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

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Abstract

America's identity in the nineteenth century was commonly located in the grand features of its landscape and its abundant natural resources. This essay investigates how these ideas were reproduced and exploited in two popular American exhibitions that toured England during the middle and later parts of the century: John Banvard's 'moving panorama' of the Mississippi River, first displayed in 1848, and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which debuted in 1887. I will show how the responses to these exhibitions in the British popular press reveal particular strategies undertaken to manage the implications of America's prodigious features. It was through the enthusiastic and often exaggerated promotion of America's remarkable size and natural resources 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 very packaging of these spectacles allowed viewers to imagine that the awe-inspiring landscape was still what most profoundly defined America. Yet the recreation of these landscapes through virtual technologies anticipated the means by which America would come to be understood in the twentieth century, an America whose power had nothing to do with the mere size of its landscape, but was industrial, cultural, and commercial.

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