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# Virtual Representations of the American Far West in 20th Century French Theater

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sarah Christine Lloyd entitled "Virtual Representations of the American Far West in 20th Century French Theater." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Modern Foreign Languages.

Les Essif, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

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# **Virtual Representations of the American Far West in 20<sup>th</sup> Century French Theater**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctorate of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sarah Christine Lloyd  
May 2012

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## Abstract

The American Far West is, perhaps, one of the foremost images of the United States, one that has influenced many authors, especially during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is a place of vast, empty spaces, of adventure and danger, of heroes and villains. It is a space that excites the imagination in its grandeur and possibility. Writers such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have written of this grandeur, of the space of the American Dream. There they find the hyperreality of America, the constant drive to re-create aspects of European history and culture to fill the cultural void. Yet it is a place that promises the fulfillment of one's dreams, and this is what makes the space so alluring.

Between 1965 and 2003 five plays written in French attempted to place this cinematic space on the stage: Obaldia's *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras*, Arrabal's *Sur le fil ou ballade du train fantôme*, Fenwick's *Calamity Jane*, Duparfait's *Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d'emploi*, and Anne's *Le Bonheur du vent*. In these five plays the American Far West is presented, not on the stage, but in the virtual space—the space of the imagination, beyond the confines of the stage. This is done in part because the Far West is difficult to represent in the theater due to the sheer size associated with it; it is a cinematographic space. However, America itself is an imagined space, a space that not only physically overwhelming, but also one that is void of culture as the French perceive it. These five plays, in a variety of styles, portray the hyperreality and emptiness of the virtual space that is America.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Absurdity and America: René de Obaldia’s <i>Du vent dans les branches de sassafras</i> .....	17
Defining a Structureless Space .....	20
European Morality Reflected in American Reality .....	32
America as Cinema, Cinema as a Mirror .....	39
Conclusion .....	41
Chapter 2: The Line Between Europe and America: Fernando Arrabal’s <i>Sur le fil ou La Ballade du train fantôme</i> .....	43
America the Consumer .....	49
Madrid Reflecting Madrid .....	53
Liberation Through Spectacle .....	59
Conclusion .....	63
Chapter 3: A Historical Calamity: Jean-Noël Fenwick’s <i>Calamity Jane</i> .....	65
Masculine Space, Feminine Space .....	71
Europe and America .....	78
America on Display .....	81
Conclusion .....	85
Chapter 4: The Surrealist Stage: <i>Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d’emploi</i> by Claude Duparfait .....	87
Theater Without Boundaries .....	92
America the Frightening .....	95
Europe in America .....	101
Conclusion .....	107
Chapter 5: Dreaming the Desert: Catherine Anne’s <i>Le Bonheur du vent</i> .....	110
A Woman’s role .....	116
Emptiness .....	122
Future Hopes .....	127
Conclusion .....	129
Conclusion .....	132
Bibliography .....	141
Vita .....	153

## Introduction: Staging the Other

Ever since their discoveries, the Americas have excited the European imagination. Here could be found the Fountain of Youth or El Dorado, the city of gold. The New World was a land of untold promise, an undefined, unmapped space full of unknown wonders and dangers. This expectation of sensationalism exists even today, although perhaps in a slightly different manner, especially in regards to the United States. While people no longer exactly come expecting to find the streets paved with gold in the U.S., there is no doubt that many arrive with hopes of a better life. They come in search of the American Dream in the form of religious freedom, of wealth and fame, of escape from persecution. Some succeed and others do not; some find their heart's desire and some just find heartbreak. But nonetheless they all share a belief in this Dream—a dream that is perpetuated from within America as well as without. America is presented in the media as a place where one can come and discover new and strange things, untold wealth, instant success, but against a background of rough, dangerous wilderness, in other words, it presents the pioneer spirit. While America is no longer a nation of settlers trekking through the wilderness in search of new and exotic lands, this mindset still exists. It both fascinates and repulses their European brethren, and the French are no exception.

Through literature, especially theater, the French are able to better comprehend the foreign culture and thus situate it in context to their own culture and have been doing so for centuries. There are many examples of America in French theater, such as René de Obaldia's *Du vent dans les branches du sassafras*, Bernard-Marie Koltès' *Sallinger*, or Michel Deutsch's *Dimanche*. These plays cover a variety of aspects of America—American business strategies, the American cheerleader, etc—but I wish to focus on the presentation of the American Far West. It is the Far West that is often used as the prime example of the United States. In fact, many

Europeans associate the United States with cowboys, and a certain cowboy mentality does continue to exist in America, a mentality of adventure and acquisition.

The setting for this image is the American Far West, but this setting is rather vaguer than the image of the Cowboy. As will be later seen, the “Far West” encompasses places such as Kentucky to Oklahoma or Montana, and even stretches as far as Arizona or California. Geographically speaking this is an area of open prairies, rugged mountains and arid deserts. It is a wild and untamed land. However, it is interesting to note that this space is, in a way, the boundary between the comprehensibility of a more European east coast—the realm of business and politics—and the absolute fantasy of the west coast—the realm of the cinema and the computer. There are quite a few French plays that deal with this space, but I wish to focus on five in particular: René de Obaldia’s *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras* (1966), *Sur le fil ou Ballade du train fantôme* (1974) by Fernando Arrabal, *Calamity Jane* (1991) by Jean-Noël Fenwick, Claude Duparfait’s *Idylle à Oklahoma : une offre d’emploi* (1998), and *Le Bonheur du vent* (2003) by Catherine Anne. All of these plays are set in America and the Far West plays some part in each of them, but more importantly the Far West is of primary importance in the virtual space of each of them. Despite the very different genres of these plays they all represent the American Far West as a sort of utopia, an empty space where dreams can be realized, and by placing it in the virtual space they heighten the sense of hyperreality as Umberto Eco presents it—where the borders between reality and fantasy become blurred.

It is important for me to clarify my definition of virtual space. This space is, in general, that which lies beyond the view of the spectators. It can be suggested by the décor—by the presence of a door or window, for example; we know there is something beyond the door, but it is not seen—the costuming, the gestures, the dialogue, or even the presence of certain characters.

In Racine's play, *Médée*, for example, the main character elicits a virtual space simply by her presence. The scene is set in Corinth, but Médée evokes by her presence her home country of Colchos, a dangerous and barbarous (according to classical tradition) land in the East. Anne Ubersfeld, in *Lire le théâtre II*, defines what she calls "l'espace virtuel du texte" as that which "désigne tout l'espace imaginaire construit à partir du texte, évoqué par lui, qu'il soit ou ne soit pas figuré sur la scène: le hors-scène en fait partie tout autant que le scénique . . ." (54). It is a space that is referred to through costume, décor, gesture, and spoken word. This definition is primarily applied to the written text, but the virtual space is present in the representation of the text as well, as it is that which lies beyond the view of the spectators. In his *Dictionnaire du théâtre*, Patrice Pavis defines the virtual space as:

. . . celui qui échappe au regard des spectateurs. Il existe seulement à travers l'évocation qui en est faite par la parole ou par le geste des personnages. Il est parfois signifié métonymiquement par un élément aperçu à travers une fenêtre ou par l'entrebâillement d'une porte, qui laisse supposer l'ailleurs entourant l'espace actuel (48).

It is an unseen space, a suggested space. It exists primarily in the imagination—the imagination of the actor, the director, the spectator, the author or even the character, though my focus will be on the virtual space as projected through the imagination of the characters. As I am primarily dealing with the texts and not with performances, the virtual space is thereby evoked mainly through discourse, though it may also be indicated in the stage directions. For example in Catherine Anne's play the character of Irène evokes the Wild West in her first conversation with Jane, "Les chercheurs d'or les Indiens les grands espaces les montagnes Rocheuses" (66). Here Irène longs to know more about things and places she knows exists, but has never seen. She

wishes to live vicariously through Jane's experiences in this foreign and exotic landscape, to see if reality matches her imagination of it. The space is thereby suggested through her discourse.

Moreover, in this example, the space that Irène is evoking lies far beyond the confines of her home. We know from mention of it that there is a beautiful rose garden outside the house, but her interests turn to the places beyond that. Both the garden and the Rocky Mountains exist in the virtual, evoked space, but there is still a difference between them. Michel Pruner, in his discussion of the virtual space, divides it into two categories: the near space, which is the space just beyond the scene set on stage—the room through the door, for example, or the garden just outside the window—and the far space, which is even further removed from what is seen. He states, “L'espace lointain renvoie lui aussi à un ailleurs. Mais celui-ci a une existence plus incertaine. Il peut se situer par exemple dans le passé des personnages . . . Il peut aussi prendre une valeur purement mythique ou onirique . . . On verra que cet espace invisible peut constituer une composante essentielle de l'action dramatique” (49). This aspect of the virtual space is not only the space beyond the spectators' view. While it may simply be a place that is located even further outside of what is seen, it often takes on psychic or temporal importance, and thus its existence becomes even more ambiguous.

It is on this part of the virtual space that I wish to focus, for it is here that the characters project their hopes and dreams—and sometimes nightmares. Not only is it an unseen space, but one that primarily exists in the imagination of the characters. Anne Ubersfeld in *Lire le théâtre I* discusses the scenic space—the space represented on stage—as a psychic space saying, “L'espace scénique peut aussi apparaître comme un vaste champ psychique où s'affrontent des forces qui sont les forces psychiques du moi” (126). While the conflict of the characters' mental state may often be portrayed on the stage, it can have its roots in the virtual space as well. The

characters often project their hopes and dreams into the space beyond the confines of what is visible to the spectators. In addition, it is in the psychic element of the virtual space that the importance of time is seen. The expectations the characters have for the virtual space is often influenced by their expectations for the future, although sometimes these expectations are closely tied with the character's memories of times past, as will be seen in Arrabal's play where Tharsis' memories of his beloved Madrid, Spain are tied to his hope for the future of his homeland, a hope that he discovers in Madrid, New Mexico.

The representation of a foreign land on the stage is not a recent aspect of French theater, nor is the projection of this land into the virtual space. Examples can be found throughout the centuries, especially in the seventeenth century, the golden age of French theater. Michèle Longino explains in her book on seventeenth-century theater:

Via the detour of the stage, and via the further staged detour through the 'Other,' French ethnographic information about far reaches of the Mediterranean world and French attitudes towards its populations was organized and disseminated. Articulating these relations in costume, plot, and language, 'Frenchness' took shape and imposed itself as the controlling norm (182-3).

It is by dramatizing a different culture that the French assimilate it and thus define themselves vis-à-vis this foreign culture. In the five plays selected for this study, there is a definition between "French" and "American" through the portrayal of the latter, but, even more, a sense of "European" versus "American." Of course, the exotic culture dealt with in the seventeenth century was different. The eyes of French playwrights were not turned westward a great deal, despite the exploration of the New World at that time, but rather eastward, toward the Ottoman Empire. Many of the most important playwrights, notably Racine, Corneille and Molière,

presented some vision of the Turk on the stage. However, it is important to note that the *space* of the Middle East is primarily evoked in tragedies and that it is of almost no importance in comedies.

The reason for this fascination of the Middle East in the seventeenth century was due in part to the friendship and rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and France. With the arrival of an embassy from the Grand Seigneur in 1670, there arose a wide-spread fad for all things Turkish. Molière, for example, had great success with his *Bourgeois gentilhomme* in October of that year. At the same time Mabre-Cramoisy published his translation of Rycaut's *The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*. However, Racine, when he presented his Turkish tragedy, *Bajazet*, in 1671 was originally criticized for inventing the story and using characters who were more French in their manners than Turks. Raymond Picard explains that Racine reacted by enumerating his many sources. He adds, "A défaut de documents imprimés, deux ambassadeurs à Constantinople sont tour à tour cités comme témoins" (170). The testimony of the two ambassadors was of particular importance as they would have had the most up-to-date first-hand information of the culture and customs of the Turks, especially since there would not have been much written documentation available to the general public. Due to this lack of written sources, much of what was known of the Levant came through hearsay. As Racine discovered, despite not knowing necessarily anything specific about the Turkish culture, most people had a specific idea of what it meant to be a Turk. In writing on the imagery of the *sérail*, Marie-Christine Pioffet notes, "L'ambivalence des Européens vis-à-vis de cette enceinte tient tout autant de l'hétérogénéité du lieu que de la polysémie du mot" (9). This term, for the French in the seventeenth century, meant both the sultan's palace and that part which housed the sultan's wives and concubines. The latter definition would have been a space unknown to the European

visitors, and therefore completely open to the imagination. As Picard states, “Cet exotisme anodin et de bonne compagnie permettait une sorte de revanche du rêve et libérait un goût de la fantaisie, de la cocasserie, de la folie, qui n’avait pas tellement d’occasions de se satisfaire par ailleurs” (168). The Orient provided a place for the seventeenth century French imagination to run free. It allowed readers and writers to indulge in their fantasies.

As for the New World, French dramatists started to represent it on the stage in the early eighteenth century with works like Voltaire’s *Alzire*, or Delisle’s *Arlequin sauvage* in which the authors present the “noble savage” of the Americas. This “noble savage” was one of the most common symbols of the New World during its colonization period: the Native American who lives in a pure state similar to that of Adam and Eve before the Fall and who is simply awaiting the arrival of the European who will share the Gospel with him. He lives in harmony with Nature and has an innocent simplicity about him. In the years just before the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin made a strong impression amongst the intelligentsia of Paris and the result was a dramatized American who was a defender of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as can be seen in Edmé Louis Billardon de Sauvigny’s tragedy, *Washington ou la Liberté du Nouveau-Monde* (1791). During the early part of the eighteenth century the American disappears from the French stage, but reappears in the latter half of that century. However, no longer is the American a “noble savage,” but a man of business. Maurice Baudin explains:

La censure impérial aidant, les Français sont redevenus nationalistes et traditionnistes. Ils se méfient de l’étranger républicain. Dans la poussée de démocratie de 1830 ils se tournent une fois encore vers l’Amérique C’est pour y voir avec M. de Tocqueville un peuple qui possède de grandes énergies, certes, mais qui fait de l’acquisition des richesses l’unique but de ses travaux (79).

It is from this point that the modern point of view of the American starts to emerge: a character obsessed with possessions and the acquisition of wealth. The character of the American is portrayed as ridiculous and vulgar in much of the theater of the late eighteenth century.

However, there seems to be a trend of plays in which the American who comes to France is not simply greedy, rude, and cold-hearted; he is backwards in his manners, perhaps, but he tries to be helpful and polite, such as in *Les Américains chez nous* written by M. Brioux in 1920. It is not until the 1950s-60s that the genre known as “the Western” appears and soon thereafter René de Obaldia adapts it for the French stage.

Of course the representation of the foreign cultures and landscapes in the virtual space in seventeenth- and twentieth-century theater is different. One of the foremost differences is the availability of information on the countries being staged. Playwrights such as Racine and Corneille relied on second-hand knowledge, derived from travel logs and letters, and never actually visited the Middle East themselves. Information was rather scarce and so the characters and spaces were created based upon people’s perception of the Middle East. Modern playwrights, on the other hand, are more likely to have visited America as well as having plenty of information at hand, Fernando Arrabal, for example, did visit Madrid, New Mexico, the setting for his play, but still much of their knowledge is also second-hand, derived from television series and films. René de Obaldia’s characters, for example, were expressly based on those from westerns of John Huston and John Ford.

Moreover, the virtual space plays a different role in the theater of the seventeenth century. While twentieth-century authors could set certain actions in the virtual space, their counterparts in the 1600s were required to set any violent actions in that space. Michel Pruner writes, “Les auteurs classiques . . . y [dans l’espace virtuel] situent la plupart des événements de

leurs pièces, pour respecter sans doute les bienséances, mais surtout afin de leur donner plus de vraisemblance. Toutes les actions importantes se passent dans les coulisses” (48). The rules of propriety, of bienséance, as observed by the playwrights of the seventeenth century, required them to keep the stage free of fighting. It is the reason why, for example, Osmin comes to announce the death of Bajazet in scene 11 of act five of Racine’s play, *Bajazet*. In René de Obaldia’s play, however, fighting, albeit one-sided as the characters are shooting at people off-stage, is seen, despite Obaldia’s adherence to the other classical rules.

The virtual space in neoclassical theater is a space of action, while the stage is reserved for discussion of what has happened. In the plays dealing with the Middle East, the result is stagnation as nothing happens. As Anne Ubersfeld, in *Lire le théâtre I*, notes, “. . . un grand nombre d’indicateurs temporels accompagné de peu d’action procure l’illusion d’une durée infinie: leur prolifération dans ce *Bajazet* où personne ne fait rien, donne le sentiment d’un temps arrêté” (163). Throughout the play the characters talk of their desires for the future, but nothing is done until it is too late. Likewise the usage of time in Corneille’s *Héraclius* builds on the sense of restraint. Here the hero is not as strictly enclosed physically, but he is confined by his identity. Léontine repeatedly encourages Héraclius to wait to declare himself, saying the time is not ready and that it is her right to bring him forth. Unlike in *Bajazet*, Héraclius’ identity is revealed at the appropriate moment and he is able to accept his rightful place as ruler. However, this declaration was done in the virtual space; Héraclius wanted to go into this space (the city) and declare himself in front of the people, but it was done for him at a time that he did not expect. Thus the virtual space can take on a temporal aspect as well, though in these cases the time is stalled, much to the frustration of the characters, until the very end. The virtual space, which normally is the space of action, when transferred to this foreign land is rendered inactive.

The foreign or exotic world is at one and the same time fascinating and repulsive because it portrays something new and exciting, yet sometimes showing us a vision of ourselves that we would rather not see. Jane Whatley explains, “The structures of the exotic world being incomprehensible to us, it is for our purposes structureless. The absence of apparent form can be exhilarating or terrifying; it is sometimes our daydreams and sometimes our anxieties that we project onto the exotic, for our own relief or illumination” (96). The lack of apparent structure in the foreign land allows us to reshape it to our own purposes, and in these plays the playwrights use the structurelessness of the space to create their image of America. The American Far West is especially susceptible to this as its physical vastness is difficult for Europeans to imagine. After all, France, the largest country in Europe, is about the size of Texas, the second largest state. It is a place of unlimited possibilities, even now waiting to be explored. The deserts of the West are a void, an expansive emptiness. Baudrillard states “La culture américaine est l’héritière des déserts. Ceux-ci ne sont pas une nature en contrepoint des villes, ils désignent le vide, la nudité radicale qui est à l’arrière-plan de tout établissement humain” (63). These deserts are more than vast spaces devoid of human life (in reality they abound in their own form of life); they represent the emptiness inherent in human society. The Far West not only represents a geographical emptiness, but a cultural one as well. Culture is created, but in America, being a particular mix of immigrants from around the world, culture is absorbed, borrowed from others and reformed into something similar, yet different. Many contemporary Europeans find this to be true when they visit the U.S. Umberto Eco, for example, in his book *Travels in Hyperreality*, writes about how the Americans often took famous European works of art or architecture and reproduced them. In speaking about wax museums in the U.S., he notes, “Here ‘reality’ is a movie, but another characteristic of the wax museum is that the notion of historical reality is

absolutely democratized: Marie Antoinette's boudoir is recreated with fastidious attention to detail, but Alice's encounter with the Mad Hatter is done just as carefully" (13-14). It is this lack of distinction between what is real and what is imaginary that Eco calls hyperreality. America tends to take elements of European culture to reproduce, making the reproductions more real than the originals.

Jean Baudrillard also describes America as hyperreality, saying, "L'Amérique n'est ni un rêve ni une réalité, c'est une hyperréalité. C'est une hyperréalité parce que c'est une utopie qui dès le début s'est vécu comme réalisée" (32). It is perceived to be a perfect place, a sort of utopia, because it exists between the real and the fantastic. It is ironic, because, of course, a utopia is unachievable, absolute perfection being impossible. And yet, millions of people believe that by coming to America life will become wonderful. This is the American Dream: the American Utopia. Michel Foucault, in his paper "Of Other Spaces," examines the idea of the utopia and divides the term into three different parts: the utopia, the heterotopia and the mirror. In regards to the latter he states,

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (24).

A mirror is reality in that it shows an object that truly exists; however, it is also nothing but a reflection and not the object, or person, in reality. America is that mirror for Europe, at once real and unreal; a virtual place. It is how many people experience America: via the television or cinema, the "reality" becoming no thicker than an image projected through celluloid, or becoming as a mirage in the desert. America is cinematographic and these French playwrights

choose to highlight this aspect because it plays a part of this mirroring effect and is used to define “Frenchness.” Where France uses the theater to define itself, a dialectic art form that has a long history of inciting thought and debate, America uses the cinema (and to a certain degree, television as well) to *portray* itself<sup>1</sup>. There is no interest in questioning identity, no argument; this *is* America. It is a perfect place, an achieved utopia, as Baudrillard calls it.

To the French, America is a structureless place. Not only is it physically vast, it is an empty space, a *désert*, to use the French term. This does not mean that it is a space devoid of life, but a space devoid of civilization. As will be seen in these plays, America is not just a country of great distances, vast parts of which are untouched by man, but it is also a country devoid of culture. Baudin, rather harshly, states that American civilization “est une médiocrité [sic] prospère. [Les Américains] n’ont pas l’amour, ils n’ont pas le sentiment, ils n’ont pas même le découragement. Ils sont la foule dont parle le poète, la cohue qui charge sans cesse, et qui rit . . . mais ne sourit plus” (90). This is, perhaps, the extreme, but America is viewed as a place where the pursuit of riches is more important than the richness of one’s life. This plays a part in the hyperreality of America, as mentioned above. America is acquisitive, but, as Eco noticed in the wax museums, does not discriminate as to the age, or even the reality, of the object acquired. As Europeans see it, there is no structure, only the drive for more.

In the theater this structurelessness is especially pertinent to the virtual space. It is evoked, it is suggested, but it is never seen by the spectator. It exists in essence, but not in actual fact. The very ambiguity of the virtual space makes it an even better setting for the virtuality of America, as can be seen in the five plays I have chosen for this study. Despite their different genres and styles, these works present the virtual space of the American Far West in a very

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to disregard the very important presence of the cinema in French culture. However, there is something very *theatrical* in the French culture as evidenced by their apparent love for dressing in costume.

similar manner. First, the virtual space—particularly that located beyond the space immediately outside of the boundaries defined by the stage directions—is located in the Far West and bears temporal and psychic meaning for the various characters. That is to say the virtual space is imagined by the characters and is connected with a specific time. Second, the idea of the Far West represents some sort of utopia, which is often found in the form of freedom, whether it be financial, social, emotional, etc. Third, since the virtual space exists primarily in the characters' imaginations, it is an undefined, structureless space. The characters place their hope and dreams in this space, yet often seem unclear as to what they desire and whether or not they will be able to attain their goals. This confusion is often seen in the contrast that arises between America and Europe.

The first play I will address is René de Obaldia's, *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras*, in which he presents this space in a farcical manner, exaggerating the stereotypes presented in the films of John Wayne: the traitorous Indian, the drunken doctor, the prostitute with the heart of gold, etc. Referring to Obaldia's drama, Gérard-Denis Farcy writes, "Or, au théâtre, Obaldia ne pouvait que «citer» le cinéma américain, et c'est précisément ce qu'il a fait avec une grande habileté qui n'exclut pas, loin de là, le clin d'œil" (41). Even though Obaldia's work, being a farce, takes these character types to an extreme, they are nonetheless recognizable as characters straight from the silver screen. For his characters the virtual space represents the achievement of financial or familial freedom. This is, however, the only play where there is not contrast between American and European values. Instead American greed and sexuality are exaggerated to the extreme.

My second play, Fernando Arrabal's *Sur le fil ou Ballade du train fantôme*, is a more serious than Obaldia's work, but with a satirical slant itself. Here Arrabal presents a small

mining town at its peak through the virtual space, thus making it temporal, and yet presents a social commentary on how the mining company treated its employees. Wichita, the old miner, lingers on his memories of Madrid, New Mexico in its heyday in order to escape the ghost town it has become and he longs for its return to glory, unable to see the exploitation he and the other miners underwent. Meanwhile the characters of Duke and Tharsis share their memories of Spain before the rise of Castro and their future hopes for their homeland. It is what the character, Tharsis, learns here in America what he believes will provide freedom from tyranny in Spain by the end of the play.

*Calamity Jane* by Jean-Noël Fenwick is the third work I am discussing. It is a historical play roughly based on the life and times of Martha Jane Cannary, and influenced by Jane's *Letters to Her Daughter*, although the authenticity of the document is questionable. Unlike the other plays which only refer to the space, Fenwick actually places the Far West on the stage. Throughout the play, Jane goes back and forth between what nineteenth-century society deemed to be the masculine place and the feminine place: longing for one, forced into the other, and belonging to neither. She is welcomed in the masculine space of the wilds of the Far West as long as she plays the role of a man. Once her femininity is discovered she is thrust back "where she belongs." However, she struggles in the role of a wife, mother, or even a respectable lady in town, finding the feminine boundaries of home and house too confining. In terms of the contrast between America and France, the masculine space is representative of America: a vast, empty, and untamed space that is unfit for the delicate nature of the woman. The feminine space represents the "civilized" world of the East Coast, which is itself a reflection of Europe in its culture and manners.

The fourth play is Claude Duparfait's *Idylle à Oklahoma*. It is in yet another style, being based upon Franz Kafka's novel, *Amerika*. In this play Duparfait presents a social commentary as the main characters attempt to find employment in a theater company based in Oklahoma and thus find freedom from an uncertain future. Karl, the main character, arrives looking for employment as an engineer in the Great Oklahoma Theater and being part of the "greatest spectacle on Earth." Duparfait plays heavily on the stereotype of the immigrant who has come in search of the American Dream. The Great Oklahoma Theater promises work to everyone who wants it. It is the biggest and the best. However, Karl seems unsure if this is exactly what he wants, especially given the disorganization of the Theater. He is torn between the glittering promises of the Far West, but also longs for the comfort of his old home in Europe.

Finally, Catherine Anne's *Le Bonheur du vent* is written in a poetic, dream-like style. This play is also based on the life of Calamity Jane but here the Far West represents both a dream and a nightmare that the characters either long to achieve or to escape. For some the emptiness of the West represents freedom from the expectations of society while for others, particularly the character of Helen, this emptiness represents chaos and disorder. It is in this play that the duality of America and Europe is played out in the relationship between Jane and Helen. Each one sees in the other her opposite, a lifestyle that neither desires for themselves, and yet, at the same time, the possibility of something that each longs for but can never have. In a similar way these two women represent the fascination/repulsion that exists between America and France (and by further extension, Europe.)

These plays are European representations of an American reality, an America that itself reflects its European counterpart. Yet the representation of the American Far West changes very little over the years. From Obaldia's work in 1965 to Anne's play in 2003, the space remains

more or less the same: empty, wild, a little dangerous, but nevertheless appealing and freeing. The various plays do bring in different elements in relationship to the Far West such as immigration, American business practices, or women's roles, but the space always holds the promise of freedom. However, as the space of the American Far West is virtual, this perhaps means that the promise is as well.

**Chapter 1: Absurdity and America: René de Obaldia's *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras***

*The Old West is not a certain place in a certain time; it's a state of mind. It's whatever you want it to be* –Tim Mix

America, land of dreams and legends, has long fascinated the European, and especially the French, imagination. This fascination started due to its standing as a new and unknown land. It belonged to the realm of fantasy. This dream continues today, though somewhat changed by the advancements made in media and technology, but becoming ever more familiar by the same means. Yet one image that remains unchanged since the nineteenth century is that of the wide open plains and prairies of the Far West, of wagon trains and fights between cowboys and Indians. It is geographically empty, with its wide open spaces and limitless horizons—to use the French term, a *désert*, void of human civilization. In the early nineteenth century anything west of the Appalachians would have been considered to be part of this emptiness. It is a structureless space, not structureless geographically in the sense that there are rivers, mountains, deserts, etc. to give it borders and boundaries, but in the sense of a virgin land, an unexplored territory, an adventure waiting to happen. It is a wilderness; wild not only physically but also in its lack of socio-cultural and moral structure, the Far West being known for its outlaws and loose living. Yet this emptiness is both frightening and enticing due to the lack of rules and regulations. Anything is possible, the nightmare as much as the fantasy. European intellectuals are often both repulsed and fascinated by America due to this lack of structure. Jean Baudrillard, for example, talks about the “unculture” of America and Umberto Eco writes about its “hyperreality.” Umberto Eco’s essay, “Travels in Hyperreality,” is about exploring (mainly) the American West and how major works of European art have been recreated to provide a more real experience—

the mania of making the copy more real than the reality—and then offered for all to see, or at least, all who can pay the entrance fee. In his article, Les Essif notes, “Instead of developing a sense of ‘culture as critique,’ America developed an ‘uncultivated’ form of cultural ‘hyperreality’ based very simply on fiction, the popular, mass-entertainment fiction of Hollywood, the advertising industry, and political propaganda” (146). Much of American culture is not meant to evoke speculation and debate, but to provide entertainment, hence the basis on the film industry. It is an art form for the masses, but one in which there is always a happy ending, the cavalry always arrives in time, and everything is black and white, good or bad.

