

## America on Display: Constructing and Containing Images of the United States

Ted Hovet

On New Year's Day of 1847, the 'American Affairs' section of London's *Morning Chronicle* noted that 'English critics have often expressed their disappointment that the literature and arts of this vast country [the United States] were not of a grandeur commensurate with the superiority of her natural features'.<sup>1</sup> If America's *qualities* as a nation were subject to debate and were found rather uncertain, as this remark implies, its *quantity* as a geographical entity – reflected in its size, its resources, and its natural features – was unambiguously grand. It seemed everything American was bigger – except Tom Thumb, who was smaller – with all such natural wonders from across the Atlantic presented with a hyperbole that suggested that only in America could such remarkable extremes be produced. To say that America's identity in the nineteenth century was located in its size and its natural resources is hardly a great or original insight. My line of investigation, though, is in how this idea of size was reproduced and exploited in two popular American exhibitions that toured England during the middle and later part of the century, and how the response to these exhibitions in the British press reveals particular strategies undertaken to manage the implications of America's prodigious features. It was through the eager and often exaggerated promotion of America's remarkable size and natural features that America's potential as an equal – or superior – cultural and political entity was safely contained, ultimately reducing America, however big, to little more than a fascinating but harmless spectacle.

The suggestion that American art was not 'commensurate' with its great natural features presents an odd formula, as if the world – or at least English critics – were waiting for an artistic expression somehow equivalent to Niagara Falls or a Redwood tree. What exactly would this look like? Luckily, the *Chronicle* had found it: '[this] reproach, as to painting, is silenced by a Mr. Banvard, who is exhibiting in Boston a panorama of the Mississippi, which covers *three miles of canvas*, and occupies six hours of unrolling before the eyes of the spectator'(emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> The 'grandeur' sought in American art, then, apparently had nothing to do with aesthetic merit or an expression of America's cultural and social values, but with the stark power of size. In the words of another review of Banvard and other American panoramas, 'size, quantity, physical vastness, seem to be the main elements of greatness in the



**Fig. 1** “Three Mile Picture” at the Egyptian Hall, Picadilly, 1849’, newspaper clipping, Evanion Catalogue, British Library.

conception of our brethren of the Western world – a natural result of the giant forms of nature by which they are surrounded’.<sup>3</sup> The *Lady’s Newspaper* of London, writing about Banvard’s panorama after it came to England, reinforced this formula:

America has everything on a large scale. She boasts of the deepest and longest rivers, the most extensive prairies, the most gigantic trees and forests, and by far the most astounding waterfall in the world. These are the works of Nature; it remained for an American to produce something in art analogous to these. Mr. Banvard has accomplished this.<sup>4</sup>

To most reviewers of Banvard, this American work of ‘art’ succeeded where others had failed because it could be quantified. Three miles of canvas and six hours of viewing – measurements that were, naturally, exaggerated – had finally provided an art of an appropriate ‘scale’ to the country that produced it.<sup>5</sup>

Banvard’s panorama opened for a long engagement at the Egyptian Hall in London at the end of 1848, advertised as ‘the largest picture in the world’ (see **fig. 1**). This engagement, which was followed by an extensive tour across England and other European countries, was a tremendous popular success and garnered a great deal of attention from the English press.

Several months after its London premiere, *Lloyd’s Newspaper* assured any of its readers who had not yet seen it that it was well worth the visit:

If proof be wanting of the real merits and truth of this stupendous work of art, the crowds that visit each exhibition, and the reception it meets with from a fashionable and, in some measure, critical audience, would at once establish its claims to be seen by all classes. To those interested in learning a true history of the wonders of the new world, it offers peculiar advantages; for we do not hesitate to affirm, that with the able explanation given by the artist, a person would learn more of the historical, geographical, and geological peculiarities of this portion of America, by a visit to this exhibition, than by visiting the spots shown to him,

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unless he possessed the length of time Mr. Banvard spent amongst the scenes he so faithfully reproduces on canvas.<sup>6</sup>

