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The Politics of Representation



Editor: Cynthia Baron

Associate Editor: Rosalind Sibielski

Contributors: Soumitra Ghosh, Arundhati Ghosh, Robert Tindol, and Angenette Spalink

Introduction: Cinema and the Politics of Representation



Rosalind Sibielski

Our Fall 2011 issue of *The Projector* brings together essays that consider questions about the politics of representation and the cinema. In “Gendering the *Acousmêtre*, Or ‘There is no such thing as Woman,’” Soumitra Ghosh revisits Michel Chion’s theory of the acousmatic voice in film, the voice on the soundtrack that does not “fully coincide with the representation of its material-objectival cause in the visual domain.” Drawing on the work of both Lacan and Žižek regarding the formation of subjectivity, she suggests that because the acousmatic voice “simultaneously continues to frustrate and titillate” the film viewer, “for whom the acousmatic voice is always something *to-be-had*” rather than something that is actualized, it can be understood as analogous to Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the object/cause of desire that holds out the unrealizable promise of “the fantastic plentitude of the unified subject.” To the extent that both the subject position Woman and the *objet petit a* are understood within the Lacanian framework to be “fundamental impossibilities . . . that are beyond attainment, Gosh asserts that representations of the acousmatic voice in cinema as that which is also always “nothing but a promise of presence” aligns it with the feminine, so that ultimately “the acousmatic voice par excellence is fundamentally feminine.”

Turning from the ideological positions supported by mainstream cinematic representational practices to the politics that govern the production of films within the U.S. film

industry, Arundhati Ghosh examines the hegemonic function of film censorship in “Myth, Genre and Censorship in Hollywood films.” She traces the history of industry-wide, voluntary content regulation from the Production Code Era to the current film ratings system, in order to examine the ways in which “the collusion between different powerful institutions in the U.S. such as religion, education and politics” and the MPPDA/MPAA has facilitated tacit efforts to suppress film content that challenges the cultural hegemony of these institutions, while at the same time encouraging the production of films that perpetuate “certain myths that make these institutions more powerful.” Drawing on Thomas Schatz’s argument concerning the symbolic function of mainstream cinema as myth and Robin Wood’s argument concerning the ideological function of mainstream cinema in promoting hegemonic values, she examines the ways in which “Hollywood operates as the chief medium through which the normalizing ‘myths’ of capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and family are fed to audiences in a palatable manner.” At the same time, noting that “genre formulas are one of the predominant tropes through which Hollywood presents audiences with a view of the world that maintains the status quo,” she also examines the privileged role of genre films in both promoting and reinforcing the “values and beliefs that have been constructed over time in the U.S to justify mainstream ways of life.”

In “A Second Line in the Sand: Changing Representations of African-American Characters in Film Versions of the Alamo,” Robert Tindol also interrogates the role of representational practices in supporting dominant cultural discourses through a close analysis of the depiction of African-American participants in the Alamo massacre across a number of films on the subject, from *Martyrs of the Alamo* in 1915 through *The Alamo* in 2004. Tindol notes that although there have been numerous cinematic retellings of the story of the Alamo, “the representation of African-Americans at the 1836 battle is virtually the only plot element that

varies between these films, while the hagiography of the principal figures and the stake of the battle in the future of the United States is left uncontested.” To the extent that representations of the two known African-American participants in the massacre, Sam and Joe who were both documented slaves, appear to “have been adjusted in various film versions of the event to conform to the political winds of the times,” Tindol argues that “Alamo films are a viable means of elaborating on the nuances of changes in dominant cultural discourses surrounding racial difference and African-American identity since World War II, with the varying depictions of the African-American characters in the films providing an inscription point for such discourses.” At the same time, however, he also suggests that while the roles that Sam and Joe play in the narratives of these films may change over time, the meaning that their experiences are invested with in dominant U.S. culture still remains the same across all of the films, with “the Alamo story provid[ing] a shelter for the myth of the ‘Plantation Illusion’ described by Everett Carter, which promotes the idea that slaves were both happier and better off before emancipation.” Ultimately these films demonstrate the ways in which “the various American filmmakers who have addressed the Alamo story are content to alter the facts of the African-American experience for the sake of good storytelling consistent with the times.” The films also reveal that mainstream American filmmakers “are not quite as willing to alter the meaning inscribed on to the story of the Alamo within the dominant American mythos” in order to either confront or contest the oppression of African-Americans under the institution of slavery.

Angenette Spalink’s “Symbolism in the Serpentine: Exploring Loie Fuller’s Dance through a Symbolist Aesthetic” turns from questions of representational politics to a reevaluation of the work of dancer/choreographer Loie Fuller within the context of the aesthetic principles and practices of the Symbolists. Building on recent scholarship on the part of Ann Cooper

Albright and Rhonda K. Garelick that argues for the (re)positioning of Fuller's work within the domain of modern dance, she argues that Fuller's repertoire, particularly the Serpentine and Mirror dances, also suggest an alignment with Symbolist aesthetics, even if Fuller herself did not identify her work as such. Spalink examines "the ways in which Fuller's aesthetic manifested Symbolist theatrical ideals regarding light, color, space, the body, and the mind" creating "a synesthetic whole that abstracted her body from conventional ideas of time and space" in ways that resonate with "Symbolist ideals of abstraction, otherworldly images, and an abdication of linear time." As such, Spalink calls for reconsideration of Fuller's work as both modernist and Symbolist in order to acknowledge both her alignment with and her contributions to both aesthetics.

**Gendering the *Acousmêtre*
Or, “There is no such thing as Woman”**



Soumitra Ghosh

In his study of the ontological status of sound in cinema, Michel Chion points out that his interests lie with the human voice; more specifically, Chion is interested in that form of (human) voice in cinema which is “neither entirely inside nor clearly outside” (4). In other words, Chion seeks to theorize the ontology of voice as that particular sonic event which does not fully coincide with the representation of its material-objectival cause in the visual domain. Borrowing from Pierre Schaeffer, Chion uses the word “acousmatic” to signify the partial status—in the experiential field of the human subject—of the voice in its ontological and experiential manifestation. Following Chion’s discussion of the significance of “acousmatic voice”—especially that of a female *acousmêtre*—in cinema, a particularly salient example of the power of the acousmatic voice might be found in the 1960 pseudo-documentary *The Savage Eye* (Dir. Ben Maddow). However, in order to properly understand the ways in which the acousmatic voice is employed in this film, one needs to first take a detour through the topography of the acousmatic voice.

Although it might appear, *prima facie*, that Chion’s formulation insists on the placement of the acousmatic voice within the aural/oral register only, it soon becomes clear that Chion’s

conceptualization of the acousmatic voice engages the aural/oral register with the visual register. However, the nature of this engagement—and consequently the ontological status of the acousmatic voice—is deeply problematic, as Chion’s elaboration on the “complete *acousmètre*” points out: it is “the one who is not-yet-seen, but who remains liable to appear in the visual field at any moment” (21). The acousmatic voice, according to this formulation, is that which stages an aural “missed encounter” in the visual domain; it is a point in the field of vision that is yet to reveal itself to the subject. Given this paradoxical juxtaposition of the visual and the aural/oral registers, one wonders about the locus of the acousmatic voice.

It is in context of this structural paradox that one understands the significance of the “neither-nor” condition that Chion posits *apropos* the locus of the acousmatic voice. The acousmatic voice, as such, exists precisely in this in-between locus: ontologically, it is neither fully sonic, nor is it fully visual. However, critical to our understanding of the locus of the acousmatic voice is its possibility to “appear ... at any moment.” It follows from Chion’s formulation that the acousmatic voice is fundamentally negative: as such, it has not yet appeared—it is always already in the process of appearing. Thus, the acousmatic voice is nothing but a promise of presence: its core must be engendered by the absent capture of the “neither-nor” formation. Insofar as the acousmatic voice remains fundamentally promissory—not yet revealed—it simultaneously continues to frustrate and titillate the subject, for whom the acousmatic voice is always something *to-be-had*. In the simultaneity of frustration and titillation subsists the unique seductive power of the acousmatic voice—as Chion points out when he says that such sonic events “gain the spotlight, for they are perceived in their singularity and isolation” (4). Clearly, the acousmatic voice lures the subject through its “promise”: a guarantee

of full access that lies beyond the promise. As such, this “promise of a beyond that guarantees full access” is analogous to the function of the Lacanian *objet petit a*: the object/cause of desire.

Slavoj Žižek formulates the *objet petit a* as that which “can never be attained ... is always missed; all we can do is encircle it” (4). The *objet petit a* is therefore not the finite object after which the subject runs; rather, it is the infinite structure that frames—as a closed set—all the possible finite objects after which the subject might run. Insofar as the *objet petit a* holds the infinite number of (replaceable) finite objects within its frame, it lures the subject with the possibility/promise of “complete satisfaction,” *if* the subject is able to access it. If we apply this formulation of *objet petit a* to our understanding of the acousmatic voice, we will be able to understand the full extent of its seductive power. The acousmatic voice *qua* object/cause of desire promises us a fantastically perfect juxtaposition of the visual and the aural registers: a coming-together of the (human) voice and the lips/face of the (human) subject that is the source of the sound.

Insofar as the acousmatic voice promises the fantasy scenario of the perfect juxtaposition of voice and face, it appeals to the primordial misrecognition of the Cartesian subject: a fantasy of being a “unified subject” at the center of the Derridean “metaphysics of presence.” Žižek speaks precisely to this fantastic convergence of the visual and the oral/aural domain *apropos* the birth of subjectivity when he rewrites the “metaphysics of presence” as “‘seeing oneself looking’ in the mode of ‘hearing oneself speaking’” (95). Thus, when the acousmatic voice is represented in cinema, it occupies the crucial position that can engender—although through a fundamental misrecognition—the fantastic plentitude of the unified subject. However, we should never forget that precisely because the acousmatic voice is not a positive/finite entity it can offer to the (viewer) subject its inherent lack as a space to engage in the fantasy-act.

Insofar as the acousmatic voice offers the subject the “gift of lack,” it re-enacts the function of the Lacanian Phallic Father, who, via castration, introduces the subject to the Symbolic order, and thereby constitutes the subject *qua* subject of desire.¹ It might appear, therefore, that cinematic acousmatic voice will have to be a male voice: a sonic representation of the Phallic Father. However, Chion points out in his discussion of the female “scream” and the male “shout,” that the acousmatic voice *par excellence* is the female “screaming” voice. If and when the female “scream” is present in the cinematic space, it does not remain contained in the body/face/lips of the female screamer. Rather, the “scream” as an instance of the acousmatic voice envelops the cinematic space, in that the “scream” becomes that point between the aural and the visual registers which the cinematic narrative endlessly attempts to articulate/embody. The crucial point here is not that the acousmatic voice is seductive *because* it belongs to a woman: it is rather that the acousmatic voice *par excellence* is fundamentally feminine.

