Hollywood, the Mythic Border, in Sam Shepard's *True West* and David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plough*

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> He began to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside.
> —Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

Should the above passage be read in a university class, the majority of the students would probably find it hard to pinpoint the significance of the key conceit therein, while they would easily identify the man dreaming of the merriment of the insiders within those enigmatic walls. At this conference on "Frontiers, Borderlines and Frames" Theodore Dreiser's "walled city" metaphor from his "truly amazing first book," (Mencken qtd. in Virágos 78) *Sister Carrie* (1900), might strike us as a ready restatement of our conference's central theme. As G. W. Hurstwood, one-time owner and manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's in Chicago, is brooding over the causes of his decline from the Chicago elite to one of New York's derelicts, he picturesquely grasps the essence of class divide, the distance between the elect and the outcast, in the image of the walled city. The walled city that keeps the insiders cheerful and careless, and forever tempts the outsiders to long to enter her well-guarded doors, is, however, more than a simple paraphrase of social divisions. It is indeed what I regard one of the most brilliant border-metaphors in twentieth-century American fiction. Dreiser's metaphor, expressive of social, economic, cultural demarcation lines within the large cities of early twentieth-century America, though quite remote in time and space from my immediate concern here, seems strangely appropriate to describe Hollywood and the manifold associations (cultural, social, historical) it brings up in popular consciousness. In the writings of America's two popular contemporary playwrights, Sam Shepard and David Mamet, the image of Hollywood as a version of the walled city is frequently evoked. 1. In what sense are these playwrights connected to Hollywood—what borders do they have to cross to immerse themselves in the Mecca of America's show business? 2. Why and how exactly do *True West* (1980) and *Speed-the-Plough* (1985) represent Hollywood as a border? 3. What other borderline crossings evolve in these plays on the level of characters, plot, and theme? 4. How, if at all, can we regard the inner textual "crossings" within these plays as part of a larger textual tendency, i.e., to conceive Hollywood as a mythic border. These are some of the questions I hope to explore.

Border-Crossings Without: Playwrights Cross the Hollywood Border

The lure of Hollywood has tempted scores of established writers ever since the movieland's early days. For twentieth-century American fiction writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway Hollywood provided fictional themes, or opportunities to make easy money as screenwriters in what West came to call the "dream dump" (qtd. in Galloway 498). Writers for the stage took a little longer to gather around the honey-pot, but from the mid-century on authors like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and others regularly moonlighted in the film industry (Gardner). Recently the most esteemed American playwrights, such as Tony Kushner, Neil LaBute, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, and others, have become frequenters of the nucleus of commercial film-making, thus challenging "even the standards of mainstream commercial theater, let alone those we associate with big budget movies" (Gardner). Clearly, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet, America's two, by-now canonized, dramatists should also be included in the above enumeration. Their links to Hollywood as a concrete geographical place and an emblem are worth looking more closely into.

Both Shepard and Mamet have taken excursions to the realm of film-making either as writers for the big screen or as directors and actors taking active parts in productions. Movie fans in the know would readily identify Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984) and *Oleanna* (1993) as wonderful cases of adaptation, besides his numerous film scripts beginning with the memorable *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1978). Several critics (Gay Brewer among them) have pointed out the ways Mamet's work as director and screenwriter inspires his playwriting career, while others have rushed to note how, in return, his films "are thematically and even structurally reminiscent of [. . .] [his] [. . .] more recent plays" (McDonough). This cross-fertilization process is also discernible in Shepard's filmic and dramatic works, whose indebtedness to Hollywood, however, is clearly more extensive, diverse and complex than that of Mamet's. From his early debut in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) to his most recent appearance in *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), which he wrote and also starred in, Shepard managed to stay continuously on or near the big screen. His Academy Award nomination for *The Right Stuff* in 1983, contradicted views which seriously doubted his talent in acting. Apart from his now regular employment as a major Hollywood star Shepard also tried himself as screenwriter from as early on as 1984, when he did *Paris, Texas* in collaboration with German director Wim Wenders, and he has remained on the screenwriter circuit ever since.