It is, perhaps, fitting that both the seat of the film industry and the setting for one of the most typical stereotypes of America are found in the Far West. The structureless space that is so fascinating and repulsive to European thinkers, of whom the French tend to be the most vocal, provides the perfect setting for the cowboy stereotype. And yet, it is from the western film and television genres that this stereotype comes. The American Film Institute defines the western genre as “a genre of films set in the American West that embodies the spirit, the struggle and the demise of the new frontier.” These films are about the Great Expansion of the mid-to-late nineteenth century in which American settlers moved west, building new towns, searching for gold and clashing with the native tribes. The western is a major part of the American culture, found in novels, paintings, television programs, but is most especially known for its influence on cinema. Paul Bleton, in his article on the western in France, points out “En outre, aujourd’hui, le mot «western» en français renvoie spontanément au seul cinéma . . . Tout ceci évoque l’image simple et banale d’une émission culturelle concentrique, d’une diffusion centrifuge : l’inspiration western partant des États-Unis pour aller vers l’extérieur, du centre américain vers l’extérieur européen” (107-8). This is the image that has been exported to countries around the world, so it is

no wonder that many French artists have used it in their representations of America. One such example is the playwright, René de Obaldia whose American western, *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras*, was first staged in 1965. However, it is an absurdist play, drawing on stereotypes and exaggerations. The representations of the American Far West, particularly those drawn from the cinema, are parodied to their greatest extent for the plays farcical effect. Moreover, the non-realistic characters and setting pulled from the western film genre are then forced onto the stage, binding them and concentrating the stereotypes they represent to an even greater degree.

It is the story of the Rockefeller family, settlers in Kentucky, which constituted the western frontier of the early nineteenth century. John-Emery, the father, is a tough, leathery older man who is proud of his homestead and his role as head of the household. Caroline, the mother, is trying to raise her children to be respectable young adults in a rough and wild setting, and dabbles in fortune-telling from time to time. Their daughter, Paméla, is a wild beauty of seventeen who longs for an adventure of her own while her brother, Tom, is a lazy good-for-nothing who chafes under his father's rules. The play opens with the family about to sit down to dinner with their good friend, the drunken Dr. William Butler. After the family meal, during which the children argue with their parents and storm off, John-Emery convinces his wife to bring out her crystal ball. In it she sees the uprising of the red skins, led by Œil-de-Lynx, the Comache chieftain they all thought to be dead. Their noble native friend, Œil-de-Perdrix, arrives to confirm this news and to tell of the destruction of Pancho City and the cooperation between the infamous Calder band and Œil-de-Lynx. He volunteers to fetch the cavalry, after which the family is surprised by the arrival of Miriam, also known as "Petit-coup-sûr", the prostitute with a heart of gold and John-Emery's daughter by the prostitute Blanche-Neige. She is the sole survivor of Pancho City and comes just ahead of the wave of Indians who then besiege the ranch.

During a pause after a fierce battle in which Miriam is hit with a poisoned arrow while doing a strip-tease, yet another stranger appears: Carlos, a handsome, rugged man of 40 who announces the complete destruction of all the neighboring farms. Paméla is immediately attracted to this tall, dark stranger, but her father is more cautious as he fits the descriptions of the newest member of the Calder band. However, they are distracted by Miriam's worsening conditions and John-Emery presides over the marriage between her and Dr. Butler just moments before she dies. After another attack, Carlos volunteers to go and fetch the cavalry, as they begin to doubt that Œil-de-Perdrix was successful in his attempts. After he leaves, the family is once again surprised by the sudden arrival of Œil-de-Perdrix, who is then revealed to be none other than their enemy Œil-de-Lynx. He gives the family an ultimatum: either Paméla agrees to marry him, or he will kill them all in the most painful way possible. John-Emery refuses to let Paméla debase herself in such a way, but she insists on sacrificing herself. Just as Œil-de-Lynx is about to rape her, Carlos appears in the doorway and kills him. He has successfully brought the cavalry who are routing the Indian hordes. Tom, who everyone thought was dead, walks in and explains how he was really the one to have killed Calder and not Carlos. He also reveals his desire to become a sheriff, upon which Carlos hands over his sheriff badge to Tom and asks Paméla to marry him. Miriam also walks in, the poison only having been a heavy narcotic and, to crown all the happy endings, Tom takes his mother's crystal ball and discovers oil wells beneath their cabin. The curtain closes with Carlos and Paméla in a breathless embrace while John-Emery, Caroline and Tom count the thousands and hundreds of thousands of oil wells.

### **Defining a Structureless Space**

Although Obaldia uses a setting that seemingly has no structure, his play adheres to the very strict structure of neoclassical theater. The unities of time, place and action are all

rigorously observed. Even the language becomes neoclassical, when Miriam pronounces her monologue in the first act in which she describes the attack on Pancho City in classical verse: “O terreur inconnue, O remuantes Alpes ! / Horloges dans la nuit dont le tic-tac vous scalpe, / Un calme délirant et qui tombait des cieux / Voulait me faire croire à l’absence des Dieux !” (46). She could just as easily be a Phèdre or Andromaque extolling her tale of woe. Anthony Pleasance writes, “In fact, [the play] is scarcely about America at all—simply a western parody in the style of Queneau or Audiberti, with the poetic prose of a Giraudoux” (35). In fact, it is the combination of the space of the American Far West with the constraints of the stage which provides a certain underlying tension to the play. We know, because Obaldia plays on all the genre stereotypes, that the characters will face some great danger, but that they will overcome and the cavalry will always arrive in time. However, the space the characters normally inhabit adapts with some difficulty to the space of a theater. Obaldia, himself, explains that his characters are confined by the restrictions of the stage:

. . . manifestement, ils supportent mal d’être prisonniers de quelques mètres carrés. Les chevauchées dans la pampa, l’incendie des ranchs, le combat sans merci entre Mormons et Mohicans, l’attaque de la diligence, les chevaux engloutis avec leurs cavaliers dans les tourbillons du Rio Grande, tout cela s’avère difficile à huis clos (9).

The space represented in this play evokes a certain grandeur, a vast emptiness which allows for all the action and adventure of a Wild West show. This expanse is easily represented in the cinema, but adapts with more difficulty to the confines of the stage. Paul Vernois adds, “Le western est privé de ses éléments constitutifs, l’espace, le mouvement, la puissance séductrice des images au profit d’une « intériorisation » des faits, au niveau d’une demeure transformée en fortin, et d’une verbalisation du drame par le moyen bien connu du récit” (391). The main

building blocks of the Western as a genre have been relocated in order to set it on a stage. The space, the emptiness that defines the American Far West, has been reallocated to the virtual space; the structureless space put into the imaginary space. The very stereotypes that these characters represent are more at ease in the great plains of the American West. Baudrillard writes:

[Les Américains] n'ont certes pas de grâce aristocratique, mais ils ont l'aisance de l'espace, de ceux qui ont toujours eu de l'espace, et ceci leur tient lieu de manières et de quartiers de noblesse. . . Nous sommes une culture de la promiscuité, qui donne des manières et de l'affectation, eux ont une culture démocratique de l'espace. Nous sommes libres en esprit, mais eux sont libres de leurs gestes (92).

Americans are used to wide-open spaces, unlike their European counterparts. They are at home in this space, which is, most importantly, an *empty* space. The sheer size of America is often hard for Europeans to comprehend; after all, they are not accustomed to a country being the size of a continent. This is seen in how the characters talk about the various places beyond the homestead with which they are familiar.

The Rockefellers are based in Kentucky, but Obaldia seems to pay little attention to the actual locations of where John-Emery has had to fight off Indian attacks. He says to Caroline, “Souviens-toi quand on était dans l’Idaho, au moment de la messe, à Santa-Croce. Les Ouitotos qui nous tombent sur le rab, juste à l’élévation. . . Et à Gettysburg, quand je m’étais foutu une perruque, par prévision. . .” (43). Of course, it is not unimaginable that a family might travel from Pennsylvania to Idaho and back east to Kentucky, but the characters continue to refer to a wide variety of places in America, without regard to the distance between these places. In addition, what is here presented is a contrast between a fictional place, Santa-Croce, Idaho, and a

historical place, Gettysburg. However, they both have certain overtones, especially when combined of western adventures. Santa-Croce evokes Santa Cruz which, along with Idaho, bring forth images of the Far West, while Gettysburg evokes the famous Civil War battle and, by extension, American battles in general. Another example comes when Carlos, upon his entry, announces the complete destruction of the geysers at Yellowstone. Again, John-Emery mixes up places when he tells Œil-de-Perdrix what will happen once he kills his arch-enemy, Œil-de-Lynx, “Toi tuer Œil-de-Lynx. Toi, devenir super Chef, super Mac... Régner sur Lac Salé, Ohio, Grande Ourse, Texas, Jupiter, Santa-Fé...” (42). He mixes up different places—cities, states, geographical locations, even reaching out to the heavens with Jupiter and the constellation of the Great Bear or Big Dipper. The physical location is unimportant, just the fact that these are places that evoke vast spaces. This is, of course, part of Obaldia’s exaggeration and absurdity. Santa Fe, Texas, Ohio and the Salt Lake all fall under the European image of the American Far West: empty and wild places, virtual spaces that are both real and imaginary. They are real in the fact that they exist; they can be visited or located on a map. They are imaginary in that Europeans usually experience them through the media, especially through television and the movies. The inclusion of Jupiter and the Great Bear add an even greater touch of virtuality to this list. They can be observed, but only ever visited in the realm of the imagination. The emptiness and wildness of the American Far West is thus contrasted with the absolute void of space.

The temporal location is also unimportant; place and history are mixed. The play takes place at the beginning of the nineteenth century, yet Gettysburg (and, by extension, the Civil War battle fought there) and Yellowstone are evoked although both are events from the second half of the nineteenth century, the battle taking place in 1863 and Yellowstone being created in 1872. However, historical accuracy is unnecessary, what is the most important is the image that these

dates evoke. The blatant inaccuracies only serve to heighten the absurdity of this play, which attempts to take all the stereotypes represented in the cinema and places them on the stage. Paul Vernois comments on this temporal effect, “Dans la pièce d’Obaldia, ce qui est imité n’est pas telle histoire de Far-West, mais la technique de l’histoire du Far-West appelée à fonctionner dans le cadre inadéquat d’une pièce classique” (390). The important thing represented in this play is not its historical or cultural accuracy, rather the presentation of this history and culture of the Far West from a cinematographic basis in a theatrical manner. In other words, historical accuracy is unimportant; the imitation of the western film genre is. What is being represented on the stage is America as it is seen via the silver screen. What is made real through the magic of movies is non-realistic in the theater, for Obaldia here condenses the grandeur of America. Vernois later adds, “L’avenir s’approche du présent selon un mouvement de zoom. . . Le passé y surgit aussi, soit que John Emery se revoie dans les salons du lupanar de Pancho-City, soit que le docteur revive sa mésaventure de praticien . . .” (392) Past, present and future become confused in this play. Characters such as John-Emery, Dr. Butler and Carlos get lost in their memories of the past while Tom and Paméla look to the future. As for Caroline, she actually sees the both the past and the future taking shape in her crystal ball. In addition, everyone—actors and spectators alike—knows how the play will end; even as the curtain rises on Act one. John-Emery, in particular, has a unique connection with time; throughout the play his age changes, according to the stage directions. Upon hearing the bagpipes announcing the arrival of Colonel Wallace and the cavalry he becomes twenty years younger, only to become much older than he is the next moment, upon hearing of the death of his son. This change of age seems to be common with him, for he says, “A trois ans, j’étais couvert de rides. La tragique expérience du monde pesait déjà sur mes petites épaules” (19). He claims that the roughness of life has aged and toughened him, and yet it is the

aspect of danger and adventure that makes him young again. He tells his wife that despite the fact that he is no longer twenty he is more than able to fight like he used to. Baudrillard finds the lack of temporal structure common in the United States. For him, the country is constantly in the present moment, in modernity, if not already looking towards the future. He states:

L'Amérique exorcise la question de l'origine, elle ne cultive pas d'origine ou d'authenticité mythique, elle n'a pas de passé ni de vérité fondatrice. Pour n'avoir pas connu d'accumulation primitive du temps, elle vit dans une actualité perpétuelle. Pour n'avoir pas connu d'accumulation lente et séculaire du principe de vérité, elle vit dans la simulation perpétuelle, dans l'actualité perpétuelle des signes (76).

The question of identity, of origin, for Baudrillard, does not exist in America. America does not have the weight or structure of history that is in the background of much European thought, but has quickly become, nevertheless, one of the most important world powers. In America there are so many nationalities that the question of origin, of a beginning, is negated<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps this is why John-Emery's age is indistinct because past and future are mixed in the present.

Even the characters recognize the structureless aspect of this space. Paméla calls the area, "Un coin perdu. Un désert. Un trou que le Diable n'en voudrait même pas pour enterrer sa grand-mère" (20-1). It is a vast, empty space that is seemingly useless—a God-forsaken place. Yet, at the same time, this emptiness evokes possibilities—the possibility of creating something from nothing, of bettering one's situation. In America there is the idea of the self-made man: someone who works hard to better himself. However, John-Emery takes it one step further. When told that he needs to leave his ranch to flee from the coming Indian attack, he exclaims, "Quand j'suis venu ici, y'avait pas de terre, y'avait que du vent. J'ai tout fait de mes mains, Œil-de-Perdrix,

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the Native American population is ignored. However, they have been regulated to reservations much in the same way that European art or history has been regulated to museums.

tout fait : ma femme, mes enfants, mon pain, mon enfer. Tout ! Quitter mon ranch ? Non. Autant quitter ma peau” (40). He is not just a self-made man; he lives on a self-made land where he was, supposedly, the creator of everything. There was nothing before his arrival—just the wind in the wilderness. Now there is his ranch, a little piece of civilization that is threatened by the encroaching wildness that exists beyond its borders. From the structurelessness of the wind, which wanders where it will, John-Emery has “created” his land; he has claimed it, named it, and given it boundaries. There is irony in what he says of it, of course, because he does not refer to his ranch as his piece of heaven or claim it as his castle. No, it is his hell, but, no matter what happens, it is *his* and he intends to keep it. It is the settler (almost always of European descent) who brings structure to the wilderness and makes something from the unstructured emptiness. This is a difficult and dangerous job; the American West is known for its rough terrain, but also for its lack of moral structure. John-Emery firmly tells Paméla, “C’est p’t’être pas marrant, vu que la région est infestée d’un drôle de gibier : des gangsters, des soudards, des Peaux-Rouges, des individus comme ton frère. C’est p’t’être pas marrant, j’dis pas, mais c’est honorable” (20). John-Emery admits that they are threatened on every side, but it is their home and they are proud to be there. They are the ones who have made it what it is, both in a moral sense (it is a place of civilization) and a physical, structured sense.

Due to the lack of structure, both physical and temporal, the virtual space—the space beyond the confines of the Kentucky homestead—represents a space of desire, of possibilities, especially the “espace lointain” where the virtual space is further distanced by time. Here, the virtual space is no longer necessarily located in the Far West, as certain characters project their dreams into yet another realm which is, nonetheless, American. Most of all, it is an imagined space, an idealized space that is held up in contrast to the restrictiveness and structure of the

pioneer home. The space beyond the confines of the family home holds untold pleasures and possibilities for the future in the eyes of the youngest members as well as representing memories both good and bad for the older members of the play. Just as the characters in general find the restraints of the stage difficult, being cinematographic stereotypes forced into the confines of the theater, so Tom and Paméla find the constraints of their parents' household, as any stereotypical child does. The virtual space offers freedom from the imposed rules, a space where anything is possible once attained. It is a place where "one of these days" dreams will come true. Tom brags:

T'en fais pas, m'man; un jour, tu verras: plutôt que de moisir ici comme un pouilleux, j'aurai un ranch à moi, avec des milliers de têtes de bétail. . . Je gagnerai tellement d'argent que je ne ferai plus rien. . . J'ouvrirai une maison de jeux, j'achèterai des mines de cuivre, des plantations d'ananas, et j'aurai une grande maison dans le Sud, remplie de pin-up de toutes les couleurs (16-17).

His desires are purely material. He wants to be rich, but does not seem to have a specific plan to achieve that goal. Yet he represents millions of people who have come to America to make their fortune, to find their fifteen minutes of fame. Tom longs for material freedom—and especially a place where he will no longer have to submit to the demands of his overbearing father—on a gross scale. It is not simply a matter of no longer being financially dependent on his father; he wants excessive wealth: to have copper mines, pineapple plantations, and an enormous cattle ranch. He is also presented as a sexual pervert who tries to rape his sister on a regular basis.

When Paméla recounts his latest attempt her father states, "Encore ! Ça devient une manie" (14). His parents' reaction is not one of surprise, as one would expect in a more realistic play; in fact John-Emery congratulates himself for Paméla's beauty and Caroline says that it is only natural in a boy of his age. Moreover, his plans for his material wealth include his sexual pleasure. He

intends on having a huge mansion full of pin-up models of every shape and color. All this is contradicted at the end of the play when he declares his desire to become a sheriff and his interest in justice. It is he who saves the day by altering the Colonel Wallace and the cavalry of the attack. He recounts his bravery, “Comme j’ai su que la bande à Calder, elle rôdait dans le coin, Tom que j’me suis dit, t’as là une occasion de te distinguer que tu r’trouveras peut-être pas de sitôt” (111). Here Obaldia summons up the image of a man: from a boy who wants to get rich quick so that he does not have to do anything to a young man looking to redeem himself in the eyes of his family and society despite the warning that Carlos gives him about the heavy duty of Justice. However, his desire to become a sheriff does not completely negate his desire for material wealth. Tom is the one who first “discovers” the oil wells in his mother’s crystal ball, signaling riches beyond even his original hopes.

Paméla, for her part, looks to the virtual space beyond the confines of her home with a longing for freedom as well, though her desire echoes the voice of the women’s liberation movement. Much like her brother, she chafes under parental rule and waits for the day when she and all young women can make their own decisions. On the verge of a breakdown during an argument over her ability to go out on her own, she declares to her parents:

Vous allez contre l’évolution de l’espèce, l’émancipation de la femme, le droit à disposer de soi-même, la résurrection des corps. . . Dans cent ans on rigolera de vous. Peut-être même avant. Moi, je suis née trop tôt, je sens bien que je suis née trop tôt. Mes idées elles galopent, elles sont en avance sur mon temps. . . (22-3).

She wants to live as an independent young woman, free to do what she wants, as she wants, where she wants. To a certain degree she evokes Calamity Jane who, as we will see in later plays, struggled against the societal image of a woman’s place. Paméla certainly does not wish to

be constrained by the four walls of a cabin in the middle of nowhere. She wants to go to Pancho City, “[m]anger des glaces à la vanilla, avec les copines, ou aux framboises. Danser avec...avec le Pasteur” (21). She is allured by the big city and its many entertainments, but is rather naïve in her images of the city. For her it is the opposite of the empty wilderness where she lives. There is life and action in the city that she does not find at home. Paméla lives in a dream defined by comic books and colored with makeup. She believes that once she leaves the family homestead things must be more comfortable, for where she lives is very rough and dangerous. She complains to her father and mother in act one:

L'eau à six cents mètres. On en revient les pieds en sang, avec des épines dans la plante qui vous réveillent la nuit. Des rapides où on ne peut même pas se baigner. Des précipices remplis de têtes de morts qui bouillonnent. Une forêt où je ne peux même pas aller me promener toute seule, parler aux oiseaux-chats ! (21).

Her expectation for the virtual space is almost Disney-like, where the heroine can wander through the forest and talk to the birds, the wilderness tamed. Or she can go to the city, which seems to be for her much like an amusement park, and walk around eating ice creams and having fun with her friends. She is the idealist of the play, believing the virtual space to be the fulfillment of her dreams and aspirations. Her prince charming and her happily-ever-after will someday come.

Paméla's view of the virtual space is definitely not that of the nineteenth century American Far West. She is not interested in the emptiness of the prairies as Calamity Jane was, but rather in the fun and excitement of the city. One could, perhaps, compare her view of the city with that great western city, Los Angeles, home of dreams, the land of the cinema. In his discussion of the rise of the motion picture business on Los Angelino architecture, Kunstler

notes, “Here was an industry devoted to the production of fantasy . . . Soon, [the set builder’s] creations spilled beyond the movie lots and onto the streets in a fantasy aesthetic wilder than any of the hodgepodge architecture the Victorian era produced” (209). One can imagine that Paméla’s vision of the city, inspired by romance novels and comic books, might resemble this description of L.A. Her virtual space is, perhaps, the most modern of all the characters. For Tom as well, the Far West of the cowboy is not what he dreams of, but rather the wealthy Southern plantations of the time. However, for some of the other characters, the virtual, imagined, space does not hold as rosy an aspect as it does for Tom and Paméla. The Far West represents a dangerous space where many of the other characters have suffered. Both William Butler and Miriam are often lost in their memories of the tragedies that occurred during their lives. Butler is often drunk in order to forget what he had done in another time and another place. He explains to Caroline, “Si je ne buvais pas, ma petite dame, je mourrais noyé sous un flot de larmes : toutes les larmes de mon corps” (24). Not content with the success of his business, Butler tried to create a new medicine that then decimated the entire country. He now lives overcome by his guilt, although it is rather vague if his guilt is due to the loss of life or due to his loss of wealth, though the latter is, perhaps, the more probable. He is the embodiment of the drunken doctor from the Hollywood movies: a failed Easterner (European?), who comes west in an attempt to escape his failure. Likewise, the position of the prostitute with a heart of gold comes directly from the cinema. This character has also come west, often fleeing some past event, but has fallen upon difficult times. Otherwise, as in Miriam’s case, she is born into her situation. However, Miriam feels very guilty of her position in the virtual space, that is, the social environment of Pancho City. She is a prostitute and is very conscious of her place in society. She cries, “Dieu... Dieu et moi on n’est pas du même côté . . . C’que j’sais, c’est que j’suis une fille de mauvaise vie...

J’pourrai jamais m’marier à l’église, même dans le civil !... Personne ne voudra de moi... j’suis qu’un instrument... Aucun homme honorable ne demandera ma main” (75). She is marginalized by society; she is an object to be used and then discarded. The virtual space represents a space of violence for her, due to both the use of her body for others’ pleasure as well as the violence she witnessed in the destruction of Pancho-City. The latter was so great that it causes her to burst into neoclassical verse, painting a scene of death and fire worthy of Racine. After she has been poisoned by an Indian arrow, she confuses the actual—the cabin and its surroundings—and the virtual—namely, Pancho City—spaces in her delirium. Miriam mistakes Dr. Butler for one of her clients at the Roxy, a Herr Jacob Schmidt<sup>3</sup>. All four of these characters, Tom, Paméla, Dr. Butler and Miriam, look for escape from their present situations. The first two seek to escape the space represented on the stage by fleeing into a space that is completely imaginary, that exists beyond the exterior or “virtual” space outside of the stage confines. The latter two, however, have entered these confines from that virtual space, fleeing their situations in that space, and come to find comfort in the cabin—from a bottle, in Dr. Butler’s case, or within one another’s arms.

As for Carlos, he is torn between his desire for a better world and his memories of the life he had lost. During the night vigil in act two he says to Paméla, “On fait des pas droit devant soi, à la manière d’un aveugle, mû par une idée fixe, et voilà que la lumière éclate dans les ténèbres et que l’on s’arrête tout à coup, que l’on retient son souffle, de peur de marcher sur son ombre...” (82). He is so wrapped up in his misery that he is afraid, when something good

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<sup>3</sup> Martha O’Nan, in her article “Names in René de Obaldia’s *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras*,” claims that Butler actually posed as Herr Jacob Schmidt when visiting the Roxy. Speaking of the one German phrase that Butler utters, “Vergessen Sie mich nicht” (23), she writes, “This is the only expression he utters in German—probably the only one he knows and probably said to Miriam in its same formal form when he poses as Herr Jacob Schmidt. (At least, she never forgets him, or more accurately, she never forgets the riches he promises her)” (120). This may be possible, but there seems to be little evidence to support this claim.

happens, that all will go wrong. He lives in a world of vengeance following the death of his wife and son, as he explains to Paméla when she questions him on his background, fearing that he might be the fifth member of Calder's band. In this, he is very similar to Oeil-de-Lynx, whose wife was killed by white men and who also seeks revenge. However, Carlos also represents the Law in this lawless land, a Don Quixote of the West, running everywhere after the bad guys. He attempts to bring structure to a structureless space. He warns Tom as he passes on his position of sheriff:

C'est toujours difficile de donner des conseils, mais tu le verras toi-même, Tom, cette étoile [de shérif] est lourde, et très encombrante à certains moments... Il y a la Loi, mais il y a quelque chose de plus fort que la Loi, qui est en chacun de nous, une autre étoile qu'on ne voit pas, et on est toujours à courir après (113).

Carlos is seeking for something greater, though he know not what, in the virtual space, the space beyond the boundaries of the Rockefellers' cabin, but also in that further space, the realm of the imagination. Perhaps it is morality, perhaps justice, this thing greater than the Law which is within each of us. For him this space, which is both somewhere "out there" and within, represents pain and misery, but there is also hope. All this time Carlos has been seeking revenge and by the end of the play he has discovered something else: a new life, a chance for something better.

### **European Morality Reflected in American Reality**

The lack of moral structure, of social confines in the American Far West, as has been stated, both attracts and repels European intellectuals. This is due to the mirror-like aspect of America, which reflects, but distorts, its European heritage. The American West represents not just the physical emptiness of the prairies and deserts, but also an emptiness of the spirit and the

mind. Not only are the vast empty spaces difficult to police, but the wilderness is often associated with lawlessness in comparison to the civilization of the cities, even in the European literary tradition. It is a place of outlaws and bandits, where immorality reigns. The contemporary Canadian poet, Jean-Paul Daoust recites certain statistics in regard to the violence in twentieth-century America, “L’AMÉRIQUE sa violence / un meurtre y est commis toutes les vingt-trois minutes / un viol toutes les six minutes / des voies de fait toutes les quarante-huit secondes / un crime toutes les deux secondes / la violence déjà désuète de ces chiffres” (20). The violence in America is as vast as its plains and prairies, empty of the social values found in Europe. The wildness of the space is echoed in the wildness of the society, and many Europeans see it as a hypocritical society, for morals are preached but rarely followed. This is also found in the perception of American religion; God is presented as the primary focus of one’s life, but just as often an observer is likely to find the dollar in that focus. Religion plays a major role in the American lifestyle, but this faith is often seen as shallow and fickle. Shallow also is the American approach to intellectualism. Since Tocqueville, Europeans have been perplexed at the limited interest in argument, debate and intellectual thought in such a limitless country. Tocqueville himself writes,

Echapper à l’esprit de système, au joug des habitudes, aux maximes de famille, aux opinions de classe, et, jusqu’à un certain point, aux préjugés de nation ; ne prendre la tradition que comme un renseignement, et les faits présents que comme une étude pour faire autrement et mieux ; chercher par soi-même et en soi seul la raison des choses, tendre au résultat sans se laisser enchaîner au moyen, et viser au fond à travers la forme : tels sont les principaux traits qui caractérisent ce que j’appellerai la méthode philosophique des Américains (v. 2, 13)

He finds that in America the individual is responsible for his own philosophical debate; that everyone searches within themselves for the reasoning instead of debating with others. Yet there is still an egalitarianism that is found in American thought; to a certain extent all Americans have the habit of thinking in the same way of morality and religion as well as their stance on intellectualism. These three topics—moral hypocrisy, religious hypocrisy, and anti-intellectualism—have long been at the root of the attraction/repulsion of Europeans towards America. Obaldia's characters demonstrate all these topics in their relation with the virtual space.

The actual space of the cabin confines represents a place of strict moral and social rules while virtual space represents a place where rules and moral codes are more malleable. The space represented on the stage, the common room of a cabin somewhere in the Kentucky wilderness, is, especially for the elder members of the Rockefeller family, a safe place, civilization in comparison to the wildness outside, a place beyond whose boundaries one dares not wander. Caroline recalls one instance when Paméla went wandering in the forest. “Souviens-toi, Paméla, la fois où tu es partie avec ta robe neuve, ta combinaison neuve, tes souliers neufs, et que tu es revenue seulement couverte d’une feuille de sassafras, des marques sur tout le corps” (21). The implication is, of course that she should have stayed quietly at home like any well-behaved young woman would have and not have lost her new clothing. Paméla, in this instance, has gone from being a civilized lady to a wild savage, from being a proper, well-dressed European to being like one of the naked Native Americans.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There is also the possible implication of a return to Eden, for Adam and Eve were naked but not ashamed. Likewise Paméla is not ashamed of her nakedness, rather, she exults in the situation, exclaiming that that is actually living. Moreover, the New World represented a sort of Eden for the first English settlers. James Howard Kunstler, explaining the Pilgrims' comparison of the New World to the Biblical wilderness, writes, “The Puritan pilgrims who came to the wild coast of North America must have wondered, from one moment to the next, whether they had landed in the Garden of Eden or on Monster Island . . . The wilderness of Hebrew folklore had been the abode of evil presided over by the arch-demon Azazel. Yet the wilderness was also a place where the Hebrew prophets went to commune with God, to be tested by him, and purify themselves” (17).

