

Film and Television Reviews

Town Destroyer. Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman, Writers, Directors, and Producers; Peggy Berryhill, Executive Producer. Bullfrog Films, 2022. 53 minutes.

Town Destroyer, written and directed by Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman, documents the 2019 effort to remove New Deal-era murals adorning the walls of George Washington High School in San Francisco, California. Commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, Victor Arnautoff painted the thirteen-panel mural titled “The Life of Washington” in 1936. The murals present different moments in the life of George Washington, and unlike school textbooks of the time, Arnautoff chose to depict some of the more troubling attributes of Washington’s career. This includes profiting from the ownership and labor of enslaved Africans and ordering the annihilation of Haudenosaunee people during the American Revolution. Hanodaga:yas (Town Destroyer) is the name Seneca people use for George Washington, and the mural’s depiction of a dead Native American lying face down in the dirt reflects that violent history. Viewing the “dead Indian” as symbolic of institutionalized white supremacy and valorizing Native American genocide, activists in 2019 demanded that San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) remove the murals. The call to action was met by the disagreement of others who voiced concern about censoring history and destroying works of art. *Town Destroyer* features interviews with artists and historians—including Native American voices—and captures the debate as it played out in school board meetings, news media, comments from celebrities, and other civic gatherings. The film effectively captures how citizens and public institutions respond to calls for racial justice and subsequent conservative (and liberal) backlash against revising histories that harm, forget, or obscure truth.

Town Destroyer is divided into three parts. In Part One, “The Past is a Foreign Country,” the film introduces Victor Arnautoff’s background and mentorship from Diego Rivera. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley and artist Dewey Crumpler explain, as an artist and communist in the United States during the 1930s, Arnautoff claimed George Washington and other Founding Fathers of the United States as representatives of radical democracy. Arnautoff used painting to further reveal that such historical figures were “not without contradiction.” As Part One illustrates, however, the mural’s depictions of radical ideals and contradictions did not translate to audiences beyond the 1930s (African American students protested the mural in the 1960s). Unlike the unequivocally offensive “Early Days” section of San Francisco’s “Pioneer Monument” (the film features its triumphant removal in 2018), Arnautoff’s

mural seems more enigmatic. Arnautoff may have strived to comment on the problems of the past, but, as California Native American artist Judith Lowry's comments and artwork indicate, there are clearer examples of art that have more effectively communicated Native American struggle and resilience.

Part Two, "Still Here," continues the story of Native American art produced during and since the Red Power movement. Paul Chaat Smith (Curator, National Museum of the American Indian), Rick West Jr. (President and CEO, Autry Museum of the American West), and artist Lowry discuss the role of symbolism in art as a means to subvert dominant narratives, the history of romanticizing Native American cultures, and the role of institutions to create "wide boundaries"—creating space for discussion versus eradicating controversial content outright—when engaging with difficult subjects.

The film concludes in Part Three, "Art Gets in the Mind," which presents SFUSD's unanimous vote in 2019 to paint over the Arnautoff murals and the immediate fallout. A radio talk show featuring critics of SFUSD's decision and a heated union meeting set the stage for additional discussion about either preserving the murals or recognizing the harm they broadcast as part of the cumulative effects of intergenerational trauma. The film's analysis in this section could have benefited from remarks by a psychologist with expertise in historical trauma. This may be particularly elucidating in cases such as this in which disentangling intent from impact seems paramount and, notably, because the mural was never painted over.

Watching the film brought to mind a recent experience. In 2022, I visited San Francisco's de Young Museum to see Jules Tavernier's painting *Dance in a Subterranean Roundhouse at Clear Lake, California (1878)* temporarily displayed together with an exhibition of historic and contemporary Pomo baskets and ceremonial regalia.¹ Leaving the museum inspired and proud to be California Indian, I stumbled into the "Turtle Sun Dial" monument and was immediately thrust back into mainstream history. The small stone column with a bronze sundial atop a turtle was erected in 1907 by California's chapter of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America to "honor the first three navigators to the California coast," including Francis Drake.² Nearby, "Drake's Cross"—an 1894 monument to white supremacy hidden in plain sight—still stands, as does Dana King's installation "Monumental Reckoning" (2021), which recontextualizes another racist monument by honoring Black history and lives.³ In neighboring Marin County, Drake's name and image are commonly found: a National Landmark signals the spot in Point

1 Editorial team, "Now Showing: Jules Tavernier and the Elem Pomo at de Young Museum—Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco," *Art of the Ancestors*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.artoftheancestors.com/blog/jules-tavernier-and-the-elem-pomo-de-young>.