For America's most prestigious playwrights crossing the Hollywood border from the realm of dramatic literature, legitimate or off-Broadway, entails first and foremost a transgression of generic boundaries. Although, on the face of it, similarities between stage- and filmic adaptations might easily be ascertained (since both genres involve processes of selection and editing related to the original drama text, the employment of production teams, and the pairing of roles and actors, etc.), theater and drama re-

main light years apart from the movies. As Shepard says at one place in an interview, elaborating on this difference: "Theater combines everything for me, it allows you to explore language, which film doesn't, and the other thing is the relationship between actor and audience: that moment by moment hanging in the balance, that terror of the moment [. . .]. It's like you pick up a saxophone and play" (qtd. in Brantly, 26). This "moment by moment hanging in the balance" which is expressive of drama's breath-taking intensity and tension simply cannot be "dubbed." In other words, it is the function of the theater to recreate a kind of immediacy that slowly disappears from our daily life, while the filmic works by filtering the ephemeral. The unique interaction between actors and audiences which, for many, is the main attraction of the theatrical experience is almost completely annulled by the neutralizing force of the filmic, resulting from our growing immunity towards the medium. Theatre removes the shields that movies insert between viewers and actors, and confronts us with our own selves more drastically than movies can ever do. In the theater the stage moment sucks us in, and we learn to feel once more. While movies provide us with illusions in the guise of the real, theatre offers us the real within the illusionary. This statement should certainly sound familiar from as far back as Tennessee Williams, whose Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* says: "I am the opposite of a stage manager. [. . .] I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (234).

Obviously, for established dramatists wandering off to Hollywood, the crossing of the city's imaginary borderline symbolizes much more than a mere transgression of generic boundaries. Hollywood in the public mind traditionally connotes a divide, figuratively speaking, a wall—to re-emphasize Dreiser's conceit—, whose function it is to draw boundaries between the world of art and commodity, high culture and mass culture, the elite and commercial spheres of entertainment. Yet, these established authors' intrusion into the turf of Hollywood signifies both the violation and the destruction of formerly held boundaries and frames, beliefs and popular perceptions. For one thing, whether the purpose is to popularize one's self as the "All-American hero" and movie star (as in the case of Shepard), or to catapult one's writing to greater fame and publicity via filming (as it is in many instances with Mamet), the allegedly high cultural is necessarily cross-fertilized by the popular upon entering the gates of Hollywood. Along with this process, the filmic also loses its former qualities of being exclusively commodified, trashy, low, and is ultimately enriched, re-interpreted and re-contextualized by the "sacred," the "pure," the "artistic," the authors' complex postmodern plays with the film as intertext, subject matter, language, medium, etc., serving as guarantees. Secondly, besides the above processes of cross-pollination our postmodern age has long questioned the validity of extreme categories or pure labels such as high and low, artistic and popular. Literary and cultural critics tend to talk about fusions, transgressions, border-crossings, interfaces and intertextuality replacing notions like dichotomies, divisions and dualities. As a result of these cultural developments border zones, such as Hollywood have come to connote multiple meanings providing chances for the negotiation of cultural values, the transaction of signs

between diverse cultural domains, rather than functioning as harsh and irremovable walls separating irreconcilable oppositions. It is partly through this new interpretive filter that postmodern dramatists have come to address the Hollywood experience.