Caroline wonders where Paméla could have gotten her ideas, because in her time young women never acted like that. She recounts, “De mon temps, une jeune fille de condition devait tenir ses yeux baissés jusqu’au mariage. Et après, elle était bien encore forcée de les baisser, vu tous les mêmes qui cavalaient dans ses jambes” (23). Caroline extols herself as the ideal of American Puritanism: the strict adherence to the proper behavior for a woman. However this adherence becomes ridiculous in its extremes. Her idea of a woman’s place is vastly different from her daughter’s and she finds her ideas to be immoral and improper, but the situations in which she criticizes Paméla are completely contrary to her preoccupations. The apparent lack of moral structure in her children, and especially in Paméla, confuses her. Caroline expects her to behave properly, as befits a young woman; she wants her to be “[u]ne jeune fille convenable” (22). Even when they are sending her out to find Tom before the battle begins, Caroline warns her to watch where she puts her feet. Despite the gravity of the situation, proprieties must be observed.

However, their past actions betray their expectations for their children, Paméla in particular. She innocently wants to experience things in the city as her friends have, but her father looks upon it in a different light. John-Emery proclaims, “Là où il y a plus de douze maisons ensemble, c’est un bordel ; ça s’appelle pas autrement.” (22). For him, the big city is not the proper place for a young woman as it is, in his eyes, a corrupt place, no better than a brothel. He does not want to see his little girl in a whorehouse, at least, not yet. However, he himself has spent a considerable amount of time in houses of ill-repute, as Miriam turns out to be the proof. He has no qualms of announcing the fact that he has had a whole lot of children, but only certain ones with his wife, yet is embarrassed to admit to his wife that Miriam is quite likely his child by the prostitute Blanche-Neige. Caroline, for her part, is praised as the faithful wife, but when

things seem to be at their darkest and the family's death is certain, she also confesses to an extra-marital affair with a friend of her husband's who supplied drugs such as cocaine, opium and marijuana, yet another of Obaldia's outrageous depictions of American indulgence. They are also critical of Paméla's capitulation in the face of Oeil-de-Lynx's threats. John-Emery asks, "Tu vas pas nous déshonorer, Paméla ! Tu vas pas nous faire montrer du doigt par les voisins ?" Caroline adds, "Tu vas tout de même pas te jeter à la tête du premier venu, Paméla !" (102). Paméla is trying to save their lives and they criticize her for it and the result is outrageously absurd. John-Emery's point of view is, perhaps, understandable. He does not want Paméla to debase herself and become the slave to this Red Skin. However, one can argue—and Paméla does make the argument—that there is a certain honor and nobility in sacrificing oneself for the lives of others, but John-Emery's and Caroline's preoccupations seem to be less on the sacrifice and more on the social response towards Paméla's "taking up" with an Indian. What will the neighbors think? Ironically, of course, the neighbors are supposedly all dead, but, nevertheless, social niceties must be observed. Caroline, for her part, believes that her daughter is so ready to throw herself into the arms of a man that anyone will do.

This play is also full of religious hypocrisy. America is often criticized for its blind faith in religious institutions, its fanaticism and its proclamation of religious conservatism despite how people actually live.<sup>5</sup> The actual space is not only used for social purposes, but it is also the seat of their religious and supernatural experiences. John-Emery's opening speech is giving thanks for the evening meal, "Alors, Seigneur, jette un œil miséricordieux sur nos humbles personnes; donne-nous ta bénédiction. Fais-nous plumer nos ennemis et triompher de nos amis. Protège le

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<sup>5</sup> The hyper-religious attitude of Americans is a common stereotype and found in many plays on America, such as Marcel Aymé's *La mouche bleue*, in which the company represented even keeps a pastor on retainer to help boost the employees' moral declaring, "Aimez votre travail qui vous vient de Dieu et de la meilleure société des États-Unis" (24).

bétail, les faibles d'esprit, et recta, moi, John-Emery Rockefeller, colon dans le Kentucky, je ne penserai pas trop de mal de toi. Voilà. Amen.” (12). The prayer is ridiculous, a parody of grace, and John-Emery keeps interrupting himself to reprimand his children, Paméla for resting her bosom on the table and Tom for playing with his gun. Then, after dinner, John-Emery suggests having a séance to pass the time. In Act two the space is again used for religious purposes in the marriage of Dr. Butler and Miriam. Once again, John-Emery, in his role of head of the household, takes on the mantle of religious leader and declares the two husband and wife, and then later leads the family in singing a hymn when faced with the threats of Œil-de-Lynx. The irony of John-Emery as the religious leader for the household comes at the end when he admits the beginning of his belief in God to his wife saying, “Ouais, ma petite vieille; figure-toi que j’commence à croire à son existence” (117). Yet again Obaldia parodies the American stereotype of the puritanical, religious household to an extreme that renders it empty of all realism, but in such a way that it becomes comical. The moral and religious structure of the Rockefeller household is merely a façade where the characters parrot the ideas that they believe to be proper for their standing as a family without ever really asking themselves what they believe or why. Throughout the play he leads the family in worship and yet does not necessarily believe in what he is worshipping. Even though he may not believe, he takes his role as head of the household very seriously, and this includes playing the part of the religious leader. He does not stop to think about whether or not there is any hypocrisy in this, it is the part he has to play.

The religious hypocrisy also falls under the broader criticism of America's anti-intellectual stance. Many European critics find America to be devoid of intellectual structure. Baudrillard states, “. . . l'Amérique entière est pour nous un désert. La culture y est sauvage : elle y fait le sacrifice de l'intellect et de toute esthétique, par transcription littérale dans le réel” (97).

As America is devoid of physical structure, so is it devoid of intellectual structure. In comparison with the esthetics of European culture, the culture of the New World is wild and untamed. The pursuit of a higher degree and intellectual thought is of a lesser importance, generally put into second place after the pursuit of wealth according to Alexis de Tocqueville. He observes, “Je ne pense pas qu’il y ait de pays dans le monde où, proportion gardée avec la population, il se trouve aussi peu d’ignorants et moins de savants qu’en Amérique” (53). He is surprised to find so many educated people who, nevertheless, seemingly have no interest in pursuing higher studies. He finds that due to the hardship of life there, many people are required to take up a trade instead of pursuing their education, but once they have the time to take up their studies, there is little interest. René de Obaldia demonstrates this ignorance in his play. For example, John-Emery is constantly attempting to use Latin phrases which come out terribly wrong. He uses expressions such as “Post-Ternum...” (41), “giron illico presto” (50), “«pacem in terris»” (67). He attempts to sound educated, but the effect is the exact opposite. He is an uneducated oaf and this is reinforced nearly every time he opens his mouth. Through the stage directions we learn that Paméla reads, but her preference is for love stories in comic book form. In fact, the only character with any obvious education is Dr. Butler, but his position as an “intellectual” is completely destroyed by his dependence on alcohol, and his fall as such came through his own greed. His roll, then, of the “intellectual” is made void and ridiculous. All the characters show a disinterest in their education except where it may help with the acquisition of wealth. Where their European counterparts would debate and analyze the situation, Obaldia’s characters act based on their feelings and instincts. European intellectuals are used to analysis and reflection, to debate and contradictions. Americans, however, expect everything to be black and white.

America is what it is because everyone believes it to be so. Too much reflection would reveal the flaws in the system.

Moreover, the basis for this play reflects the lack of intellectual discourse: the cinema. The vast majority of Hollywood films are created to be crowd-pleasers, not too thought provoking or ambiguous. It is an art form for the masses, and one that often represents America. Baudrillard states:

En fait, le cinéma n'est pas là où on pense, et surtout pas dans les studios qu'on visite en foule, succursales de Disneyland—Universal Studios, Paramount, etc. si on considère que tout l'Occident s'hypostasie dans l'Amérique, l'Amérique dans la Californie, et celle-ci dans MGM et Disneyland, alors c'est ici le microcosme de l'Occident. . . Où est le cinéma ? Il est partout dehors, partout dans la ville, film et scénario incessants et merveilleux (56).

The West—not just the American Far West, but the whole western world, including France—is found in the movie lots of California. It is condensed into the painted sets piled in the back lot of a movie studio. Baudrillard asks where then is the cinema? It is everywhere: in the streets, in the town, in everyone's life. America is cinematographic, an art form for the masses, and though there is an intellectual form, it is less well-known. It is an image on celluloid that is then projected for the world to see.

### **America as Cinema, Cinema as a Mirror**

If America is cinematographic, then France is theatrical. The French have long come to an understanding of other cultures by dramatizing them. By representing another culture on the stage, the French define themselves in what they are or are not in relation to the other. To a certain degree, America does the same, although they use the cinema to proclaim who they are.

Daoust writes, “les cow-boys sont des fantômes / pour faire bander / les vieux pays / voyeurs / que la nuit américaine filme” (47). The cowboy, and, by extension, the Far West, is the image America presents to Europe. It is a cinematographic image, for the cinema is able to capture in a unique way the defining vastness of the space. The cinema also heightens the sense of possibilities; effects can be done on film that cannot be done on a stage. Moreover, this image is much like a mirage, a projection of the light, gone in the blink of an eye.

René de Obaldia uses the cinema for a specific purpose. He states, “Ai-je besoin de vous présenter les personnages de cette pièce? Je crois qu’ils vous sont aussi familiers que ceux de la Commedia dell’arte . . . Je n’ai eu qu’à les prier de descendre des écrans de cinéma et, les poussant aux épaules, de les amener sur scène...” (“Bouteille,” 9). He has chosen to use the western film genre because it is such a well-known representation of America. The audience has certain expectations from this genre—the characters are supposed to act in a certain way; certain things are supposed to happen; the cavalry always arrives in time. He openly admits that this play is the product of American Westerns. It is an imitation, not of the reality of the nineteenth-century American West, but of the early-to-mid-twentieth century cinematographic representation of this space. All the characters are based on stereotypes taken from the cinema: the drunken doctor, the prostitute with a heart of gold, the gruff, leathery patriarch, etc. Carlos is specifically described as “sorti spécialement d’un film de John Ford” and Paméla confuses him with John Wayne and Gary Cooper. Gérard-Denis Farcy, in his *Encyclobaldia*, states, “Ce faisant elle [Paméla] illustre à sa façon une attitude caractéristique de la mythologie américaine qui prend son bien n’importe où, que ce soit dans la chronique du passé ou bien dans le septième art” (41). The mythology portrayed in this play—that of the cowboy—is just as likely to come

from historical documentation as it is from films. The distinction between history and cinema is indistinct; here cinema becomes history and history becomes cinema.

## **Conclusion**

By putting the cinema on the stage, Obaldia attempts to condense and define the vast structureless space that is the American Far West, a wild untamed space that entices the imagination of spectator and character alike. He writes, “A vous de sentir, derrière la porte, la pampa tout entière, houleuse de bisons, de deviner dans les coulisses des milliers de Peaux-Rouges montés sur leurs coursiers, prêts à fondre au moindre signe ; à vous d’entendre le vent dans les branches de sassafras” (“Bouteille,” 9). His characters, stereotypes from the Western film genre, hyperbolize many of the American characteristics that baffle Europeans in their attitudes towards the virtual space, that space just beyond the stage boundaries. It is the representation of their sufferings and desires, a place of freedom, but also sometimes a place of suffering. Where the mimetic space is confining physically, morally, spiritually and mentally, the virtual space offers freedom of movement, a place where great wealth can be achieved without great effort or thought, but also where there is greater danger and where morality is often reduced to a hollow shell. But America is too big for the mimetic space; it is too big even for the virtual space. Just as John-Emery enumerates the places over which Oeil-de-Perdrix will rule after the defeat of his enemy, a list that goes from American cities into the cosmos, so does the representation of America leave the confines of the cabin to transcend time and space. The imagination is let free to run wild. The America that Obaldia presents is one of gross exaggeration, of hyperbole, much in the same way as Jean-Paul Daoust describes it: “Biggest Finest Wonderful / le pays du superlatif” (25). Everything is bigger in America and the

immensity is difficult for Europeans to comprehend. The French attempt to stage it, but, as Obaldia reveals, the structurelessness of the Far West surpasses the structure of the stage.

## Chapter 2: The Line Between Europe and America: Fernando Arrabal's *Sur le fil ou La*

### *Ballade du train fantôme*

*Every country gets the circus it deserves. Spain gets bullfights. Italy gets the Catholic Church. America gets Hollywood –Erica Jong*

At the end of the nineteenth century the coal mining in the Ortiz Mountains in New Mexico was significant enough to warrant the construction of a rail line and by 1899 all coal production was centered in Madrid, New Mexico. The small town, consisting mainly of mine employees, thrived through the first few decades of the twentieth century. One of the major attractions to Madrid was the Christmas Light Display, which began in the early 1920's. The history page of the Madrid visitors' web site describes this display: “. . . Madrid miners lit up the winter sky with 150,000 Christmas lights powered by 500,000 kilowatt hours of electricity. The power was provided by the company's own coal fed generators. The displays were the product of both Madrid and Northern New Mexico artisans and laborers” (par. 3). However, the Christmas display ended with World War Two. The mines then closed in the 1950's and Madrid soon became a ghost town. Nowadays Madrid has come back to life as a tourist destination, profiting from its status as a ghost town of the Old West.

In 1974 Fernando Arrabal visited this abandoned town and later that year produced his play *Sur le fil, ou la ballade du train fantôme* at the Avignon Festival. Ardelle Striker mentions that “[i]t was his third visit to the United States, but the first to provide him with an image which he could integrate into his own creative activity” (217). *Sur le fil*, like many of his other plays, calls for liberation from an oppressive regime and echoes his own autobiographical incidents. However, it is one of the few to have an actual setting, that of a ghost town in New Mexico.

Tharsis is a Spaniard in his forties who has come to the ghost town of Madrid, New Mexico with the Duc de Gaza, who is a young man of twenty years. The play opens with the two

men near the mouth of one of the mines, the mummified bodies of dead horses around them, and Tharsis trying to talk to the Duc's father on a portable radio-phone. They are trying to extort money from the Duc's father through a pretended kidnapping. Tharsis is a dancer and a juggler, an artist who has gone into exile from his home town of Madrid, Spain. He and the Duc believe that they are the only ones in the ghost town surrounded by slag heaps. However, they are surprised by the arrival of Wichita, the last inhabitant of Madrid, New Mexico and a former tight-rope walker, as well as by the sounds of a train passing beneath their feet. He tells them a little about the history of his beloved city, reminiscing especially on the Christmas display. He also attempts to demonstrate his prowess by walking the tightrope, but fails multiple times. Tharsis manages to convince Wichita to teach him how to walk the tightrope in the hope that one day he might set Madrid, Spain free by walking the tightrope. The Duc de Gaza gets tired of Tharsis' lamentations on the state of Spain, and insists that Tharsis try contacting his father again. While he does so, Wichita exits to feed his beloved crows and vultures, but comes back with a can of dog food he discovered by the side of the railroad tracks. They overhear on the radio the fact that they have been discovered. The Duc's father has condemned them to death, and the President of the United States has agreed to help. Before Tharsis and the Duc flee, Wichita endows Tharsis with his book containing the secrets to the art of the high wire. He then strips and, before the others can stop him, throws himself into the depths of the mine. The Duc looks into the mineshaft through a pair of binoculars, but refuses to share what he sees with Tharsis. Just before they leave, they notice the crows and vultures setting up the giant crèche from Madrid's glorious past in homage to Wichita.

The setting of the final scene is fluid; Tharsis and the Duc are still in Madrid, but it is uncertain whether it is still Madrid, New Mexico or Madrid, Spain. Tharsis is going to attempt to

walk the tightrope.<sup>6</sup> Before he begins, he asks the Duc what he had seen in the depths of the mine of Madrid. The Duc explains that the train that they had heard was gathering the bodies of the miners and the horses in order to turn them into dog food. When Wichita threw himself into the shaft, he fell directly into one of the wagons. As Tharsis begins his walk, a helicopter attempts to shoot him down, but he is protected by the crows that arrive to attack his enemies. The helicopter may be a part of Franco's forces, but they may have also been sent by the president of the United States. He crosses to cheers of "Liberty!" and his success is greeted with a final "Halleluiah" as the play ends.

Needless to say, Arrabal plays with the names of the two towns, paralleling Madrid, Spain with Madrid, New Mexico. The setting as seen by the spectators is one of filth, darkness and death. The stage directions read, "L'action se déroule près d'une des entrées de la mine. Désolation. Au loin les terrils semblent plus sales que jamais. A terre, des chevaux morts. C'est la nuit" (7). This dismal, dirty setting is constantly compared to the virtual Madrids—both the Madrid of Wichita's memory, but also with Tharsis' memory of his hometown as well as his hopes for its future. Both time and place are played with in the presentation on Madrid. However, despite the glowing memory Wichita has of his beloved mining town, the virtual presentation of America echoes the physical representation: gloomy and depressing. America, as represented by Madrid in its heyday, may seem like a fantastic, magical place, but behind the glitter of the lights, the grim reality shows itself to be deadly. The miners put their whole lives into the mines only to die from asphyxiation and to be cast aside when no longer useful. The consumerist aspect of America is revealed at its worst. Yet the play is not entirely without a semblance of hope; it is in the New World that the Old World finds its chance for freedom.

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<sup>6</sup> The stage directions at the beginning of the play specifically require the actor playing Tharsis to be a tightrope walker.

Tharsis learns how to walk the tightrope from Wichita and will perhaps go on to reawaken Madrid, Spain from its stupor under a tyrannical government.

Arrabal is often labeled as an absurdist playwright, but he is also known for his own genre: Panic Theater. Franck Evrard defines this genre:

« Panique » peut être interprété comme une référence au « théâtre de la cruauté » prôné par Artaud mais aussi, au regard de l'étymologie, au dieu Pan et à la profusion dionysiaque. Proche du psychodrame et du happening (« ce qui advient »), le théâtre baroque et provocateur d'Arrabal s'efforce d'inventer au présent des moments de confusion au cours desquels les tabous sexuels . . . religieux . . . [et] politiques . . . sont transgressés (83).

*Sur le fil*, while lacking in physical Dionysian profusion evoked in Wichita's reminiscing, does transgress sexual and political taboos. The artist's relationship with the wire has sexual overtones; Wichita kisses the wire several times during the play, stroking it and telling it that he loves it.<sup>7</sup> There is also an aspect of voyeurism in the relationship between the artist and the audience. The audience watches the artist perform; when the performance is on the stage or the screen, the audience is often seated in the dark, increasing the separation, watching the performer in his movements. Although she is writing about film, Laura Mulvey offers an explanation to the voyeuristic aspects of the spectator towards the performer: the pleasure the spectator takes from the act of looking. She notes, "Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world" (135). In cinema, of course, the sensation of looking in on a private world is

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<sup>7</sup> Wichita's relationship with the mine was also sexual in nature. He admits that at times he forgot that he was lying deep in a mine, surrounded by rock and coal, but, instead, that he was lying on a woman who held him close. He says, "Mon sexe s'emboîtait entre deux roches et je me sentais dans le ventre d'une vierge très blanche qui me murmurait : « Ne t'en vas pas, ne te retire pas : je veux avoir un enfant de toi »" (30).

different from that of the theater. It is a “safer” form of voyeurism for the characters are completely separated from the spectator; in the theater the actors look back. Nevertheless, the spectator, whether of a film or a play, looks on a world that is outside of their own, one that is created for their imagination. This increases the virtual aspect of the performance. The audience watches the artist do something they cannot or will not do and they take pleasure from the act. Wichita explains this relationship to Tharsis towards the end of the play: “Le costume a beaucoup d’importance: les collants souligneront la forme de votre membre et de votre derrière pour que, lorsque vos fesses se fermeront pendant l’exercice les spectateurs s’imaginent qu’elles tiennent leur âme dans leur étau. Le collant dessinera votre musculature et durs et lisses apparaîtront en relief vos couilles et votre sexe” (42). He continually reminds Tharsis how important it is for the spectators to see the artist’s testicles and penis; that seeing him will arouse them. There is an element of voyeurism in any theatrical production, but Arrabal makes it overtly sexual. He also breaks the political taboos by criticizing the tyrannical government in this play.<sup>8</sup> Tharsis calls Madrid, Spain a ghost town because so many of its artists have fled, which is what happened under Franco’s rule. While Franco is never mentioned, given the context of the play and the tyrannical government in Spain, it is hard to not associate the political regime against which the characters are fighting with that of Franco, especially when one takes into account Arrabal’s history. The resulting violence is similar to what Antonin Artaud presents in his Theater of Cruelty. Artaud explains how this theater must work:

Le théâtre ne pourra redevenir lui-même, c’est-à-dire constituer un moyen d’illusion vraie, qu’en fournissant au spectateur des précipités véridiques de rêves, où son goût du crime, ses obsessions érotiques, sa sauvagerie, ses chimères, son sens utopique de la vie

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Podol, in an interview with Arrabal states, “Arrabal asseverated several times that with two or three exceptions, his works are not political” (“Interview,” 63). One wonders if he considers *Sur le fil* to be one of these exceptions.

et des choses, son cannibalisme même, se débondent, sur un plan non pas supposé et illusoire, mais intérieur (141).

In *Sur le fil* Arrabal attempts to awaken the desire for liberty in his audience through the dreams of Wichita and Tharsis, through their eroticism and their artistry<sup>9</sup>. In a broader application of Artaud, the American Far West often fills these dreams of violence, eroticism and utopia. It is the symbol of the American Dream, where one has the space to create one's ideal. Yet is also a violent place, a wild and savage place.

Space often plays a key role in the production of Arrabal's plays, for his work often calls for an expansion of the conventional space of the stage. One of the most famous examples took place at the Dijon Theater Festival in 1966. Claude Schumacher describes the setting of *Le Cimetière des voitures*, "The space (18m x 12m x 5m) was transformed into a chaotic 'car cemetery' with broken up cars hanging from the ceiling at various angles and different heights. The action unfolded at all levels, inside, on top and beneath the cars and all around the spectators" (133). His use of space is symbolic, usually highlighting the confinement in which the characters find themselves and from which they seek freedom. The setting for *Sur le fil* is, perhaps, not quite as complex, but the requirements for the physical action of the play also break beyond the conventional space of the theatrical stage with Tharsis walking the tightrope above the audience at the end of the play. However, in this particular play, the physical space has a connection to the virtual through the connection between the American and Spanish Madrids. As Peter Podol explains:

The depths of the abandoned mine in Madrid, New Mexico—which come to represent both political and social oppression—constitute one end of that [vertical] axis . . .

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<sup>9</sup> There is even a note of eroticism/cannibalism in Tharsis's description of his relationship with Ludith, his fiancée. He sucks on her elbow or her knee before moving on to nibbling her arms and her buttocks until she started tasting of death.

Tharsis' daring, uplifting and ultimately triumphant feat occurs high above the heads of the spectators at the other extreme of Arrabal's vertical axis. The vertical dialect is paralleled by a telling horizontal juxtaposition—the equation of Spain's capital with a ghost town (139).

The actual space that is represented on the stage, that of an abandoned American coal-mining town, acts as a focal point for the opposing vertical and horizontal axes. These axes are the resulting juxtaposition of two spaces. The vertical axis exists in the actual space of America, even though both ends may not be physically represented on the stage. One end is in the depths of the mine and is evoked through discussion and the sound of the train passing through, while the other end is seen, although it takes place above the heads of the audience. This vertical axis offers a physical correlation to the dreams of both Tharsis and Wichita—the ability of the artist to lift the common man from the depths of his existence to the heights of artistic freedom. The horizontal axis is completely unseen, virtual, both in time and space with one end being in the glory days of Madrid, New Mexico and the other in the hope for the future of Madrid, Spain. It is found within the virtual space because it only exists in the imagination: Wichita's memories of his beloved town and Tharsis' dream for his home<sup>10</sup>.

### **America the Consumer**

It is generally accepted that America is a consumerist society, driven by the supply and demand of the market. As contemporary Canadian poet, Jean-Paul Daoust observes, it is a place “où d'année en année L'AMÉRIQUE magazine / it's a big shopping center up there / if you don't buy you'll die / le syndrome de la consommation” (51). The American economy is based on this push to consume, on marketing and advertising, the so-called need to “keep up with the

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that Tharsis, according to the NASA planetary glossary, is “In the Bible, a land at the western extremity of the known world. Thought to be a region in modern-day Spain.” It is also the name given to a volcanic ridge on Mars.

Joneses.” This consumerism has changed the space in America. The push to buy more has resulted in more and bigger stores. James Kunstler points out that once commerce took place in elegant buildings built with an eye to the future. Nowadays the eye is bombarded by expanses of asphalt, billboards and cheap buildings. Kunstler observes, “This is precisely the outcome in ten thousand highway strips across the land: boulevards so horrible that every trace of human aspiration seems to have been expelled, except the impetus to sell. It has made commerce itself appear to be obscene” (121). Gone, for the most part, are the family-run shops; nowadays the small business owner struggles to compete with the vast shopping centers and big-box stores that offer convenience and variety, but sacrifice individual service. At the time Arrabal visited the United States there was no longer any pride in the beauty of a city’s shopping area; the small, individual shops were starting to be replaced by strip malls that rarely take aesthetics into account. In this way business emptied itself of the human factor. In the context of the American Far West, over the years the vast spaces have provided even more room for shopping centers and freeways. The empty spaces available, especially in the west, allowed Americans to spread out and yet, as they did so, they emptied the downtown areas of many cities, the inhabitants preferring to live in the suburbs. The chain stores and shopping malls have followed their customer base, driving out the vast majority of small, privately-owned shops. While there has been a reverse trend in recent years, these shopping centers create wastelands of pavement for parking and the consumerist drive has created a void of humanity in the American business spirit, as will be more closely seen in chapter four.

In this play, the presentation of America is not a flattering one. Wichita is blinded by his memories of Madrid in its glory, but the grim fact remains that the miners drove themselves to their death in dedication to the company. At one point in the play Wichita shows Tharsis and the

Duc a collection of X-ray negatives. He explains, “Ce sont des radios... Celles de mes frères, de mes amis, de mon père . . . Ils sont morts à la mine ou de la mine . . . Ce sont des poumons . . . pleins de fumée. . . C’est la silicose” (26). His brothers, his friends, and even his father died because of the mine, often from the coal dust clogging their lungs. He explains that his father went to work in the mine at the age of 13 and worked there until he could no longer move due to the silicosis he developed. Nor were the men the only things that were used to their extremes in the mines. The characters are surrounded by the mummified corpses of horses that once worked in the depths of the mines as well. Wichita explains their presence to Tharsis and the Duc saying that “. . . on nous les amenait de Courcerault, près de Mortagne au Perche en France. . . Dès leur arrivée on les descendait à la mine et au travail, pour tirer nuit et jour des wagonnets bourrés de charbon . . . au bout de trois mois ils devenaient aveugles” (27). The horses, like the men, were driven to work, no matter the cost, even at the cost of lives. They were put in the mine where they then spent the rest of their lives. What mattered the most was the coal extraction, as much and as fast as possible.

However, the miners were proud of their work, and even pushed themselves harder in order to extract more and more coal. To a certain extent the men have made themselves as blind as the horses in their devotion to this establishment which results only in death. In an account that invokes Émile Zola’s *Germinal*, Wichita informs his audience:

Mon père, avait été mineur, et le père de mon père, et mes frères, et les frères de mes frères, et moi aussi ; nous travaillions tous, heureux, à la mine, à treize ans. Quelle fierté de pouvoir descendre au plus profond ! Combien sont morts embrasés par le grisou, transformés en un instant en un brasier avec des jambes. Mais la foi que nous avons en notre ville et notre mine, était indestructible. Nous luttons pour battre le record d’un

million de tonnes de charbon. Nous descendions à cinq heures du matin, une heure avant l'horaire fixé, et nous ne remontions que treize heures plus tard noirs de la tête aux pieds mais heureux d'avoir contribué au record. Et les chevaux aveugles tombaient comme des mouches tant le rythme était exténuant (29).

The miners willingly descended into the mines earlier than needed in order to beat the records. They were proud of their work and did not feel that they were being exploited by the coal-mining company. Of their own free will they drove the horses and themselves to death for the company, their lives becoming a commodity, part of the forces driving the price of coal.