Consider, in this context, Lacan’s formulation “There is no such thing as Woman” (72). This formulation does not claim that the feminine gender is non-existent. Rather, the formulation contends that Woman, as a category, cannot be universalized. In other words, Woman represents that fundamental impossibility which is analogous to the structure of the *objet petit a*. As such, both Woman and the *objet petit a* are beyond attainment. The subject can attain/have a finite object *in the place of* the *objet petit a*; similarly, the subject can attain/know a particular female subject *in the place of* Woman. If we apply the structural impossibility of Woman to the fundamental negativity of the acousmatic voice, then we will understand why the acousmatic voice *par excellence* is fundamentally feminine.

When a male and a female acousmatic voice co-exist in a cinematic space, our attention is called to the immensely seductive, centrifugal power of the feminine *acousmètre*. *The Savage*

Eye depends precisely on this contest between a male and a female *acousmêtre*.² The film stages an interior dialogue between Judith—a young divorcé—and a male voice that identifies himself to Judith as “your God, your angel, your ghost.” Although the male *acousmêtre*’s voice becomes available to us as the film opens, the viewer is instantly and deeply captured when Judith’s voice *qua* acousmatic voice appears. A close-up shot of Judith’s face—non-coincidental with the feminine voice—introduces the viewer to the acousmatic presence of Judith. The off-hand, matter-of-fact, objective quality of the male *acousmêtre*’s voice instantly transforms into a passionate, eager and inquisitive tone, as he keeps talking to Judith. In contrast to the volubility of the male *acousmêtre*, Judith’s acousmatic voice appears meager. As if determined to elicit from Judith a positive response to his questions, the male *acousmêtre* assumes an aggressive, almost hectoring tone. However, in his desire to possess Judith by dominating the feminine acousmatic voice, the male *acousmêtre* loses its status as the acousmatic voice: he reveals too much of himself. The film attempts to restrain the seductive feminine *acousmêtre* by attempting to obliterate Judith’s bodily presence via a car accident. However, undefeated, the acousmatic voice of Judith assumes the tone and style of the male *acousmêtre*’s voice. In a final act of desirous desperation, the male *acousmêtre* reveals himself once again by reappearing at the end of the film, only to be frustrated by Judith’s strange agreement to what the male acousmatic voice has to say. Fundamentally, Judith’s acousmatic voice remains unknowable, always already a “missed encounter.”

Even though the limited scope of this analysis of the acousmatic voice reveals, in a fundamental way, the significant position of (human) voice, cinema studies, as a discipline, is still largely tethered to the analysis of the visual domain of an entity that is emphatically audio-visual. Moreover, the scholarly works that do pay attention to the aural register of cinema often

miss the ontological partialness of (human) voice. Voice in cinema, when taken to be a finite, fully integrated and complete object—rather than as a part-object—can neither sufficiently reveal the topology of voice/sound, nor can it account for the object-causal role that voice/sound plays in engendering the seductive power of sound-cinema. My brief analysis of the ontology/topology of (human) voice—especially, that of the acousmatic voice—seeks to direct the attention of cinema scholarship to the analytical lacunae mentioned above. Rather than presenting an exhaustive ontological/topological analysis of voice, through this essay I merely wish to gesture towards the singular import of the study of (human) voice in cinema in revealing the way in which subjectivity is precipitated in and through representation.

Notes

¹It is important to remember, however, that what the subject gives up in castration is not the real phallus; that which is castrated is the imaginary phallus. Therefore, the subject gives up something that s/he does not have in the first place. Consequently, the lack that castration introduces is not a lack in the real. However, what the introduction of the lack does is ultimately constitutive of the Symbolic subject: the lack transforms that which the subject does not have into that which the subject may have in future, precisely because it is something that has been “taken away” from him. Thus, lack creates positivity in retrospect for the subject.

²*The Savage Eye*, directed, written and edited by Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyers, and Joseph Strick, follows the aesthetic modes of the American cinema verite movement in the 1950s and '60s. In the film, the camera—at least initially in the documentary-objective mode—follows around a divorced woman through the mundane activities of her daily life. However, *The Savage Eye* ultimately takes a narrative form, whereby the central character, Judith (Barbara Baxley),

journeys through the fantasies, failures and struggles of her own life towards some kind of resolution, which ultimately remains unavailable to the viewer. Throughout her physical journey through the nameless city, Judith seems to participate in a conversation with a male and a female acousmatic voice.

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Myth, Genre and Censorship in Hollywood Films



Arundhati Ghosh

It is well known that film scholars have taken various approaches to the study of cinema. For example, some have insisted on lending a certain kind of autonomy to “auteurs” while others have pushed for a more historically grounded understanding of films. Perhaps less widely acknowledged is the fact that U.S. films are part of an industry that has millions of dollars riding on it every year, and, like any other major industry, it is concerned with generating a profit. Any consideration of films as an art form or social document must reckon with the reality that a film is, at a very important level, an industrial product. It is part of an industry that has to limit risks and that must pander to, as well as create, audience tastes and demands. For all the potential that cinema holds as an artistic or cultural medium, the collusion between different powerful institutions in the U.S. such as religion, education and politics means that U.S. films become a means of perpetuating certain myths that make these institutions more powerful. It is interesting to look at the role these institutions play when considering questions of tacit censorship in mainstream U.S. cinema.

In this essay, I will argue that Hollywood operates as the chief medium through which the normalizing “myths” of capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and family are fed to audiences in a palatable manner. By myths, I refer not just specifically to sacred stories of a remote past validating one’s religion, but rather, I use the term to indicate all values and beliefs that have

been constructed over time in the U.S to justify mainstream ways of life. Bronisław Malinowski argues in his essay “Myth in Primitive Psychology” that myths function as fictitious accounts of the origin of rituals, thereby corroborating them; myth “gives rituals a hoary past and thereby sanctions them” (199). The daily rituals of American social, political, religious and economic life that the secular myths justify are best ingrained through Hollywood movies, especially genre movies. It is partly through such movies that, these myths come to operate as a form of censorship, and indeed censorship boards in Hollywood, such as the MPAA (formerly the MPPDA) have always reflected and continue to reflect the ideals contained in these myths.

Hollywood movies have largely been genre-driven and genre formulas are one of the predominant tropes through which Hollywood presents audiences with a view of the world that maintains the status quo. As Judith Hess points out, “Hollywood genre films—the western, science fiction film, horror film, gangster film—have been the most popular (and thus the most lucrative) products ever to emerge from the machinery of the U.S. film industry” (Hess). Traditionally, “genre” has been understood as a limiting, separating category and different genres are usually considered in isolation from each other. Timothy Corrigan defines genre as “a category for classifying films in common patterns of form and content” (79). Similarly, Jacques Derrida, in his essay, “The Law of Genre,” notes that, “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn” (56). However, as Robin Wood observes in “Ideology, Genre, Auteur,” similarities in plots and stories are found not just *within* certain genres, but *across* genres as well. He argues that “one of the greatest obstacles to any fruitful theory of genre has been the tendency to treat genres as discrete” (Wood).

Critical of this tendency to treat each genre as pure and in isolation, Wood contends that “an ideological approach might suggest why they can’t be, however hard they may appear to try: at best they represent different strategies for dealing with the same ideological tensions” (Wood). He identifies a set of themes that can be found in a number of genres. These include the glorification of the heteronormative, patriarchal family and the importance of monogamous

marriage; the promotion of capitalism and the notion of “honest labour”; and stereotypical, sexist depiction of women as either “pure,” saintly nurturers or evil seductresses (Wood). Wood’s demonstration that all Hollywood plots, across all genres, can be reduced to a few basic ideas recalls Vladimir Propp’s contention in *A Morphology of Russian Folktales* that all Russian folktales can be broken down into thirty-one functions and seven character types (25). Propp’s thesis has been adopted by formalist critics of films, but his theory also neatly compliments what Wood implies in his essay on film genre.

The connection between mainstream Hollywood genre films and folktales or mythology is also noted by Thomas Schatz. In his essay, “The Structural Influence: New Directions in Film Genre Study,” Schatz looks at the genre film as a “contemporary folktale” (46). He proposes that “considering the genre film as a popular folktale assigns to it a mythic function that generates its unique structure, whose function is the ritualization of collective ideals, the celebration of temporarily resolved social and cultural conflicts behind the guise of entertainment” (47). Similarly, in “Genre Films and the Status Quo,” Judith Hess points out that genre films have traditionally been successful because “they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts. They helped to discourage any action which might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt” (Hess). Hess thus identifies the covert agenda of genre films. She points out that genre films “serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film’s absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts”(Hess). In doing so, the genre film functions as a purveyor of cultural myths.

A myth is very much a part of the story that a culture/nation, wants to narrate about itself. In “Myth in Primitive Psychology,” Malonowski points out that a myth fulfills “an indispensable function; it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (199). Reading

Propp's and Malonowski's discussion of myths in conjunction with Schatz's, Wood's and Hess's essays on genre, it becomes clear that the myths that U.S. mainstream films codify include the sacredness of private property, the importance of hard work, the idea that money is not the key to happiness, the belief that a "good" woman stays at home and cares for her children, and so on. Importantly, these are all myths that help to sustain a capitalistic, patriarchal social order. What seems to emerge, then, is that most Hollywood films basically find different ways to reaffirm some combination of myths that maintain the status quo. Sometimes, as in the case of horror or noir films, this is done by exploring the fears that threaten these myths, and then by the end of the film magically expelling those threats. Thus, different genres may have different themes, narrative styles, and settings, yet the essential principles governing the films remain the same.

The fact that genre films' endorsement of these national myths is not purely incidental, but rather well-thought out and deliberate, becomes clearer if we consider the kinds of directives that Hollywood's censors (both official and de facto) have been meting out to its moviemakers. In *Hollywood Censored*, Gregory Black explains the main problems with the studio system of classical Hollywood: "Movies were the product of a large corporate, collaborative enterprise. The cost of production and distribution was enormous. The goal of the studios and the corporations that controlled them was profit, not art" (5). And profit, invariably, lay in feeding the old, familiar, somewhat comforting myths to the audiences. At the same time, though, no less important was the power of censorship boards over the content of Hollywood films. Black explains that in the studio era "much of the blame for the failure of the movies to deal more frankly and honestly with life lay with a rigid censorship imposed on the industry itself . . . which the industry not only accepted, but embraced, encouraged and enforced" (5). Black is, of course, talking about classical Hollywood and referring to codes like the Motion Picture Production Code, which was created by the very Catholic Martin Quigley and the Jesuit priest Father Daniel A Lord, and endorsed vehemently by head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, William Hays, who was also a Presbyterian Elder and former head of the Republican National Committee (Black 21-44).