Hollywood as Border in the Drama Texts

Sam Shepard's *True West* and David Mamet's *Speed-the Plough* both portray an intense struggle between characters who dream of making it in Hollywood's wonderland. In Shepard Hollywood does not simply spell success and fame for the mediocre artist, Austin (and for his brother, Lee), it is envisioned almost like a mythical, idolized locale, which allows only the very best of creative talents to enter its confines. Act 2, Scene 5 of the drama, for instance, opens with Austin, the professional scriptwriter's burst of anger over the news of Lee's overnight success with his seemingly primitive script idea. The first sentence from the excerpt references Saul Kimmer, the Hollywood producer, who disregards the months of cooperation with Austin and dismisses the former contract in a flash to privilege Lee's "true to life" western:

> AUSTIN. He is giving you an advance?
> LEE. Now what's so amazing about that? I told ya' it was a good story. You even said it was a good story.
> AUSTIN. Well that is really incredible. You know how many guys spend their whole lives down here trying to break into the business? Just trying to get in the door? (28)

Apparently, Lee does not have a clue about how exceptional this kind of breakthrough really is, but this does not seem to trouble him much, as long as it is he who gets a free ride to wealth and fame.

Hollywood the walled city looms large in Shepard's tale, signifying a divide between the crowd (of laymen) and the elect few. The latter, at least in the fantasies of the outsiders, have access to miraculous formulas, along with the good life of the very rich, and are accordingly idolized. Lee's hazy notions about the writers for the big screen reveal processes of mythicization underlying popular Hollywood legends:

> LEE. [. . .] Sittin' around dreamin' stuff up. Getting' paid to dream. Ridin' back and forth on the freeway just dreamin' my fool head off.
> AUSTIN. It's not all that easy.
> LEE. It's not, huh?
> AUSTIN. No. There's a lot of work involved.
> LEE. What's the toughest part? Deciding whether to jog or play tennis? (25)

Tellingly, Shepard's self-nominated artists never get close to the city border in spatial terms, therefore their mythicization of the place remains uninterrupted by the crude facts of the real world. In the suburban California home of their mother, Austin and

Lee attempt to master the tricks of screenwriting, beginning to taste the meaning of "success," which, as they hope, would eventually entitle them to enter the sacred gates. As the two brothers struggle, fight and almost murder each other amidst their quest for the secret formula, Hollywood remains beyond their reach. Indeed the nearest the protagonists get to the mythical Hollywood is Saul Kimmer himself, who prompts the brothers to work together on the script, combining raw experience and talent in writing. Luckily for the play, Kimmer stays sufficiently aloof, not to interrupt the brothers' rather naïve (yet intense, verging on the murderous) idealization of the recipe of fame, and its spatial equivalent. If anything, he functions very much like a trickster figure, who plays out the brothers against each other, while making them believe that he is acting in their interest. Kimmer, the trickster, having a foot in both realms (the world of common folks and those of the elect few), communicates the teasing, tempting and signifying potential inherent in the figures of border-line tricksters. Since his confidence game lies in being a catalyst of conflict rather than a magician who solves them, it is no surprise that towards the end of the drama Lee and Austin are still oblivious to the futility of their attempts at composing the one true-to-life western of the present. The chase scene the siblings enact both in the literal and figurative sense involves the overtaking and beating of the other in the race for success, while they constantly and desperately reverberate Willie Loman's infamous plea: "What's the secret"? (Miller 85).

Mamet's *Speed-the Plough*, on the other hand, takes us right inside the "sacred city," into the office of the head of production, yet, as we shortly learn, even the "insiders" there have their daily battles to fight. This time Hollywood, the mythic city shows its inner divide as Bob Gould and Charley Fox, several years in the business, hope to pull through their once-in-a-lifetime deal. That the Hollywood myth is not completely absent from Mamet's "redoing" either is indicated, among other things, by the idealistic fantasies Gould and Fox project of their future wealth on account of the would-be success of the script they promote:

> FOX. "I'm going to be rich and I can't believe it."
> GOULD. Rich, are you kidding me? We're going to have to hire someone just to figure out the *things* we want to buy…
> FOX. I mean, I mean, you think about a concept, all your life…
> GOULD. …I'm with you…
> FOX. "Wealth."
> GOULD. Yes. Wealth.
> FOX. Then it comes *down* to you… (19)