The importance of the market over well-being is, however, a heavily-entrenched stereotype of American culture, one which is not without its foundations in fact. Baudrillard, in his book, *Simulacres et simulations*, talks specifically about the rise in advertising and how it has taken over all aspects of our lives. Publicity is no longer simply selling a product, but a social experience as well. He writes, “On va donc pouvoir faire de la publicité pour le travail, la joie de trouver un travail, comme on va pouvoir faire de la publicité pour le social” (136). Every aspect of life becomes a commodity. Daoust biting comments, “tout est à vendre en AMÉRIQUE / tout est à louer / des bungalows aux utérus” (30). There is nothing in America that is not available for sale, including life and death and this single-minded focus on business empties America of its humanity. One would think that there would be little use for the mummified corpses of the horses and the miners in the play, but the phantom train, which the Duc sees through the binoculars, comes and gathers the bodies of the dead. He reveals this to Tharsis at the very end of the play, just before the latter begins his walk on the tightrope, “Une usine de pâtée pour chiens vient récupérer les cadavres des mineurs morts au fond et les chevaux aussi pour faire des conserves” (60). Not only were the miners exploited during their lifetimes, but

now they are also subject to the caprices of the market even in death. They have been dehumanized; deprived of a proper burial and left as refuse, they have become nothing more than commodities. The mining company has come in, exploited the New Mexican wilderness, emptied the land of its resources and abandoned the remains, leaving an empty shell of a town.

However, America is not the only place where people are worked to death due to greed. The Duc's father is a very powerful man and he does not seem to care how many people die in order for him to have what he wants. The Duc of Gaza explains, "Mon père a les mains couvertes de sang. Ses châteaux de Salamanque ont été rebâtis par les prisonniers politiques qui tombaient comme des mouches, toute sa fortune il l'a reconstituée à force de crimes" (46). Much like the mining company which worked the miners and the horses so hard they fell like flies his father drove the political prisoners to their graves in the interest of his fortune and comfort. The Duc was brought up in a very wealthy and comfortable home, but in a country where the wealthy were privileged and the poor downtrodden. While even in America today wealth and politics are closely linked, the distinction between the mining company and people like the Duc's father is one of motivation. The mining company oppressed and exploited its workers in the name of consumerism and business, while the Spanish aristocrats oppressed the common people for political gain. Nonetheless, both Madrids become places of oppression, though one is ultra-consumerist and the other ultra-fascist; Madrid, New Mexico and Madrid, Spain mirroring one another.

### **Madrid Reflecting Madrid**

Arrabal, of course, took full advantage of the name of this ghost town deep within New Mexico. In fact, it might seem to be too convenient a coincidence to be true. As Striker notes, "Unless closely acquainted with the Southwestern United States, spectators of *On the Tightrope*

might assume that the details of Madrid, New Mexico, were primarily the creation of Arrabal's fertile imagination, enriched perhaps by elements from Western films and images drawn from previous trips to America" (220). Despite seeming to be the setting of a movie, Madrid, New Mexico does exist and plays an interesting counterpoint to Arrabal's hometown in Spain. Throughout the play the characters mix up the two places, most particularly Wichita, who does not seem to realize where his visitors are really from. Not only has he never seen Madrid, Spain, but he seems never to have heard of it. This constant confusion adds to the imaginary status of the space. Wichita is the one who generally takes offence to the sometimes less than flattering comments the Duc and Tharsis make about their home. In fact, the contrast between the American ghost town and the European capital is closely linked with time. Madrid, Spain as it was twenty years ago, in 1954, when Tharsis (and Arrabal) left it is comparable to Madrid, New Mexico in the "present" of the play, that is to say, devoid of life. According to the Duc, the Spanish Madrid has continued in the same state as Tharsis left it. In Spain's case, its position in the characters' eyes as a ghost town is due to its absence of artists who fled Madrid during Franco's regime. The American Madrid, as Wichita remembers and glorifies it in its heyday, is similar to the future Madrid Tharsis and the Duc hope for in Spain. Their hope reflects the confused memories of an old man living in an abandoned mining town, thus highlighting how virtual their hope is. Many of Arrabal's characters live in an illusion, often to their detriment. Tharsis is no different. He has created an image of what he hopes to achieve some day in Spain, yet he takes very little account of the danger he is currently in. Much of the play is devoted to his memories, as well as Wichita's, which causes the space to become even more virtual. The focus is on this other space. In her discussion of Janusz Glowacki's play, *Hunting Cockroaches*, Una Chaudhuri states, "America, that is, is utterly derealized. Like the Moscow of Chekhov's

characters, its existence as an actual place is covered over and ignored in favor of its role in the opposition between one's own painful reality and 'somewhere else'" (200). This is true of Arrabal's play, as well, since the characters pay little attention to their actual surroundings and choose instead to dwell on their memories, good or bad, of times gone by or on their hopes for the future. To a certain degree, through this play of time and space, the virtual space of the imagination or memory is far more important to the characters than the actual space they are in.

The Madrid of Wichita's past was, in his opinion, a wonderful place. When he first encounters Tharsis and the Duc de Gaza he criticizes them for speaking ill of Madrid, unaware that they are talking of their own city, unaware, even, that there was even another place by the same name. Trembling, Wichita remembers, "Madrid était la plus extraordinaire, la plus belle, la plus captivante ville du monde, c'était une cité pour princes mineurs, pour marquis des scories, pour chevaliers du charbon. Oui... en elle était enclose toute la misère du monde mais aussi toute la grandeur, les meilleurs sont morts dans ses mines... par milliers..." (16). Here Wichita evokes the element of the American dream in which everyone can succeed. The men of Madrid may have been simply miners, covered in coal dust, but they took pride in what they did and felt themselves to be nobility of the mine. Much like Cinderella, they seemed to represent the world's misery, but they were actually princes beneath the ashes and soot. Their Christmas display, in particular, was known world-wide according to Wichita. He mentions, "Staline, le Pape, Churchill, le Roi de l'Atlantide et François I<sup>er</sup> avaient espéré de ne pas rater le spectacle au moins une fois dans leur vie" (20). Everyone wanted to see the lights of the Christmas display with its giant crèche and parades,<sup>11</sup> yet he falls into extreme exaggeration in regards to the dignitaries who were interested in this small town. Arrabal also draws on many of the stereotypes

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<sup>11</sup> The Madrid Christmas Display ended with the beginning of World War II but has been revived by the new community. According to the *Visit Madrid* website, December 4, 2010 marked the opening of the twenty-eighth annual Christmas Open House and festivities include carolers, a light display, Santa and a Christmas parade.

of America when Wichita describes the Christmas parade. He says, “Et, dans la chevauchée des rois figurait au premier rang l’Indien Josué Hébron, leader du championnat de home-runs de la Ligue du Pacifique . . . Et, derrière lui, les reines de beauté avec leurs maillots de bain verts fluorescents et leurs chaussures à talons très hauts, le maire. . . les premières communautés et les boy-scouts avec leurs torches de trois livres” (19). Baseball players, beauty queens and boy scouts populate the memories of Wichita. All are symbols of the American way of life and are entrenched in the mindset of Americans. Americans are successful, beautiful and helpful; how can they not be admired? Wichita’s memory of Madrid in its glory is the ideal that Tharsis aspires to. He longs for a Madrid that is free of tyranny, where the artist can express himself in complete liberty.

This is in direct contrast to the present status of both the American and Spanish Madrids. In New Mexico, Madrid has been reduced to a ghost town populated by carrion birds and mummified corpses. The Duc de Gaza explains to Wichita, “Je ne parle pas de votre Madrid, de ce Madrid où nous sommes, je vous parle d’un Madrid rance et pourri planté au cœur de l’Espagne comme un chancre dans la chair d’un lépreux” (16). While the Madrid represented on the stage, that of the American West, is nothing more than an abandoned slag heap, the other Madrid is no better. While the Duc has left Spain in order to extort money from his father, he still supports Tharsis in his opinion of their home town, which is languishing under Franco’s rule. He is less poetic in his description—after all he is not an artist lamenting the loss of his art—he nonetheless realizes that Spain is also suffering. Wichita, who has confused the two cities and thinks that the Duc is criticizing his town, is seems unable to see the suffering before him. He continues attempting his routine, waiting patiently to die like his compatriots. Yet both in the visible world of the actual Madrid and in the invisible, imaginary, virtual Madrid there is a

sense of rottenness. There is physical rottenness in the presence of the mummified corpses strewn around the stage, but also a mental rottenness in the descriptions of the destruction of intellectual freedom.

This doubling of Madrid provides a mirror in which America reflects Europe. In *Simulacres et simulation*, Baudrillard states:

De toutes les prothèses qui jalonnent l'histoire du corps, le double est sans doute la plus ancienne. Mais le double n'est justement pas une prothèse : c'est une figure imaginaire qui, telles l'âme, l'ombre, l'image dans le miroir, hante le sujet comme son autre, qui fait qu'il est à la fois lui-même et ne se ressemble jamais non plus, qui le hante comme une mort subtile et toujours conjurée (143).

Madrid, New Mexico does not replace Madrid, Spain, but is a reflection of it. It is and is not like its European counterpart. Tharsis, in particular, finds many similarities between the two towns. He says, "Madrid...mon Madrid, est plus abandonné et plus désert que Madrid Nouveau-Mexique" (13). It is important to remember that Madrid, New Mexico is a ghost town—a particular image from the American Far West and one that is especially paired with emptiness. It is empty in a different way from how the plains or prairies are empty. The Great Plains abound in life; even the western deserts contain their own special ecosystem. Some of the world's most fertile soil is found in this part of America. The west is home also to a vast variety of wildlife. They have been called wastelands, but this space has never been truly devoid of life. However, a ghost town is associated primarily with abandonment, the town left for nature to reclaim, but it also bears the connotation of death. People have come and used what resources were there before moving on, leaving the empty shell of the town. In this play many miners and horses gave their

lives for the mining company which cast aside the remains of the town when the mines themselves died. It is a place of abandoned dreams.

Madrid, New Mexico was abandoned by the mining company once the coal supply ran out. This was not an uncommon occurrence, as small, abandoned towns dot the west, left for nature to reclaim. However, it is not completely abandoned; Wichita still holds on, a ghost wandering around, lost in its memories, not realizing that the world has gone on without it. He shows the Duc and Tharsis a postcard he found in a gas station calling Madrid a ghost town. He exclaims, “Une ville fantôme, c’est dire que moi qui vis ici je ne suis qu’un spectre !” (20). The sole survivor of Madrid, New Mexico is nothing more than a shadow; the artist turned phantom. He, however, resents the denomination “ghost town” not only because he still resides in Madrid, but it is also populated by the crows and vultures. It is not a town without life; in fact, it is burgeoning with life, the irony, of course, being that the inhabitants of this ghost town are themselves representatives of death: carrion fowl that feast upon the corpses of those left behind.

Mirrored within this American ghost town is the paralleled town of Madrid, Spain. Tharsis finds it also to be full of ghosts, explaining, “C’est aussi une ville fantôme dont il ne me parvient que des échos de chaînes et de mort” (20). For him, the virtual space of Madrid, Spain—this place that exists primarily in his memories—is just as empty and dead as the town where he finds himself. While his Madrid was not completely abandoned in the same way as Wichita’s, the people who remained are nothing better than ghosts, a people living under oppression without fighting against it. It was the artists who left; those who, like Tharsis, inspired the people with their work. Tharsis nostalgically recounts to his companions, “Ceux qui ne pouvaient pas peindre partirent et couvrirent la terre de tableaux, ceux qui ne pouvaient écrire s’en furent et leurs brouillons devinrent des poèmes et ceux qui ne pouvaient ni vivre ni travailler sautèrent

aussi par-dessus la frontière dans l'espoir de trouver la dignité, leur gloire" (15). Madrid, Spain has become a city without art, and therefore without life. The artists who fled Franco's regime emptied the Spanish capitol of its thinkers, artisans, and visionaries. Those who were unable to flee were imprisoned or silenced. In the second scene, after meeting the crows and vultures of Madrid, Tharsis talks about the population of his hometown saying, "Madrid est demeuré sans habitants, sans vie, comme un coeur qui ne bat ni ne palpate plus. Avec ses meilleurs fils en prison, en exil ou bâillonnés" (41). Where Madrid, New Mexico is thought to be dead, but is really teeming with life, Madrid, Spain, which is thought to be a vibrant capital city, is actually dead. Its inhabitants may live and breathe, but the city itself has been deprived of its thinkers and artists, of its freedoms of thought and speech as well as those who fight for them.

Baudrillard, in the above citation from *Simulation et simulacres*, evokes the idea of the doppelgänger—the idea of one's other self, usually an aspect of evil. If one sees one's doppelgänger it is thought to be a harbinger of death. In a way, Madrid, New Mexico meets its doppelgänger of Madrid, Spain in the form of Tharsis and the Duc. By the end of the play one can say that the American Madrid "dies" with the suicide of its last inhabitant—a death signaled by the arrival of the Spanish characters. However, death also has a connotation of metamorphosis, and through Wichita's death, Tharsis has the chance to become a tightrope walker and, by expressing himself through his art, brings his Madrid to freedom. Wichita may die, but he passes on his knowledge and his legacy to Tharsis.

### **Liberation Through Spectacle**

Despite the extreme consumerism presented in this play, hope still seems to be found in America. It is the land of freedom. The exiled artist finds his inspiration once more. This search for liberation is common to Arrabal's work, as Podol points out, "From his very first play

through his most recent endeavors, the quest for liberation is asseverated on a political and a personal level” (132). For him, the artist must be free to express his views. Arrabal’s plays continually portray the theme of the artist trying to break free from an oppressive (and often political) regime. He constantly calls for freedom of speech. As Jolene Lichtenwalner notes, “Absolute liberty of expression is what Arrabal demands for all writers. By extension he desires liberty for all people, although in his plays this results more in a portrayal of the lack of freedom experienced by most of his characters” (47). Arrabal himself encountered many difficulties in his attempts at expression. He went into exile twice and was even jailed for the dedication he wrote in a copy of a novel of his that he had publically distributed in 1967. In *Sur le fil* Arrabal draws specifically from his own experiences in his treatment of the themes of exile and the role of the artist in society. His attitudes are especially prevalent in the character of Tharsis, with whom Podol says Arrabal closely identified. He explains, “Through Tharsis [Arrabal] expresses the feelings of pain caused by his own alienation and exile from his native land” (139). Like Tharsis, Arrabal was chased from his country which he hopes to move towards social liberation through his work, which was suppressed under Franco. He wants to move away from the political propaganda that reigned in Madrid. Tharsis states, “Nous c’était la poussière de la haine et de la terreur qui s’infiltrait dans nos cerveaux et nos esprits jusqu’à les durcir comme du carton” (22). The hate and the terror with which Tharsis remembers growing up worked on the spirits of the inhabitants of his beloved hometown until they were as dry and as strong as cardboard. His childhood memories are populated with soldiers and violence. It is against this tradition of fear and brutality that Tharsis is fighting. He longs to inspire his fellow Spaniards to rise up against the oppressive regime under which they are languishing.

However, the artist who fights against the presiding regime is unfailingly discriminated against. After demonstrating his prowess at juggling, Tharsis explains to his companions to what degree he was victimized, “Il est interdit de parler de moi ; il est interdit de montrer ce que je fais, on ne peut parler de moi que pour me calomnier ou m’insulter. On vient d’écrire qu’il faudrait me châtrer pour m’empêcher d’avoir des enfants qui comme moi... Nous les gens du cirque, les ambulants, les artistes, « nous n’existons pas »” (21). He, and people like him, are outcasts; they do not exist. It is for this reason that he has taken up with the Duc de Gaza who is also searching for social change, although his motivations for doing so are somewhat different. (He is more interested, at least initially, in upsetting his father than in social revolution.) How they ended up in coming to America is never made clear, but their discovery of Madrid, New Mexico is just as much by chance as Arrabal’s discovery of it. It is in this ghost town in the Ortiz Mountains that Tharsis finds his inspiration. He declares:

Je veux être le meilleur de Madrid. Je veux éblouir tout le monde par un exercice unique . . . je retournerai à Madrid et j’installerai le fil en plein centre, à la Puerta del Sol, entre deux hautes tours et j’irai de l’une à l’autre à la surprise générale. Et Madrid tout entier, qui pour le moment vit bâillonné, comme une [sic] peuple fantôme, verra que l’on peut être libre, que l’on peut toucher le ciel (21).

Through his exploits on the high wire he will inspire the multitudes below him. Even though he will be outrageously dressed and made-up, no one will notice due to the great height that will separate him from his audience. His freedom from the ground and from gravity will create a longing for freedom in those who observe him. It is his experience in the American space that has taught him the freedom of movement needed for this exploit. This is a freedom that is particular to America. As Baudrillard notes, “La liberté ici n’a pas de définition statique ou

négative, elle a une définition spatiale et mobile” (*Amérique*, 92). The sense of freedom in America comes from its wide-open spaces which allow for movement, even require it.

More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that it is a freedom that is also a spectacle. For on the other side of the equation from Tharsis is Wichita, known as “l’ange du fil dressé,” who teaches Tharsis how to walk the tightrope. He is an idealist, lost in his memories of Madrid’s glory days. He feels that, through his art, he provided his compatriots of the mine with the aspiration of something better. He explains to his visitors, “Moi j’apprenais aux mineurs, habitués à vivre au fond de la mine, couchés, le marteau et la pioche en main, les poumons parcheminés, qu’il existait un funambule parcourant les airs en dansant sur un fil” (25). He walked the tightrope, defying death and gravity, providing a dream for the other miners that perhaps they too could one day touch the sky. His circus act created a dream for the overworked miners. The irony is, of course, that he was perpetuating the mining company’s abuse. He allowed the miners to feel that they were free—he himself thought that he was free—but in reality they were merely serving the greed of the owners of the mine who were exploiting them.

According to Baudrillard, the American would not feel the need to search for freedom; he is already part of the dream that is America. Baudrillard writes, “Il se peut que la vérité de l’Amérique ne puisse apparaître qu’à un Européen, puisque lui seul trouve ici le simulacre parfait, celui de l’immanence et de la transcription matérielle de toutes les valeurs. Les Américains, eux, n’ont aucun sens de la simulation” (*Amérique*, 32). In order to see the simulacrum that is America, an outside viewer is required. The European is ideal because he has not become part of the simulation, but also has some of the same cultural heritage. Therefore, Wichita, who lives within the simulation, has conformed to the dream. He feels no need for liberation because he already believes himself to be free in his art and it is the space that makes

him free. By walking the tightrope he rises above the pits of the mine. Tharsis, on the other hand, can possibly find the means of liberating Madrid, Spain in New Mexico because he lives outside the simulation of perfection and can see it for what it is. Yet he perpetuates Wichita's belief: that the high-wire act will inspire his compatriots, thus entering into the illusion. The American circus did not liberate the oppressed of Madrid, New Mexico; rather it carried on the exploitation. It remains to be seen as to whether Tharsis is capable of achieving his dream or if he just assimilates into the business ethic of America.

### **Conclusion**

In his play, Arrabal creates a counterpoint between the American, Wichita, and the European, Tharsis. Both are artists, vaunting their skills, and both are deeply attached to their respective Madrids. The very present reminders of death and filth—the carcasses, the slag heaps, the carrion fowl—in the American Madrid mirror the conditions in the Spanish Madrid, the violence and repression of intellectual and artistic freedoms. Arrabal continuously plays on the doubling of Madrid. Both are struggling under oppressive regimes. America, on one side, is dehumanized in its search for economic growth and power. As Reinhold Niebuhr mentions, “The peculiar weakness of business men and engineers is that they tend to disregard the human factor. Engineers are under no necessity to consider it and business men have an ideal of business efficiency which reduces it to a minimum” (91). He argues that it is the attitude of the engineers and business men that has taken over the minds of Americans, that they are now obsessed with the push to produce more wealth that the condition of the workers is often disregarded. This is what has happened in the mines of Madrid; the miners are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to produce more coal. On the other hand is Spain, which is languishing under the heavy hand of Franco's fascist political regime. Nevertheless, the characters of Wichita and Tharsis

focus more on the memory of Madrid in its heyday or on the dream of a renewed Madrid than they do on the actual space of the American wasteland.

However, it is in this wasteland—littered with corpses, surrounded by slag heaps and inhabited by carrion fowl—that Tharsis finds his inspiration. Wichita tells him about the liberty found in walking the tightrope and bestows upon him his precious book detailing the secrets of his art. It is through this new art form that Tharsis is going to inspire his fellow Spaniards to awaken from their stupor and rise against the oppressor. He is going to combat the hatred that has poisoned the minds of his countrymen by walking high above the Puerta del Sol, above Franco's reach. In the final scene the setting becomes fluid; he may be in Madrid, New Mexico, but he may also be in Madrid, Spain. With the doubling of the two cities the distinction becomes obsolete. However, the question remains as to whether or not Tharsis is merely continuing Wichita's legacy of illusion. Is Tharsis truly going to be able to free his beloved city, or has he merely assimilated into the American Dream? Given the inability of Arrabal's characters to actually achieve the freedom they long for, the chances that Tharsis does so are slim.

### Chapter 3: A Historical Calamity: Jean-Noël Fenwick's *Calamity Jane*

*We are rough men and used to rough ways.*  
--Bob Younger

One of the foremost images of America is that of the Wild West, the expansion of the western frontier during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is a time that is populated with some of the greatest heroes and villains of American folklore: “Buffalo Bill” Cody, the Sundance Kid, Geronimo, Wild Bill Hickock, Sitting Bull, or Butch Cassidy, to name a few. It was mainly a man’s world, this era of gold rushes, railroads, and Indian wars, but there were a few women who made a name for themselves as well. Annie Oakley, for example, was one of the stars of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Another, and perhaps even more famous figure, was Martha Jane Canary, better known as Calamity Jane, who will be addressed in yet another play, Catherine Anne’s *Le Bonheur du vent*, in chapter five.

Born in 1856, in Mercer County, Missouri, Martha was the eldest of six children. Her family migrated west when she was young and she quickly took a liking to the rough life of the men on the wagon-train. The family settled in Virginia City, Montana, where her mother died in 1866. In 1867 her father went to Salt Lake City where he disappeared and the Canary children were dispersed among various foster families. The fifteen-year-old Jane went to live in Wyoming, but was soon kicked out (if she did not leave) by her foster family due to her penchant for the saloons.

From then on, Jane spent her time among the men and soldiers of the West, learning to drink, swear and ride like them. Her comportment isolated her from most other women as it was deemed unseemly. In her autobiography, *Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane*, she mentions that she was a soldier under Custer, a rider for the Pony Express, a rancher, and an innkeeper,

amongst other exploits. How much of this was true is uncertain, although historians and biographers do believe that she passed herself off as a soldier or a scout, though perhaps for a shorter period than she claimed. She also worked at one point in a brothel (although not necessarily as a prostitute) as well as for different Wild West shows, though never for Buffalo Bill. She was a wanderer and a drinker, but also extremely generous. For example, she nursed several people, especially children, during the smallpox epidemic in Deadwood from 1878 to 1880. She married several times, most notably to M. Clinton Burke, whose name she used to sign her autobiography and is the name on her tombstone. She died of a pulmonary inflammation on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1903 and was buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery in Deadwood next to Wild Bill Hickock.

Calamity Jane's life was one of legend, and that legend inspired many authors, both American and European. She is one of the foremost representatives of the American Far West, an image that has become one of the major stereotypes of the American: a person with an adventurous spirit, but somewhat lacking in social refinements. Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of her life, other than her role as a woman who dared to defy the conventions of her generation, is the supposed love story between Jane and Bill Hickock. Historians disagree whether or not the two heroes of the western frontier could have even had an affair, but the historical accuracy is less important next to the fact that it makes a good story, whether in a novel, on the stage, or in a film. This love story is presented in Jane's supposed collection *Lettres à sa fille*,<sup>12</sup> which Jean-Noël Fenwick used as a reference when writing his play, *Calamity Jane*, published in 1992. The play did not fare well with the critics, though appreciated by the public, and was performed only one hundred times, as Sylvie Thomas mentions in her interview with Fenwick. The reason for

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<sup>12</sup> I have opted to use the French translation of this work as it influenced Fenwick for this play as well as Catherine Anne in her play, *Le Bonheur du vent*.

this poor performance, according to Fenwick, was due to the critics. One of the reasons he wrote this play was because he was indignant at the ignorance of the general public about the nineteenth century. He tells Thomas that it is a century “dont on ne retient que le soufflé romantique alors qu’il s’agit d’un siècle scientifique, celui des inventeurs, de toutes les révolutions” (45). The twentieth century version of the American Far West in the 1800s is indeed romanticized, and its representation in literature and, most especially, film has perpetuated the romanticism. After all, the routine of every-day life does not make for an interesting story. Instead, it becomes a time and place of adventures and heroes which inspires artists and writers. In this it becomes much like ancient Greek and Rome, as André Camp explains in his editorial to *Calamity Jane*:

Comme la mythologie de l’Antiquité avait inspiré la plupart de nos auteurs classiques, il était normal que la mythologie des temps modernes inspirât artistes et écrivains d’hier et d’aujourd’hui L’Olympe était remplacé par les montagnes rocheuses, fédéraux et sudistes de la guerre de Sécession se substituaient aux Grecs et Troyens de *L’Iliade*. Ne s’agissait-il pas, après tout, de deux guerres civiles ? (1).

Where the authors of the seventeenth century found their inspiration in classical mythology, modern authors are inspired by modern mythology. Thus the representation of the American Far West is not the representation of reality, but of a myth.

The play follows her from the moment she met Wild Bill Hickock in 1870 to her death in 1903. The play is in two acts and consists of a variety of scenes depicting events in her life, with longer scenes focusing on her relationship with Wild Bill and her daughter. In act one, scene one Jane, disguised as a young man, comes to warn Bill of a plot on his life. Together they fight off the assassins and Jane reveals herself for what she is. In the following scenes they are discovered

first by the Reverend Sipes, who marries them, and then General Allen who comes to see Wild Bill's help in rescuing a soldier captured by Indians. Jane volunteers, but she and Bill are unable to agree on a plan. In scene four they enter Jane's hometown of Deadwood in order to dispose of her parent's home. Instead, the grocer, Burke, offers Bill the job of sheriff at the prompting of Louella, the owner of the town saloon. Bill is tempted by the offer, despite the protests of Jane, and agrees to settle in the town. However, while it seems to work at first for the newlyweds, Jane soon falls pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl. As for Bill, who is deceived that his child is a girl, he loses interest in Jane and their marriage quickly degenerates. He leaves them, and Jane, out of desperation and poverty, offers her daughter to a rich young couple from the East, Jim and Nancy O'Neil, who, to their dismay, are unable to have children of their own. After this, in scenes eight and nine, we find Jane as she attempts to be a rider for the Pony Express and later as a scout for a scientific team exploring the Black Hills of South Dakota. However, her time in these jobs is affected once it is learned that she is a woman. By scene ten she is wandering again, and in her wanderings runs into her beloved Wild Bill. What happens at this encounter is left to the audience's imagination, for in the next scene Bill is back in the saloon at Deadwood playing cards, when he is shot in the back of his head by the outlaw McCall.

Act two opens in Burke's general store during a malaria epidemic in the summer of 1878. Jane, it turns out, has been nursing various people who have gotten ill, and we see varying points of view on her generosity. The holier-than-thou character of Mrs. Grim believes that Jane is in league with the devil and has brought the epidemic upon them. The grocer, Burke, takes a more neutral stance, but is not terribly pleased when Jane forces him to donate some goods for her patients. Afterwards she tries her hand at "women's" work, as a prostitute in the saloon in Deadwood, but is no good at it. Louella suggests that she try another line—getting married—so

Jane gets married to the grocer Burke as he seems perfectly content to take care of the household while she is out driving the coaches. However, it soon becomes clear to Jane that he has no intention of letting her invite her daughter, Janey, to come and live with them, which has long been Jane's dream. In the middle of an argument over it, Jane receives a letter from Buffalo Bill inviting her to join his circus, which she immediately does. She travels around with Bill doing riding stunts for the crowds and is one day able to invite the O'Neils and Janey to dine with her when the circus is in Richmond, where her old friends now live. She desperately wants to make a good impression on her daughter, who is unaware of her true origins, having been adopted by the O'Neils. However, the meeting backfires and Jane, drunk, ends up insulting Janey's fiancé and the young girl storms out of Jane's suite. After this, Jane returns to Deadwood, where she continues to take care of her neighbors until the affects of too much drink start to deteriorate her health and her neighbors have to take care of her. It is at this point that Janey, as a journalist, comes to interview Jane. Jane gives her an old album in which she has written her life story. Janey promises to come back the next day, but once she leaves Jane is visited by the ghost of her long-lost love, Bill Hickock, and the two of them begin to waltz as the curtains close.