*Lloyd's* assertion that the painted panorama offered a value that exceeded a physical tour of the actual 'spots' offers a striking endorsement of virtual travel, something that panoramas had promised since the early part of the century.<sup>7</sup> The coverage of Banvard in the press consistently emphasized that the artistic merit of this painting rests in its veracity and scale rather than any particular aesthetic value – in short in its didacticism. Well over a year into the panorama's run in London, *The Morning Chronicle* reminded its readers that 'thousands who have seen the panorama have, while admiring it as a work of art, confessed that they had received from its exhibition a vast amount of really useful knowledge respecting the modes of life in the Western continent.'<sup>8</sup> Though the *Chronicle* clearly meant this as a strong endorsement, there is something underwhelming in its emphasis on the exhibition's 'useful knowledge', as if it were simply the world's largest illustrated travel guide. The crowds were described by *Lloyd's* as more 'fashionable' than 'critical', and the suggestion that the lesson offered was appropriate for 'all classes' made a not so subtle implication that Banvard offered nothing that required much education or discernment. Nor, by extension, did America – this painting, after all, presents its 'true history'. Here is America on display: one size – however 'stupendous' – fits all.

A word on how Banvard's exhibition worked: unlike painted panoramas that filled the rotunda of buildings usually created for the purpose, Banvard's 'moving' panorama was set up on a stage with the canvas stretched between two large cylinders. The canvas slowly unrolled from one to the other (fortunately this took only two hours, not the six that the *Chronicle* claimed), with the visible surface – probably about sixteen feet long or so – stretching in front of the audience. Banvard elaborated on the passing images in a carefully prepared lecture, one that could be adjusted to cover both up river and down river since when one performance ended, the canvas would unroll back in the opposite direction for the next.<sup>9</sup> His panorama laid claim to being the world's largest painting, yet it was neatly packaged in a mechanism that could be carried to a variety of venues suitable to 'all classes', transforming the 'grandeur' of America's natural features into portable entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

This particular design meant that the 'three-mile' length was difficult to prove, since only a small portion of the canvas was ever exposed at any given moment, and there was more than a

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bit of scepticism on both sides of the Atlantic as to this claim. When a rival panorama from America appeared on English shores in 1849 that was advertised, perhaps inevitably, as *four miles long*, there was some sarcastic protest. *Punch*, not able to resist such a large target, chimed in:

The Americans have lately commenced the practice of drawing pretty largely on our credulity, by the exhibition of drawings purportedly to rival the sea serpent in length; and Banvard's Three-mile painting has just been surpassed by one of four miles of the Gulf of Mexico [...]. We suspect that if we were to measure either of the Monster Paintings by a three-foot rule, the claims of the artists to credence, might be four-feited, on the spot.<sup>11</sup>

As for *The Era*, only a literary allusion could suffice:

Arrived last week from Brodbignag – we beg pardon, from America – the four-mile panorama of Brodbignagian – we are at fault again – of Transatlantic scenery; which is to realize, at length, the assertions of Gulliver – Brother Jonathan, we should have said – respecting the enormous work of art to which we allude.<sup>12</sup>

Despite such quips the controversy about the true size of the American panoramas contributed to their promotion, following the Barnumesque strategy of luring in audiences with incredible details that patrons were as eager to disprove as to prove. Banvard's success as a showman rested in his ability to play the role of the ambitious Yankee innovator promoting a wondrous item that invited both awe and skepticism from an audience familiar with these kinds of acts.

Banvard's panorama remained the most popular of the moving panoramas despite the new competition. The high point of his tour came with a presentation to the royal family at Windsor Castle, where he simply set up his panorama in St. George's

MR. BANVARD exhibiting and exhibiting to BANVARD'S PANORAMA OF THE MISSISSIPPI, between the Queen, Prince Albert, the Royal Children, and the Court, at St. George's Hall, Windsor Castle. In the Course of the Exhibition, MR. BANVARD was admitted to London upon the GREAT ORIGINAL MISSISSIPPI PANORAMA of the

**WILL OPEN MONDAY EVENING, February 9th, 1852**

**ASSEMBLY ROOMS,**  
GEORGE TAVERN, NORTH SHIELDS.

**MR. HANVARD'S**  
THE GREAT ORIGINAL MISSISSIPPI PANORAMA OF THE  
**MISSISSIPPI**  
MISSOURI AND OHIO RIVERS,  
QUEEN AND COURT, AT WINDSOR CASTLE,  
FOR FIVE DAYS ONLY.