But of course wealth is nowhere, it is merely a fancy Gould and Fox share and then project into their prayer-like recitation. The embodiment of the key to wealth, Richard Ross, the mysterious doyen or imperator of the studio, is likewise missing. He stays sufficiently remote and mysteriously unreachable throughout the play to stress that

the realm he stands for is simply rendered unattainable for the likes of Gould and Fox. Although, we are told that Fox's life-changing deal depends upon Ross, the latter keeps delaying a personal meeting and then flies off to New York to return allegedly right on time to close the offer. But that eventual moment of the meeting is set beyond the limit of the drama. Within the play Ross is never present, only talked about, and the little we learn of him comes via Gould (the single person who has access to him). The illusions of money, the mystery of overlords, the fancies about big business deals work exactly because the experience of the dream industry remains forever second-hand. The absence of the all-powerful decision-maker, or the studio representatives in both Shepard and Mamet, evokes associations to the fairy tale quality of Hollywood moguls, whose words rule over millions of dollars. Hollywood's interior divide separates these legendary "rulers" and the simple "cogs" in the machinery of big business (the likes of Gould and Fox), the unseen kings of the domain, and the "underdogs," who are desperately hoping to get the chance of their life.

Whether representing a divide between the outside and inside, or the separations within, Hollywood as cultural sign or mythical place connotes "border." It alludes to symbolic dichotomies of we-they, success-failure, mainstream-margin, wealth-poverty both in Shepard and Mamet, which ultimately signal social, cultural, historical, class divisions within the larger culture. This border, however, assumes reality in the dramatic "re-tellings" only in as much as the characters are constantly employed in surpassing the divisions suggested, furthermore, processes of mythicization also blur the contours of the magic wall.

Border-Crossings Within: Characters, Plot, Thematic Preoccupation

It is fascinating to observe that both dramas start out with "pure" character types (clichés), who represent fossilized social, cultural or gender roles. Shepard's Austin is the respectable, middle-class man, with a good job and career as screenwriter, a loving wife, kids and home up north, whereas his brother, Lee, is the outlaw, with an alleged criminal past, a nomadic life in the desert, with casual relationships, and no career whatsoever. Similarly, Mamet's characters are also cliché-like at first: Gould, the all-powerful head of production, Fox, the ineffectual side-kick, who works as a producer, and Karen, the naïve temporary secretary, are all well-recognizable types. Moreover, they too represent easily identifiable oppositions between dominant-dominated, central-marginalized, masculine-feminine. In all of the stereotypical conflicts charted by Mamet Gould occupies the traditional position of power, and Fox and Karen act as the "underdogs." As the dramas unfold the characters gradually break out from their former shells and begin to rehearse the border-crossing mechanism inherent in the central motif. Clichés no more, they crash through the confines of their former roles to experiment with identities other than themselves, to assume and ultimately devour the positions/roles/identities of their "Others."[2]