Indeed, what was censored by the Production Code was anything that shook the American faith in the sanctity of the heteronormative nuclear family, Christianity, and the American nation. For instance, the Code censured positive depictions of infidelity, incest, or homosexuality, with tenets like “the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld” and “impure love must not be presented as attractive and beautiful,” while stipulations like “the use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful” and “ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains” respectively sought to ensure positive representations of the American nation and of the Church (*The Motion Picture Production Code*). By no means unaware of the power of film in influencing the masses, the Production Code also stated that “a wide knowledge of life and of living is made possible through the film. When right standards are consistently presented, the motion picture exercises the most powerful influences. It builds character, develops right ideals, inculcates correct principles, and all this in attractive story form.” It also asserted that “if motion pictures consistently hold up for admiration high types of characters and present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind” (*The Motion Picture Production Code*).

Thus, what Schatz identifies as genre films’ tendency to represent an idealized cultural self-image, and what Robin Wood identifies in American films of all kinds as a sometimes blatant, sometimes covert “American capitalist ideology” (Wood), can be attributed at least partly to powerful institutions like the MPPDA/MPAA that control film content through censorship and other regulatory methods. It is not surprising that what institutions like the Hollywood censorship board or the Church try to curb in movies is often precisely anything that endangers the myths that Wood and Schatz describe—myths which keep the status quo of capitalism, Christianity, patriarchy, etc., in place. Indeed, when Malonowski says that myth “expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (199), he may well be talking about the goals of the Production Code Administration.

While the Production Code was scrapped in 1968, the current film rating system enforced by the Motion Picture Association of America is no better, and the anonymous board that rates films before their release ends up upholding pretty much the same values as those endorsed by the Production Code. As demonstrated in Kirby Dick's exposé on the MPAA, *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006), not only do the Christian clergy continue to play a significant role in the MPAA's suggested edits and ratings, but the MPAA also keeps pandering to the major studios and distribution companies. Dick's investigations reveal, among other things, that the board seems to treat homosexual material much more harshly than heterosexual material, that senior raters have direct contact with studio personnel after movie screenings, and that the MPAA's appeals board is made up mostly of movie theater chain and studio executives—not to mention the two members of the clergy (one Catholic and one Protestant), who are always included on the appeals board.

Thus, questions of genre, ideology, economics, and censorship seem to intersect over the question of the content of Hollywood films. American film, for all its potential as an art form, has found it difficult to break out of the limitations put on it as an industry with monetary profits as its goal. Aided by market-driven concerns and external and internal censorship boards, Hollywood has emerged as a business that sells national and cultural myths as its primary product, and in doing so provides “entertainment” that abates fears and provides neat resolutions to complicated questions about ourselves and our surroundings.

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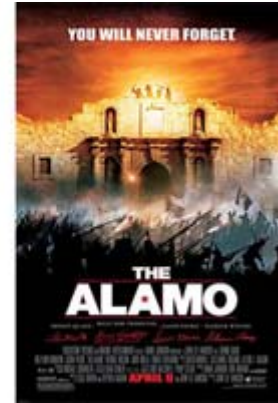
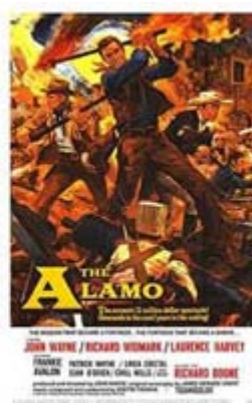
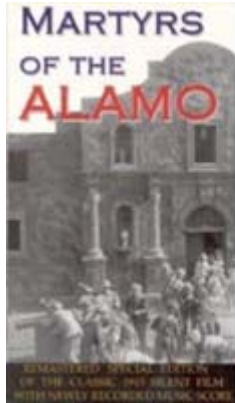
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**A Second Line in the Sand:
Changing Representations of African-American Characters in Film Versions of the Alamo**



Robert Tindol

In the 1915 silent film *Martyrs of the Alamo*, an Anglo actor in blackface portrays Jim Bowie's loyal slave Sam as the two await the imminent arrival of Mexican troops in Bowie's sickroom during the final massacre. Twenty-two years later, in *Heroes of the Alamo*, Col. Bowie is still the co-commander of the Alamo troops (along with William Barrett Travis), but in this film he has no slave and dies alone in his sickroom after taking out several Mexican troopers. Sam is back with his master in 1953 in *The Man from the Alamo*, but is absent once again in 1955 in *The Last Command*. In 1960, however, Sam returns to dive in front of his master and take the first bayonet thrusts from Mexican troopers in *The Alamo*. In the 1986 film *Thirteen Days to Glory*, Sam is nowhere to be seen, as is the case in 1998 in *Two for Texas*. The Sam of 2004 in *The Alamo* is evacuated with the woman and children at Bowie's urging, thereby escaping the carnage.

Historians do not know exactly how Jim Bowie died or whether he actually had any slaves with him at the Alamo, but the mythology of the Alamo has allowed filmmakers to engage in contradictory retellings of the event, albeit to a limited extent. This is not

surprising, because as Roland Barthes pointed out decades ago, a historical event is at times best understood as a myth when it is recounted (109). One reason the Alamo has been a subject for mythmaking is that many details of the final skirmish are vague. The principal actors did not live to tell the story, and the scant eyewitness accounts are somewhat erratic. However, the basic outline of the Alamo story has never varied in its film depictions. Precisely how the story can be told, therefore, is open to a certain extent, so long as specific mythical parameters are preserved, but closed insofar as the heroes and the basic legend (treated as sacred and untouchable) are concerned.

The role of African-Americans at the Alamo, as the cinematic depictions cited above reveal, has always been fair game for revision on the part of filmmakers. In fact, the representation of African-Americans at the 1836 battle is virtually the only plot element that varies between these films, while the hagiography of the principal figures and the stake of the battle in the future of the United States is left uncontested. Given changes in social attitudes over the last hundred years, it is perhaps not surprising that the experiences of African-Americans at the Alamo—most notably Sam, who is sometimes identified as Jim Bowie's slave, and Joe, the documented slave of William Barrett Travis—have been adjusted in various film versions of the event to conform to the political winds of the times. And yet, as this essay will argue, the treatment of slaves in the antebellum South has been and continues to be laundered by the mythical treatment of the Alamo within the larger context of America's appropriation of territory, and in the films analyzed below the Alamo story provides a shelter for the myth of the "Plantation Illusion" described by Everett Carter, which promotes the idea that slaves were both happier and better off before emancipation (12). The Plantation Illusion was, in fact, once a mainstay of classical

Hollywood cinema, as evidenced by the depictions of the servants in *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and, as this essay will demonstrate, this representational convention extends to a large number of cinematic portrayals of the Alamo.

With the mythology of the Alamo is an open field for signification only in a limited sense, cinematic adaptors have settled on a version of the story that is remarkably consistent in both its attention to historical detail and its development of the characters of well-known figures such as Bowie and Crockett. Several of the film versions of the Alamo story have hedged their accounts so that very minor differences in personalities can be attributed to the Texians, the Anglo-Americans settlers and adventurers who opposed the Mexican government of Santa Anna, but the hagiography never varies when it comes to depictions of Bowie in particular. Both Sam Houston and Jim Bowie are typically portrayed as “larger-than-life” figures, and although a few Anglo-American scoundrels occasionally show up in certain Alamo films to provide very minor nuisance to the Texians, the front of Texian opposition against Santa Anna is overwhelmingly united. At the same time, the fact that slavery was an important dimension of the 1836 battle for Texas independence is never broached in any of the Alamo films, which have been inherently conservative in their political orientation during the past century of filmmaking.

As far as representations of African-Americans in these films are concerned, the image of Sam protecting his master as the two await the imminent overrun of the Alamo by Mexican forces has been consistently invoked to suggest that America is a great country because of its uniqueness in human history and despite its utilization of slavery. After all, the promise of the Alamo martyrdom, both in Texas schoolbook history and in film depictions, is that Texas in 1836 had the capacity to become a “little America” because the

battle was a small-scale version of the Revolutionary War. Therefore, the image of Sam selflessly protecting his master seemingly lends credence to the view that slavery was not an inherently bad thing because slave and master were obviously emotionally attached to each other.

In the case of the standard cinematic image of the slave Sam aiding the stricken Bowie, the signifier remains stable for approximately fifty years, from 1915 to 1960, but in more recent years this representational pattern has shifted. One could argue that the integration of the armed services in World War II and the Civil Rights movement are the pivotal events behind this shift. As Richard Flores writes in *Remembering the Alamo*, “both the breadth of the Alamo story...and the divergent understandings of it...are the result of its transformation from a site of defeat in 1836 into a powerfully rendered and racially produced icon of American cultural memory” (xiv). As such, this essay will argue that the Alamo films are a viable means of elaborating on the nuances of changes in dominant cultural discourses surrounding racial difference and African-American identity since World War II, with the varying depictions of the African-American characters in the films providing an inscription point for such discourses.

Before an analysis of the various film version of the Alamo story can begin, however, it is useful to discuss some of the facts about the event that are available. The purpose here is not to sort out the veracity of conflicting stories, but rather to point out that certain documents have been the sources for the creative reinterpretations of various filmmakers in regard to the role of African-Americans at the Alamo. A good source of the various contemporary reports is Bill Groneman’s 1996 book *Eyewitness to the Alamo*, which includes every testimony written down by survivors, those purporting to be

survivors, and various friends and descendants who have claimed through the years to possess information about the Alamo massacre. These records do not clarify the number of dead on the Texian/Tejano side, much less the exact names of the fallen, although according to Alamo historian Walter Lord there were about 183 fatalities (209). The figures for Mexican casualties are also imprecise, although Lord indicates that the total number of Mexican dead may well have been much higher than the Texian/Tejano losses (209). Mexican accounts and the debriefings of the very few Alamo survivors agree that there were no survivors among the armed male Anglos in the final battle.

Although Bowie is consistently portrayed as a brave and noble warrior—albeit somewhat mercurial—his death has been subject to slight variations in various film versions of the Alamo story. Bowie was presumed by survivors of the battle to either have died in bed of severe pulmonary illness just before the final assault, or else to have been well enough to kill a few Mexican soldiers with a brace of pistols and/or his celebrated bowie knife before succumbing to his illness. Mexican accounts, by contrast, say that Bowie was found cowering underneath a blanket, a story that might be based on there being a blanket covering him in his sickbed. The death of William Barrett Travis, co-commander of the Alamo forces, is less ambiguous because his slave Joe reported that he had seen Travis shot in the forehead early in the final assault. Filmmakers have taken advantage of the ambiguity of Bowie's death in their contrasting portrayal of his slave Sam, and have even done so with Travis's slave Joe, despite the fact that Travis's death and Joe's actions during the battle are well documented in Joe's account of the events.