Exhibition on Monday, even only: in the Evening at half-past 8 o'clock. On Tuesday and Wednesday, every week day, at 10 and half-past 10 o'clock. And on Thursday and Friday, FRIGID TIDES & DAY, at 10, half-past 10 and half-past 11.

**ADMISSION:—RESERVED FRONT SEATS, 3s. MIDDLE SEATS, 1s. BACK SEATS, 6d.**  
Children under 12 years of age pay 6d. for the full price to the Front, 3d. to the Middle, 6d. to the Back.

Fig. 2 'Banvard at the Assembly Rooms' (1852), poster. Broadside Collection, Missouri History Museum Archives.

Hall just as he did in the Egyptian Hall (see **fig. 2**). As such, Banvard's exhibition is not so different from Barnum's famous 1844 tour of England with Tom Thumb, which also began in Egyptian hall and culminated with an audience in front of the queen.<sup>13</sup> In a mocking review printed shortly after his London debut, one of the few that incorrectly predicted that Banvard would not find a receptive audience in England, *John Bull* made this connection explicit:

‘The smartest nation in all creation’ may boast of having ‘beat the Britishers’ by producing the smallest human ‘crittur’ and the largest painted ‘pictur’ ever seen [...]. If this ‘three-mile painting’ should yield half so rich a harvest to Banvard, the painter, as ‘Tom Thumb’ did to Barnum, the showman, the artist will have no reason to regret his visit to England; but we fear that this lengthy product of American art will not prove so attractive as the tiny offspring of Yankee ‘natur.’ This monster panorama bears the same proportion to others as the ‘sea sarpint’ of American imagination does to an ordinary snake, though it does not move so quick, for it takes nearly two hours to unroll the ‘three-miles’ of canvas, and a corresponding degree of patience on the part of the spectators; notwithstanding the efforts of the exhibitor to enliven the pictorial procession with Yankee jokes, delivered with the ‘genoo-ine’ twang.<sup>14</sup>

Of course a certain amount of patriotic protest at Banvard's popularity could be expected. A writer for *The Era*, on a trip to Cremorne Gardens, even went so far as to insist that English scenery was superior: ‘you see the panorama of the Thames, and you proudly declare to yourself, that Banvard's Mississippi, long as it is, exhibits nothing like the wealth of activity which line the shores on both sides of you’.<sup>15</sup> But while the size and popularity of the panorama made an easy target for parody, its power came in its neatly packaged depiction of a country that was rich in natural wonders – and very little else.

This focus on size is why much of the press coverage exhibited an almost giddy willingness to admit that Europe has nothing to compare with the features exhibited by Banvard. As a much more enthusiastic writer for *The Era* put it in a review of the panorama's opening in 1848, ‘of the faithfulness of the glowing scenery depicted Mr. Banvard has vouchers in abundance, from travelers, native and foreign, who have traversed that mighty American river, in comparison to which, all the European are but streamlets.’<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on fidelity – the idea that this painting faithfully represents the ‘real’ Mississippi – plays right into this strategy of reducing America to facts that can be measured and assessed. Four months after its debut the *Era* returned to reexamine the panorama and to, once again, firmly remove Banvard from the realm of art by connecting him to a very different means of reproduction:

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Perhaps its simple truthfulness adds to its interest, for it forcibly portrays all the peculiarities of the mighty river, and with minute perspicuity are set forth those individual details which High Art would not deign to notice [...]. We understand that daguerreotype drawings have materially helped to the bringing about of perfect resemblances to originals which all who have seen those originals immediately detect. This is just as it should be. We want mechanical precision more than imaginative display.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly the *Lady's Newspaper* praised the simple utility of the exhibition: 'as a work of art, it will not bear comparison with the dioramas and panoramas of this country', but, the reviewer continued, it could be recommended for the impressiveness of its labour, its accuracy, and 'as a source of information respecting places which even in this age of traveling few of the inhabitants of London are likely to behold'.<sup>18</sup> Here aesthetic considerations were again dismissed as not even worthy of elaboration, reducing the panorama to something that functioned as mere 'information' that, as the *Era* would have it, required no imaginative speculation.