Calamity Jane is known for her rough and wild ways which were simply those of the western frontier. Her lifestyle was often in conflict with the rules and regulations of the European-style society of the east coast. The major problem with Jane's comportment in the eyes of her contemporaries was that she was a woman in a man's world. The idea of the American Far West—vast prairies, majestic mountains, untamed territory, battles between cowboys and Indians, bandits, etc.—is primarily as a *masculine* place, where the feminine space was defined by the hearth and home. The dichotomy of masculine-feminine space corresponds to the dichotomy of the West and the East; both falling under the broader definition of uncivilized

versus civilized space. The danger and adventure found there was for the men; the women would provide a civilizing presence later on. Likewise, in literature, and later in cinema and television, the focus is primarily that of the male experience, although there are exceptions, Calamity Jane being one of the foremost. The importance of this separation of masculine and feminine space is to underline the disparities in the American Dream. The Far West represents a space of freedom, but it is not a place where, in the eyes of nineteenth-century society, a woman could find freedom. Anyone could come and lay a claim in the vast expanses of land that were available, as long as they were men. Calamity Jane transgressed this unwritten rule in an effort to find freedom from the constraints of society, to find the absolute freedom of the open spaces of America.

The virtual space of this play is an idealized space, as in the other plays. However, it is difficult to define because the physical space of the Far West is actually seen on the stage, though only in two scenes—three and nine—of act one. Scene 3 gives a glimpse of the adventures that Jane has with Bill in the wild spaces of the Far West. This is the life that she longs to return to after the birth of her daughter. Scene 9 shows her attempt to re-enter this space, an attempt at which she fails. The distinction between the virtual space and the actual space is linked with the distinction between the masculine space and the feminine space, or, more broadly, between uncivilized and civilized space. Most often, Jane is represented in the more “civilized” space of the home or town, but she longs to return to the open spaces of the prairies. It is a space of freedom, both physical and social. However, the West is not the only idealized space. Jane’s estranged daughter also looks beyond the limits of her place in Richmond, Virginia, but instead of turning her eyes West, as her birth mother does, Janey turns her eyes East. For Janey, the ideal is the virtual space of Europe, a civilized, dignified place unlike the

virtual space of the west that Jane represents. Here the virtual space is the civilized space, but one that is even more civilized than the actual space.

Much of Europe's and the East Coast's knowledge of the Far West was through dime novels and travelling western shows, such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders. In one brief, but intriguing scene of Fenwick's play we see the circus-like presentation of the American Far West through Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In his stage directions, Fenwick calls for pictures of the original show to be projected,

Le rideau s'écarte...pour laisser la place à un écran blanc, sur lequel apparaissent des images d'archives du véritable cirque itinérant de Buffalo Bill. Nous avons de ce fait un aperçu de ce qui a préfiguré Barnum, Pinder, Bouglione et tout le cirque moderne (34).

Bill Cody was one of the foremost showmen to bring the Far West to the European spectators. Part magician, part salesman, the Buffalo Bill of Act two, scene four lauds the adventure, danger and excitement of this mythical space. His promise that he presents the genuine article reveals the hyperreality of this virtual space. It is more real than reality. It is a far-away, imagined space to the spectators and he, with the help of Calamity Jane and others, has brought a piece of the West to them.

### **Masculine Space, Feminine Space**

The culture in America during the nineteenth century had a clear definition between what was considered masculine and what was considered feminine. The frontier was a clearly masculine space, a space of soldiers and explorers, of cowboys and bandits. There were far fewer women who moved west. They would provide a civilizing presence, building homes and families. Women outside this home sphere were anomalies, disreputable women: dance-hall girls and prostitutes who were distinctly outside polite society. This stereotype carried over into

literature. In his discussion of the male and female aspirations in frontier literature, Stephen L. Tanner points out that the frontier was viewed as a place where the rugged (male) individual would find the contrast between wilderness and civilization. He writes, “From this interpretation grew conventions in popular literature that celebrated male experience—variations on the theme of boys lighting out for the territory to escape the civilizing threat of women” (53). The western frontier was a romanticized space of action and adventure. This was a chance for the men to go forth into the wild without having to worry about cleanliness or manners to test their strength against nature. Even though the reality may have been more along the lines of daily drudgery and back-breaking labor, the promise of excitement still existed. Panning for gold, for instance, was dull, uncomfortable work, but the dream of striking it rich brought thousands of men westward. The Western genre, in both literature and film, greatly romanticizes the excitement of the frontier. As Edward Buscombe notes, “The genre demands action in order to dramatise the conflict, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women did not, on the whole, go rushing around on horseback shooting at Indians” (40). Women went West with their men folk to help found the new homesteads promised by the U.S. government. They did not go, in general, in search of the adventure that drew so many men westward. They went to civilize the new frontier, to create homes and raise their children. The new frontier was a rough and wild place, and the women came to help create farms and towns. They helped establish churches and schools. However, there were certain women who did not go west to set up a homestead. Some came for simple business purposes, hoping to make money off the gold miners lonely for female company. There were other women, of course, who refused to conform to society’s general idea of the women’s role. Calamity Jane was only one such woman who fought against the constraints of society.

Fenwick demonstrates, in his play, the various ways in which Jane resisted the conventions. She is a woman who tried to exist in the masculine space of the Wild West, rejecting the feminine space of the home and hearth. Jane wants to be herself, but is always confined to playing a role, and, after her divorce and the adoption of her daughter, often failing. At first she is successful, as is seen in the first few chapters where she is easily accepted as a young man, at first by Bill and then by General Allen and Reverend Sipes. However, after she marries Bill she takes on the role of wife, a role in which she is less willing to adapt to the conventions, especially when they arrive in Deadwood and Bill accepts the job of sheriff. Mrs. Grim, upon hearing that Jane and Bill are going to be staying, invites Jane to all the different social clubs and events that she has set up in the Deadwood. She says: “Quelle chance ! Tu vas t’inscrire à notre club. On s’appelle « Les Pouliches d’Abraham ». C’est moi la présidente. On ne s’ennuie pas tu sais. Tournois de croquet, exposition de patchwork, concours de quetsches, j’en passe et j’en oublie . . . Nous avons une chorale. On peut chanter 122 psaumes, dont 7 sans respirer” (15). These women have so many activities that Mrs. Grim is unable to remember everything. However, there is a sense that these activities are just ways to pass the time. For example Mrs. Grim is very proud of the fact that they can sing seven Psalms without breathing. Throughout much of the play, she constantly presents a holier-than-thou attitude, causing several conflicts between her and Jane, but she gives the impression that this is the role that she is playing because it is what is expected of her. She sings in the choir and leads various clubs; she is very devout in her religious beliefs, but rather naïf. Mrs. Grim is the stereotype of the white American Protestant and she claims to have a great deal of concern for the state of Jane’s soul. On two occasions she accuses Jane of consorting with the devil. Nevertheless, the two women become friends by the end of the play. Jane takes care of Mrs. Grim by giving her her daily shot,

and Mrs. Grim takes care of Jane as she loses her sight. The role that she tries to play is that of a devout wife and upstanding citizen, but for much of the play she comes across as a busy-body. For example, in act two, scene two, she denounces Jane as the cause for the malaria epidemic to Burke saying, “Ah, je sais, c’est dur d’admettre que quelqu’un qu’on connaît est un suppôt de Satan et que les corn-flakes que vous vendez servent à nourrir les crapauds lors des sabbats de pleine lune... Mais l’évidence est là ! Je dois sauver la ville. Je vais voir le shérif” (28). Mrs. Grim believes that because Jane does not comport herself as she, Mrs. Burke, believes a woman should behave, therefore she must be guilty of witchcraft.

Even with the man who knows her best, Jane still has to struggle against the expectations put on women at that time. He enjoys the adventures they have, but once they settle down, he expects her to take on a more feminine role. Bill tells Jane scene 6, after she has given birth and finds motherhood confining, “C’est pas ma faute si t’es une femme! Janey a besoin de boire ton lait, pas le mien ! Après l’avoir nourrie, il faudra que tu l’élèves. Si c’était un garçon à sept ans je le prendrais en main mais c’est une fille et c’est toi. C’est fini la piste pour toi.” (18) Bill does not sympathize with her difficulties in this new role. She is a woman and is expected to stay at home and raise the children. Moreover, she had a daughter and it is her duty to raise her. Bill washes his hands of her education because he believes he has no role to play. He is the one who wanted to settle down and build a stable life with Jane in accepting the position of sheriff in Deadwood. She agreed to please him, but it was not her dream. Jane longs to return to the time and space of their adventures, but is unable to do so with an infant. As a result, she struggles to conform to the expectations of a wife and mother.

It is not just the life of a mother and wife that she finds confining; Calamity Jane dislikes the lifestyle that a woman of the nineteenth century was expected to lead. She does not know

how to behave like a lady. This leads Bill to spend time with a woman in the town. Bill tells Jane, “Agnès Lake est quelqu’un avec qui on ne couche pas. Mais qui sourit, que tout le monde respecte, qui n’est pas contre tout, quelqu’un d’aimable et c’est rafraîchissant” (18). Agnes Lake knows how to demonstrate her femininity, a quality that was lacking in the frontier towns and one which the men appreciated. It is this quality that Jane lacks. At one point she even tries to be a saloon girl and attempts to flirt with the cowboys in Louella’s saloon. However, here again she fails spectacularly. One of the cowboys explains:

[II] faudrait parler gonzesse. Dire des trucs comme « Oh, ces cow-boys ! » ou genre « Allons voyons, voulez-vous bien cesser de dire tous ces gros mots » ... Moi c’est ça qui m’plaît. Toi, des gros mots t’en dis plus que moi, en plus t’as l’accent du patelin, une tache sur ta robe et du poil sous les bras. Ça va pas ! C’est pas régulier ! Maintenant, si tu veux faire un poker tu peux peut-être me plumer ? (31).

Jane is like one of the boys, and she has great difficulties in comporting herself like a lady of any sort. She can swear with the best, but is unable to even dress up properly which serves to highlight her inability to conform to the space of the town. The fact that she cannot wear the costume of her chosen role—a feminine role, even though one of more dubious moral nature—demonstrates how hard it is for her to live and work in the feminine space.

However, when she manages to infiltrate the masculine space, Jane struggles. As long as she can maintain the role of a boy, she is accepted into this space, but when her sex is revealed, she is expelled. For example, in scene nine of act one Jane is a scout for a scientific expedition of the Black Hills led by the General Allen, but is posing as a young man by the name of Cannary. However, she refuses to guide the anthropologist, Hackenking, to the sacred burial grounds of the Cheyenne chiefs. Upon her refusal he denounces her to the General who insists that Cannary

show Hackenking “his” manhood. When Jane questions the reasons for this, the General Allen explains, “Le règlement [sic] exclut qu’une femme soit auxiliaire” (24). The army is no place for a woman and the rules strictly forbid it. The Far West is a dangerous place and women were thought incapable of surviving the hardships. The irony is, of course, that Jane was the one guiding the group on the expedition through hostile territory. Exposed as a woman, as Jane is leaving, Allen insists on accompanying her saying, “Je vous accompagne. Nous avons eu des mots mais tout de même pas au point de me faire oublier toute notion de galanterie...” (24). Jane is furious at this suggestion because she has proven her capabilities in defending herself and finding her way, but now that her femininity is revealed, Allen feels compelled to treat her with the same delicacy he would for any member of the “weaker” sex. However, all along Jane has proved that she is more than capable of taking care of herself.

Jane revolts against the life-style into which the other characters try and force her. She wants to be out in the wilderness and not trapped in a role she is unable to play. She is a conflicted character, striving to fit in to one world or the other—masculine or feminine—but not wholly belonging to either, making her a conflicted character. It is interesting to note, moreover, that one of the few scenes in which the fact that Jane is a woman does not matter is when she is working for the Pony Express. In this scene she is less of an abnormality for she is not the only outsider. Jeremiah White, the clerk at the Wild Birch office, is Jewish, for example. For the Pony Express, the most important is getting the mail delivered, not who was delivering it. Jeremiah asks Jane, “Qu’est-ce que tu préfères? Dormir au chaud, ou : galoper toute une nuit... gagner 600 dollars... devenir un héros du Poney Express et lutter contre l’antisémitisme ?” (22). This particular job is unique because the train has broken down and the replacement part that has been sent is the wrong size. The man from the train, White, desperately argues and begs that someone

be sent to get the correct part. In a way this offer represents the decision Jane has to make on a daily business: is she going to choose the comfortable, safe place of a woman, or take on the masculine space with its dangers (but also its possible rewards) and possibly make a difference? She chooses to make the ride despite her extreme fatigue, although her motivations are more due to the 60 dollars (Jeremiah said she would earn 600 dollars in order to get her attention—White only paid him 60) offered and not the possibility of becoming a hero because she needs the money to go see her daughter some day.

Fenwick's play is unique among the five chosen for this work because the American Far West is actually represented on the stage and not just as a virtual, referential space. This is very different to Catherine Anne's play on the same subject, as we will see in chapter five. There, Jane is always seen within an enclosed space, completely putting the Far West into the virtual space. Fenwick chooses to show Jane in the masculine space of the Wild West in scenes such as in scene 3 of act one, where Jane and Bill visit an Indian village in an attempt to free a white captive. The masculine space and the feminine space become both the actual space and the virtual space. When Jane is out in the wilderness, there are references, such as the one above from General Allen, to sending her back to the virtual space of the female world. She is not in the appropriate space and should go back to the homestead. When she is in the home, she longs to be out in the virtual male world. For example, Reverend Sipes comes to visit her after the birth of her daughter. Jane explains her malaise and he rebukes her for not being satisfied with a "normal life." She however, longs for things to be as they were before, full of adventure. She tells him, "Écoutez révérend, vous demain, dans deux jours, vous serez le cul sur une selle à galoper peinard. Moi pas. Quand on peut plus décider de sa vie, on peut pas s'épanouir. Même le cœur se met à rouiller..." (17). Jane longs for the same freedom that the men have, to "ride off

into the sunset,” instead of being tied eternally to one place. Even though there are moments when she is able to attain this masculine space by cross-dressing and passing herself off as a man, it is constantly removed from her grasp when she is revealed as a woman.

### **Europe and America**

This contrast between the wild, masculine space and the civilized, feminine space also reflects the contrast between America and Europe. America, especially in the nineteenth century, was represented as a wild adventurous country, the exact opposite of its cultured and refined European counterparts. Calamity Jane is a major figure representing the American Far West and in this play the roughness of her life is contrasted with the civilization of the East Coast and, by extension, Europe. Europe, in the nineteenth century was considered to be the center for fashion and culture. America was still a young country, still expanding and exploring its borders. The new technologies that were being developed, such as the telegraph or the steam locomotive, greatly aided in this expansion, and they soon became the focus of the American spirit and culture. This is in contrast to the European concept of culture, as Baudrillard states, “La culture n’est pas ici cette délicieuse panacée que l’on consomme chez nous dans un espace mental sacramentel, et qui a droit à sa rubrique spéciale dans les journaux et les esprits. La culture, c’est l’espace, c’est la vitesse, c’est le cinéma, c’est la technologie” (98). Americans are obsessed with technological advancement, with speed and with space, an obsession that took wing during the nineteenth century. It is what fueled the pioneer spirit—the desire to go forth and discover new realms and brave any danger.

This particular play does not contrast Europe and America to as great an extent as the other four plays discussed in this dissertation. However, there is one scene in which the contrast is highlighted. When Jane finally gets to meet her daughter she is highly nervous and overly

formal, as can be noted by her use of the literary past tense, *le passé simple*, instead of the *passé composé*. Buffalo Bill and Jim encourage her to just be herself and the result is that she becomes drunk and too friendly for the prim young woman who has come to visit her. She tries to lighten the atmosphere by a story which she finds amusing about an encounter with a pretentious young man. However, this young man, whom Jane ended up insulting, is none other than Janey's fiancée. Young Janey explodes:

J'ai horreur du cirque, du far-west, des gens qui se donnent en spectacle, qui s'habillent avec autant d'absence de goût que de prétention, qui racolent la sympathie, qui ont l'argent ostentatoire, qui boivent et qui bâfrent, qui se complaisent dans la vulgarité, qui gaspillent...J'ai horreur des jugements expéditifs sur l'Europe en général et sur l'Angleterre en particulier. . .vous n'aurez qu'un aperçu de mon dégoût pour vous et pour la vie facile et vide que vous menez sur terre (40).

Janey is not interested in Jane who makes a spectacle of herself. Jane participates in the exhibition of the American Far West, an exhibition that is particular America. To her, Jane represents all that is uncivilized in this space. The West represents all that is ostentatious and vulgar, in contrast with Europe, which is a civilized and refined space. While she condemns Jane for her quick judgment of Europe and England, Janey is herself passing a quick judgment on a space that she has only perceived second-handedly. Meanwhile, Jane attempts to imitate her perception of the manners befitting a European woman in her formal language and dress, but fails miserably. Janey, for her part, has difficulty retaining her mirth at the ridiculous figure this woman from the West makes. The two sides have great difficulty in understanding one another, a factor that Baudrillard underscores in his comparison of Europe and America. The two

continents have different ways of thinking and thus have difficulty in comprehending one another. He states:

Nous reprochons aux Américains de ne savoir analyser ni conceptualiser. Mais c'est leur faire un faux procès. C'est nous qui imaginons que tout culmine dans la transcendance, et que rien n'existe qui n'ait été pensé dans son concept. Non seulement eux ne s'en soucient guère, mais leur perspective est inverse. Non pas conceptualiser la réalité, mais réaliser le concept, et matérialiser les idées (83).

Here Baudrillard highlights the fact that Europe and America have different ways of thinking. Europe has the tradition of analyzing and conceptualizing facts, creating ideas from the concrete. America does the opposite, creating facts out of concepts and making ideas a reality. Janey has created her idea of a perfect world (England and Europe) from her experiences, but it remains in the virtual space. Jane has gone out into the world to live her idea of a perfect world, which, nevertheless, remains virtual since she, as a woman, cannot remain in the space she idealizes.

However, Fenwick does make the spectator reflect on the definition of "civilized." Janey may represent a space that is not as rough and dangerous as Jane does, but we are moved to pity when the mother is so devastated by her daughter's rejection. Later in the play, Janey, herself, realizes how cruel she has been and returns to apologize. Her ideals of the civilized, feminine space—a home, a husband and a child—have been destroyed by the death of her child. She tells Jane that her daughter was only three months old when she died of malaria and that her husband took the death badly. She explains, "Nous sommes séparés. Fred pense que je n'ai pas pris assez de précautions contre l'épidémie. Je n'ai pas pu le supporter" (43). By leaving her husband and getting a job, Janey has redefined her role as a woman as well. The conflict that once existed between them is dissipated as Janey learns more of the world around her and learns that she can

be subject to the same perils as can be found in the west. Moreover, there is an evolution in the relationship between the “civilized” Mrs. Grim and Jane’s rough lifestyle. Mrs. Grim prides herself, as has been seen above, on her devotion to God. Despite her supposed godliness, at the beginning of act two, she blames Jane for the outbreak of malaria in Deadwood. This takes place several years after she has attempted to welcome Jane as a part of the Deadwood society, an invitation which Jane chose to turn down. Using Jane’s wild behavior as proof, she declares that Jane is an emissary of the Devil and has brought the disease upon them. The grocer, Burke, himself displaying false virtue, rebukes her, saying:

Mrs Grim, vous devriez avoir honte! Voilà une femme qui a perdu son mari depuis à peine deux ans, qui surmonte son chagrin, qui accepte les travaux les plus rudes, qui n’était même pas à Deadwood quand l’épidémie s’est déclarée ! Une femme qui aussitôt revenue se dévoue pour soigner les victimes, qui donne jusqu’à sa chemise pour eux et c’est elle que vous soupçonnez ? (28).

Jane, despite her position as an outcast in society, has undertaken the care of a variety of people struck by the disease, with little worry for her own health. On the contrary, the townspeople, such as Burke and Mrs. Grim, focus more on their own health and safety. The wilderness with which Jane is associated is both an accursed place—Mrs. Grim talks about rituals honoring the Devil under the full moon—and a place of healing—Jane has set up a temporary hospital on her homestead. Much in the same way that Jane herself is both scorned and admired, the Far West is a place of fear and beauty.

### **America on Display**

Of course, most of the information Europeans receive about the Far West comes from second-hand sources: literature, movies, television and the internet. In the nineteenth century,

information about the West was transmitted through novels, newspapers and, most especially, a variety of Wild West shows. Susan F. Clark writes, “These images of the West, patronized largely by East Coast and European audiences, were accepted as ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine.’ It has only been in recent years that the myths surrounding the characters and events that made up the very stuff and substance of the Wild West Exhibition have been scrutinized with any intention of rectifying earlier misconceptions” (145). These shows claimed that they presented the true nature of the Far West, displayed for the enjoyment and entertainment of “more refined” audiences. The most famous of these shows was Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders, which lasted from 1882 to 1912. This show not only traveled around America, but Buffalo Bill brought it to Europe, including performances in Marseille, Toulon and Paris in 1905. Calamity Jane is often associated with this show, but, although she knew Bill Cody, she never participated in his spectacle. She did, however, participate in other Wild West shows. Moreover, the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley traveled with Bill, and the two women were often confused with one another.

Fenwick has Jane participate in Buffalo Bill’s spectacle and, though it is a very brief scene—act two scene four—it presents an interesting image of America. Jane is not seen performing in the show. Instead, at the beginning of scene five, Bill’s voice is heard from off-stage describing her actions, and we do not see her until she enters her hotel room, the setting for scene five. He explains what she is going to do for the audience, “Le pied droit sur un cheval, le gauche sur un bison, Calamity va traverser la piste au triple galop et tenter d’attraper avec deux doigts seulement l’œuf de poule que Bronco Billy, debout sur un tonneau, va lui lancer à mon signal” (34). By having her performance reported in this way it becomes virtual; the spectator imagines what must be happening in the arena where the show is being performed. For the first

time in the play, Calamity Jane is playing the role of Calamity Jane; she is not trying to play the role of a mother, of a wife or of a young army scout.

Buffalo Bill is selling the idea of the American Far West In scene four. He arrives on the scene dressed in a costume covered in sequins and fringe and surrounded by lights and the smoke of fireworks. He announces the wonders of his Wild West Show, every inch a showman. He declares:

L'Ouest, que dis-je, le far-west, creuset de toutes les aventures et de tous les dangers, terre de contraste et de légende si vous voyez ce que je veux dire, épopée baroque, jungle sans foi ni loi, magma sonore et chatoyant, théâtre des exploits les plus sublimes et des violences les plus barbares ! (34).

He presents the Far West as a legendary space, greater than life, hyperreal. The Far West is a place of legends, a place without laws, dangerous, and Buffalo Bill is going to present a piece of this on the stage for his audience to experience. He works on all the stereotypes of the West—wild animals, savage Indians, and sharp-shooting cowboys—and insists on the historical accuracy of it all. The irony is that in the preceding scene Buffalo Bill has admitted to embellishing the truth in order to give the audiences what they want. He writes to Jane, “Mes Indiens ont des plumes de Sioux, des frocs de Hurons, des arcs de Comanches et la moitié d’entre eux sont des Mexicains. Pour te dire. Eh bien, cette escroquerie fait un tabac, on nage dans l’opulence et j’ai pensé à t’en faire profiter” (33). His presentation is not as accurate as he proclaims it to be. Not only does he cobble together the Indian costumes from a variety of tribes, half of his Indians are not really Native Americans at all. However, the audience believes that his show is real and pays to see it.

The original Wild West Show also made this claim of historical accuracy. Ronald Walters explains, “At its core was an assertion, made time and time again (although not necessarily correct), that Cody’s Wild West was real, the genuine thing, a piece of history enacted before the spectator’s eyes” (201). Buffalo Bill tried to present the West in a form as close to reality as possible by providing real cowboys and real Indians. Men who actually fought at the Battle of Little Big Horn reenacted the battle during the show. In her discussion of Wild West shows, Susan Clark mentions that Buffalo Bill used “genuine props, such as the Deadwood Stagecoach and Indian tepees, and real horses, elks and buffaloes were also utilized to create a picture of ‘reality’” (145-6). Even the slightest detail was important. All of this heightened the verisimilitude of the show, and the spectators left believing that they had seen the “real” West. Walters also explains how this desire to represent reality in as great detail as possible led to Bill Cody’s spectacular failure in the realm of cinema, in this case, when he tried to film a reenactment of the Battle of the Little Big Horn. His obsession with presenting the genuine battle posed a variety of problems. This recalls Umberto Eco’s observation that American’s are obsessed with the genuine, but an ideologically motivated “genuine.” This genuine has to be more genuine than the original. He writes, “This is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (8). This preoccupation for the “real” real thing is yet another indicator of the hyperreality of America. By definition a copy is not the original, but America has the tendency to desire an exact replica, something as real as possible in the most easily accessible manner. The spectators of Bill’s Wild West show want to have as real an experience of the West as possible, but without leaving the comforts of their home.

## Conclusion

Calamity Jane, as a historical character, was very complex and, due to the many varying stories told about her, it is difficult to know what is true and what is not. However, the most important fact is that she is one of the major figures representing the American Far West. As John Ames notes, “She was one of the first masters of ‘spin’ and of image control. Even today, naïve writers report her manufactured stories as fact, never realizing they have been had by the best in the West—Calamity Jane, gold camp nurse and bullshit artist extraordinaire” (138).

Calamity Jane was a teller of tales and her tales have been passed on and retold time and time again. Even if her story is not completely accurate, it is the truth that people want to hear. She was a woman who dared to transgress the bounds of society and enter the masculine world. Yet she was a conflicted woman in search of an identity. M. Heather Carver comments on the difficulties she had in doing the research for a biographical play on Calamity Jane:

Questions immediately emerged about authenticity, identity, history, reality, and representation and made it difficult to determine who was the ‘real’ Calamity Jane. I quickly found that an attempt to answer this question became counterproductive, for in this postmodern world of multiple identities it is more important to show the complexities of the self in performance (97).

Calamity Jane was a multi-faceted figure, who still remains something of an enigma. Yet there is something theatric about her personality; she has become bigger than life, an American legend. It is not a question of presenting American Far West in the most historically accurate manner possible, but rather in the way that people believe it to be. One has to create the illusion of reality because in America, contrary to Europe, the belief becomes the reality. Where Europe is a world of ideas, America is a world of action where if something can be dreamed it can be achieved. As

Baudrillard points out, “[Les États-Unis] fabriquent du réel à partir des idées, nous transformons le réel en idées, ou en idéologie” (83). Calamity Jane in this play has an idea of the life she wants to live, free from the constraints of society’s expectations for women, and she does what she can to make that a reality, contrary to Janey, who dreams of her perfect life, only to find out the flaws later.

Jane fights against the definition of the feminine space by attempting to be a woman in the masculine space of the Far West. This masculine space is the hills and prairies and not the towns, which were the beginning signs of civilization and thus the influence of the feminine. In the West, the women provided a civilizing presence in the rough, masculine wilderness. However, the definition of “civilization” is called into question in the comparison between Jane and the “civilized” characters of Mrs. Grim and Janey. Jane is rough and ill-mannered, but her generosity is shown throughout the play. While Mrs. Grim does evolve throughout the play, she is a small-minded, holier-than-thou townswoman at first. Janey, as well, evolves, but she also is blinded by her prejudices and ignorance. She may have had an education that was never offered to Jane, but she has difficulties seeing past the image of the Far West that she has created in watching Bill’s Wild West Show and Jane’s performance.

Jane prefers the wild and dangerous space, which is seen in act one scene three and idealized in act two scene four. The idealization emphasizes the wildness and the danger of this space, but tames it as well. Buffalo Bill presents a Wild West as his spectators imagine it to be, while trying to remain as close to the reality as possible. The result is a hyperreality, the show becoming more real, more believable than the truth. It was shows such as Buffalo Bill’s that has inspired many artists and writers in their presentation of the Wild West, thus making the myth a reality.

**Chapter 4: The Surrealist Stage: *Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d'emploi* by Claude  
Duparfait**

*'Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'* –Emma Lazarus, “New Colossus”

In 1927 Franz Kafka's book *Amerika: Der Verschollene* (*Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared*) was published. It recounts the story of a young German boy named Karl Rossmann, whose parents have exiled him to the United States after he is seduced by a servant. It is one of Kafka's unfinished novels, with several “fragments” coming at the end. One of these fragments deals with Karl's discovery of a mysterious theater, which is offering jobs to all comers. This theater seems to promise Karl that which he most wants: a job and a chance to make something of himself. Mark Harman notes that Kafka intended to use this chapter to close the novel, although there are several references to events that are not mentioned in the main body of the book. He writes:

According to his friend Max Brod, he intended to end the novel in a conciliatory fashion, and used to hint with a smile on his face that within ‘this “almost limitless” theatre his young hero was going to find again a profession, some backing, his freedom, even his old home and his parents, as if by some paradisiacal magic’ (11).