2 Kinen Karvala, "'Looking Back': Turtle Sundial," *Richmond Review/Sunset Beacon*, October 4, 2022.

3 Richard White, "This Monument to White Supremacy Hides in Plain Sight," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2020; "Monumental Reckoning Golden Gate Park, San Francisco 2021," Dana King Art, <https://danakingart.com/monumental-reckoning-2021>.



The “Turtle Sun Dial” monument in front of the de Young Museum, San Francisco. (Photo by author)

Reyes National Seashore where Drake supposedly landed in 1579, Sir Francis Drake Boulevard bisects the entire county, and a 30-foot-tall sculpture of Drake once stood at Larkspur Landing (it was removed preemptively in 2020 out of concern for

vandalism by “Black Lives Matter activists”).⁴ Unlike the “Early Days” monument and other dismantled statues to colonizers and enslavers, Drake lore mostly endures. Why?

How we view art and history in a time of racial reckoning and the role of public historians in local debates about America’s past are questions at the core of this film’s analysis, as well as several recent publications.⁵ Unfortunately, “the debate continues” and “every story that we tell is incomplete” (two messages at the end of the film) ring hollow. They are true statements, but this reviewer feels they detract from a larger concluding message that could have been made about the role and importance of nuance—a “quaint notion” nowadays, quips Paul Chaat Smith—in heritage debates and broader public unease with ambiguity.⁶ The film notes aspects of Arnautoff’s painting—the “soulless” settlers rendered in black and white; that one dead Indian doesn’t make up the entirety of the painting; and even Crumpler’s later “multiethnic” additions to the mural—that add subtlety to an argument that mostly centers on either protecting historical works of art or calling George Washington “Town Destroyer.” Rather than reinforcing the extreme positions in this debate, a stronger conclusion may have focused on how we might engage and act collectively as “better relatives to each other,” as scholar Jessica Young urges, to find nuance when confronting controversial topics. What this film does well is capture a moment when more citizens and communities are thinking critically about the past and the things used to communicate that past. *Town Destroyer* shares the longer history of how artists and activists speak truth to power, and it may serve as a starting point for deeper reflection on the potential for more nuanced approaches to heritage.

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4 Mike Moffitt, “Sir Francis Drake Sculpture Removed from Larkspur Landing: British Explorer’s Role in Slave Trade at Issue,” *SFGate*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Sir-Francis-Drake-sculpture-removed-from-Larkspur-15443255.php>; Peter C. Mancall, “Sir Francis Drake’s Date with Destiny,” *Alta*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.altaonline.com/dispatches/a39177689/sir-francis-drake-backlash/>.

5 See, for example, Jason Pierce and Michael Powers, “We and Bobby Lee: Public Historians and the Fight to Remove Confederate Memorials,” *The Public Historian* 45, no. 4 (November 2023): 63–81; Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels and Jon D. Daehnke, eds., *Heritage and Democracy: Crisis, Critique, and Cooperation* (University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 2023); David Adams and Peter Larkham, “Contesting Urban Monuments: Future Directions for the Controversial Monumental Landscapes of Civic Grandeur,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 8 (2022): 891–906; and Barbara J. Little, “Violence, Silence and the Four Truths: Towards Healing in U.S.-American Historical Memory,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 7 (2019): 631–40, and other authors in this themed journal issue on “Heritages Haunting the American Narrative.”

6 Lonnie G. Bunch III, “The Archive of Emancipation,” *The Atlantic* 332, no. 5 (2023): 24; see also Lonnie Bunch, “Embracing Ambiguity: The Challenge of Interpreting African American History in Museums,” *Museums & Social Issues* 2, no. 1 (2007): 45–56.