As for the actual situation of the African-Americans at the Alamo, historical records show that at least one man (perhaps two or even possibly more) were held as slaves

in a province of Mexico, which had allowed both Anglos and Tejanos to have Black and Indian slaves until prohibited by Santa Anna. Joe, whose last name is not known, earned his place in Texas annals by traveling with fellow survivor Susanne Dickinson to Sam Houston's headquarters, where he provided an account of the battle that has been the basis for much of the history and legend. Regardless of his service to the nascent republic of Texas, Joe's immediate destiny showed that the probate courts were not inclined to reward his efforts, as historian Paul D. Lack explains:

By [Joe's] own account, conveyed according to one hearer, 'with much modesty [and] apparent candor,' the servant fired at the attackers several times, received wounds but escaped the initial massacre by hiding in a building inside the fortress, narrowly avoided execution through an officer's intervention, and even spoke with Santa Anna concerning the Texas army . . . However, his eloquence did not bring him freedom—Joe remained a slave in the Travis estate, living near Columbia for over a year after his great adventure. (247)

Joe did eventually manage to gain his freedom. As Lack observes, in the process he "created his own method of celebrating the first anniversary of the battle of San Jacinto. Accompanied by a Mexican and taking two fully equipped horses, Joe chose that day to run away in search of the freedom that had eluded him" (247-8).¹

As for Jim Bowie, William C. Davis writes that he had one or two slaves when he took up residence at his in-laws' San Antonio house prior to the Alamo siege (499). According to Lack, the slave with Bowie during the siege was named Sam (244). The online *Handbook of Texas* also confirms the existence of Sam, but adds that "no further

record is known to exist.” Walter Lord, on the other hand, says that the Sam sometimes identified as Bowie’s slave was actually Ben, a man employed as a cook by Juan Almonte, one of Santa Anna’s colonels (207-208). Lord’s position is that Susanne Dickinson, her infant daughter Angelina, and Joe were the only Americans who survived the battle at the Alamo (208). Significantly, though Sam might not have been a slave of Bowie or a survivor of the Alamo, he has nonetheless been portrayed as such in several Alamo films.

Within this context, it is worth noting here that there is certainly no obligation on the part of filmmakers to adhere closely to the historical facts when dramatizing them onscreen. Filmmakers have taken liberty with their depictions of historical events throughout the history of the cinema, and storytellers since ancient times have had little compunction in altering stories to fit their agendas, as a comparison of various stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* with their antecedents makes clear. The purpose of this paper is thus not to determine whether the various Alamo retellings are “authentic,” but rather to explore one single aspect of the event that has been particularly open to free interpretation, that of the experiences of African-Americans at the battle. Further, this essay seeks to question why the experiences of African-Americans has been so free for alteration when the overall Alamo story is quite stable and unvarying. This becomes particularly evident in the films analyzed in the following sections, which, while certainly not the only Alamo films that have been made, are all especially interesting for the manner in which they take liberties with the story of African-Americans during the battle.

Making the World Safe for Women: *Martyrs of the Alamo*

Those who are troubled by D.W. Griffith’s classic 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* and

its racism will have the same problem with its obvious derivative, *Martyrs of the Alamo*. Produced by Griffith but directed by Christy Cabanne, *Martyrs*, also released in 1915, follows the lead of Griffith's film in positing the struggle of the early Texians as one in which the protection of innocent women from swarthy, uncontrollable hordes is paramount. *Martyrs* depicts the first insult leading to the epic confrontation between the Texians and Santa Anna's army as the humiliation of Susanne Dickinson. After a Mexican trooper insults Mrs. Dickinson on the streets of San Antonio, she slaps him, rushes into the house, and blurts out the incident to her husband. Mr. Dickinson grabs a pistol and kills the Mexican in the street. The incident is brought to the attention of Santa Anna, played in blackface by the white actor Walter Long, who also portrayed the nefarious Gus in *Birth of a Nation*.

The role of Sam is likewise played by a white actor (never identified) in blackface who is first seen watching General Cos, Santa Anna's brother-in-law, parade through San Antonio. Just as the Cameron slaves in *Birth of a Nation* are depicted as a carefree crowd of gentle souls who love their masters and fear Northern victory, Sam in *Martyrs of the Alamo* also seems to fear living under Santa Anna. In this way, the film seems to evoke what Everett Carter terms the "Plantation Illusion." According to Carter, "[t]he Illusion has many elements, but it is based primarily upon a belief in a golden age of the antebellum South, an age in which feudal agrarianism provided the good life for wealthy, leisured, kindly, aristocratic owner and loyal, happy, obedient slave" (12). The Plantation Illusion is not confined to Sam's fear of Santa Anna's victory as he watches de Cos and his troops march through San Antonio in *Martyrs of the Alamo*. Another white actor in blackface later appears seated beneath the standing Bowie, withdrawing to the background when Davy

Crockett confers with Bowie on the upcoming revolt.

This unidentified African-American servant is also present in *Martyrs* when the ill Bowie needs help crossing Travis's celebrated, but perhaps fictional, "line in the sand." One of the apocryphal stories of the Alamo is that Travis drew a line in the sand and gave the Alamo defenders the option of remaining to face almost certain death, or else leaving with honor. The title of this article is taken from this legend, because even if no such thing happened, the necessity of choosing sides and remaining faithful to a cause is freely appropriated in many of the film versions of the battle when it comes to the depiction of the African-American characters.

After willingly crossing Travis's line, the servant is next seen sitting on the floor beside Bowie's sickbed in order to reload Bowie's muskets for the final attack. We also see him in wide-eyed fear as Bowie stabs a Mexican attacker, but he is not present when Bowie's corpse is shown after the battle. The film ends with Susanne Dickinson and her infant, released by Santa Anna, riding out of the Alamo alone.

The significance of the representation of African-Americans in *Martyrs of the Alamo* is that the filmmakers seemingly envisioned a world in which history had smiled upon Anglo-Americans in fighting the good fight against the heathen hordes, while everyone else was relegated to one of two roles: the enemy or the loyal subordinate who willingly and unhesitatingly trusted the master. It is in this sense that *Martyrs of the Alamo* is representative of the Plantation Illusion.

No New Deal for Sam: *Heroes of the Alamo*

The question of whether the 1937 film *Heroes of the Alamo*, directed by Harry L.

Fraser, changed the racial stereotypes present in the depiction of African-American characters in *Martyrs of the Alamo* depends on how one interprets a crucial exchange of dialogue between Stephen F. Austin (Earl Hodgins) and Luke (Fred “Snowflake“ Toones), his servant and presumed slave. After several scenes dramatizing the imminent confrontation between Santa Anna’s forces and the defenders of the Alamo, Austin is visited in his San Felipe home by a group of men who want to discuss the crisis. Luke, who has opened the door for the men at Austin’s instructions, listens while standing in the background, and after they leave, questions Austin about the likelihood of war. Austin, who has lost himself in thought after the door closes behind the men, answers Luke politely, but insists that war is unlikely.

A close analysis of this scene reveals that Luke is pretty much in the same frame of mind as the loyal servants that would be seen two years later in *Gone With the Wind*. In other words, the Anglo-Americans are the sole principal players in the political drama, while the African-American servants are primarily relegated to the task of fretting in the background with overwrought expressions to convey the presumed desire that their “good” masters prevail in the struggle. Luke’s dialogue is minimal, and his presence onscreen serves mostly to display worry for his master rather than concern for the larger political forces at work in the conflict with the Mexicans. The latter is Austin’s concern alone, for this scene implies that Austin is the grand actor on the stage of history whose charge is to take action with the unfolding of major human events in mind, while Luke is merely left to agonize over whether his master may be swept away by forces even greater and more powerful than himself.

We never see Luke or Austin again. When the action shifts to the Alamo, Bowie

suffers his life-threatening illness without the aid of an African-American servant. The remainder of the film consists of a confrontation between white Alamo defenders and Mexican forces. The events depicted would be reasonably accurate if not for the fact that Travis's slave Joe and the Mexican officers' cook Ben are not shown in their real-life roles as the men who accompanied Susanne Dickinson to Sam Houston's headquarters. Therefore, as a representation of the African-American experience at the Alamo, the film alters widely accepted historical fact in apparent preference for a dramatic ending employing only Anglo survivors. These Anglo survivors walk off the screen, but are clearly destined to bear their grim testimony to other Anglos and provide information needed for the imminent confrontation with the Mexican forces. Ultimately, then, because the African-American survivors of the actual historical event are not even depicted in the film, and because the Luke-Austin confrontation at the beginning of the narrative is ambivalent, *Heroes of the Alamo*, much like *Martyrs of the Alamo*, can be classified as another reenactment—and thus, as a reinforcement—of the Plantation Illusion.

Knowing Our Friends from Our Enemies: *The Man from the Alamo*

Possibly drawing from the story of Louis Moses Rose, who is reported to have left the Alamo just before the final battle, *The Man from the Alamo* (Budd Boetticher, 1953) recasts the encounter in Cold War terms by repeatedly asserting that an individual's fidelity to the American (or Texian) cause is much more important than one's ethnic background.² The film depicts an America in which fidelity to the patriotic cause is the only tolerable stance for an individual, regardless of background. Those who are on the other side are naturally the enemies—in this case, the Mexicans, who presumably were meant to invite

comparisons with the Soviets for contemporary audiences, or else at the very least to evoke the communists with whom America was busy fighting in Korea at the time that the film was released.

The message of the film seems to be that it is incumbent on all good Americans to tell the good people from the bad—those whose politics are corrupted by either greed or bad philosophy—especially since the former may appear to be latter due to the intrigue and confusion that always accompanies war. The protagonist, John Stroud (Glenn Ford), is one such individual, because he draws the “unlucky” straw that compels him to depart the Alamo under cover of darkness in order to make sure that the families of his fellow townsmen are safe. As he is told by one of his fellow soldiers, he is unlucky because dying a hero at the Alamo will not only be easy, but will also ensure eternal glory for those who drew the short straws.

However, Stroud leaves only to find that all the families in his town—his own included—have been massacred. Not only has he been unsuccessful in providing aid to the townsfolk, but he quickly discovers that he has been branded a coward and traitor because he has survived the Alamo massacre. Those who knew about the drawing of the straws are all dead, of course, and the only male survivor of the Alamo (sent on a mission just before the final assault) is not aware of the circumstances and also thinks Stroud to be a coward and traitor.

Against this backdrop, the renegades are easily identified as villains by the “good” Anglos who would lynch Stroud, but their motivations are obviously greed. Once we observe the renegades after Stroud escapes his jail cell, we see that each of the men are simply stereotyped bandits virtually indistinguishable from countless other film bandits of

B Westerns. Stroud is assumed by the “good” Anglos to be morally corrupt and therefore motivated by bad philosophy, thus equating the motives of an outlaw gang with the earnest but misguided difference in world-view of a dissenter. As such, the character of Stroud in the film might be interpreted as being representative of the American citizens who were victimized by the McCarthy witch hunts of the early 1950s, in that Stroud is clearly not ethnically a representative of the enemy, nor is he firmly committed to the enemy’s point of view, but he is nonetheless classified as a foe within the narrative because of his reluctance to endorse the “right” side without reservation. Gone is the Plantation Illusion in which an individual is classified according to the color of his skin. Stroud is an enemy because of bad ideas, while Bowie’s slave Sam (Smokey Whitfield) is an ally because he willingly and trustfully aids Bowie in the final battle.