This ending may seem odd, given the difficulties Karl has experienced and the sense of danger that marks Kafka's work. Throughout the novel Karl has been beaten down and chased out of a multitude of jobs. However, in this fragment Kafka seems to let Karl's luck change. Finally he may be able to obtain the American Dream, the idea of America as the place of limitless possibilities, a place where one's hopes and dreams can come true. It is a magical place, a paradise. Moreover, it is a theater, and an almost limitless one at that, with all the romanticism that accompanies it: the lights, the fame, the excitement, the ability to safely enact whatever

situation one can think of. After wandering from place to place, Karl Rossmann may be able to find where he belongs, where he is accepted. Kafka describes Karl's reaction when he reads the Grand Oklahoma Theater's poster, "'All welcome' it said. All, even Karl. Everything he had done up until now would be forgotten, no one would hold it against him. He could turn up for work that was not a disgrace, something for which people were openly invited to apply!" (202). At last, after wandering from place to place, looking for a job, Karl can become a regular citizen with a job instead of a wandering vagabond. One of the greatest attractions of America is the chance to have the slate wiped clean and to start anew. Everyone is welcome to attempt their chances. In this fragment Karl does manage to be hired, although it is more difficult than he had assumed, which is not entirely surprising given the loss of all his papers. Nonetheless, he has managed to land a job and the fragment breaks off with him and a former co-worker, Giacomo, gawking at the wild landscape outside their train, on their way to Oklahoma.

In 1998, Claude Duparfait published a play loosely based on this fragment of Kafka's novel entitled *Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d'emploi*. This play offers a satirical reading of the portrayal of American society found in Kafka's book. The possibility of redemption is offered, but not without an impending sense of danger. Duparfait manages to keep the sense that the story is not finished, that it is fragmented, by the choppy transitions from one scene to another. (The play is one act, broken into six scenes, each with a different title.) The first scene opens at the racecourses of Clayton, a town somewhere in America where Karl has arrived, looking for employment with the Oklahoma Theater. There he encounters first his friend, Fanny, who is also looking for employment, and the two of them reminisce over the last time they were together. They talk about their chances of finding a job with the Theater and where else they might go if this does not work out. Karl finally decides to try and get some information on what they need to

do when he runs into his friend, the child Léo, who is part of the drum corps at the theater. The next scene takes place on the racetrack itself, where a rudimentary stage has been set up. There Karl finds Fanny once again. She has been given a position in the Theater as a trumpet-playing angel and she tries to encourage Karl to find a job in this wonderful Theater, and especially in her group. They vacillate between how wonderful the Grand Oklahoma Theater is and how many difficulties Fanny has with her new job. In scene three, Karl encounters the Golden Voice, a loudspeaker which is supposed to help people orient themselves in their search for a job. However, he encounters several difficulties in dealing with the machine. They argue, but once Karl tells the story of how he came to the United States the Golden Voice has pity on him and sends him to the Top-Top Engineering Society. Karl has some difficulty, nevertheless, in finding the office of the Top-Top Engineering Society and spends much time knocking on the two hundred doors he finds. At 23h30—the offer for employment is over at midnight—he manages to find one office that is occupied. The man in the office tells him that he is too late, but Karl refuses to budge. This man, the Head of Personnel, calls for security while Karl attempts to evoke his sympathy by describing his difficulties in other towns. The Head, instead of managing to have security sent up, seems to be authorized to offer him a job, but the fact that Karl has lost all his papers makes the task more difficult. After proposing some ways in which the spectacle could be improved, impressing the man, Karl is offered a job but gives his name as “Negro.” Upon learning that he has been hired as a technical assistant, Karl faints and regains consciousness when the Head of Personnel fans him with a photo. The photo fascinates Karl and he looks through the pile of photos in the office. He is much surprised to find the photo of his parents amongst them, but he is not allowed to take it back. The Head of Personnel then learns that Karl has managed to pass himself off under a false name and believes that it may cause

problems in the company. However, Karl distracts him long enough that it is too late to call headquarters. In the final scene, Karl is rejoined by Léo just before they embark on the train that will take them to the wonders of Oklahoma.

Duparfait keeps a Kafkaesque undercurrent in this play as seen in the absurdity of the administration and its structurelessness. As in chapter one, and will be seen again in chapter five, the setting is an enclosed space within the walls of a single building. However, the immensity of America is also invoked through this enclosed space, particularly in the first four scenes. The play opens at the racecourses, but the stage is dark and the darkness and the distance make it difficult for Fanny and Karl to find one another. Later, in scene four, Karl is trying to find an open office, but the immense absurdity of the Oklahoma Theater requires two hundred doors. This immense actual space is in contrast with the actual spaces found in Obaldia's and Anne's works in which most, if not all, of the action takes place in a small room.

Just as in *Du vent dans le branches de sassafras* and as will be seen in *Le Bonheur du vent*, the image of the Wild West is one of a far-flung, somewhat vague space. In *Du vent*, the West is presented through the memories of the older characters as well as the imagining of the space by the younger ones. In the next chapter we will see how the main character of Jane creates an image of the West based on her memories and longings, as well as the presentation of this space through the imagination of other characters. Yet, both *Du vent* and *Le Bonheur* have a western setting. Duparfait's play does not actually take place there, but the West, in the form of Oklahoma, is constantly evoked. It is an ill-defined place, since none of the characters who talk about going to Oklahoma have ever been there. All descriptions of Oklahoma are hearsay, second-hand accounts, like so many of the stories of the New World brought back to Europe in

travelogues and letters. As Oliver Simons remarks in an essay on the semiotics of literary America,

Scenes of arrival in America begin quite frequently with second-hand descriptions, with a quotation of another travelogue, with images seen long ago. For an America novel one must not travel the country . . . America is a textual construction, a topos whose history is first and foremost literary in nature (196).

Although throughout much of the twentieth century America is primarily experienced through cinema or television, it has long been experienced through literary accounts<sup>13</sup>. It is a space that is completely imaginary, unseen by spectators and characters alike, a second-hand space. For many Europeans, America is experienced first through some form of media, through someone else's experience and presentation of the space, before they visit America themselves, if ever they do. The result is somewhat voyeuristic, this interest in experiencing America through another's point of view, second-hand. It is this building upon other people's accounts of what the United States is like that reinforces all the myths and stereotypes.

Due to the rising influence of Hollywood cinema, the effect of literature on the general modern public is somewhat lessened, and this is especially apparent with the portrayal of America. It a recounted space, one often first experienced through the media, be it television, films, news reports, or even literature. However, in this day and age, it is primarily experienced through the visual media. Because of its imaginary status, the characters are uncertain about their reaction to it. At times they glorify the wonders of Oklahoma, at other moments they have doubts about going there. It is a place where their dreams can be acted out, but it is also a stage for

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<sup>13</sup> François René de Chateaubriand was perhaps the first important French author to portray America in his works. We find this portrayal in *Le Génie du christianisme* and its separate novels, *Atala* (1801) and *René* (1802). In 1791 Chateaubriand did indeed travel through parts of the United States, he nevertheless extensively relied upon a host of earlier travel accounts written by French explorers and missionaries.

nightmares, for the text is satiric in its treatment of the American “utopia.” America as a utopia has been attracting immigrants since the seventeenth century, but, as many of them have discovered over the years, it is easy to get lost in the immensity of the American space. Duparfait has managed to capture this sense of enormity and, especially, emptiness in his play through the immensity of the Oklahoma Theater, but this also provides a sense of Kafkaesque unease that haunts various characters throughout the play, particularly for Karl, the European immigrant. He has come in search of a job but finds himself often overwhelmed by the enormity of the Theater and treated with scorn or indifference due to his immigrant status. Duparfait reveals the strained relation due to immigration between the Old World and the New World, specifically the immigration of Europeans to America in the early 1900s. until it seems that one will finally assimilate the other.

### **Theater Without Boundaries**

In Obaldia’s text, America was presented as cinematographic, while Arrabal’s and Fenwick’s texts present America in a circus-like manner. In his play, Duparfait presents its theatrical side as the Oklahoma Theater represents all of America. The New World, when first discovered, was a place of limitless possibilities, a place where one could start afresh. James Kunstler comments, “The settlement of the New World was a transforming event in human history. For Christian Europe, already burdened by its past, the New World was a vast stage upon which to act out, at the scale of nations, the romance of redemption, of a second chance at life” (17). America in the eighteenth century was a blank canvas, an empty stage on which the European settlers could re-enact their lives, create their utopia. There was room for all, a place for all, a chance for all, and this is what the Oklahoma Theater promises. Before Karl leaves her to go try to register for a job, the angel, Fanny, exclaims, “Oui, Karl. Un grand théâtre! Un

théâtre immense! Sans frontières! Un théâtre où chacun trouvera sa place, et qui s'agrandit constamment!" (34). This theater promises to provide an opportunity to all who come. It is constantly growing, larger than can be imagined, like America. The Oklahoma Theater echoes the immensity of America. Fanny recounts what some of her colleagues have told her:

C'est le plus grand théâtre du monde, Karl! Tous les jours des trains arrivent de Muskogee et de Sapulpa, et des navires touchent les quais du fleuve pour assister au spectacle. On trouve tout dans l'Oklahoma. Même par moments l'odeur de la mer, qui est pourtant si loin . . . Et des fleurs de papier multicolores, pour les déshérités du paradis ! Et tu franchiras les escaliers lumineux. Les gars du vestiaire seront lissés comme des soldats d'opérette. Et ils te dirigeront en autommates dans les couloirs de velours, avec en fond sonore, l'Information Please qui diffusera par haut-parleurs un programme des plus sensationnels (26).

Everything can be found in The Oklahoma Theater, and, by extension, in America. Moreover, it is all bigger, better, and more amazing than one could imagine. Everyone can find something for themselves there—as Fanny states, there are even paper flowers for the disinherited of paradise. It is somewhat ironic, though, that one of the greatest stereotypes of America—that of the cowboy and Indian—is not yet part of the Oklahoma Theater. For a theater that claims to be American, there is very little that is notably “American” apart from the size. They are in the process of creating a paradise with angels and demons, paper flowers and rainbows. It is Karl who suggests to the Head of Personnel, “J’ai comme une furieuse envie de voir une course. . . Peut-être même avec des Indiens ? Pourquoi pas ! Oui, des Indiens sur des chevaux. En biais. Dans l’air ! Et qui jetteraient les rênes ! Comme ça ! Des Indiens ! On les verrait quitter les éperons !” (67). The Head of Personnel is very interested in this suggestion, for he has never

even thought of it. He may never even have seen Oklahoma and thus has no idea of what it is like, for Karl asks if he has been there and he refuses to answer. In fact, no one seems to have ever been to Oklahoma; the only information on it is brought second-hand, recounted by Fanny as something she had heard from a co-worker. Karl's ideas of America in general and the west in particular are new and interesting to the Head of Personnel. He offers a European view of America. As was mentioned in chapter three, Jean Baudrillard observes that it is often difficult for the American to see the simulation that they are in, that they create. He writes, "Les Américains, eux, n'ont aucun sens de la simulation. Ils en sont la configuration parfaite, mais ils n'en ont pas le langage, étant eux-mêmes le modèle" (*Amérique*, 32). It takes the European observer to see and articulate the "mirage" that America projects of itself. The Oklahoma Theater wants to create an example of the American paradise, but is, perhaps, unaware of the deep-rooted image of cowboys and Indians to an outside observer, such as Karl.

The Oklahoma Theater, therefore, may be compared to Disneyland. Both are entertainment industries representing America—specifically the hyper-reality of America. Both project an image of America, but one that has very little to do with reality. Disney creates a fairy-tale land that is cinematographic, a perfect world of brave heroes, fair damsels and happy endings. America is a virtual world created out of lights and imagination. For the Oklahoma Theater, America is also a virtual space, but its members are representing some distant land on the stage. As Baudrillard points out:

. . . Disneyland est là pour cacher que c'est le pays « réel », toute l'Amérique « réel » qui est Disneyland . . . Disneyland est posé comme imaginaire afin de faire croire que le reste

est réel, alors que tout Los Angeles et l'Amérique qui l'entoure ne sont déjà plus réels, mais de l'ordre de l'hyperréel et de la simulation (*Simulacres*, 25-6).<sup>14</sup>

The imaginary becomes real in Disneyland, and thus makes the “real world” that surrounds it hyper-real, bigger than life, because we believe in the fantasy. Disneyland (or the Oklahoma Theater) is just as real as the rest of the United States. It represents the fantasy that is America, what Baudrillard refers to as the holographic nature of America in his book, *L'Amérique*. It is a reality of the imagination, of the achieved utopia.

The Oklahoma Theater offers everything one can dream of, and more. After all, America is the land of dreams. One can find anything one desires there. Karl tells the Head of Personnel, “. . . de là où on est tous les deux, j'imagine des forêts tout autour. Elles doivent être immenses en Amérique ! Je n'en ai encore jamais vues, ici. Depuis un bout de temps déjà, je pense à toutes ces forêts, comme à une promesse. Et je pense au vent qui court au travers des arbres, aussi. Au vent libre, comme l'air” (68). Even here in the theater is found the freedom of the American wind. The openness of America is one aspect that attracts immigrants to this country. In America they have the space to settle and to do as they will. The wind, here and, as will be seen, in chapter five, represents this freedom of movement which is not only physical movement, but also social and economical. However, with such openness comes the sense of emptiness and with so many choices available the decision becomes difficult. The freedom that so many have come seeking becomes overwhelming with its apparent lack of structure.

### **America the Frightening**

Once again, America is illustrated as a structureless land; in this case the Kafkaesque lack of administrative structure is the most obvious, though there are other elements such as the

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<sup>14</sup> To differentiate between Baudrillard's texts I will use the abbreviation *Simulacres* to refer to *Simulacres et simulation*.

passage of time. Karl has come to find a job, but there is no one who can tell him where to go or what he needs to do. He spends the entire play trying to figure out what is going on. This, of course, is part of the surrealist nature of the original work which is itself without a clear structure, being only partially finished. Karl in Kafka's work keeps moving from place to place without any ideas of where he is going or even of where he is. He simply encounters one surprising event after another and attempts to make the best of his circumstances. Duparfait's Karl is also forced to make the best of a series of unusual circumstances: from trying to find information for Fanny to being informed by her, from arguing with a machine to arguing with a man. He and Fanny even discuss the poor administrative structure when they first meet. Fanny complains, "On sait pas encore vraiment ce qu'ils recherchent. Tu te rends compte ? Aux guichets, y a personne qui renseigne . . . Quand même ils pourraient prévoir ce genre de choses, non ? Tous ces gens sur la tribune qui attendent pour un travail, et qui voient personne !" (11). The Theater has called for people to come and yet no one knows what they are there for nor what they are supposed to do at the beginning. After the first scene it is only Karl who is lost within this structureless theater; everyone else seems to have been assimilated into the troupe. Fanny, for example, found a position amongst the angels, although how much time elapsed between her meeting Karl and Karl finding her as an angel is unclear. However, the indistinct passage of time adds to the sense of structurelessness.

The lack of administrative structure clashes with the claimed temporal structure, as the play is set within specifically defined time limits: The Oklahoma Theater will only be accepting applications in Clayton from 6 a.m. to midnight. The time is constantly evoked, increasing the tension of the play. For example, in the fourth scene, entitled "Les Deux Cents Portes," the Golden Voice proclaims the hour every minute, as Karl desperately tries to find an open office.

He is constantly pushed to hurry: hurry to register for a job, hurry to find an open office, hurry to catch the train, etc. This accelerated time increases the frenetic and chaotic atmosphere.

Everyone is in a rush, but nothing is accomplished. When the Head of Personnel wants to call headquarters about Karl's false name, Karl suggests, "Il nous suffit d'attendre ensemble, assis là, tranquilles tous les deux sur nos chaises, le dernier chant de sirènes. Et pendant ce temps, vous me parlez d'Oklahoma, et moi, d'Europe" (79). Instead of rushing around, trying to get every detail perfect, Karl suggests a moment of rest and exchange, which is, of course, declined. It goes against the image of American efficiency. Although he is talking about the automobile industry, Reinhold Niebuhr makes an observation that is applicable to other industries as well (including the theater industry of the Oklahoma Theater): "Nowhere is technological efficiency more highly developed and nowhere does power express itself with more ruthless disregard of the human factor than in this industry" (91). He finds that the automobile industry is more obsessed with its technology and efficiency to the detriment of workers' rights. The same can be said of the Oklahoma Theater. The Head of Personnel is far more interested in getting his job done or in lauding the grandeur of the Theater (for he does take a moment to explain the different photographs of the Oklahoma Theater to Karl) than he is in the welfare of his employees. As he responds to Karl's mention that the angels are unhappy, "Parce qu'en plus, nous, on devrait rendre tout le monde heureux" (67). He is uninterested in Karl's stories of Europe, or in almost anything he has to say, unless it can be used to improve the spectacle. Likewise, he shows very little interest in the troubles that the angels have; for instance, he completely ignores Karl's mention of the difficulties that Fanny is having.

America is the land of dreams, a place where anything can happen, a perfect place. As Baudrillard notes, "L'Amérique n'est ni un rêve, ni une réalité, c'est une hyperréalité. C'est une

hyperréalité parce que c'est une utopie qui dès le début s'est vécu comme réalisée" (*Amérique*, 32). America is more real than a dream; it's even realer than reality because it is an achieved utopia, heaven on Earth. Kafka makes an allusion to this terrestrial paradise in his fragment: the welcoming committee, so to speak, is ". . . a hundred women dressed as angels in white cloths, with great wings on their backs. . ." (203). However, instead of being welcoming, this spectacle intimidates the people who have come to apply for jobs, including Karl. The angels are all playing trumpets, but they create more of a confused noise than a harmonious melody. They are there to praise the wonders of the Oklahoma Theater, but it becomes more of a parody of a utopia than the presentation of one. Duparfait also presents this parody in his play. While Karl is not met at the door by a "heavenly" host, he encounters Fanny for the second time dressed as an angel, but the idyllic image the trumpeting angels are supposed to present is destroyed once Karl notices how precarious Fanny's position is and how much her costume is hurting her. The realization of dreams is offered, but nothing productive ever seems to happen. Time is accelerated, but the rush actually decreases productivity. This parody of the utopia, this dystopia, offers, in the end, nothing but pain and confusion. As Phillippe Wellnitz mentions,

La parodie d'un paradis utopique atteint son comble dans la description des anges : Des femmes sont placées sur des piédestaux pour leur conférer une grandeur qu'elles n'ont pas et surtout pour occulter les différences de taille qui symbolisent les inégalités sociales. Le simulacre de grandeur et de beauté vire à son contraire, Karl en remarque le côté ridicule. L'art tel que Oklahoma le reflète à Clayton est aux antipodes du beau et du vrai de l'esthétique classique (85).

America is supposed to be the place where every man is equal, a place where no matter one's background, one can succeed. However, this is very rarely the case, as countless immigrants have discovered over the years.

Duparfait uses the angel choir as well, but he adds a touch of the demonic: the trumpeting angels are periodically replaced, Fanny explains, by a team of drumming demons. Just as in Kafka's work, the angels in Duparfait's work are also frightening. Karl initially finds Fanny's angel costume beautiful, with the color in her hair, the glitter on her face, and the wings on her back, but once he has seen past the glitter, he finds her job terrifying. He explains this to the Head of Personnel, who has proposed to hire Karl for the same post:

Et quand je regarde l'ange danser en haut de son podium, il tremble. Il a peur. Et il manque invariablement de tomber ! Sa trompette a beau étinceler et produire un son inouï, ses ailes n'en demeurent pas moins accrochées à même la peau, là, dans son dos, comme deux griffes sur une proie. Et les sirènes d'embauche le transportent jusqu'au ciel, dans un rythme à lui couper le souffle. C'est terrifiant à voir ! Mais, comment les hommes ont-ils pu concevoir un système pareil ? Ne pourrait-on pas envisager pour lui, quelque chose de plus harmonieux ? (67).

At this point in the scene, the Head has offered Karl a job as an actor, as one of the angels, to be precise. However, Karl does not want that position because he has seen what a horrible job it is. Just like the angel choir in Kafka's work, the angels are perched on pedestals (the stage directions in the second scene call for trestles to be set on stage) upon which they must dance when the sirens sound, an event that occurs with increasing frequency. They must dance faster and faster, increasing the sense of accelerating time. The result is no longer harmonious and heavenly, but rather frenetic and confused. From a distance, everything looks beautiful, but upon

closer inspection the simulation is broken. Moreover, this is the first impression that is presented, for the angels are the first ones to greet the visitors. If the first impression is one of false happiness attempting to mask pain and fear, what might the rest of the spectacle be like? In addition, the spectacle is hazardous to the actor's health. Karl finds that Fanny's angel wings have hurt her. He asks, "Pourquoi portes-tu ces ailes à même la peau ?! Ton dos est tout abîmé !" (28). The simulation of beauty goes beyond being just a costume to being hazardous to her health. The appearance of paradise serves to cover up the danger inherent in the system.

The lack of structure in Duparfait's play—of a well-defined idea of what is expected of the characters and what they will encounter in Oklahoma—provides the undercurrent of impending danger that is common to Kafka's work. Nor is this lack of structure limited to Oklahoma. Karl arrives in Clayton having just come from a town called Butterford. When Fanny, unsure of her chances at the Oklahoma Theater, mentions she might try to find work there Karl exclaims, "Là, vaut mieux que tu oublies tout de suite Butterford, Fanny ! C'est une ville... Y'a pas de mot pour ça ! Une ville vois-tu ! Dans toute l'Amérique, t'en auras jamais vu une comme ça !" (9). We will never know what happened in Butterford as this is one of the many loose ends that Kafka left in his work, but Karl's reaction to the thought of returning is violent. Nor is he the only one to have a negative reaction to this city. Léo tells him that he has done well in leaving Butterford when they meet at the beginning of the play. He comments, "Des villes comme celle-là, on y perd tout. On y perdrait même jusqu'à son nom" (15).<sup>15</sup> The fact that Léo says that it is easy to lose everything, even one's identity in Butterford, foreshadows what

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<sup>15</sup> In this issue of names, it is interesting that Duparfait chooses to call this character "Léo" because in Kafka's text, Karl boards the train to Oklahoma with his long-lost friend, Giacomo. Harman, discussing Kafka's choice of "Negro" notes, "We now know that the insertion of the word *Negro* was a deliberate act on Kafka's part, for he first wrote "Leo"—a coded allusion to himself in a fragmentary dialogue in a diary entry of August 15, 1913—then went back over the handwritten manuscript and changed the name nine times to 'Negro'" (11). Perhaps Duparfait has chosen to represent Kafka through this character.

happens in the Head of Personnel's office later on. Not only did Karl lose all his papers, but he also lost his name in Butterford, being given the name "Négro" instead. He explains, "Dans certaines circonstances, il peut sonner très bien dans l'immensité américaine. Et puis, à Butterford, personne ne s'était donné la peine de m'en trouver un autre" (78). Karl lost his name and was given, not another, but a description. The name, Négro, somehow fits the image of America. It recalls the many events throughout American history that deal with race relations. Nor was it chosen by chance. In his discussion of this name Mark Harman says that Kafka was influenced by a photograph found in a travelogue on America. He writes, "The photograph in question depicts the lynching of two blacks, with a group of grinning whites standing by, under the sarcastic title 'Idyll aus Oklahama' (Idyll from Oklahama), and this title tellingly bears the same misspelling that Kafka consistently adopts in the novel" (11). This reveals the darker side of the American utopia and perhaps foreshadows Kafka's true intent for the ending of his novel. America is not the idyllic dream that so many have believed it to be, and Duparfait highlights this irony by using the same title for his play. Will this horrific death be the eventual fate of Karl, who has been hired as "Négro," and Léo with him<sup>16</sup> as they discuss boarding the train to Oklahoma at the end?

### **Europe in America**

In this play, the Old World and the New are continually contrasted. Karl, the young man from Germany, repeatedly evokes his homeland. He sings and plays tunes for Fanny that he learned in Germany as a child. He reminisces about his childhood and his parents, especially when he discovers the photo of his parents amongst the photos in the Head of Personnel's office. When Karl marvels at the wonderful picture of the president's lodge in Oklahoma, the Head of

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<sup>16</sup> In his play, *Claudel et Kafka*, Fernando Arrabal also has Kafka identified with Karl, although in his play Kafka sees himself to be Karl. He tells Claudel towards the end of the play, "J'ai été le vagabond, l'oublié, surnommé le Négro, qui voyageait en train avec le Théâtre d'Oklahoma" (80).

Personnel remarks, “On dirait que vous en êtes encore à vos premiers jours d’Européen en Amérique” (72). Karl is presented as the stereotypical immigrant who is freshly arrived in America and is overwhelmed at the grandeur, even though he has been in the country for quite some time. However, America constantly exceeds the immigrant’s expectations. This contrast—between the nostalgia for the “good old days” back in the home country versus the wonders and excitement of the New World—is not in the least unusual. It is a contrast of two “positive” impressions, a balance between the longing for the old and familiar and a longing for the new and exciting, which, nevertheless, cause an internal conflict. It is particularly disconcerting when this New World attempts to imitate, to recreate, the Old World. It is and is not what one expects. Eco writes about America’s desire to perfectly copy Europe. He states, “Holography could only prosper in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented” (4). America is obsessed with having an exact replica, but more than that, of having a perfect replica, one that is undamaged by the passage of time. This is the perfection that Disney seeks to portray. They take an idea from Europe and recreate it in order to make it more real, hyper-real, American.

With the theme of immigration, *Idylle à Oklahoma* is less about America reflecting European values, as is seen in other chapters, but about the process by which the European immigrant becomes swallowed up by America. Baudrillard notes, “L’Amérique correspond pour l’Européen, encore aujourd’hui, à une forme sous-jacente de l’exil, à un fantasme d’émigration et d’exil, et donc à une forme d’intériorisation de sa propre culture” (*Amérique*, 75). Not only does America represent the New World, the utopia in which one can realize one’s dreams, but it also evokes a sense of exile. The immigrant has left the roots of his or her culture behind, but

often with the hope of a cultural exchange in the new country. Karl constantly expresses a desire for this cultural exchange; he believes he has something to offer: his technical skills, his ideas, his musical talent. Fanny encourages him in this, telling him what a great artist he is. After Karl plays her trumpet for a bit, she remarks, “Tu joues comme personne ici ! Et ta musique est vraiment très belle. Tu entends? Quand tu joues, c’est toute l’Amérique qui fait silence pour t’écouter ! ” (22). She, too, believes that Karl, a foreigner in a foreign land, has something to offer to his new homeland. However, Fanny has been assimilated at this point into the Oklahoma Theater. She comes across almost brainwashed since she continues to extol how wonderful the Theater is, despite the exigencies of her job. America wants what he has to offer, as Fanny claims, but usually not in the way that Karl expects. When he attempts to apply for a job, he gets insulted. The Golden Voice, angry with him, exclaims, “Mais, c’est qu’il sort de ses gonds. Faux jeton d’Européen. Malotru. Malotru d’Allemand!” (42). The Oklahoma Theater’s initial reactions are indifference and insults, for the Head of Personnel is also unimpressed by Karl. However, he still manages to receive the promise of a job, although it is less than he expected.

While America takes what it can, it gives as little as possible in return, yet it always appears to offer the extreme limits of one’s imagination. After all, the American Dream is the fulfillment of one’s greatest hopes and wishes. The Oklahoma Theater offers greatness, although it remains to be seen if it will fulfill these promises. When he and the Golden Voice decide on an engineering society in which he can work, Karl sings, “Oklahoma Top-Top Engineering, / The world leader in all dream-machines, / Will continue for you its accelerated growth / Within Europe in America” (45). Thus this theater builds dreams in Europe and brings them to America. Or perhaps Europe has been swallowed up by the American dream. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants have come to America over the years in search of the same thing Karl is looking for:

an honest job, a place to call his own. As they come they bring their cultures with them, which then either become assimilated into American culture or are sacrificed for the sake of assimilation. Reinhold Niebuhr argues that the American devotion to business efficiency and civilization has cost it the development of culture. He writes:

Perhaps this was due to the fact, as Spengler suggests, that culture and civilization are incompatible with each other, and that the vast immigrant hordes who came to our shores dissipated their cultural inheritances to such a degree that they could give themselves to the extensive tasks of civilization with complete and fervent devotion (90).

America expanded her borders at just the right moment: the inventions of the telegraph, the steam engine and the automobile made governing the vast spaces more feasible. Moreover, it sparked the devotion to technological innovation and business: bigger, better, faster. Immigrants arriving in the New World were greeted with the promise of a better life in this efficient new country. Taken by this idea, many threw away the elements of their culture that did not fit the American lifestyle. Cultural aspects of these immigrants were lost in the drive to create wealth and perfecting industrial technique, while others created cultural enclaves in an attempt to hold on to the culture, tradition, and language they had left behind. Otherwise, according to Jean-Paul Daoust, America goes and searches for whatever it likes from other cultures. He writes, “L’AMÉRIQUE a pillé le monde entier pour se faire / des musées / des styles / des recettes” (21). One can find anything from Europe there, and usually much more easily accessible, as the original Europe is physically too far away. Kafka describes this attitude when Karl is being interviewed by two gentlemen, one of whom is the leader of the publicity team that announced the acceptance of applications. The gentleman asks Karl what he had studied back home and as he does so “he took his hand away from his chin, and waved it feebly, as though to indicate at

one and the same time the remoteness of Europe and the insignificance of whatever plans might have been made there” (213). The Old World becomes insignificant next to the wonder and size of the New. It gets lost within the immensity of America, which then never lets go. Karl discovers this when he finds the lost photo of his parents in the pile in the Head of Personnel’s office. He asks if he can take it back because, after all “[q]ue ferait l’Amérique d’un petit cliché d’Europe comme celui-ci ? C’est une goutte d’eau dans l’immensité de votre théâtre!” (76). However, the Head refuses to let him take it. It may be just a “small drop,” of no significance to any but Karl, but it belongs to the Oklahoma Theater, as it was amongst their photos. This piece of Europe has now become a part of America.

