abroad, the embodiment of the perennial ordinary guy trying to make his way in a world that is beyond him. That common humanity between Mexicans and Americans is also suggested in the rather more elaborated finale of the novel on which the film is based, *Viva Max!* by James Lehrer (of *PBS NewsHour* fame and impeccable liberal credentials). Here the US and Mexican Presidents come together in friendship, and an exact replica of the Alamo is erected in Mexico City by "the voluntary contributions of the people of the United States of America and the Republic of Mexico as a lasting symbol of mutual love and respect" (Lehrer 1966: 218). As cries of "Viva Max!" ring out, the novel's final lines read:

The sound seemed to reverberate throughout the new building, the plaza outside, the city, the country, the hemisphere and the world.

Listen. Maybe you can hear it (Lehrer 1966: 219).

This comes across as a well-meaning plea for hemispheric solidarity and even a utopian call to world peace. Paris's contradiction-laden film version may not quite match these earnest standards, but there is surely at least something of a generous thrust behind it. At the end of the movie, there is a remarkable moment of political correctness *avant la lettre*. When National Guard chief and local furniture store owner Billy Joe Hallson (Jonathan Winters) is ordered to "get these wetbacks outta here", he purposefully retorts: "Don't you say that! 80% of my customers are Mexican-Americans."

## Conclusion

It is certainly true that Mexicans have had a hard time in Hollywood movies just as they have within and in relation to North American society. However, the familiar accusation of moronic or gormless othering is not the whole picture. Just as the 1960s is about both progress and prevarication, so too is Wayne's *The Alamo*, both deeply conservative and occasionally open-minded, while *Viva Max!* is radically disruptive yet wedded to unpondered assumptions. The Latin American sixties may, as Sorensen has suggested, be characterized by "a sense of imminence, of arrival about to take place, or to be voluntaristically ushered in", but she also notes that "the pervasive sense of imminence anticipates crisis, destruction and the rumblings of new beginnings" (2007: 7, 9). *The Alamo* and *Viva Max!* span a decade in which film culture quite simply and quite complexly performs a culture and politics of change and uncertainty.

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## Filmography

### *Films*

- Casablanca* (1942): Directed by Michael Curtiz. USA: Warner Brothers.  
*Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* (1981): Directed by Clive Donner. USA: American Cinema.  
*Death on the Nile* (1978): Directed by John Guillerman. UK: Paramount.  
*Havana* (1990): Directed by Sidney Pollack. USA: Universal.  
*Heaven's Gate* (1980): Directed by Michael Cimino. USA: United Artists.  
*High Noon* (1952): Directed by Fred Zinnemann. USA: United Artists.  
*Licence to Kill* (1989): Directed by John Glen. UK: MGM/UA.  
*Little Big Man* (1970): Directed by Arthur Penn. USA: National General.  
*Maid in Manhattan* (2002): Directed by Wayne Wang. USA: Columbia.  
*Rio Grande* (1950): Directed by John Ford. USA: Republic.  
*Soldier Blue* (1970): Directed by Ralph Nelson. USA: AVCO Embassy.  
*The Alamo* (1960): Directed by John Wayne. USA: United Artists.  
*The Alamo* (2004): Directed by John Lee Hancock. USA: Touchstone.  
*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1967): Directed by Sergio Leone. Italy: United Artists.  
*The Magnificent Seven* (1960): Directed by John Sturges. USA: United Artists.  
*The Mission* (1986): Directed by Roland Joffé. UK: Warner Brothers.  
*The Professionals* (1966): Directed by Richard Brooks. USA: Columbia.  
*The Wild Bunch* (1969): Directed by Sam Peckinpah. USA: Warner Brothers/Seven Arts.  
*Viva Max!* (1969): Directed by Jerry Paris. USA: Commonwealth United.

### *TV Series*

- F Troop* (1965-1967): USA: ABC.  
*Gilligan's Island* (1964-1967): USA: CBS.  
*Happy Days* (1974-1984): USA: ABC.  
*Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971): USA: CBS.  
*Mad Men* (2007-): USA: AMC.  
*PBS NewsHour* (1975-, under various titles): USA: PBS.  
*Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In* (1967-1973): USA: NBC.  
*The Addams Family* (1964-1966): USA: ABC.  
*The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961-1966): USA: CBS.