By the time the film reaches its climax, Sam is presumably dead, as all the other Alamo defenders have certainly been slaughtered. If *Man from the Alamo* indeed proposes that an individual’s fidelity to the American cause is more important than his or her race or ethnic background, then, the brief scenes involving Sam are consistent in their depiction of a man who has aligned himself with an ideological cause that may not be directly in his best interest. Though Sam is never referred to as a slave, he is obviously a close servant of Bowie, who is depicted as bedridden, but nonetheless fully conscious and able to participate in combat to a certain degree. Sam, in the first scene, is given the opportunity to polish Bowie’s famous knife, and Bowie himself is later seen polishing the same knife with a whetstone while the two sit on the bed and await the final assault. In this way, while Sam is a servant in the film, in the thick of battle he provides a function that somehow transcends the “mundane” details of his servitude. Therefore, while Sam’s fidelity to the

service of his master in *Man from the Alamo* may harken back to the Plantation Illusion to a certain extent, it does so in a manner that befits the changing social attitudes surrounding racial difference in the early 1950s, with Sam provided an opportunity to affirm his patriotism through service to his country (or a revolutionary cause, in the case of the Alamo).

The question, then, is whether the Sam of *Man from the Alamo* is essentially one of the happy Cameron slaves of *Birth of a Nation*, or if instead he is a representation of African-American enlisted men who were finally welcomed into the U.S. armed forces during World War II. Sam is never shown engaging in combat, although there is nothing to suggest that he merely stands by while Bowie fights valiantly. Thus, although *The Man from the Alamo* does not make much progress in countering the Plantation Illusion supported by the earlier film depictions of the event, Sam is nonetheless provided the choice of allegiances within the narrative, so that he fights out of belief in the cause and not necessarily only out of loyalty to his master. His death is not shown in the film, but we have no reason to doubt that Sam fights with Bowie when the Mexicans break into Bowie's sickroom, and that both die fighting, even if Bowie is the first to die. Moreover, the handing over of the knife shows that Sam can be trusted to carry on the American military tradition, even though he may have been exploited under the system of slavery.

In depicting Sam as representative of an African-American combat force that can be trusted to defend the American cause faithfully and bravely, *The Man from the Alamo* may have been influenced by the contributions of African-American soldiers during World War II in its representational departure from the portrayal of Sam in the earlier Alamo films. Sam may only be handed a weapon with the approval of his white superiors in *The*

Man from the Alamo, but he nonetheless can be trusted to use it appropriately, unlike the Sam characters in the earlier films. *The Man from the Alamo* therefore represents a major ideological shift in representations of African-Americans at the Alamo, and further, is tied very closely with social changes that emerged during the decade of the 1950s. The African-American experience changed significantly after World War II, and Hollywood depictions of the Alamo massacre apparently adjusted accordingly in onscreen representations of Sam beginning with *The Man from the Alamo*.

Protecting Republicanism on the New Frontier: *The Alamo*

The 1960 film *The Alamo*, directed by and starring John Wayne as Davy Crockett, is probably the Alamo film most familiar to the American public. The character of Sam in this film is yet another throwback to the Plantation Illusion, with Bowie portrayed as a benevolent master and Sam as his faithful servant.³ It is worth noting here that the prevalence of this Sam-Bowie relational dynamic in film versions of the Alamo may be due in part to the real-life biography of Bowie, who spent his early years in Louisiana, as well as William C. Davis's book *Three Roads to the Alamo*, in which Bowie is portrayed as a Southerner. Drawing on these sources, Bowie can be portrayed as Southern landed gentry, as he is in the Wayne film, or as a Southern hell-raiser, as in the case of some of the more recent Alamo films which will be examined in more detail below. Conversely, in *The Alamo*, Sam is depicted as a couple of decades older than the 39-year-old Bowie (Richard Widmark), and presumably a loyal family servant of many years. As Richard Slotkin notes of the film,

Wayne's handling of the theme of slavery drew on a recognizably

denigrating stereotype of the faithful black servant and reiterated one of the oldest of pro-slavery myths by having Bowie's servant resist his own manumission and elect to die with his master. (*Gunfighter*, 518)

Like Sam in *The Man from the Alamo*, the Sam character in *The Alamo* is loyal to a fault, even electing to remain inside the compound after Bowie hands him his papers of freedom. At the final battle, when the injured (rather than ill) Bowie is besieged by a storm of Mexican troopers invading his sickroom, Sam throws himself in front of the approaching bayonets, sacrificing himself in a futile attempt to protect his former master. Unlike Sam in the 1953 film, however, Sam in the 1960 film also seems irrevocably cast in his racial identity, with the narrative emphasis on his ability to fight found in *The Man from the Alamo* absent from *The Alamo*. In fact, *The Alamo* seems to regress to earlier representational patterns supporting the Plantation Illusion in its depiction of Sam, perhaps because of Wayne's well-known conservatism, or perhaps because U.S. society was growing increasingly ambivalent about the Civil Rights Movement as the 1950s drew to a close.

At the same time, though, Sam's death as portrayed in *The Alamo* is also unique among Alamo films in its highly dramatic circumstances, which temporarily place Sam at the center of the narrative action. As in the case of *The Man from the Alamo* in 1953, the social changes in America at the time of *The Alamo*'s release perhaps made this more active narrative role for Sam possible. This is not to suggest, however, that the film is in any way progressive, or that it necessarily breaks new ground in the representation of African-Americans at the Alamo outside of allowing Sam to die heroically in service of his master rather than just to die alongside his master. Indeed, because there is not only

no solid evidence that Bowie had slaves with him at the Alamo, but also certainly no evidence that an African-American took a bullet (or bayonet) for Bowie, the subplot of Sam's sacrifice in *The Alamo* is purely a creation of the film that seeks to reassert the Plantation Illusion at the exact social-historical moment when the systematic oppression of African-American citizens in the United States, from the horrors of slavery through the injustices of segregation, were at the forefront of American cultural consciousness as a result of the Civil Rights movement.

Joe and Bill's Excellent Adventure: *Thirteen Days to Glory*

The tremendous social developments that occurred in America in the years between the release of *The Alamo* in 1960 and the 1986 film *Thirteen Days to Glory* (Burt Kennedy) include the realization of desegregated educational institutions, the rescinding of Jim Crow laws by federal statute, the invalidation of miscegenation laws, and efforts towards overall greater social and economic opportunity for African-Americans. However, this period also saw the ruinous Vietnam War (in which African-Americans for the first time were disproportionately represented on the front lines), the re-emergence of conservatism with the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, and subsequent calls for dismantling of the welfare state in which African-Americans were frequently demonized in political rhetoric, as well as the Rambo-esque rewriting of history to suggest that Vietnam was more a failing of the political leadership to let soldiers do what they did best than a flawed military escapade. As with the older films discussed above, the revisions made to the Alamo story in *Thirteen Days to Glory* seem to gesture to these events, incorporating in its depiction of the battle of the Alamo the discourses of both the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, as well

as Regan-era conservatism.

Though *Thirteen Days to Glory* was made almost a decade after *Roots* aired on television, the 1986 miniseries is in many ways infused with the *Roots* ethos. Foremost is the depiction of Travis's slave Joe, who in the 1986 film is not a slave at all, but rather a sidekick who is thinking about pushing on to California now that his partner has found his calling in Texas. Joe nevertheless hangs around long enough to take part in the final battle, and is last seen accompanying Susanne Dickinson and the other survivors to safety behind Houston's lines. As one can surmise, this version is as much a freewheeling re-creation of Alamo history as the intimations of Mexican insults to Anglo-American womanhood in 1915's *Martyrs of the Alamo*. Southern Anglo men like Travis (who came to Texas from antebellum Alabama) simply did not have African-American sidekicks of equal social standing in 1836, which means that the 1986 version not only revises the history of the Alamo substantially, but also revises the entire history of race relations in the United States.

Following the release of *Roots*, it became less socially acceptable for films to openly endorse the notion that slavery could be supported by decent Anglos with self-respect. Arguably it is this legacy of *Roots*, at least in part, that led to the revisionism surrounding the depiction of Joe in *Thirteen Days*. The historical William Barrett Travis was indeed a slave owner, something that would likely have made his representation as a hero problematic for a 1980s film, because the legacy of *Roots* meant that the "good guys" could not own slaves. Therefore, the apparent solution was to rewrite history so that the Travis of the film is not a slave owner at all, but instead simply a white man with a buddy named Joe who happens to be African-American. In this sense, the depiction of Travis's

and Joe's relationship in *Thirteen Days to Glory* also draws on interracial buddy movies of the 1980s such as *48 Hours* (Walter Hill, 1982) and *Trading Places* (John Landis, 1983), with the Travis-Joe relationship in *Thirteen Days* emblematic of the Hollywood vision of racial harmony that was prevalent in such cinematic representations throughout the decade, although not necessarily reflective of any kind of social reality.

Such radical taking of liberties with historic fact is not particularly unusual in Hollywood films based on real events. However, the historical revisionism engaged in by *Thirteen Days to Glory* is a perfect example of the linchpin argument of this essay—that a historical event often can most efficaciously be retold by adjusting its mythic parameters along lines that are seemingly inoffensive to prevailing ideologies. Thus, in the film versions of the Alamo discussed above, certain historic facts are consistently represented, while others are not. The events of the battle, such as the wholesale massacre of the Texians and Tejanos, for example, have never been readjusted in any film versions of the Alamo, nor has the heroism of the major characters. Likewise, the value of the Alamo skirmish in the winning of the revolution and consequent founding of Texas, as well as the assertion that the creation of Texas was an inherently good turn of events in world history, remain uncontested across all of the films. The depiction of African-Americans at the Alamo, in sharp contrast, is routinely altered by filmmakers as the political and social winds blow, perhaps leading to the conclusion that racial equity in this country is sometimes more a function of political rhetoric than a meaningful evolution of circumstances—or at least it has been so for the makers of Alamo films, and presumably for those who have avidly consumed them.

Regeneration Through Clean Living: *Two for Texas*

Thirteen Days was not the only film about the Alamo in the post-Vietnam era that saw revisionism in its representation of interracial harmony. While Sam is once again absent from the story in *Two for Texas*, and there is only one minor character who is African-American, this film version of events is particularly noteworthy within the context of this essay because of its willingness to revise history to comply with modern sensibilities. Originally broadcast January 18, 1998 on TNT and directed by Rod Hardy, the film employs revisionism in placing fictional characters Hugh (Kris Kristofferson) and Son (Scott Bairstow) in revolutionary Texas where they have escaped from an unjust imprisonment in the bayou country of Louisiana. Hugh is an old friend of Bowie's, and soon becomes convinced that the legendary knife-wielder's fight for a new nation is about as good a goal as any other. Along their way to the Alamo, Hugh and Son meet Sana (Irene Bedard), a Native American woman who also takes up the battle for Texas independence.