Austin and Lee do not only trade roles (so that Austin becomes the outlaw who

is willing even to kill to assume the brother's living sphere in the desert; and Lee, the respectable screenwriter, with a promise to establish himself in Hollywood), they eventually merge into each other, as well as into their very own fictional counterparts in the script. Shepard carries border-crossing to the extreme as his characters melt into each other, and vice versa, and then move from the position of the "Other" to the realm of the fictional. As the players move from social type, class- and archetype (Cain-Abel analogy), represented by their respective others, they eventually come to question and undermine their own respective realities, ultimately dissolving in their fictional variants. As Reingard Nischik contends observing the same postmodern fragmentation within the character between role-self-myth-archetype-type, "[t]he actors in the Shepard play do not play rigidly fixed roles out of a Shakespeare drama beyond which they may not transcend, [. . .] but [. . .] they are performers, if sometime improvisers, of roles in a film script, cutting in and out of various prescribed roles [. . .] (72). Mamet's characters, on the other hand, in a more traditional/realistic manner, renegotiate power-relations (related to status, class, gender), as is usually the situation in his plays, so that both Karen and Fox attempt to promote themselves and usurp the position of the dominant, while constantly overpowering their respective contestants. Karen, quite predictably, uses her sexuality to advance the script of her choice, and she quickly acquires the necessary tools to use and abuse language, just like her male opponents. Meanwhile Fox plays off his friendship and the primacy of male-bonding in order to beat Karen in her seduction-game. Katherine Burkman emphasizes the twin motif inherent in both dramas, and, accordingly, analyses the Gould and Fox character, similarly to Shepard's siblings, as mirror images. Likewise she interprets the prison script as Mamet's fictionalized extension of his Hollywood producers. I argue, however, that the role-reversals and merging of opposites so typical of the border-crossings in Shepard never really materialize in Mamet (but are simply charted out), neither is the mirroring of the dramatic characters in their fictionalized others as persuasive in *Speed-the-Plough* as in *True West*. If there is any crossing taking place, it occurs primarily across power positions (dominant-dominated, central-marginal), a temporary reversal of gender roles, and class lines (middle-class/upper class). The violation of the latter, however is merely fantasized about never to become an actuality in the course of the action.

Mamet's play falters somewhat when the gradually established shifts in power positions are suddenly annulled in act 3, only to restore the original structures between the characters of the drama's beginnings. As Gould and Fox are patting each other on the back, feeling quite confident about themselves and the still not closed deal, we can feel hardly more than pity for the two petty rascals:

> FOX. Well, so we learn a lesson. But we aren't here to "pine," Bob, we aren't put here to *mope*. What are we here to do (*pause*) Bob? After everything is said and done. What are we put on earth to do?
> GOULD. We're here to make a movie.

FOX. Whose name goes above the title?
GOULD. Fox and Gould.
FOX. Then how bad can life be? (82)

The border-crossing mechanisms relevant for our understanding of the characters are repeated through the plot as well in both plays. If we strip away all the external differences between the two dramas, Mamet's and Shepard's plays strike one as profoundly similar underneath the surface: they are both about a contest between two scripts; one displaying predominantly feminine qualities (the love story in Shepard, and the radiation script about the end of the world in Mamet), the other being a male-interest story (in Shepard the Western script, and in Mamet the prison script). *True West* alludes to the "border-conceit" on the level of the plot as Austin and Lee are made to work together on Lee's western script, whereby the "professional" writer, Austin, is made to give up his project, the "period piece" (Shepard 13) for the sake of the layman Lee's story about "the first authentic Western" (Shepard 30). Thus cultural/social associations linked to each of the brothers naturally feed into and supposedly mingle in the new writing, which they co-author but which they never actually finish. Significantly, the two brothers as writers also reflect upon dualities innate in the writing process *per se*: Lee-body, Austin-mind; oral-written; fluidity-fixity; original-copy, the real-the transcriber of the real, etc. By staging the ultimate merging of these oppositional values, notions and spheres Shepard is re-imagining authorship itself as a form of border identity, and the process of representation as the act of crossing.

Speed-the-Plough has businessmen and a secretary to battle over manuscripts, therefore Mamet's plot moves away from the analysis of the procedure of writing to the discussion of its actual cultural and personal worth. The author addresses issues such as the marketability of art, artistic value, and questions of reception, thus exploring the contextual dimensions of the artistic process. Gould's opening remark: "If it's not quite 'Art' and it's not quite 'Entertainment,' it's here on my desk. I have inherited a monster" (3), reveals the "in-between" status of the writings that Hollywood offers, where the real thing is nowhere to be found, not even in the form of manuscripts. The competition between the scripts eventually turns into a staged contest between two separate worlds, art and commerce, where neither text displays the true qualities of the particular value system they allegedly represent. Katherine Burke is quite right in asserting that "Mamet never gives any serious credence to the novel as a work of any more substance than the buddy film the male whores agree to make" (117), and in fact they are both ridiculed as clumsy, confused and cliché-ridden. When Gould comes to ask "Is there such a thing as a good film which loses money?" (41), he unconsciously weds the two spheres: the aesthetic and the financial/economic realms, the former being the one played down. Aesthetic worth in Hollywood, he seems to state, is a nonexistent (or at best irrelevant) category, and even if it does exist, it is subjected to interests in profit. The "courtesy read" intended for the "artsy" work and the promotion for the prison script are speaking of business considerations involved in studio