Cultural historian Rebecca Solnit argues that in the nineteenth century America 'rooted its identity in landscapes, as though to suggest that its identity was itself natural, in contrast to the much-denounced artificiality of European culture', a phenomenon that Tim Barringer further explores in his contribution to this volume.<sup>19</sup> Banvard's panorama was an ideal manifestation of this, and one that allowed the work of art and its artist to stand for the entire country. The writer in the *Era* who demanded 'mechanical precision', for instance, felt compelled to talk not so much about the panorama but about the country that produced it, conflating the country's natural features with its 'people':

[America is] a continent spread out so large in its dimensions and so vast in its capabilities, that all Europe is but an infant in comparison. The earth is prolific, the rocks rich with ores, the climate varying to suit the growth of every vegetable production. This is, indeed, a glorious country, capable of containing a glorious people. The panorama suggests such thoughts as these, and corrects many an erroneous notion.<sup>20</sup>

The *Chronicle* implied that one couldn't really separate the artist and the work, and that both are quintessentially American:

The panorama is a decided curiosity, and so is the exhibitor, who gives you the idea, in language, voice, and manner, of a thorough American, and does not at all seem ashamed of his noble country [...] As sufficient good in itself, but, above all, as the first thing of the kind exhibited in London, this panorama of the

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Mississippi is worth seeing. The ‘description’ circulated among the visitors, is as *unique* as the picture and the exhibitor. In some parts it defies caricature, and distances Dickens.<sup>21</sup>

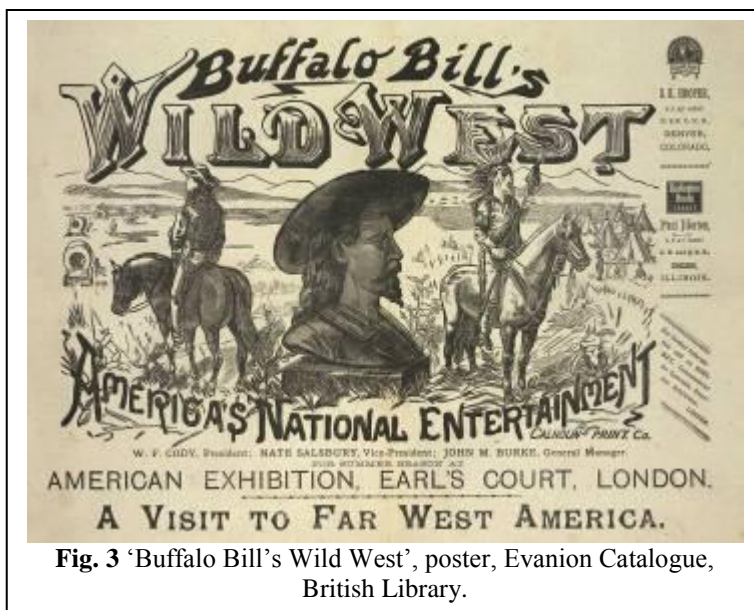
If ‘erroneous notions’ are ‘corrected’, and Dickens is ‘distanced’, it is because we are firmly within the world of fact, not those of art, creativity, or ultimately anything that generates a substantial concern or threat. The very things mocked by the *John Bull* review were at the heart of its success: English audiences had more than enough ‘patience’ for an America so neatly packaged – three miles, two hours, and on to the next show. When the realm of competition existed in natural features, not aesthetic ones (let alone social, political, or economic ones), England could, for the most part, cheerfully buy into Banvard’s publicity machine and grant that he, his panorama, and his country had – in this very limited realm – ‘beat the Britishers’.

## II

In tracing the British fascination with American landscape throughout the century, there is, not surprisingly, an east-to-west direction. In the earlier part of the century, Robert Buford successfully exhibited panoramas of New York City and, of course, Niagara Falls in Leicester Square. Though the Falls would always retain their fascination, a common subject of ‘high’ art oil paintings and an obligatory part of any lantern lecture on traveling in America, the

fascination with American landscape in public amusements moved from the east coast to the centre in the middle part of the century, exemplified by Banvard’s Mississippi River, then near century’s end settled, perhaps inevitably, in the west.