The Alamo massacre is not shown in the film, but Hugh and Son are aware of the dire circumstances of the Texians and ride to San Antonio to see how they can help. They are too late to join the battle, however, and revisionism once again comes into play when the two circulate freely inside the Alamo (Santa Anna and his troops already having departed), and view the corpse of Bowie and the other defenders that Mexican peasants are readying for cremation. Son decides to marry Sana, a narrative development that seems to communicate the message that integration is the hope for the new Texas and ultimately for America, with Son and Sana positioned as the Texans of the future. Although the filmmakers chose to portray Sana as Native American rather than African-American, the interracial marriage between Son and Sana nonetheless points to an idealized lessening of

interracial tension in America that is presumably meant to suggest that this is equally true of the country at the time of the film's release. This idealized stance can be easily gleaned from both *Thirteen Days to Glory* and *Two for Texas*, insofar as both films seem to invite interpretations of their revisions to African-American participation in the Alamo in light of the supposed improved race relations in the U.S. at the time that the films were made.

As for African-American characters, there is precisely one in the entire film—a prison guard at the facility in Louisiana that Hugh and Son escape from, who is instructed to beat an Anglo prisoner for some infraction or other. While not quite as startling as the sight of Travis and Joe as traveling sidekicks in *Thirteen Days*, the image of an African-American man beating a white man with the full legal blessing of his Southern state in the antebellum period is an unlikely scenario. Moreover, while in the 1986 and 1998 films the overt support of the Plantation Illusion found in the earlier films disappears with the transformation of the African-American characters from servants to autonomous individuals, this erasure of slaves from the Alamo story is problematic in a different way because there was certainly at least one African-American at the Alamo who was a slave in historical fact—Travis's slave Joe. Therefore, *Two for Texas* is a long way past the Plantation Illusion, but still lodged in post-Vietnam “Ramboesque” revisionism, in which, much like in *Thirteen Days to Glory*, uncomfortable historical truths are elided in favor of idealized representations in which the racial inequalities between the African-American and white participants in the battle at the Alamo are either rewritten, ignored or erased.

The Alamo Story for a New Millennium: *The Alamo*

As a retelling of the African-American experience at the Alamo, the 2004 film *The*

Alamo (John Lee Hancock) is the most historically accurate to date, although its depiction of events is still creatively embellished. For one thing, it is the only film in which Joe (Edwin Hodge) is actually portrayed as Travis's slave, reflecting the historical reality. In this version, Joe is often seen with Sam (Afemo Omilami), who for the only time in film history is depicted as a slave not particularly invested in the success of his owner Jim Bowie (Jason Patric). Sam is fluent in Spanish, which serves him well once the Mexicans inevitably overcome the Texians. Sam's knowledge of Mexican culture and language is not an unrealistic fabrication, because Bowie was after all married for years to an aristocratic Mexican and lived at his Veramendi in-laws' San Antonio residence prior to the Texas Revolution.

The Sam of 2004's *The Alamo* is also by no means imbued with the Plantation Illusion, and, in fact, urges Joe to make his escape if the opportunity arises. While digging a well together, Sam even coaches Joe in how to say "Please don't shoot; I'm a negro" in Spanish. Later, when Bowie tells Sam and his Latina sister-in-law that he wishes them to join the evacuation of women and children, Sam asks him if he is getting his papers. Bowie answers that Sam is his property until he dies, and that he intends to come and claim him after the Alamo confrontation is over. In this way, the film not only presents a new vision of historic accuracy in its depiction of African-Americans, but it is also the first Alamo film to assign slightly negative character attributes to any of the principal heroes of the battle (although it should be acknowledged that the film also hints that Bowie realizes that the defense of the Alamo is essentially a suicide mission, and is in essence giving Sam his walking papers by dying). Gone too is the interracial buddying of the 1980s and 1990s Alamo films, although it is unclear whether in openly acknowledging the subordinate

social status of Sam and Joe as slaves the filmmakers merely wished to strive for greater historical accuracy, or if instead it is an explicit attempt to avoid the naiveté of *Thirteen Days to Glory* and *Two for Texas* by confronting issues of racial inequality head-on.

Travis (Patrick Wilson) is depicted in the 2004 film as an unrepentant slave owner and a very young and rather vain man who nevertheless rises to the occasion when it becomes apparent that the loss of the Alamo to the Mexican forces is imminent. However, in its portrayal of Travis, the 2004 film also resurrects the image of an Anglo-American man who doesn't see a contradiction in his support of the institution of slavery and his support of American democratic platitudes. One can question whether the flag-waving by Travis and Crockett (Billy Bob Thornton) at the end of the film truly compensates for their failure to acknowledge the democratic right of certain of their fellow Americans, or is merely a glaring inconsistency that is not handled adequately by the scriptwriters. If the latter, then perhaps there are reasons for the film's box-office failure other than Slotkin's assertion of mythical incoherence in today's Westerns. After all, the realistic portrayals of Joe and Sam may be to the credit of the filmmakers, but ultimately the film does little to question the ideological values inscribed onto the Alamo battle, which have gone largely unchallenged for the last 175 years, even if it does alter aspects of the story prevalent in its cinematic representations. In other words, while facets of the narrative may change in this film, the meaning that the story is invested with in dominant U.S. culture still remains the same.

Conclusion

In the films analyzed in this essay, the history of the Alamo is quite stable overall,

while the details of African-American involvement in the battle is altered to suit the cultural temper of the moment. The fact that representations of the African-American characters, their motivations, and their actions can be changed when other aspects of the battle are apparently too sacred to tamper with leads to the conclusion that, when it comes to cinematic depictions of the Alamo, the African-American experience is free for reinterpretation at the whims of filmmakers. Because the Alamo massacre has consistently been the subject of films every decade or so from 1915 onwards, the stories of Joe and Sam (whoever he was) have been ripe for reinterpretation, and continuing shifts in depictions of Joe and Sam, both in terms of character and motivation, may very well continue to occur in subsequent films.

While, as this essay has argued, the revisions to Joe's and Sam's stories in the films discussed above are arguably the result of changing social attitudes, a closely related question is whether America may someday rethink the significance of the Alamo massacre and the Texas Revolution. Although slavery in Texas is never a major theme of Alamo films, one important outcome of the defeat of Mexico in 1836 was the legal reinstatement of slavery in Texas. Therefore, the Alamo as an important battle in the successful war for Texas independence can be interpreted as a miniature enactment of the Civil War struggle between the anti-slavery North and pro-slavery South—an enactment in which the South wins and successfully secures the right to own slaves. And yet film versions of the Alamo myth to date have failed to acknowledge, nevermind to consider, that the victory of the Texians in their battle for independence resulted in Texas becoming a slave state.

Whether any such soul-searching will occur in either Texas or Hollywood is another question. Unlike the story of the Little Big Horn massacre and the radical

rethinking of George Armstrong Custer in popular culture (most notably in the book and film *Little Big Man*), the Alamo story has undergone very little historical alteration or revision in the time since the event occurred. In short, the 1836 battle was and is taken by American society as an inspiring test of the mettle of brave warriors who are bent on protecting their cultural values from undesirable outside forces. Except for the slight desanctification of Jim Bowie in the 2004 film *The Alamo*, the basic facts of the battle and the basic understanding of the main characters has been remarkably consistent. Indeed, despite the fact that the story of the Alamo massacre could be reasonably expected to lend itself to mythic retellings, the only aspect of the story that has been consistently altered by filmmakers is the experiences of the African-Americans who were present at the massacre. The logical conclusion to be reached is that the various American filmmakers who have addressed the Alamo story are content to alter the facts of the African-American experience for the sake of good storytelling consistent with the times, but are not quite as willing to alter the meaning inscribed on to the story of the Alamo within the dominant American mythos.

Notes

¹ William C. Davis bases his information about the 1875 appearance by Joe on the John S. Ford Memoirs in UT Austin's Center for American History. One can only conclude that Joe had learned the extent of Texian gratitude for his service at the Alamo, for the online *Handbook of Texas* entry for Joe notes that an ad in the *Telegraph and Texas Register* offering a \$50 reward for his capture continued to run in the paper for three months. Joe showed up in Austin in 1875, according to the online *Handbook*, but Davis writes that he

passed on an opportunity to celebrate the San Jacinto victory.

² Groneman has misgivings about the Rose story (66-68), although other Alamo historians have repeated it verbatim. Jeff Long, for example, recounts the Rose and line-in-sand stories as they have come down from the 19th century (232-234), as does Walter Lord (201-203), the latter even providing evidence to back up his assertion that the story is probably accurate. Richard Flores provides a good overview of the matter (111-112), taking no side but focusing rather on the uses of the Rose legend as a basis for *Man from the Alamo*.

³ Sammy Davis Jr. reportedly wished to be cast in the heavily stereotyped role of Bowie's slave Sam, but according to Michael Munn's biography, the film's financial backers nixed Davis's casting because he was dating a white woman at the time (207-208).

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**Symbolism in the Serpentine:
Exploring Loie Fuller's Dance Through a Symbolist Aesthetic**



Angenette Spalink

Loie Fuller (1862 - 1928) performed throughout the United States and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In her distinctive Serpentine Dance, Fuller swirled billowing costumes and fabric above her head. Underneath the surging fabric and colored lights her body was engaged in perpetual motion, which was sustained by movement that radiated from the core of her body. Fuller has not traditionally been considered a modern dancer, although recent research by Ann Cooper Albright and Rhonda K. Garelick demonstrate that Fuller's use of the core as the center of her movement re-situates her as such. At the same time, though, elements of Fuller's performances also align her both aesthetically and philosophically with the Symbolists. In her Serpentine Dance, Fuller exhibits an aesthetic that appears similar to that which the Symbolists strove to achieve in their theatre, and she employed the modern notion that movement should evolve from an internal impulse. In this essay, I explore the ways in which Fuller's aesthetic manifested Symbolist theatrical ideals regarding light, color, space, the body, and the mind in order to argue that through the amalgamation of these elements, her performances created a synesthetic whole that abstracted her body from conventional ideas of

time and space, constructed a performance that was uniquely Fuller, and is ultimately an expression of modern movement.

Fuller arrived in Paris in 1892, a time of great political, cultural, and aesthetic flux. Her career at the Folies Bergère coincided with the establishment of the Third Republic of France which was constituted after the collapse of the empire of Napoleon III in the Franco-Prussian War (Holmes 30). In Paris, this era was designated the “Belle Époque” and was characterized by many avant-garde artistic movements including Realism, Naturalism, Decadence, Futurism, and Symbolism. Fluctuations in approaches to movement were also evident during this period. Hillel Schwartz asserts, “Between 1840 and 1930 the dance world in Europe and the United States had, by seduction and then concussion, suffered a shift in attitudes toward physical movement” (71). Schwartz attributes this fluctuation in movement to the discovery of torsion, the ability to twist the entire body in space, which was influential on many dancers of this era. As Schwartz notes, “Modern dancers insisted on effort, on weight and torque, and they consistently dissented from the balletic ‘delusion that the law of gravitation does not exist for them’” (75). This new form of dance acknowledged gravity and encouraged the dancer to play with the body’s relationship with it.