preferences. Moreover, the assertion of such dichotomies as high-low, elitist-commercial, artsy-popular, the setting up of borders between values and qualities approved and rejected, is done by people who merely select or at best "reproduce," but are far from being creative artists themselves. Shifting the emphasis from the artist to the text Mamet interrogates the process by which writings cross from dead letters on the page to visual realities on the screen, exposed to the mercy of Hollywood sharks. More importantly, while Shepard is engaged in the dramatization of the *writing process* through his pseudo-artist characters, Mamet lays emphasis on the *process of reading* and its relationship to gender, power, ethics. Reading in Mamet's work becomes not simply a male prerogative, but is also depicted as a passive exercise, and is accordingly contrasted to the active creation of meaning through writing. Furthermore, Mamet seems to conjoin the reading process with the complementary activities of interpretation, evaluation and selection, all of which, the playwright asserts, license the dominant male to exercise his power.

When the plot begins to move ahead, Gould is made to consider the "radiation script," the one with supposedly more artistic merit, over the choice of his long-time friend, Fox, the male-interest script with more commercial potential. Choosing between the scripts, which initially involves a weighing of aesthetic vs. material principles, later in the play will come to denote a juxtaposition of moral and physical dictates. As the "artsy" crosses from margin to center, from courtesy read to potential studio choice, the dilemmas of ethical and bodily drives strangely color over the original conflict exposed. Yet, the combinations of art and commodity, morality and sexuality prove altogether too unreal to materialize; the crossing is attempted but never becomes final. The idea, however, is considerably weakened by the fact that, as stated above, Mamet chooses to represent the realm of art by a work that simply does not amount to being anything but laughable.

That the crossing of conventional borderlines is even tested is thanks to Karen, whose sexual appeal persuades Gould to give up his rigid male principles at least temporarily. When Fox confronts Gould with the otherwise all too obvious (i.e. that Karen was driven to him not by real feelings but was motivated by individual interests and greed) Gould quickly retreats. The crossing of generic, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical boundaries envisioned thus, questions but never deconstructs conventional demarcations drawn around categories such as center and margin, masculine and feminine.

Moving beyond the plot onto the realm of thematic preoccupations the border-metaphor again seems to be an integral part of these texts. Whereas Shepard's drama self-reflexively highlights the creative process from the author's point of view, Mamet is investigating the artistic procedure from the aspect of the audience and the agents of the entertainment industry. Artistic creation that lies in the strategic combination of idea-experience; mind-body; fantasy-reality; written-oral, etc. in Shepard, foreshadows questions of marketability and aesthetic worth, production vs. reproduction, writing and reading, authorship vs. readership, as well as the dilemma of their interrelations in Mamet. From isolated, "pure" principles we go to the wedding of for-

merly alien concepts in both dramas, then from the temporary merging of these to the fictionalization or the undoing of the proposed unions. Shepard presents the dilemma of authorship, authenticity, artistic creation and issues related to the representation of truth from within, and Mamet does the same from without. Quite interestingly both head towards similar conclusions. In Shepard the border-crossing that the creative process triggers ends with the fusion of the dramatic characters with their own fictional extensions, thus borders between real-unreal, life-fiction, reality-art collapse. Mamet's drama, on the other hand, sets up the movie script as literary text against its reader, while investigating the various influences that the process of reading-evaluation-selection incorporates. From the weighing of actual aesthetic principles, through a temporary consideration of emotional and subjective judgment to the enforced realization of power structures Mamet indicates the taintedness of the recipient and the reception process. Fox and Gould go ahead with the prison script to promote it to the head of the studio. The work representing the realm of "art," as well as the sphere of the feminine is figuratively speaking returned to the shelf, symbolically representing its undermined marketability.