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show arrived in England as a part of the American Exhibition of 1887 at Earl’s Court (see **fig.**



**Fig. 3** ‘Buffalo Bill’s Wild West’, poster, Evanion Catalogue, British Library.

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3). Like Banvard's panorama, it had a wildly successful run in London before moving on to other cities. Many other shows featuring America's natural wonders presented by enterprising showmen had, of course, toured in the years between these two events. But Banvard and Cody have a striking connection in the way that they managed to contain America within a distinct vision of a landscape that was simultaneously exotic and authentic, exaggerated and plausible, impressive yet safely distant. Also like Banvard, who benefited from the *Chronicle's* breathless preview (the one that initially claimed that the panorama took six hours to view), Mr. Cody's show got advance publicity, in this case from none other than Henry Irving: 'I saw an entertainment in New York the like of which I had never seen before, which impressed me immensely', he wrote to the *Era* when visiting America in 1886.

It is an entertainment in which the whole of the most interesting episodes of life on the extreme frontier of civilization in America are represented with the most graphic vividness and scrupulosity of detail. You may form some idea of the scale upon which the scene is played when I say that when I saw it the stage extended over five acres. You have real cowboys, with bucking horses, real buffaloes, and great hordes of cows, which are lassoed and stampeded in the most realistic fashion imaginable. Then there are real Indians, who execute attacks upon coaches driven at full speed.<sup>22</sup>

Since the days of Banvard's Mississippi River panorama, a spectacular representation of American landscape shifted from the middle part of the country to the 'extreme' west, expanded from three miles to 'five acres', but carried with it precisely the same qualities: size, authenticity (everything is 'real'), and the claim that this exhibition was of a scale and nature absolutely foreign to England ('the like of which I have never seen before'), yet perfectly representative of America. Obviously there were numerous entertainments and exhibitions featuring diverse American subjects in the intervening decades, but the response to the Wild West Show is striking in how closely the language used to describe it adheres to the themes established in the reviews of Banvard.

The Wild West Show debuted in London in a rather peculiar and telling context. The American Exhibition, as was typical of such events, was designed to promote the latest industry and innovations of the United States, with displays arranged in categories like agriculture, mechanics, furniture, and textiles. The Wild West Show, technically offered as a part of the state of Colorado's contribution to the exhibition, actually stood completely apart from the rest

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of the exhibition, both literally and figuratively, linked by just a short bridge. When it came to the industrial products on display, the best that most commentators could do was to note the American genius for convenience. A review of the exhibition published in the *Glasgow Herald* about a month after it opened did so rather bluntly:

American art has yet to justify its existence. But if the sense of beauty has not quite been brought to the high-water mark of British taste, the Britisher must hide his diminished head and confess utter defeat when it comes to a competition in comfort, convenience, and the thousand ingenious ways in which the American saves labor and adds to the easy, tranquil flow of life.<sup>23</sup>

While the ‘Britisher’ had again been trumped, this emphasis on comfort and tranquility was hardly a great compliment to American industrial might. Once again the utilitarian quality of what America produced was emphasized at the expense of loftier cultural or aesthetic values – the reviewer even claimed that America’s ability to build superior products of convenience was due to its access to natural resources such as ‘American wood’ which had a ‘toughness, strength, and elasticity [...] unknown in this country’.<sup>24</sup>

Once the industrial exhibition was compared to the Wild West show on its far side, its materials were even more marginalized. As *Reynold’s Newspaper* put it, ‘so far as attractiveness goes [...] the Exhibition itself certainly has to pale its ineffectual fires when compared with the startling realism of the picturesque appearance of the Buffalo Bill contingent, whose white tents, with their curiously coloured totems, and their semi-savage appointments, seem in curious contrast with [...] modern appliances of civilization.’<sup>25</sup> Over and over again, the English press reported that people hurried through the exhibition of goods to get across the small bridge to Buffalo Bill and company. In his opening speech, widely quoted in the London press, the chief American representative attempted to tout, as one would expect, the goods in the exhibition that represented America’s growing commercial and industrial might. But even he found himself drawn, in the end, to that strange ancillary spectacle that emerged as the undisputed central attraction:

It would be an easy task to lay before you figures showing the enormous yearly product of our country, and prove that her resources still underground are abundant [enough] to tempt many generation of Englishmen to explore and develop lands yet untouched; but our object here [in the commerce half of the exhibition] is merely to show what improvement we have made since the days

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when our ancestors reclaimed the American forests from the families of the very red men who are with us here.<sup>26</sup>

Of all the wonders of the Wild West Show, the presence of (in Irving's words) 'real Indians' captured the attention of the press and public more than any other, creating a striking – and troubling – link between America's efforts to establish itself as a modern industrial power and an exploitation of its past history. And the presence of the Native Americans led many reports to see the entire contingent as 'semi-savage', as *Reynold's* had put it. Thus just as Banvard had seemed to embody America every bit as much as his painted panorama, Buffalo Bill Cody himself was frequently described in ways that suggested America was a hybrid of the civilized and the savage:

He is a perfect hero with respect to bearing pain and meeting danger. He has a code of honor which, half-savage as it is, he adheres to with far more rigidity than is the case in similar circumstances with the denizens of civilized districts. Absolute indifference to peril, perfect fealty to a friend, extreme amiability and openness, coupled with a readiness to 'shoot' as soon as a certain code of civility has been transgressed, and a habit of indulging in periodical 'sprees,' which are dangerous alike to his pocket and his life are, roughly speaking, the peculiarities of the cowboy's character.<sup>27</sup>

While cowboys were presented as a distinct breed of American, the descriptions of the Wild West Show reinforced the notion that what was most impressive about America was not the goods in the Exhibition (which themselves were at best utilitarian), but the heroic throwbacks in the spectacle. Banvard's combination of utility and 'grandeur' seems to have been split into two halves in this exhibition, but the overall effect was much the same: Buffalo Bill might conquer crowds of eager customers, but he offered no real threat to English industrial and cultural superiority.

Unlike Banvard's one-man show featuring a virtual landscape, Buffalo Bill thrilled audiences with live performances from a cast of hundreds (thousands, if one counts the animals) that attempted to make the actual landscape a part of the show. The event was divided up into several acts, some featuring riding and shooting displays by some of the featured 'stars' – Annie Oakley, Buck Taylor and, of course, Buffalo Bill Cody himself – while others, as Irving reported, were large-scale productions. The *Daily News*, in its account of a command performance for the Prince of Wales and other dignitaries (eventually Buffalo Bill would also perform at Windsor Castle), gave this account of the final scene:

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The closing scene was the most exciting of the show. In the centre of the arena stood a settler's cabin, the head of the family having, it was to be presumed, just returned from a hunting expedition, when suddenly a hostile Indian appeared, and was promptly shot by the settler. A band of savages immediately rushed from all directions, and, after a desperate combat, the cabin seemed to be on the verge of capture, when, with a ringing cheer, 'Buffalo Bill' and his scouts dashed up and dispersed the Indian braves.<sup>28</sup>

Though the cowboys and Indians were conflated in many ways, such set pieces left no doubt about the relative status of the two groups.

The effort to draw attention to the modern 'improvement' and advancement of American industrial production through the goods on display in one half of the exhibition was, one could say, stamped by the raw and unbounded spectacle of a brutal, alien, and distinctly pre-industrial landscape that – despite the obvious fakery, fantasy, and showmanship – struck many viewers as somehow more 'real'. Intriguingly, one of the most praised elements of the show was, like Banvard's panorama, strictly virtual: a painted canvas that took up the back half of the exhibition area (the grandstand that seated an unprecedented 20,000 spectators stretched around the front half) and, as a sort of half-panorama, attempted to recreate a Western landscape to serve as a background for the action. *Reynold's Newspaper* told its readers that 'on one side may be seen – and the make-believe is almost perfect – the blue skies of California, its rocky canyons, and its waving pine trees'.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to imagine how painted trees could 'wave', but this sort of commentary matches the breathless reports of the authenticity of Banvard's Mississippi river.