Modern dance defined itself in opposition to classical ballet in multiple ways, but for the purposes of this essay, I will be focusing on the reaction against the emphasis placed on exterior form. Ballet was composed of codified movements that were pieced together to form a dance. Modern dancers, alternatively, thought that movement should grow out of an inner impulse or desire; it should not merely be the combination of dance steps. While ballet dancers may depict emotion in their dance, the dance is not created from an emotion or desire, but by a combination of preordained movements. Modern dancers believed that dance was not merely an aesthetic

expression of the exterior, but a manifestation of an inner impulse. Modern dancer Doris Humphrey designated this concept “moving from the inside out” (Cohen 122). Dance historian, Selma Jeanne Cohen unpacks Humphrey’s statement by remarking that modern dancers began not with traditional steps as ballet did, but with an emotional idea (122). Physical movement developed from an internal impulse. Cohen asserts that modern dance is concerned “with the body and its natural impulse to express its feelings in movement” (122). The concept of inner life (meaning emotion, spirit, desire, or impulse) was not the same for every modern dancer; each had their own interpretation of this idea. Regarding interior emotions, dancer Mary Wigman states, “Shock, ecstasy, joy, melancholy, grief, gaiety, the dance can express all of these emotions through movement. But the expression without the inner experience in the dance is valueless” (152). As I will discuss later, this philosophy of movement as an outward manifestation of an inner desire was a dominant component of Fuller’s work, and is clearly articulated in her writing.

At the same time that modern dance was emerging as a new form of dance, the Symbolists were exploring similar ideas in regard to physicalizing the internal in theatre, literature, and the visual arts. Symbolism originated in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, and was based on the tenets that the corporeal world was arcane and that truth could only be discovered by delving into the human psyche. In *Theater of the Avant-Garde 1890 - 1950*, Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf describe the concepts that the Symbolists were exploring:

The world, which the realists and . . . the naturalists had attempted to know fully and depict accurately, was revealed by the Symbolists to be pure illusion—a veil of fleeting appearances behind which were hidden deeper truths. It was what lay

buried within the psyche and concealed behind the mirror that this radical new poetics of drama proposed to explore. (6)

The Symbolists were not concerned with the materiality of the world, as were the naturalists or realists. Instead, they were interested in the ethereal, the hidden mysteries residing within the self and the universe.

Many Symbolist plays and productions were being produced in France while Fuller was employed at the Folies Bergère. In her performances, Fuller seems to exude many of the artistic principles that the Symbolists firmly upheld. Both Fuller and the Symbolists were interested in the external representation of the internal. In Symbolist plays and productions, acting, scenery, lighting and sound did not adhere to nineteenth century conceptions of realism and naturalism. Instead, the Symbolists strove to find ways to use technical elements such as lighting and scenery to portray the hidden mysteries of the human psyche (Drain 228). Fuller, meanwhile, endeavored to use light, color, costume, and movement to communicate her internal emotions and spirit. Fuller and the Symbolists also both exhibit a shared desire to use space as an avenue through which to explore internal ideas. While Fuller never identified herself or her work as Symbolist, examining her dance in light of Symbolist ideas regarding theatrical practices reveals that the two are congruent.

In *Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Work of Loie Fuller*, Ann Cooper Albright points out the importance that lighting, color, and space assumed in Fuller's performances. Color and light were not an afterthought in Fuller's work; they were vital components of the performance. Her use of specific lighting and color combinations illuminated her body and allowed her movement to be both revealed and concealed. Her performances have often been described as kaleidoscopic because of this fusion of light, color, and movement.

Journalist Arsène Alexandre stated in his column in *Le Théâtre*, “Before . . . Fuller, there was lighting, but no one understood how to use it . . . She brought us this marvelous discovery: the art of modulation, the ability to shift across the spectrum of color tones” (qtd. in Albright 58). Fuller developed new techniques in lighting; she projected light through a filter in order to reduce glare, and is also credited with the development of under-stage lighting, in which she employed an electrician below stage to project light through a trap door to illuminate her skirt from underneath. Just as the Symbolists strove to use light as part of an all-embracing work of art, so did Fuller. She endeavored to combine color and light intensity, and weave them together with space, costume, and movement to create her own all-encompassing art.

Fuller’s lighting techniques evoke similarities with what the Symbolists expressed as their ideal for stage lighting. In *Lighting in the Theatre*, Gosta Bergman explains the importance of the use of light in the Symbolist theatre, stating, “It goes without saying that light was to play a central role in the Symbolist dreams of the all-embracing work of art: not the atmospheric illusionary light, but the light that, with all degrees of intensity and colors, can form inner, mental courses of events, can create rhythm” (qtd. in Albright 81). Bergman claims that the Symbolist’s interest in light extended beyond merely casting an otherworldly glow, and resided in the creation of visual patterns through the fusion of light and color. Though not directed at Fuller, this statement describes her well, as she used light and color variation to create a visual flow that was then incorporated with her movement.

Fuller also shared many of the same sentiments regarding art and the body as her contemporary theatrical practitioner and lighting designer, Adolphe Appia. In “From How to Reform Our Staging Practices,” Appia states, “Until now it has been believed that staging must achieve the highest possible degree of illusion; and it is this principle . . . which has barred our

progress. I strive to show . . . that scenic art must be based on the one reality worthy of theatre: the human body” (Appia 16). Thus, for Appia all elements of scenic design should be constructed in conjunction with the human body. He goes on to assert that “the plasticity of scenery [is] necessary to the beauty of the actor’s attitudes and movements” (Appia 237). Appia insists that scenery should not simply be a backdrop that the actor performs against; instead, it should be malleable and able to move and adjust in accordance with the performer’s body. He states, “In the theatre, we are there to be present at a dramatic action: that action is due to the presence of the characters on stage; without the characters there is no action. Thus the actor is the essential factor in the staging of the scenes” (Appia 237, italics in original). Once again, Appia maintains that the human body is a vital component in the equation of onstage performance. All the scenic elements should work in harmony with the body and together they should create a cohesive piece of art. Fuller is an excellent example of Appia’s ideas regarding the fusion of scenic elements and the human body. For Fuller, lights, color, costume and space were equally as important as her choreography. Her dance was not merely performed in front of a backdrop; her movement, costumes, lights, and colors worked together to create a dynamic composition.

As Albright notes, rather than accepting the stage as a static frame, Fuller considered it an active space (63). She recognized the dynamic energy present in the performance space and used it in her dances. The wands attached to the sleeves of her costumes allowed her to reach beyond her personal space and interact with the space around her. For Albright, Fuller’s sense of engaging space begins in the way she initiates movement through her chest and body (3). Fuller’s movements radiated out of the central core of her body; activating her core enabled her to support and sustain not only her movement, but also her billowing costumes and fabric. Albright remarks, “Launching and guiding the fabric in a constant play with gravity, Fuller

creates an ongoing spatial dialogue of extension and release” (65). The twisting and contracting of her torso enabled her to have the momentum to lift her long wands of fabric and to keep them extended while she danced, allowing her to interact with the lights, color, and space around her. Thus, as Albright asserts, because Fuller understood the importance of actively engaging her body in space, she was able to recharge the spatial and temporal energies of the stage (66). Fuller was a dynamic performer because she understood the importance of creating a cohesive whole; that light, color, space, and movement must be used in collaboration with one another. In the process, though, her performances also melded these elements together to create what Appia referred to as an “animated stage” (228), which becomes one more way in which her work aligns with Symbolist theatrical practices.

Likewise, in Fuller’s *Serpentine Dance*, her body appeared to be both present and absent while she danced. The visual fluctuation of her body seems similar to the Symbolist’s interest in the abstraction of the human form, specifically their intrigue with the marionette. Cardullo and Knopf comment on the Symbolist preoccupation with the marionette, “Because marionettes are abstractions of the human form, individual experience does not obtrude on our perception of them, as it inevitably does with a human performer when the actor’s personality comes into play” (7). When a human body is used in a performance it carries with it certain connotations; it can never be free from meaning. A puppet, on the other hand, supplies a solid form without the associations that might accompany a human body. The marionette also provides a body that transcends the boundary between the human/nonhuman form. In the *Serpentine Dance*, Fuller also obfuscated this boundary. Her combination of light, flowing costume, and spiraling movement made her body disappear and reappear in a manner that caused her human form to

become virtually unrecognizable. The absence and presence of her body becomes an interesting template for thinking about the Symbolist idea of the abstraction of the body.

The performance of the Serpentine Dance filmed by the Lumière brothers in 1896 provides an excellent illustration of this simultaneous invocation of absence and presence in Fuller's work. Fuller has historically been considered the dancer in this film, although some speculate that it may be one of her imitators. Nevertheless, examining this representation of the Serpentine Dance provides insights into important and unique elements regarding the presentation and performance of this dance. In this film, Fuller dances in her famous costume composed of billowing fabric with wands attached to the sleeves so that she is able to manipulate and extend the costume above her head and diagonally to the sides. Fuller dances and as her body becomes enveloped in fabric it eventually disappears, and as the fabric continues to move her body eventually reappears. The motion of the dance and the movement of the fabric along with the play of light and shadow cause Fuller's body to be both visible and invisible, both absent and present. When her body is not present it appears as though there is a whirling colorful "other" on stage, not a body or a human, but an abstraction of the human form. Eventually, her body will briefly come into view again and thus remind the spectator there is indeed a human body performing onstage. However, the body will then evanesce and all the eye will perceive is the whoosh of colorful perpetual motion as the body disappears, reappears, and disappears.

Symbolist writer and critic Stéphane Mallarmé describes the phenomena of Fuller's dance as "the personification of his dream of the ideal theater—without scenery, without words, where space and time had no importance, where reality would not intrude between the idea and the audience" (qtd. in Coffman 93). Mallarmé indicates that Fuller's performances, executed without scenery or words, were not constrained by realistic ideas of space or time. For Symbolist

plays and performances, events did not have to occur in a linear fashion, nor were they confined to three-dimensional space. Cardullo and Knopf note, “the Symbolists liberated playwriting from mechanistic notions of chronological time and Euclidean space; they enlarged the frame of drama to include worlds and beings other than those inhabiting the bourgeois theater” (7). Time could move at a hyper speed or it could stand still, and movement in space could take place outside the rational, three-dimensional world.