It is interesting to note, however, that Karl struggles against the invitations to assimilate into American culture. As was mentioned earlier, he is willing to share and exchange cultures, but the American business culture as represented by the Head of Personnel has no interest in an exchange. It has been mentioned above that Karl lost his name, his identity, in Butterford, but that here he has the chance to create a new identity with the Oklahoma Theater. However, he refuses the job they initially offer him. He says, “Et si on peut aussi facilement devenir acteur, quand bien même on y a jamais songé, on doit bien pouvoir y mettre ses connaissances techniques à profit !” (65). He does not want to be an actor; he would rather be an engineer. It is what he has dreamed of becoming, and here is his chance to live the dream. However, they do not want him as an engineer. One might think that Karl would accept any position that allows him to create an identity for himself, and what a better one than an actor—a job that requires one to recreate oneself. However, by being an actor Karl would have to take on the rolls that he is given by the Oklahoma Theater. He would have to assimilate and agree to their terms. The Head of Personnel mentions, “On se décarcasse méchamment pour intégrer Négro dans la grande

entreprise ! Ça prend du temps, mais on finit quand même par y arriver !” (64). The Oklahoma Theater wants him to integrate into their venture, but he fights against it. He hopes to achieve his dream and is willing to give up on the Theater if he cannot. He is less willing to bend to their will and certainly refuses to put up with their insults. Karl tells the Golden Voice, “Vous m’insultez! Et vous insultez toute la nation à laquelle j’appartiens, rendant d’un seul coup absolument impossible le simple fait de rester ici, avec vous ! Adieu donc, la voix d’or dans l’immensité ! Ce soir encore, j’irai coucher dans un fossé d’Amérique !” (42). He refuses to be cooperative when abused because he does not behave like the Oklahoma Theater wishes. He insists on keeping his dignity as a human being, but the Theater does not see him as such. Rather, he is just another element that needs to be integrated. By the end of the play he does receive a post with the theater, but it is not clear whether or not he is going, for when he sits to eat with Léo, he seems indifferent to the possibility of the train leaving without him.

It is in this assimilation of Europe that the hyper-reality of America can be seen. America takes what it has obtained and sets about making it “better,” more real. In describing the experience of seeing a waxwork reproduction of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in Santa Cruz, CA, Umberto Eco notes,

you have been touched by the thrill of artistic greatness, you have had the most stirring spiritual emotion of your life and seen the most artistic work of art in the world. It is far away, in Milan, which is a place, like Florence, all Renaissance; you may never get there, but the voice has warned you that the original fresco is by now ruined, almost invisible, unable to give you the emotion you have received from the three-dimensional wax, which is more real, and there is more of it (18).

It is not the original, but it is better because there is more of it. America offers the simulation of Europe; taking pieces from there and making it more real, even hyper-real. Disney, for example, has perfected the art of the enchanted castle. No longer is the castle what it is in Europe, but what it should be: a fabulous realm, drawn from legends and mythology. It goes beyond the reality into the fantastic. There is no romance in the dank dungeons or the drafty corridors of the medieval fortress, therefore the reality must be improved upon. The result is the spun-sugar towers of fairy-tale castles, which is what people have come to expect. Simons remarks, “The authentic must always be produced anew because there is no longer anything genuine. Because American signs are exchangeable, because they can be shifted and displaced, they lend themselves to the production of aesthetic semblance” (200). In America, things are not exactly what they seem. The “real” item is not necessarily genuine. This is exactly what Tocqueville, upon his arrival in New York, notices: “un certain nombre de petits palais de marbre blanc dont plusieurs avaient une architecture antique; le lendemain, ayant été pour considérer de plus près celui qui avait particulièrement attiré mes regards, je trouvai que ses murs étaient de même de briques blanchies et ses colonnes de bois peint” (2: 77). The architecture that Tocqueville noticed is only a simulation of marble walls and columns. What is most important is the image, the illusion. America dresses itself in the trappings of Europe, but upon closer inspection the illusion is broken.

## **Conclusion**

The presentation of America in *Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d'emploi* reflects not only the grand and hopeful aspects of the country, but also the dark and cynical ones. The Far West—Oklahoma—is an imaginary place which none of the characters have seen, but which, nonetheless, promises the fulfillment of dreams in the form of an immense theater. However, the

emptiness and Kafkaesque disorganization add a sinister side to this great theater. Karl, the immigrant from Germany, comes in response to an offer of employment in a theater company; he comes in response to the hope proposed by America, as have so many of his kind before him. The dream offered is fantastic, bigger and more beautiful than he imagined. As the Golden voice tells him, “Boy, now everything is ready, here! It’s the American night! All is possible for you, now! What an immensity!” (44). Anything is possible in America. Karl can find the job of his dreams which will allow him to recover his self-dignity, to become an up-standing member of society. The future is before him with a million different possibilities. However, he gets lost in the hustle and bustle, partially blinded by the razzle-dazzle which barely conceals the danger present in the system. The size and the spectacle are there to mask the pain and suffering of the employees. The Oklahoma Theater, and, by extension, America, is so immense that Karl, this little piece of Europe, is swallowed whole. America ingests whatever she receives from Europe and makes it part of the illusion.

This illusion, this Disney-like perfection, is the American reality. Duparfait has chosen to present the American Far West in the form of a theater, but he especially reveals the blind devotion to business and the neglect of culture. The Oklahoma Theater produces a spectacle that is initially attractive and impressive, but upon closer inspection the flaws are visible. However, it is not the “reality” that is important, but the appearance of reality. Oklahoma—the very heart of America—is upheld as the promised utopia, but none of the characters have even seen it. One doubts they ever will. It has been idealized; it is now a fantasy land that exists only in the imagination and thus is without any real physical structure. The Oklahoma Theater claims to offer the greatest spectacle of all in facilities that are meant to impress the spectator with its grandeur. However, the company is primarily a business venture, inclined to think more of

efficiency than to worry about the conditions of the workers. Like America, it is there to sell itself. As Baudrillard notes:

Le *look* de cette société est autopublicitaire. Témoin le drapeau américain, partout présent, sur les plantations, les agglomérations, les stations-services, les tombes des cimetières, non pas comme signe héroïque, mais comme sigle d'une bonne marque de fabrique. C'est simplement le label de la plus belle entreprise internationale qui ait réussi : les USA (*Amérique*, 84-5).

America is a spectacle, whether this be cinematographic, theatrical or circus-like. It thrives on the image, the ideal. It is the biggest business in the world and its business is to sell itself.

## Chapter 5: Dreaming the Desert: Catherine Anne's *Le Bonheur du vent*

*The West, where a man can look farther and see less of anything but land and sky.*  
-Will James

As mentioned in chapter three, Calamity Jane is one of the foremost symbols of the American Far West, a heroine the equal of Buffalo Bill or Wild Bill Hickock. Her story is, perhaps, even more interesting due to the social boundaries she had to overcome to live the life she wanted to live. She chose to live a rough and wild life, a life contrary to what the society of the time thought appropriate for a woman. However, her story inspired a variety of authors even during her own lifetime and her written works have continued to inspire writers throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. The most influential of these is her *Letters to her Daughter*<sup>17</sup>, which were first revealed to the world on May 6, 1941. These letters are purported to be letters which Jane wrote to her daughter, Janey, whom she had by Wild Bill Hickock. The veracity of these letters is questionable, although there is information in them that also supports Jean McCormick's (the supposed daughter) claim.<sup>18</sup> These letters paint a portrait of the heroine of the Far West that is different from the ones presented in her own autobiographical pamphlet, *The Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane*, or other narratives. Gregory Monro describes the letters,

Loin de l'image répandue de la Calamity braillarde brandissant ses pistolets, il brosse le portrait, ou l'autoportrait, d'une femme solitaire et tourmentée, d'une mère rongée par le regret d'avoir abandonné son enfant, et d'une amoureuse passionnée, blessée par la

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<sup>17</sup> I have specifically chosen to use the French translation of this text as it, and not the original English text, is the inspiration for this play as well as Fenwick's play.

<sup>18</sup> These letters not only influenced the two plays in this work, but also (and perhaps more well-known) the Warner Brothers' 1953 musical *Calamity Jane* starring Doris Day, Howard Keel and Allyn Ann McLerie, as well as its 1963 television remake starring Carol Burnett.

malveillance des « femmes comme il faut », qui se bat sans relâche pour affronter sa postérité la tête haute (104).

Here, Jane is a woman tormented by her abandonment of her child and who struggles with the scorn of others around her. While still the rough-living, adventure-seeking cowgirl, Jane's letters present more of an internal, reflective point-of-view. This is the image that Catherine Anne presents in her play *Le Bonheur du vent*: a young woman who dreams of the Far West, but struggles with the reality of the life she lives.

Written in 2003, *Le Bonheur du vent* tells the tale of Jane's life from shortly before she gives up her daughter to soon after her first meeting with her as a young woman, paralleled with the story of Helen, the woman who adopts the infant with her husband, Jim. While this play is based on the same story as Fenwick's, Anne focuses more on the feminine relationships and how the women relate to the space of the Far West. Fenwick provides a more historic rendition of Calamity Jane's life, recounting various adventures that she had from the time she met Wild Bill Hickock to the time of her death. Catherine Anne's play spans a shorter period of time, from May 1874 to May 1902, as specified in the "Avertissements aux Lecteurs" at the beginning of the work.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Catherine Anne's Jane is more contemplative than the Calamity Jane of Fenwick's play. One way that Anne accomplishes this is through her poetic style. The whole play is written in free verse with no punctuation. This causes the play to have even less structure since even the sentences are broken. In addition, Anne's Jane is much more vocal about her thoughts and feelings, especially when she confides in Mary. This is the influence of *Lettres à sa fille*, as mentioned above. Anne's text follows the *Lettres* much more closely than Fenwick's work did, but is not as detailed in Jane's adventures. *Calamity Jane* presents the heroine as a conflicted woman who transgresses the norms put in place by nineteenth century American

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<sup>19</sup> Fenwick's play covers the years 1870 to 1903, but is not any more specific in the temporal indications.

society. She tries to survive both in the masculine space of the Wild West, disguising her sex and working as a man, and, when revealed as a woman and rejected from the masculine space, in the feminine space as a mother and housekeeper. Anne, however, presents a more introspective heroine, who is never seen outside of an enclosed space. Instead, Anne focuses on the relationship between three women: Jane, Helen and Irène. Throughout the play the action switches between Jane's story and Helen's story, or rather between the Far West and the East coast. In the third act, after Helen's death, a supernatural element is added in the form of Helen's ghost.

Jane's story is that of a young woman trapped by the social constraints of nineteenth century society, but who longs for the freedom—both physical and social—that the open prairies offer. She is also torn between her longing for freedom and her love for her daughter. The freedom she longs for is not appropriate for a child due to the many dangers and uncertainties of Jane's lifestyle. However, the role of a mother ties Jane to home and hearth, a role in which she chafes and in which she is unable to financially support herself and the infant. As in Fenwick's play, she is tormented about giving up her child for adoption, but Anne focuses more on Jane's emotions than Fenwick does, especially her desire to reconcile her desires with the requirements of her daughter and the society she lives in. Anne shows the struggle Jane goes through trying to support her small family on her own, without the aid of a man. In fact, the men in Jane's life are, if not outright absent, then distant. The spectator understands that the father of Jane's child is Wild Bill Hickock, but his name is never mentioned and this only serves to highlight his absence in her life. The other male figure, the Friend, is also nameless. He tries to help and support Jane but, while she does appreciate and ask for his help from time to time, she is far more preoccupied by the absent man she loves. Despite the fact that she even agrees to marry him, Jane is also

dismissive. She tells him at the end of the play, “Ne me touche pas tu ne me touches plus / ... / Parce que l’ami / Je ne supporte plus nos grimaces va-t’en” (86). She marries him on a whim and on a whim she leaves him again. Her sight is failing and she feels that she will not live much longer, so she has little need of a man to take care of her.

Helen, however, accepts the norms defined by society. She longs to be a good wife and mother. She struggles with her barrenness, which makes the adoption of the infant Irène both more joyful and more terrifying for her. With Irène she is able to fulfill her role as a woman, giving her adoptive daughter the best education she can and trying to provide everything Helen wishes she had had as a child. For example, in act two, scene 3, Jim and Helen are discussing what to give Irène for her fourth birthday. Helen wants to give her a harpsichord, saying, “Un clavecin / . . . / Un jouet ravissant / . . . / Ne te moque pas / Petite j’ai manqué de tout” (48). Like many parents, Helen tries to live vicariously through her daughter, giving her gifts that Helen longed for. She imagines her daughter growing into a beautiful, refined young woman, but this is somewhat contrary to Irène’s personality. Irène loves to run and jump and climb which makes Helen think of Jane. This scares Helen, for she lives in perpetual fear that someday Jane will appear to reclaim her child, destroying Helen’s dream.

Throughout the play Jane is contrasted by Helen. They are extreme opposites, like night and day. Jane rebels against the societal concept of a woman’s place while Helen embraces it. Jane revels in the freedom she finds in the emptiness of the open prairies while Helen is repulsed and afraid of this space. However they are not without their similarities, most notably their fathers. Jane’s father came west to spread the Gospel. She describes him, “Mon père devant brandissant une bible / son arme contre les Indiens / Prédicateur mon père / Un homme de mots qui t’assomment / Un homme qui se croit le tonnerre de Dieu et lance / Des phrases / Un homme

sans peau / Et ma mère derrière / Hagarde harcelée d'enfants" (66). Her father was passionate about his work as a pastor and this passion drove him west, followed by his wife and children. He comes across as a forceful man, although perhaps somewhat oblivious to the hardships that his wife and children may face. Likewise, Helen's father came west, seemingly for religious reasons also, although he is later described as a doctor. Helen describes her family, "[Ma mère] n'avait pas voulu suivre sa folie / Traverser tant de terres pour / Le plaisir d'être aveugle derrière son prophète / Quand il est parti je n'étais qu'un bébé" (13). Helen's father set forth for the new territories of the western frontier, blindly following his prophet, according to Helen. However, her mother opted to stay behind on the East coast with the infant Helen. As a result, she never knew her father except as the man who chose to abandon her for the wilds of the Far West.

The relationship of these two women with their fathers is important because, to a certain degree, it influences their concept of their roles in society. Jane escaped from the controls of her family at a young age, breaking away from society's rules and regulations of how a young girl should behave. Ever since, she has defied the accepted rules of womanly conduct, wishing only to be free to do as she pleases. She is scorned by other women as a result, but is scornful of them in return. Helen, however, takes refuge in these societal rules and seeks to create that which she never had: a family. Since she never knew her father and her mother died when she was young, Helen longs to re-create the security of the family circle, and to this purpose she and her husband, Jim, have come west to visit her father. Unfortunately for her, she is barren and her barrenness becomes a torment. In scene two of the first act, she and her husband are walking and, in response to his suggestion that they have their whole lives together before them, she bitterly replies, "Quelle vie / L'absence a pris racine en moi / Rien ne me vien / Rien / Et lui / [Mon père] marche sur sa marmaille" (13). The absence of the longed-for child consumes her, and the

fact that her father, who denied her when she went to visit him, is the proud parent of a large family.

As a result, both Jane and Helen are also influenced in the way they perceive the virtual space, this space that lies, not just beyond the confines of the stage, but also beyond the confines of their lives. Jane, who longs to be free from the confines of society, also longs to be free from any physical confines and is much more at home in the wild and empty spaces of the western prairies. There she can feel the wind and does not have to worry about anyone or anything. Helen, however, is afraid of the West and is consumed by the emptiness inside her, an emptiness she sees reflected in the western spaces. For her the virtual space is an uncivilized and dangerous space, so she takes refuge in the enclosed, cultivated spaces in the East. Despite their many differences, these two women also have their love for Irène and their hopes for her future in common. Irène is a combination of these two women, one by nature and the other by nurture. She was raised in the East and has always spent her life playing the role of a well-to-do young woman, but longs for the freedom and excitement of the West, unaware of her lineage. Mary, her western counterpart, shares her ideals of this space; both of them romanticize the free life Jane leads. Irène herself is torn by these two parts of her heritage. In scene 7 of act three she decides to run away in search of the reason for her restlessness. She tells her horse, Câlène, after the ghost of her mother has tried to stop her from leaving, “Je deveins folle / Câlène / J’entends des voix fantômes / Je leur parle / Quelqu’un s’est emparé de mon âme / . . . / J’ai besoin de savoir / J’ai besoin d’être libre” (82). She has the sensation that something is not right; she wonders that she does not remember her mother. She wants to leave the house she grew up in to find the freedom that she longs for, the freedom of the wind.

## **A Woman's Role**

In the nineteenth century, the woman of the Far West was a civilizing presence, providing a symbol of stability in an unstable world, that of the family unit. In his analysis of a Zane Gray novel, Stephen L. Tanner mentions, "It is female sensitivity, loving, nurturing, supporting, and enduring that enables meaning and happiness at the end of this novel. And by implication, it was those same female forces that enabled a new society in the West" (59). The pioneer woman was supposed to be demure, subject to her husband, but also providing important physical and moral support to her male counterpart. Even though it was the men who went forth and built farms and towns, it was the woman who created the home, who brought a need for education and spiritual guidance to a rough and savage world. Her realm was the house, cooking, cleaning, bearing children and raising them. Young girls learned the skills needed to keep house from their mothers so that they would be ready to take their place in society when the time came. Calamity Jane, however, seemed to care little for what was expected of a young woman in the West, being much more interested in living her life the way she saw fit: drinking, swearing, and gambling, even from her youth. Gregory Monro describes her adolescent years:

*Cette adolescence passée dans le Wyoming enduret très tôt la jeune Martha, qui s'intègre vite à la vie de l'Ouest sauvage. Véritable garçon manqué, elle apprend à monter à cheval, à manier le lasso, à vivre au jour le jour en vagabondant de ville en ville. Mais, livrée à elle-même, elle est de tous les excès. Cette jeune fille sans chaperon, qui fume, boit et jure, ne passe pas inaperçue. Son comportement extraverti marque les esprits et l'isole des autres femmes, pour qui elle n'est pas fréquentable (36)*

The historical Calamity Jane was an anomaly from a relatively young age, behaving like a man and thus scorned by the other members of her sex. Her lifestyle was inappropriate for a lady. She

rode like a man, swore and drank like a man, and traveled from town to town without a chaperone. As a teen, she was not controlled by a male figure, her father having disappeared in 1867. Even as a wife and a mother, she continued to live a life many considered unacceptable for a woman, as Fenwick depicts in his play. His Jane attempts jobs such as a Pony Express rider or a scout for a scientific expedition, which were thought inappropriate for a woman of the nineteenth century. Just as inappropriate for a respectable woman was her job as a dancing girl in the saloon.

Jane in Catherine Anne's work also has difficulties with her role as a woman. She finds the life other women lead too confining, too restrictive. Young girls stayed at their mother's skirts learning the skills they would need once they married. After marriage they were tied to their home and, eventually, children. Jane poetically observes, "Les femmes je les voyais vivre entourées d'ombre ou d'éclat / En cave ou en cage / Aucune n'a droit au vent au soleil au vertige de l'horizon / Aucune n'a droit au regard franc d'un homme / Au jeu au rire au tintamarre" (22). In her youth she saw how women lived and how they were treated and decided that this was not the life that she wanted to lead. They were either hidden away or put on display, but either way a woman was entrapped in the constraints of society. They were not free to enjoy the sun and wind for fear that it would damage their complexions; they were not free to run and laugh and play. They were not treated as equals of men and were expected to be submissive, not even raising their eyes to meet a man's gaze. Jane seeks to escape these rules and the confining space where they are enforced. She does not want to play the role of a respectable woman on the stage where society sets her. She even finds the costume restrictive. When Jane comes to visit Jim and Irène, she comments on her skirts, "Satanés jupons / Impossible de courir avec ça / Galimatias / Comment voulez-vous que les femmes aient une petite chance" (63). Jane is accustomed to

dressing as a man and the freedom of movement that pants give her and the long skirts and corsets that are the fashion hamper her physical movement just as much as the scorn of the other women hampers her socially. In this she is much like the French heroine, Joan of Arc, another historical figure is, by her cross-dressing, becomes a theatrical character. Jane, like Joan, puts on male clothing to play the role of an adventurer, however, when Jane puts on feminine clothing, she is still roll-playing. She does not feel comfortable in the cultivated, feminine space and this is highlighted by the difficulties she has with her costume.

This social encumbrance is seen in the way other women treat her, most specifically in her recounting of the treatment she receives from Mary's mother, a character who is never physically present. Mary's mother is not as outrageous as Mrs. Burke is in Fenwick's play. She does not try to drive out the devil from her, but neither is there any mention of her, or indeed anyone, helping Jane at the end of her life. Jane describes to Mary an encounter with her mother, "Ne veut pas me croiser / Me parler / me dire pourquoi elle change de trottoir quand elle m'avise / Parole / Un jour / Ta mère / Je l'ai fait traverser cinq fois / Avec mes grandes jambes / Je zigzaguais comme un diable" (16-17). Mary's mother considers herself too good to talk to Jane and goes out of her way to avoid her. Jane, for her part, takes a perverse pleasure out of demonstrating her abhorrence of their vanity and hypocrisy. Mary's mother, for instance, worries about Mary's safety alone in Jane's cabin, but, despite her, most likely, Christian upbringing she seems not to give a second thought to Jane's infant daughter being left alone in the cold, hungry.

Jane is fighting against the social concept of a woman's space. She longs to return to the free life she used to live on the prairies, but by having a child she becomes tied to civilization. No longer does she have to think only of herself, now she has an infant who is completely dependent on her and thus Jane becomes dependent on the goodwill of others. Jane moves from

the freedom of the empty spaces to the confines of her shack and, by extension, the confines of small-town mentality. She is closed in by the actual space of the scene and left longing for the virtual space. For example, in the very first scene she explains to the Friend why she sent him to spy on her lover. She tells him, “Enfermée ici tout l’hiver / Bloquée / Je ne savais même pas s’il respirait / Je t’ai demandé de le trouver de l’observer de rester dans son ombre” (10). Jane wanted the Friend to let her know where the man she loves was and what he was doing so that she could eventually go forth and find him. Every scene in which Jane is seen she is closed in, whether in her own cabin or in the home of Jim and Helen. The most “open” setting is when she is at the train station, but Jane is not the one to be going forth on a journey. Instead she gives up her daughter and remains tied to the space she inhabits. The society gives her a role that is contrary to what she holds dear: the role of mother. As a mother Jane is expected to settle down, become respectable and set a good example for her young daughter, but this in direct opposition to her personality. She wants to inspire a love of the outdoors in her daughter. She sings to the baby, “Dans la prairie / Aïe aïe kaille di / Tu grandiras / Le vent emportera tous tes soucis / Aïe aïe kaille di / Tu chanteras” (7-8). For Jane there is freedom in the prairies, a freedom of movement, freedom from worries and social constraints. The baby Jane will grow up in this kind of paradise. However, the prairies and wilderness compose the masculine space and, as such, are forbidden her. According to a twenty-first view of the nineteenth century society, this natural space is the actual space for the men; it is a virtual space for the women. Jane realizes that her daughter will not have much of a life with her. She tells Jim on the platform of the train station, “Ici / Il n’y a que des bêtes et des tueurs / Si je garde ma petite elle sera maltraitée / Toute son enfance montrée du doigt / Elle portera le poids d’être ma fille / Emmenez-la protégez la / Et qu’elle fasse des études” (33). For Jane, the dangerous space is the feminine space of the Far

West, not because her child may come to physical harm, but she will never be accepted by society. While Jane has little interest in how the townspeople see her, she does come to realize that her daughter will have to interact with others and their derision risks to pose a problem. The infant will grow up with the stigmata of being her daughter. Just as Jane is scorned and despised, so will her daughter be. Yet she is not without hope. Even as she gives up her daughter, she sings this song, hoping that the child's life will be easier than her own.

In contrast, Helen welcomes and finds solace in her role as a respectable, refined woman. In the beginning of the play she is struggling because she does not feel herself to be complete due to her inability to have children. She is a good wife, but is unable to be a good mother. As they are walking through the dust in the second scene, Helen tells Jim, "Envie de vomir / Honte / Honte sur moi qui t'ai traîné jusqu'au lieu de ma honte" (13). Helen has brought Jim west, searching for her father in the hopes that somehow he will be able to heal her of her barrenness. However, after meeting him, she feels even more lost than ever. He denies her as his child and this denial reinforces her feelings of loss. However, she is given a second chance; she and Jim learn that there are many children in the West who are desperate for a stable and loving home. Jane eventually offers her daughter to them, knowing that they will be able to provide for the infant in ways she never will. Finally Helen can fill the role of mother that she has longed for.

Nonetheless, her feelings about this role are complicated. She is thrilled to be a mother as well as a wife, and when we first see her in this role she is reading a story, awaiting the return of Jim from New York. It is interesting to note that the one part of the play that is not in verse is for a short passage at the beginning of Act two where she is reading a story aloud. She reads, "Légère et joyeuse, l'enfant sortit de la forêt. Cela fit un bond de clarté. Dans le ciel encore bleu, les premières étoiles apparaissaient. L'enfant reconnut le jardin, le cerisier, la forme familière de

la maison. Elle courut vers l'intérieur, tenant son trésor, serré" (35). This description could easily be applied to Helen when she comes home for the first time holding the infant Irène, her treasure. She is like this lost child, searching for the familiarity of home and joyful at finally finding what she seeks. However, she feels a constant threat from Jane because, for many years, Helen has felt guilty for taking Irène from her. She is in possession of a stolen treasure. Just after she learns that her disease is fatal, she asks Jim, "Était-ce une mauvaise action / Jim / Prendre ainsi la place encore chaude / Irène s'est endormie dans mes bras / Le train allait / L'éloignant de sa mère / Le train nous berçait merveilleusement ensemble / Et j'ai senti à l'intérieur de moi / Quelque chose s'ouvrir / Devenir tendre / Et je mourrais de peur / La voleuse" (58). She feels like a thief, stealing Jane's most precious possession, but is nevertheless afraid of Irène learning that she is not her real mother. She is so afraid she makes Jim swear that he will never tell and when he does she knows that the doctor has told him she will not live to see Irène grow up. Once again she has failed in her role as a woman.

This role has a well-defined space: that of the home. At first she insists that this home be in England, for she lives in constant fear that one day Jane will return to reclaim her daughter. Jim asks her to move to New York, where he works, because the strain of travel is wearing on him, but she absolutely refuses. When he protests that Jane will not come and bother them she replies, "Que savons-nous de cette femme / Elle vit dans l'extravagance / Ce que les autres redoutent elle en raffole / Que savons-nous de ses brusques désirs" (38). Jane is different from other women, and, for Helen, that difference is dangerous. She fears that the extravagance and the wildness of the West as represented by Jane will invade the tranquility of her household and destroy what she holds dear. Much as her father's departure tore apart her young life, the prospect of Jane's masculinity threatens to do so again. Hers is a refined space, where she

imagines the young Irène sitting genteelly, practicing the piano and wearing the latest fashion. Helen is more representative of the East and of Europe, in her tastes for beauty and culture. England, where they make their home after the adoption of Irène, is safer. It is impossible for Jane to come riding up, disturbing their lives. Most importantly, it is even more civilized than the East Coast. She strives for conformity where Jane seeks for adventure. This is why she is more at home in Europe than in America, because the smaller, more confined spaces of the Old World reassure her. Baudrillard notes:

Bien au delà des mœurs à découvrir, c'est l'immoralité de l'espace à parcourir qui compte. C'est elle, et la distance pure, et la délivrance du social, qui comptent. Ici, dans la société la plus morale qui soit, l'espace est vraiment immoral. Ici, dans la société la plus conforme qui soit, les dimensions sont immorales. C'est cette immoralité qui rend la distance légère et le voyage infini, c'est elle qui purifie les muscles de leur fatigue (14).

American culture is obsessed with morality and conformity, but the wide-open American spaces are neither moral nor conform. Helen wants to raise her family in a safe, confined home, conforming to the societal view of a woman's place, but this is not representative of American spaces. Their emptiness defies constraints. Jane is part of this vast "immoral" space. She is at home in the freedom of this space that is too large to control. She is able to be herself and not have to fulfill a role that the society gives her with little problem.