Later, when the show was on the road, the *Manchester Times* declared that 'its colossal stage has given scope to the scenic artist to produce effects of perspective and other illusions which even the stage pictures in a Christmas pantomime or a modern melodrama could never eclipse'.<sup>30</sup> The comparisons to pantomime and melodrama are significant: they associate the Wild West Show with popular spectacles at a great remove from anything even remotely 'artistic'. Yet with the live action presented to the crowd in front of this panorama, it was almost as if one could now enter into the landscape, making the spectacle even more real and accessible. When a revival of the show went through Birmingham in 1891, a reporter turned to a modern technology to describe the effect, echoing the reporter who thought of the daguerreotype when viewing Banvard: 'What one should aim to bring away in the mind [...] is

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a number of what may be called instantaneous photographs; and the exact moments at which to snap the shutter of the camera are to be well chosen only after a little experience'.<sup>31</sup>

However impressive its effects, though, the Wild West Show was obviously every bit as 'virtual' as Banvard's moving panorama, and not just because of this painted backdrop. It was a reenactment of an American West that no longer existed, if it ever did. And audiences certainly recognized that Cody was a showman, not a historian. Several otherwise positive reviews of the act couldn't help but comment sardonically on the fact that the realistic effect of scenes like the raid on the cabin described earlier – at least one other act involved the slaughter of Indians – was spoiled a bit when the 'dead' Indians, at the end of the performance, hopped back up on their horses and rode away. The *Era* admired the depictions of covered wagons going across the prairie as 'an interesting resurrection of a method of peopling the soil practiced even now in the remoter regions of the West' but recognised the anachronistic nature of the Indian raids: 'the redskins, we believe, are pretty well confined nowadays to the Indian territory, and are reduced to, at least, an outward "friendliness"'.<sup>32</sup>

The reanimated Indians in Earl's Court, taking part in a bizarre reenactment of their culture's demise, told a story about America perfectly palatable to audiences in both the United States and England. By this late point in the nineteenth century, as Solnit argues, 'What was vanishing as ecology was reappearing as imagery'; something especially poignant and distressing when considering the role of the 'red man' that so fascinated the English press. In Solnit's words, 'it was as though [Native Americans] were being kicked out of the real world but invited into art and entertainment, into dime novels, Wild West circuses, paintings and photographs' (66; 73). In this sense, even though the Wild West Show was physically removed from the main part of the exhibition and appeared to represent a very different concept of America than the goods on display, it actually served as a powerful allegory essential to the American narrative of progress and domination (see **fig. 4**). This didn't escape the rather ambitious critic for the *Manchester Times* who gallantly tried to review this hodgepodge of circus and spectacle and carnival as a coherent dramatic entity: 'The representation was hardly a play, but it had a leading theme, developed with a certain amount of dramatic sequence. It was the gradual civilization of a vast continent that was to be depicted, beginning with the primeval forest that was populated by the Indian and wild beast only'.<sup>33</sup>

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**Fig. 4** 'Buffalo Bill at Sanger's Amphitheatre', poster, Evanion Catalogue, British Library.

Here is the ultimate irony of American landscape, whether Niagara Falls or the Mississippi or the extreme West: the landscape creates the illusion of an America constituted by nature and perhaps a few 'semi-savage' settlers, yet the promotion of that landscape through popular entertainment happens at the moment it has been thoroughly usurped by the civilized, the modern and the industrial. The very packaging of these spectacles suppressed this shift and allowed the viewers to imagine that the seemingly authentic landscape on view was still what most profoundly defined America. In this regard, even if the content of Banvard and Buffalo Bill was