Fuller’s Serpentine dance did not follow a typical dance progression, which would have consisted of beginning in a pose, ending each phrase with a pose, and ending the performance in a pose. Albright notes that in many nineteenth century dances, “the endings of musical phrases were often punctuated by individual or group poses that visually consolidated the line” (68). Dancers posing at the end of musical phrases was a convention that informed the audience where to direct their gaze. Fuller did not use poses to inform the audience where to focus; instead, she performed continuous movement throughout the entire performance. Because of this perpetual motion, it is possible to surmise that it caused those observing to lose track of time and thus to be enraptured by the experience. The continual motion in this dance aligns her with the Symbolist tenet of resisting the realistic/naturalist constraints of chronological time. Her performance emancipates her body from the restraints of linear progression, and in this space where time seems to not exist she creates with her movement and costumes the appearance of a supernatural “other.” In the names of many of her dances, Fuller also evokes the idea of a supernatural other, such as the Serpentine, the Butterfly, and the Fire Dance. Each of these dance titles elicits images that distance Fuller’s dancing form from that of a human.

In the Serpentine Dance, Fuller’s body is abstract because the fabric of her costume and the dynamic interplay of light, dark, and color obscure it. But performed in a space where time

seems absent and the continual motion of her movements and costumes make her body both visible and invisible, it seems that her body becomes abstracted to a second degree. The otherworldly qualities of her performance seem to abstract her completely from the idea of the human form. This quality of her performance once again aligns her with the Symbolist notion of abstraction. In the Serpentine Dance, Fuller takes a human body and abstracts it from its humanness by enveloping it in the motion of the costume, and then makes it even more abstracted by taking this form that is both visible and invisible and situating it in a realm where time does not exist. Therefore her human body becomes something that does not exist in the human perception of time or space. A human body cannot be both present and not present, nor can it make time stand still. Yet in Fuller's performance her human body seems to succeed in achieving both of these tasks. Through the combination of movement, costume, and light, Fuller's body appears abstracted and the visual images she creates evoke representations of non-human forms.

Mallarmé in "Les fonds dans le ballet" describes such an experience: ". . . the performer . . . illustrates many spinning themes from which extends a distant fading warp, giant petal and butterfly, unfurling all in a clear and elemental way" (qtd. in Albright 45). Mallarmé watches Fuller's body, clothed in fabric, light, and color disappear and then re-emerge in the non-human form of a flower and then a butterfly. Albright notes other representations that Fuller has been compared to, "Images of phantoms, wings, birds, gemstones, water, and flowers—these are the fundamental metaphors that are echoed throughout many of the early descriptions of Fuller's performances in Paris" (38). The abstract images evoked through Fuller's Serpentine Dance manifest the Symbolist desire to shake free from realist representations and to manipulate the audience's apprehension of chronological time on stage.

In addition to emancipating onstage bodies from the rational ideas of form and chronological time, the Symbolists were also interested in probing the inner mysteries of the mind. They were concerned with investigating the internal aspects of the psyche and making these internal elements external in their plays and performances. Katherine E. Kelly notes that at this moment, writing was “shifting its representational center from the outside to the inside, from the natural/material realm to the individual/mental realm as the crucial site of awareness” (11). In her writing, Fuller discusses a similar idea regarding working from the inside. In “From Light and the Dance,” she states, “What is dance? It is motion. What is motion? The expression of sensation. What is sensation? The reaction in the human body produced by an impression or an idea perceived by the mind. A sensation is the reverberation that the body receives when an impression strikes the mind” (246). Fuller thereby makes the connection that dance is a physical manifestation of a mental impulse. The external expression of the dancing body is created by an internal stimulus. Fuller and the Symbolists clearly both shared a desire to probe the inner workings of the mind and to make them physically present on stage.

In her writing, Fuller also explains how she takes a mental impulse and makes it physical; she translates the image in her mind through her dance to the audience. She avers, “To impress an idea I endeavor, by my motions, to cause its birth in the spectator’s mind, to awaken his imagination, that it may be prepared to receive the image” (247). Through her dance, Fuller attempts to transcribe an image from her mind to the mind of the audience. Her goal in this process is to simultaneously get audiences to understand an image in her mind and moreover, to be an image in their minds. She is trying to get them interested in both her inner mental workings and her outer physical workings. If audiences understand the outer image of her dance they will also understand the inner image in her mind. When she states her desire “to cause its birth in the

spectator's mind," Fuller indicates that she expects her audience to engage with her not only on an aesthetic level, but also on a mental level. She wants her audience to not only process her images visually, but also mentally, so that her physical actions act as a mode of communication between her brain and her spectator's brains.

Regarding this form of communication Fuller states, "Thus we are able . . . to feel within ourselves as an impulse an indefinable and wavering force, which urges and dominates us" (247). Fuller indicates that using her dance as a physical form of inner communication between her and the audience creates a force between the two that is both tangible and intangible. It is palpable in the sense that she knows that it exists and that there is a transfer of something ineffable in the sense that it is not quantifiable. Fuller's attempt to communicate her inner images through her exterior movement was not to assert that audiences were unable to construct their own experience, since spectators could choose which element or combination of elements on which to focus. However, I think that Fuller believed that the power of the inner impulse was so strong that it would be communicated through her performance no matter upon which visual element the audience chose to focus. Her desire to create an entire performance including lights, color, fabric, and movement all evolved from an internal idea, and that concept would be disseminated through every element of the performance.

Another place where Symbolist ideas and the performance of Loie Fuller converge is with their interest in mirrors. The Symbolist desire to explore the mysteries of the mind created new conventions in which consciousness and the psyche could be explored (Kelly 12). This fascination with exploring the unknowable elements of the world and peering into the innermost self manifested itself in the Symbolists' captivation with the mirror; they were intrigued by the reflection that materialized when a person looked into one. Frazer Lively notes this fixation with

mirrors commenting, “motifs that were common to symbolist writers [were] . . . the dangerous enchantment of mirrors” (271). The Symbolists were fascinated with mirrors because the mirror was a device that allowed a person to look into the glass and see beyond him or herself, to see a double, or their Other reflected back at them. Lively, explains that the preoccupation with the Other in the mirror alludes to the myth of Narcissus, the man who sees his own reflection in a pool of water and becomes enamored with it (271). The space of the mirror allows the self to acknowledge the existence of its reflected Other.

Fuller was also interested in playing with the reflection of the self in her performances and created a means by which she could dance and have her image reflected at the same time. In 1893 Fuller patented a device that she called a “mirror room.” Garelick describes this invention as “an octagonal backdrop, open in the front, made up of continuously arranged mirrors illuminated by tiny electric lights installed in the interstices. This curving wall of lights and mirrors created multiple reflections of the dancer performing before it” (45). Fuller would dance and her image would be reflected all around her, thus producing multiple images of her form. Consequently, not one human body, but many were reflected and refracted in the performance space.

According to Garelick the audience had a difficult time determining which of the dancing bodies onstage was actually the flesh-and-blood Loie Fuller (45). From this account it seems that just as the Symbolists were interested in the merging of the self and the Other in the mirror, so too was Fuller. It appears that she was interested in what happened onstage when the physical dancing body converged with the reflections of the dancing body. Mrs. Griffith, a British writer who saw the Serpentine Dance performed in the mirror room described its effect on her. She explains, “By some mysterious arrangement, eight Loie Fullers appear to be dancing at the same

time, and the whole stage is bathed in a flood of glorious tints, in which may be seen aerial forms, in cloudlike vestures, whirling and dancing . . .” (qtd. in Garelick 45). This audience member describes Fuller’s performance with her multiple reflections and combination of the lighting effects as something celestial or otherworldly. Garelick notes “The mirror room . . . both dissolved and reproduced Fuller’s image” (45). By dancing in a space with mirrors Fuller’s physical body dissolved because it became difficult to differentiate which body onstage was Fuller’s actual body. However her body was also reproduced, because the mirrors allowed not just one dancing body onstage, but multiple dancing bodies.

The idea of absence and presence once again manifests itself in the mirrored performance. Fuller’s body is visible because she is onstage performing. But it is also hidden, because at times during the performance it becomes hard to extricate Fuller’s physical body from the reflections. Her experimentation in the mirror room produced multiple images in the mirror that added to the ethereal sense of the performance. Instead of one body disappearing and reappearing, there were multiple bodies.

According to Albright, because the mirror room set was so large and breakable Fuller could not tour with it, so she began experimenting with other ways of using mirrors, “adapt[ing] the play of light and mirror by using large swaths of shiny, reflective fabric, or by sewing mirrors on [her] costumes,” (191). Even though she could not always use the large mirrors, the use of mirrors and the reflection of her image was something that she continued to experiment with and to implement in different ways throughout her career.

This mystical ambiance that Fuller created with her dancing and her use of mirrors further connects her with Symbolist ideals. According to Lively, “the symbolists wanted a theater of the soul, in which a mystical inner life would transcend the corporeal world” (269).

The way that Fuller discusses her process indicates that perhaps this Symbolist idea was implemented in her work. She would have an impression or image in her mind that she would then “transcribe” to her body. She would perform this transcription, combining dancing, lights, and the mirrors (if they were used) to create a mystical, ethereal place where her inner self appeared to transcend her corporeal body, where her physical body became absent and present and time did not exist. The combination of her being both concealed and revealed as well as the effort to transcend linear time indicate that for Fuller’s audience, the performance seemed to exist somewhere between the real world and the supernatural world.

This liminal space between the real world and the imagined is also something with which the Symbolists were concerned. Lively explains, “Many [symbolist] plays showed . . . characters . . . who seem to exist partway between the real world and beyond” (269). Fuller’s performance fits this description; in the moment that it is occurring it appears to exceed the bounds of the natural world. Albright describes the phenomena by stating, “Beginning with dim lighting (often described as ‘eerie’), her movement typically became more and more expansive as the surrounding lights increased in intensity and color variation, creating a climatic (sometimes apocalyptic) vision that exploded back into darkness” (66). The description of Fuller’s performance as climatic or apocalyptic reinforces the idea that her dance created a space that existed somewhere between the real world and that which is beyond the real world.

The otherworldly visions constructed in her performances were not created by movement alone, but with the help of other scenic elements. It is the unique synesthetic combination of Fuller’s moving body enveloped in the elements of light, space, and color that create the whole effect. These components working together create a transcendent space where Fuller’s performance resides. She created her own lighting plots using original techniques and color

palettes, which she also designed. She fashioned her own costumes, made of fabric that undulated as she danced. The wands connected to her costume allowed her to reach beyond her personal space and engage far beyond herself. When she danced in this costume her body was both revealed and obscured.

Analyzing Fuller's aesthetics, performance, and methods of composition in context of Symbolism reveals that both possessed a desire to use theatrical techniques to evoke representations of inner emotion and spirit. Fuller's Serpentine Dance employed color, light, fabric, and movement in a manner that elicited Symbolist ideals of abstraction, otherworldly images, and an abdication of linear time. Examining Fuller through this lens affirms that her theories and implementation of space were modern in nature because she used the performance space to physicalize her internal emotions. The fusion of Symbolist ideals and Fuller's own philosophies regarding lights, color, and space constructed a synesthetic whole that transcended conventional ideas of time and space and created a performance that was uniquely hers, and provides further evidence that Fuller should be acknowledged as a modern dancer.

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