### **Emptiness**

For Jane the untamed western deserts symbolize the absence of social constrictions. She is free to move, to act, to be whoever she wants to be. She remarks on her life before she became pregnant saying, "J'avais écarté la malédiction d'être une femme / Tous oubliaient mon sexe / Redoutée des Sioux et des désespérés / Je me sentais forte invincible" (22). She was able to

forget and make others forget that she was a woman, thus escaping the confines to which other women were subjected. She was a force to be reckoned with, feared by her enemies. Her life on the open prairies is one of freedom: freedom from the conventional Western, white, male-dominated culture. There she is in charge of her destiny and answers to no one. However, this is a space that has been transformed into a virtual space for her; she can no longer access it like she used to except through her memories. Her pregnancy slowed her down and having a child was both a pleasure and a burden. The second time Mary comes to take care of the infant, Jane explains to her how she felt when she became pregnant, “Puis la petite a surgi en dedans et je me suis alourdie stupidement / Comme toutes / Puis la petite est née / Et mes seins réclamaient sa bouche / Et c’était bon ces longues heures de lait / Ces heures sans combat” (22). Just as millions of women before her, Jane’s body changed when she was pregnant. She has become slower and more appreciative of the peaceful hours spent nursing her child. This burden, this weight, is what keeps her from entering once again into the space she dreams of, but a space in which the spectator never sees her.

The reason Jane is so attracted to the emptiness of the Far West is because it is a structureless space. There are no borders, no constraints of house and home if she does not want them. She can ride freely where and when she wants. Moreover, there is less of a social constraint. In the emptiness of the prairies she does not have to conform to societal expectations. However, in order to survive, Jane is required to participate in town life; she has to work to support herself and her child. This requirement distances her from the empty space and she becomes hemmed in by the expectations of the people around her. Nevertheless, the life Jane leaves is a rough and sometimes violent one. She may long for the prairies, but this space is beyond the borders of civilization. She admits that she does not lead a gentle life and that

everyone only depends on his or her pistols and this is what led her to give up her daughter. She explains this to Jim as she is giving the baby to him at the train station, “La nourrir l’habiller OK et puis / Quel exemple / Ici / Aucune beauté aucune gentillesse / Chacun ne compte que sur ses colts” (32). The lack of social structure causes the Far West to be a physically dangerous place; one can only count on one’s prowess with a gun. The country side was populated with wild and dangerous animals as well as Native Americans who were not always welcoming to the settlers. In addition to this, many of the towns were just as dangerous. While Catherine Anne does not specify where Jane’s cabin is, the historical Calamity Jane is most closely associated with Deadwood, North Dakota. John Ames, in his chapter on law and disorder in the Far West, notes:

The lawlessness in Deadwood grew more from fear than evil—fear of losing a bonanza in gold. Very early on, Deadwood wasn’t just lawless, it was illegal. A white man’s town on Indian real estate, and full of gold poachers at that . . . Many of those first citizens were reluctant to even report killings for fear the government would run them out (46).

People would kill over gold, politics, or just in a drunken fight and nothing would be done about it. While the presence of Mary and her family seems to suggest that the town near which Jane is living is not as lawless as Deadwood, there were nevertheless many dangers. Nevertheless, Jane prefers the wildness of the West to the comforts of the East. When the Friend, trying to encourage her to give up the baby, mentions how rough the life is that they lead Jane responds, “Est-elle moins rude sous un édredon de plume / Ou sous le ciel étoilé / La vie / Je préfère le bonheur du vent au confort des maisons” (29). Just because there is more physical comfort does not mean that one’s life is freer. Jane prefers by far to feel the wind in her hair to a comfortable home which is nothing more than a prison for her. She would rather be free in the open, natural spaces of the Far West. The openness of the American Far West is one of the defining features of

this space. The French often think of the American Far West as a *désert*, a great expanse of wilderness, untouched by mankind. This emptiness is one of the defining features of America, both physically as well as culturally. Baudrillard states, “La culture américaine est l’héritière des déserts. Ceux-ci ne sont pas une nature en contrepoint des villes, ils désignent le vide, la nudité radicale qui est à l’arrière-plan de tout établissement humain” (63). This sense of space is integral to the American culture. This space is the background of all human establishments, the blank page upon which the human imagination builds. America is a land of possibilities, where dreams can come true. This is what makes it so alluring to people from all over the world. Everyone dreams of a better place and America presents itself as a place where those dreams can be achieved. However, these dreams can also be nightmares.

Helen, for example, hates the emptiness of the Far West. She has come west in search of her father in the hopes that he might heal her of her barrenness. However, he denies any knowledge of her, and she is even more hurt by the fact that not only has he replaced her, but that he is the father of a large family while she has none. She tells Jim, as they are sitting on the side of the road, “Pays absurde / Où mon père a choisi de venir vivre et se multiplier / A l’image de son Dieu / . . . / L’absence a pris racine en moi / Rien ne me vient / Rien / Et lui / Il marche sur sa marmaille” (13). Helen’s dearest wish is to have a child, so that she can fill her role to its utmost by providing heirs for her husband. However, she is incapable of having children and the bounty of this empty space seems to mock her. It is a fertile land, although she experiences it as only dust<sup>20</sup>, but one in which children seem to abound. After he saves Jim and Helen from the bandits and brings them to town the Friend mentions that there are many children in that part of the country who are unwanted. He explains, “Ici certains naissent que personne ne peut désirer ni soigner / Certains naissent qui ne connaîtront pas d’enfance / On les retrouve dans la gueule des

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<sup>20</sup> The stage directions for act two indicate that Jim and Helen are walking “en soulevant de la poussière” (12).

chacals” (19). The Far West seems to abound in children: the large family of Helen’s father, the unwanted children who often end up in the mouths of wild animals. She is surprised to learn that even Jane has a child.

The emptiness of the Far West seems to make fun of Helen’s barrenness because despite the lack of culture or civilization, it is a place of fertility, though not for her. She has come seeking a remedy to her barrenness, but has been denied. It also echoes the emptiness inside her. It reminds her of what has been taken from her and what she will never have. Where Jane longs for the emptiness of the Far West, Helen is afraid of it. She is afraid of the structurelessness and finds solace in the rules and regulations of society. There she is safe. In the West she is lost and alone. Most importantly, however, is that it is a dangerous space, and one that threatens her no matter where she goes. The West first of all took her father from her and it, in the form of Jane, threatens to destroy her way of life in her point of view. When she learns of Jim’s correspondence with Jane, Helen demands, “*Quel autre engagement as-tu pris / Va-t-elle venir ici un jour bientôt quand / Cette femme / Quelle chambre lui as-tu réservée dans la maison / Vas-tu te faire mormon et l’épouser aussi / Toutes deux parmi les roses nous serions belles*” (52). For Helen, Jane threatens to ruin the happy home that she has created, a home that she never dreamt she would ever have. She is afraid that one day Jane will arrive and take her daughter back. She already suffers from the void her father left in her life. To have her most prized possession taken away from her would create an emptiness that she could never fill and from which she would never recover. Jim is unaware of the conflict within her, though he is conscious of her unease. Helen accuses him, “*Tu ne me comprends pas / Tu ne comprends pas cette peur que j’ai en moi du vide / Tu ne veux pas comprendre*” (52). This fear of emptiness within her is not something that Jim can understand. It is another part of her character. Twice Helen mentions that she lives a

backward, inside-out life, once at the beginning of the play and then right before she dies. She tells Jim, “J’ai vécu à l’envers trop longtemps / Usé trop de forces à résister au désastre de l’enfance” (57). She has spent her time and energy fighting the sense of loss and emptiness, and the Far West represents this emptiness.

### **Future Hopes**

The axis between Jane and Helen is Irène. In her is found elements of both: she was raised in polite society and knows how to dress and behave as befits a young woman of her time but she also dreams of the emptiness and freedom of the western prairies and longs to feel the sun and wind on her skin. This is, of course, completely different from the character of Janey in Fenwick’s play. There she is the character who hates the Far West and prefers the social conventions and comforts of Europe. The first moment that Anne’s Irène gets alone with Jane she attacks her with questions about her life in the West. She tells her, “Racontez-moi vite / . . . / Les chercheurs d’or les Indiens les grands espaces les montagnes Rocheuses” (66). She has a romanticized view of life in the West; she thinks it must be exciting and liberating to live in such an adventurous place. She wants to hear stories about people striking it rich in their search for gold, about battles with Indians, about this vast and wild space. Nevertheless, the reality of life in the West is different from how it is presented in the dime novels of the time. As Edward Buscome observes, “Much of the actual experience of the overland emigrant trail was humdrum, as attested in the hundreds of memoirs and journals produced, many written by women . . . Dramatising the experience of trudging across the featureless landscape or expiring from cholera doesn’t make for the kind of entertainment westerns are expected to deliver” (40). There is very little that is romantic or adventurous about bad travel, bad food or back-breaking work. Jane ends up not sharing this monotony, or even her love for the freedom of the wind, with her as they are

interrupted by the arrival of Jim. However, Irène is certain that it must be wonderful because she is free.

She is drawn by the West as much as Helen was repulsed by it. In a way, she is like Helen in that she has a double life. Irène tells her father as she is getting ready to leave, “Si je n’étais pas cette Irène / Sage / Cette Irène obéissante / Si j’étais autre / Si toute cette impatience dedans / Etait le cri de l’autre que je suis” (84). It is this other that Helen has been trying to protect her from, this other that Helen fears. Yet it is Irène’s heritage coming out, pointing at her roots. It is the part of her that longs for the freedom of the West. In scene one of act three Irène comes back from a ride on her horse and Jim scolds her for being gone too long. She replies, “Câline a sauté deux barrières / . . . / Après tout s’est ouvert / Entre nous et l’horizon que l’écume des prés verts / Au trot longtemps rebondissant sur ma selle / J’avais perdu toute notion du temps / Jusqu’à voir soudain droit devant / Le soleil du soir / . . . / Je brûlais d’aller jusqu’à l’océan / Là-bas / L’océan du soleil couchant” (60). She briefly tastes the freedom that the West can offer, this freedom of open spaces. No longer would she be physically hemmed in by the walls of a comfortable home or the borders of a rose garden. The Wild West is a space that she has conceived in her imagination, much like Paméla in Obaldia’s play, although Irène does not associate it with the hope for social freedoms that Paméla (or even Jane) does.

Paralleling the character of Irène is the character of Mary.<sup>21</sup> While Irène is completely unfamiliar with the Far West, Mary lives there, but in a “civilized” town. She is the well-to-do daughter of the town grocer and through her the spectator learns about the town that exists beyond the walls of Jane’s lonely cabin. However, like Irène, she romanticizes Jane’s life. When Jane tells her that she has found a job at the construction site on the hill, Mary is ready to join

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<sup>21</sup> In the original staging of this play on March 7, 2003, Mary and Irène were played by the same actress, Chloé Dabert.

her. She says, “Je pourrais aussi m’engager sur le chantier / Echapper / Aux odeurs des épices au son du tiroir-caisse / Au cri d’aiguilles à tricot de ma mère / Je travaillerais dur je ne dépendrais plus de personne” (21). She longs to escape the routine of her home for the freedom she believes Jane has. However, Jane discourages her in this because life never happens the way one expects; one day she will meet someone and fall in love, she too will have desires. When Mary comes to ask her opinion on marriage Jane tells her that one can never depend on love. Mary, however, is of a different opinion. She announces to Jane, “Moi je réussirai / Je m’y prendrai mieux / Je vais me marier oui / Et mes enfants je les élèverai / Pour la liberté pour l’indépendance pour l’amour” (44). Where Jane has failed, Mary believes she will succeed. She will manage to combine the freedom of the West with her role as a wife and mother. She will raise her children to love the freedom of the western spaces.

Unfortunately, there is still the foreboding of continued tragedy. Irène tells her father upon Jane’s departure, “J’ai rêvé que j’étais mariée / Avec cet homme que vous n’aimez pas / Et une petite fille sortait de mon corps / Et cette petite fille fondait disparaissait / Et Jane / Ton amie Jane / Les yeux perdus dans les pleurs / Me murmurait / Ta petite fille perdue le pire qui pouvait t’arriver Jane” (77). Irène has dreamed of losing a child, and that this loss is something that her father’s friend, Jane understands. According to Gregory Monro, Jean McCormick, the woman who claimed to be the daughter of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill and thus is the basis for Irène, did have a daughter, Betty Jane Oakes, whom she lost, though due to a kidnapping instead of a death as is recounted in *Lettres à sa fille*, or even in Fenwick’s play. Nonetheless, Calamity Jane’s daughter loses her own daughter, and so Irène’s dream is somewhat prophetic. Will Irène, and, by extension, Mary succeed in marrying their love of the West with the rules and regulations of society? Or is this space forever untamable?

## Conclusion

In this play the two major characters of Jane and Helen very much represent the spaces of the Far West and the East (and, by extension, Europe.) Jane embodies the wildness and freedom of the West. She longs for the freedom and emptiness of the structureless American wilderness where she is not bound by the social restraints placed on women. Helen, on the other hand, represents the safety and conformity of the East. The emptiness of the Far West represents loss and mockery to her as well as threatens to destroy the home and family she has struggled to create. She takes comfort in the set rules and regulations of a woman in the nineteenth century, and, like many women, is repulsed by Jane's obvious flaunting of the conventions. It is in Irène that the two points of view come together. She has been brought up in a world of luxury and culture, but longs for the freedom of the wind, not knowing that her birth mother wishes the same for her. Jane states in the last scene, "Je n'étais pas fragile ni docile ni froide ni éprise de Dieu / Femme déplacée / Je prie qu'un jour dans cette ville dans ce pays / Sur notre terre entière / Jane puisse exister / Ma fille Jane / Et toutes les petites" (87). Perhaps someday women will have the freedom to be who and what they are. She hopes that her daughter will be able to taste this freedom, as well as all little girls, a freedom that has been denied to her.

Jane and Irène both believe that the freedom they seek will be found in the virtual space of the American Far West. It is a space where anything is possible, a fascinating place. Baudrillard explains this fascination, "... pourquoi les déserts sont-ils si fascinants ? C'est que toute profondeur y est résolue — neutralité brillante, mouvante et superficielle, défi au sens et à la profondeur, défi à la nature et à la culture, hyperespace ultérieur, sans origine désormais, sans références" (119). The West is enthralling because it is this undefined and indefinable space, a space greater than the imagination. It defies the senses with its immensity. The openness and

emptiness of the space allows for the freedom of physical and social movement, defying culture. It is structureless, without boundaries and without order. This is, of course, what Jane finds most appealing of the virtual space while Helen is terrified. She longs for culture, order and structure and this she finds to a certain degree on the East Coast, but even more so in Europe. There she is safe from any threat of the West and its chaotic ways.

### **Conclusion: I Want to be in America**

America: the land where dreams come true. It is the home of Hollywood and Disneyland. It is a country of wonders and wide-open spaces. It is a land of black and white, good and bad; a mindset that confuses yet fascinates Europeans. It is an overwhelming space, a vast and empty space besides being dangerous. The most common image of America is that of the cowboy and Indian, this small piece of America's past that so marks the nation and everyone's view of it. It is the image of the American spirit: adventurous but conquering everything in its path. The American Far West, realm of the cowboy, has sparked the imagination of many authors since the second half of the nineteenth century. Representations of the Far West are found in all forms of literature, including the theater. There is a wide variety of plays that focus on America, but five in particular focus on the American Far West: *Du vent dans les branches de sassafras*, *Sur le fil* ou *Ballade du train fantôme*, *Calamity Jane*, *Idylle à Oklahoma: Une offre d'emploi*, and *Le Bonheur du vent*. All of these plays—dating from 1965 to 2003 and covering a wide variety of styles—place America on the stage. The French are known for their tendency to place the Other on stage, thus helping themselves to define what it is to be “French.” In the seventeenth century the French defined themselves by dramatizing the Oriental Other, but by the twentieth century, when looking toward America, the definition is enlarged to “European.”

Throughout these plays we have seen several of the same underlying themes: the attraction and repulsion between the Old World and the New, the emptiness of the American Far West, and the hyperreality of this space. Moreover, all five plays set the Far West into the virtual space—an unseen and imagined space—where it is given an even greater importance. Despite the different time periods in which these plays were written, despite the different styles, all the

playwrights have similar ways of viewing America. Most importantly, all five of them choose to represent this foreign space on the theatrical stage.

In all of these works, Europe and America are juxtaposed. Each one watches the other with fascination, but also with a little bit of abhorrence. This is most obvious in the European point of view as all the authors are European, and most of them French. In these plays Europe and America are primarily represented by the characters themselves. Even when, as in Obaldia's play, the representation of the two continents is not obvious, there is still a representation of the Old World and the New. The Old World represents stability and tradition while the New World represents danger and excitement. For example, John-Emery and Caroline represent tradition, though in a farcical nature, while Paméla and Tom represent the search for new ideas, a new way of life, but also in a farcical manner. The American Far West is an ideal world; often the character is going to be free when he or she reaches this space: free from parental authority, free from a tyrannical dictator, or free from social anxieties and constraints. It is an idealized space, where dreams come true. This is what Baudrillard calls the "achieved utopia," that America sees itself (and thereby causes others to do so as well) as the perfect place where everything is possible. Baudrillard states:

Le principe de l'utopie réalisée explique l'absence, et d'ailleurs l'inutilité, de la métaphysique et de l'imaginaire dans la vie américaine. Elle crée chez les Américains une perception de la réalité différente de la nôtre. Le réel n'y est pas lié à l'impossible, et aucun échec ne peut le remettre en cause. Ce qui s'est pensé en Europe se réalise en Amérique — tout ce qui disparaît en Europe réapparaît à San Francisco ! (83)

Because nothing is impossible in America, there is no reason for the same level of thought and debate as in Europe. Americans have a different viewpoint from their European brethren. The

black-and-white mindset that many Americans have often confuses Europeans, especially the French who are used to debate and argumentation, for whom there are many shades of gray. Where Europe is a space for thought, America is a space for action. This causes both the fascination and repulsion that the French exhibit towards Americans. However, there is a responding fascination of Americans towards Europe: Europe is where history is. This fascination leads to a general acquisitiveness where Americans seek to re-create aspects of Europe.

This reproduction of European artifacts adds to the unease and enthrallment of America for the European because the reproduction is both like and unlike the original. Umberto Eco, in his travels around America, witnessed on many accounts the mania for collecting, rebuilding and recreating. In his discussion of the Palace of Living Arts in Buena Vista, Los Angeles, he writes:

The Palace's philosophy is not, 'We are giving you the reproduction so that you will want the original,' but rather, 'We are giving you the reproduction so you will no longer feel any need for the original.' But for the reproduction to be desired, the original has to be idolized, and hence the kitsch function of the inscriptions and the taped voices, which remind you of the greatness of the art of the past (19).

Eco continually highlights the tendency of America to recreate the masterpieces of Europe and then to make them "more real." These masterpieces are lauded for their greatness, but are less real because the reproductions are here, in America, and they are better than the originals. This is the hyperreality of America. It is what calls to Tom and Paméla, to Fanny, Karl, Tharsis, or Irène. The American Far West is better; it is more real because it is where dreams come true, à la Disneyland or Hollywood. The Far West of the nineteenth century is a perfect setting because it is a time and place of excitement, adventure, and aspirations. It is more closely connected with

the cinematographic West Coast than the business-minded East Coast. It is a realm of vast empty spaces, dramatic mountain ranges, dangerous bandits, famous heroes, and wild savages, in other words a setting straight out of the movies.

Obaldia specifically based his play on the stereotypes of the western film genre. For example, the character of Carlos is described as “40 ans, superbe, sorti spécialement d’un film de John Ford,” while the other characters fill other various stereotypes. As for the other plays, while they may not make as overt a link with the cinema there is still an aspect of the hyperrealistic spectacle, notably the circus. Arrabal’s play has obvious links to the circus, with juggling and high-wire acts. Two of his three characters are circus performers and the stage directions require the actor playing Tharsis to be a tightrope walker. Fenwick’s play also has an element of the circus in the scene portraying Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Buffalo Bill was a showman who wanted to bring the “real” West to his spectators and Fenwick’s character is no different. He sells the spectacle of the Far West saying, “Frissonnez de dégoût, chavirez de terreur, applaudissez l’ardeur qu’il faut là-bas pour vivre, tout est vrai, les combats son à mort, les tirs à balles réelles, les serpents à sonnette et les toilettes à droite” (34). Buffalo Bill insists on the reality of his show in the performance, but Fenwick incorporates images from the historic Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders projected onto a screen behind him. While Duparfait has chosen to set his play in a theater, it is not an ordinary theater, it is the greatest one in the world and the emphasis is on the spectacle—that what is seen is fantastic, exceeding the audience’s expectations—more than on the performance—that the angels are in tune, or even playing steadily, for example, is of secondary consequence. Finally, in Anne’s play, Irène has created an image of the Wild West for herself that is similar to those portrayed in the films: vast spaces, dangerous villains, and grand adventures. While the other plays have some note of the superlative, Catherine Anne presents the

Far West in a more dream-like quality, with the characters projecting their hopes and dreams (or nightmares) onto the empty space of the Far West.

One of the reasons why the cinema is a hyperreal media is that it claims to show the truth, much like the obsession for the “real thing” that Umberto Eco finds in his travels in America, but is nothing more than light projected upon a screen. It seems real, but is simply a photographic re-creation displayed through light and film. Peter Brook states,

The cinema flashes on to a screen images from the past. As this is what the mind does to itself all through life, the cinema seems intimately real. Of course, it is nothing of the sort—it is a satisfying and enjoyable extension of the unreality of everyday perception.

The theatre, on the other hand, always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This also is what can make it so disturbing (111).

A movie is nothing more than frozen images of a past event flashed before the viewer’s eyes while in the theater the spectator is participating in an event (however real or unreal it may be) as it is being performed. The theater adds that element of reality that the cinema lacks.

But the cinema can provide something that is difficult for the theater: it can physically portray the vast expanses of the American West in a way that is impossible in the theater.

Another key element to the hyperreality of the Far West is its emptiness. The Far West of the nineteenth century was and is a wild space to be conquered and filled by the imagination, a blank canvas waiting to be filled. This emptiness is one of the defining features of America, both physically as well as culturally. Baudrillard states, “La culture américaine est l’héritière des déserts. Ceux-ci ne sont pas une nature en contrepoint des villes, ils désignent le vide, la nudité radicale qui est à l’arrière-plan de tout établissement humain” (63). This sense of space is

integral not only to the American culture, but to all of humanity as well. As the background of all human establishments, the American wilderness is not simply a natural counterpoint to the city; it underscores the emptiness present in human civilization. This is not a critique of human civilization, but rather an explanation for the fascination of this emptiness. The emptiness of the American Far West is not necessarily one of death and waste; it represents not exactly an absence but rather a possibility, much like the virtual space in the theater where it is found.

To reiterate, the virtual space of the theater is an imagined space, an invoked space, one always represented by something or someone else. Sometimes this representation is visual or tangible: the presence of a door or window, a character or prop that evokes this unseen space; sometimes it is intangible, such as a gesture or the spoken word. Nevertheless, it is always an “other” space, somewhere else, either near or far. Obaldia, Arrabal, Fenwick, Duparfait and Anne have all chosen to make this “other” space America, specifically the American Far West. America is a perfect setting for the virtual space because of its own “virtuality.” It, too, is generally an imagined space, particularly to those who have never been there. It is a place that is first explored through the media, especially the visual media of television, internet and films.

The virtual space is a possibility; it exists, but is open to the imagination of the director, actor, spectator—even the character. Paméla, for example, looks at the virtual space as a space of possibilities. It is a real space, but not one she is familiar with. However, she relates to that space through her imagination of it. With the exception of a couple of scenes from Fenwick’s play in which Jane is seen in the Indian camp or in the Black Hills, the Far West exists primarily in the imagination or memories of the characters. It is true that in Arrabal’s play the characters are in an exterior space, but they dream of a different time and a different place. Even in Fenwick’s play Jane is only allowed into the Far West as a man and whenever she is discovered as a woman she

is sent away. The Far West is, for many of the characters, a place where everything will be better if only they can attain it, thus putting it into the realm of the imagination. As mentioned in the introduction, Anne Ubersfeld discusses the scenic space—the space represented on stage—as a psychic space saying, “L’espace scénique peut aussi apparaître comme un vaste champ psychique où s’affrontent des forces qui sont les forces psychiques du moi” (126). The characters of these plays do attempt to define themselves, but instead of this psychic space being enacted on the stage, it is projected into the virtual space. This is especially apparent in Catherine Anne’s work as her characters, Jane and Helen, define themselves according to the Far West, which is never seen, only discussed. Jane is a free and independent woman in this space while Helen is a barren orphan who is unable to fulfill her role in society.

Moreover, the space of the Far West is tied to a specific time period: the second half of the nineteenth century, the time of the great Indian Wars, of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny. Thus the virtual space of these plays is not only a physical space, but a temporal one as well. Of these plays, *Obaldia*, *Fenwick*, and *Anne* present a twentieth or twenty-first century vision of the late nineteenth century. *Duparfait*’s 1998 play is set in an early twentieth century America, while *Arrabal*’s play is set in 1974. Yet despite the differing times for the settings, all five plays bear elements of the American Far West as it was in the nineteenth century in the virtual space and all five provide a modern vision of America in the late 1800s to early 1900s. The most striking element is that this vision changes very little over the years: the Far West is still a place of adventure and wonder, where dreams come true in the 1960s as it is after the turn of the century.

This connection between place and time in the virtual space is not new to modern theater. The virtual space in neoclassical theater also bears this connection for it is in the virtual space

that the action takes place. As part of her discussion of the unity of time in *Lire le théâtre I*, Anne Ubersfeld notes:

Ainsi par exemple l'histoire chez Racine est renvoyée non seulement au hors-scène, à cet *ailleurs* de la guerre de Troie, de la guerre de Mithridate, des conquêtes d'Athalie – mais au hors-temps, à cet *ailleurs temporel*, où Agrippine a empoisonné Claude, dépossédé Britannicus, où Titus a conquis la Judée avec l'aide de Bérénice. L'histoire est une *autre place temporelle*, et l'unité de temps, coupe nécessaire et brutale dans le temps historique, prive les rapports humains (socio-historiques) de tout développement, de tout processus (153).

The virtual space represents another (an Other) space, but it also represents another time. It is the space where things have happened, are happening, or will happen. While the actual space remains in the present, the virtual space represents all periods of time. This historical blending of time and place is applicable not only to neo-classical theater, but to modern theater as well, for these plays have, to greater or lesser degrees, a link with history, whether it is the Far West of the nineteenth century as in *Du vent* or either of the Calamity Jane plays, the Far West combined with Franco's reign over Spain as found in Arrabal's work, or the state of an immigrant to the United States in the early twentieth century as Duparfait's play presents<sup>22</sup>. André Camp, in his editorial to Fenwick's play, describes the Far West as the new ancient Greece or Rome:

Comme la mythologie de l'Antiquité avait inspiré la plupart de nos auteurs classiques, il était normal que la mythologie des temps modernes inspirât artistes et écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui L'Olympe était remplacé par les montagnes rocheuses, fédéraux et sudistes

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<sup>22</sup> As noted in chapter four, the references to the Far West as a setting for cowboys and Indians are very slight, but this image is nonetheless present.

de la guerre de Sécession se substituaient aux Grecs et Troyens de *L'Illiade*. Ne s'agissait-il pas, après tout, de deux guerres civiles ? (1).

Modern writers have taken the myth of the Far West for inspiration just as classical writers of the seventeenth century did with ancient Greece and Rome. In France, especially, the playwrights of the seventeenth century recreated the myths from antiquity, but they also looked to the Other and tried to represent the Other on the stage, drawing from the mythology of that foreign space. In the seventeenth century this Other came from the Orient, the Ottoman Empire that was the major competitive power at that time. In modern French theater, the Other is now the American and the French playwright draws his or her inspiration from American mythology: stories of cowboys, Indians, stagecoaches, bandits, etc.

The French historically place the Other on the stage in order to define themselves, especially to show what they are not. The American of these plays—no matter what the time period or the writing style—is presented in nearly the same manner: the American believes that the space of the Far West is a utopia to achieve. America is a perfect place, a belief which is perpetuated through one of the major industries of the West: the film industry of Hollywood. The simplistic acceptance of this fact is characteristic of the American, but is in contrast with the European's (and especially the French person's) love of complexity and debate. Baudrillard comments on French culture, "Notre univers n'est jamais désertique, toujours théâtral. Toujours ambigu. Toujours culturel, et légèrement ridicule dans sa culturalité héréditaire" (120). If America is cinematographic, France is theatrical. Where America is simple and black and white, France is ambiguous and shades of gray. America has a vast space while France (and Europe) has a vast historical culture. These differences have attracted and confused the French audience for years and will likely continue to do so in the years to come.

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