thoroughly rooted in the nineteenth-century idea of America defined by landscape, valued primarily for its size, their recreation of 'stupendous' landscapes through virtual technologies anticipated the means by which America would be portrayed in the twentieth century, an America whose size had nothing to do with landscape, but was industrial, cultural, commercial – the very things the audiences rushed past on the way to the Wild West Show.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> ‘American Affairs’, *Morning Chronicle*, 1 January 1847, p. 5.
- <sup>2</sup> ‘American Affairs’, p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> ‘Wednesday Concerts’, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 1 April 1849, p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> ‘Banvard’s Panorama’, *Lady’s Newspaper*, 9 December 1849, p. 472.
- <sup>5</sup> Banvard’s moving panorama has been long lost to history. However impressive reproductions of his sketches and paintings can be found in John Hanners, ‘John Banvard’s Mississippi Panorama’, *American History Illustrated*, 17.7 (1982), 30-39.
- <sup>6</sup> ‘Theatricals Etc.’, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 21 January 1849, p. 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Excellent histories of the nineteenth-century fascination with panoramas can be found in Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) and Bernard Comment, *The Painted Panorama* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 2000). A detailed study of the phenomenon of ‘virtual travel’ in the nineteenth century can be found in Alison Byerly, ‘“A Prodigious Map Beneath His Feet”: Virtual Travel and the Panoramic Perspective’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 29 (2007), 151-68.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘Holiday Amusements’, *Morning Chronicle*, 2 April 1850, p. 5.
- <sup>9</sup> Banvard sold a printed version of his lectures with additional background information, with a title that says it all: John Banvard, *Description of Banvard's Panorama of the Mississippi River: Painted on Three Miles of Canvas; Exhibiting a View of Country 1200 Miles in Length, Extending from the Mouth of the Mississippi River to the City of New Orleans; Being by far the Largest Picture ever Executed by Man* (Boston: J. Putman, 1847). The complete text of this printed lecture can be accessed at the Internet Archive, <<http://www.archive.org/details/descriptionofban00banv>>.
- <sup>10</sup> Erkki Huhtamo argues that the increasing popularity of moving panoramas marked a turn toward narrative (rather than ‘immersive spectacle’) in the public presentation of panoramas during the middle part of the nineteenth century. See Erkki Huhtamo, ‘Penetrating the Peristrophe: An Unwritten Chapter in the History of the Panorama’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 6 (2008), 219-238.
- <sup>11</sup> ‘Drawing it Rather Too Mild’, *Punch*, 31 March 1849, p. 127.
- <sup>12</sup> ‘Theatres Etc.’, *Era*, 18 March 1849, p. 12.
- <sup>13</sup> Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 94-95.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Fine Arts’, *John Bull*, 2 December 1848, p. 775.
- <sup>15</sup> ‘Cremorne Gardens: the Elysium for the Million’, *Era* 15 April 1849, p. 13.
- <sup>16</sup> ‘The Exhibitions’, *Era*, 31 December 1848, p. 13.
- <sup>17</sup> ‘Square Panorama of the Mississippi’, *Era*, 8 April 1849, p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> ‘Exhibitions’, *Lady’s Newspaper*, 2 December 1848, p. 451.
- <sup>19</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 44. Subsequent references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

**Ted Hovet, America on Display: Constructing and Containing Images of the United States**

**19:** *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 9 (2009) [www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)

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- <sup>20</sup> 'Square Panorama of the Mississippi', *Era*, 8 April 1849, p. 12.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Panorama of the Mississippi', *Morning Chronicle*, 28 November 1848, p. 4 (original emphasis).
- <sup>22</sup> 'The "Wild West" Show', *Era*, 18 September 1886, p. 10.
- <sup>23</sup> 'The American Exhibition', *Glasgow Herald*, 3 June 1887, p. 9.
- <sup>24</sup> 'The American Exhibition', p. 9.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Buffalo Bill at Bromfton', *Reynold's Newspaper*, 15 May 1887, p. 1 (this is the title of the article in the British Library catalogue, but it seems likely to be a typographical error, and should read 'Buffalo Bill at Brompton').
- <sup>26</sup> 'Buffalo Bill at Bromfton', p. 1.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Buffalo Bill in Camp', *Era*, 23 April 1887, p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> 'Royalty at the "Wild West"', *Era*, 7 May 1887, p. 15.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Buffalo Bill at Bromfton', p. 1.
- <sup>30</sup> 'The Wild West Show', *Manchester Weekly Times*, 24 December 1887, p. 3.
- <sup>31</sup> 'The Wild West Show', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8 September 1891, p. 5.
- <sup>32</sup> 'The Wild West Show', *Era*, 14 May 1887, p. 9.
- <sup>33</sup> 'The Wild West Show', *Manchester Times*, 24 December 1887, p. 3.