Hollywood, the Mythic Border: Processes of Mythicization and De-Mythicization

In his review of Jonas Spatz's *Hollywood in Fiction* David Galloway identifies Hollywood as "the dream capital" (499) profoundly connected to the American way of life, and revealing a lot about the intellectual history of the country. Hollywood surely is a unique "microcosm" of "myth, romance and illusion" (Galloway 498). As Mamet's and Shepard's dramas prove, playwrights both in their private and public lives as well as in their creative work seem to recreate and simultaneously deconstruct this myth by occasionally adjoining it with yet another strong cultural metaphor, that of the border. As the border metaphor is strengthened and rehearsed on diverse levels of the plays (character, plot and theme), the notion of the mythic capital is built deeper and deeper in the imaginings of the characters, in the drama scripts, as well as in the thoughts of the readers and spectators.

The centrality of the Hollywood myth for America's contemporary dramatists did not go unnoticed. In 1997 Kimball King edited a collection of critical essays entitled *Hollywood on Stage: Playwrights Evaluate the Culture Industry*, where the contributors analyzed the various ways mainstream playwrights deconstruct the myth of the world's largest filmmaking enterprise. Do Shepard and Mamet share in such overall tendencies of de-mythicization identified by Kimball? Do they critique or uphold the myth of America's filmmaking paradise? My answer to this question is two-fold, since the plays respond to the Hollywood experience very differently depending on whether we concentrate on the characters or the authors.

On the level of characters both Mamet and Shepard engage in the celebration of Hollywood, which, as Katherine Burkman argues, they first set out to critique (113). Austin and Lee, Gould, Karen and Fox all succumb to the mesmerizing power of the

myth. Hollywood in these processes of idealization and mythicization is reasserted as a land of dreams and dreaming. It gradually grows for the characters to be much more than a mere spatial entity to denote: glamour, fame, stardom, lifestyle, ideology, a chance for the crossing of cultural and class barriers. For all the dramatic characters of these two plays Hollywood resurfaces as a version of the American dream, where absolutely anyone can realize his/her ideals, and where the dreams "really do come true." Mamet's and Shepard's characters are all captive to this grand national myth. They, as Burkman correctly observes, "are living in illusion (114)," and the background against which they enact the pampering of their ideals is the very metaphor of dreaming. Hollywood, in the eyes of the public has always been a sphere for the reproduction, packaging and re-selling of illusions which by their very nature never come true.

Although both plays move towards a suggestion that the dreams will be or have already been deferred, the male character-pairs seem to be entirely oblivious to this fact. As they keep on stumbling or rushing into the enchantment they themselves generate, we see them as contented and/or intoxicated by their mirage-like fantasies. For the authors of these plays, on the other hand, the downside of the Hollywood dreamworld is clear. While the insiders' (the characters') vision is completely fogged by the promise Hollywood holds, the playwrights posing as social analysts diagnose the erosions within. As both Mamet and Shepard argue, this microcosmic world refers to the social ills of the larger culture out there, functioning like a wound through which to detect the maladies spread all over the nation. Brothers turning against each other, the betrayal of friends, struggles for livelihood, sexual abuse, the misuse of power, submissiveness to authority, are only a few of the sicknesses detected. The people representing and upholding the values of Hollywood are also depicted as corrupt and scheming to the last. They are not merely shallow, but often make haphazard decisions out of stupidity or instinct. Kimmer, who poses as the benefactor of the siblings in *True West*, chooses the Western script of Lee over Austin's long-in-the-works love interest project simply because he has lost a gamble. Likewise the Gould-turned-Kimmer in *Speed-the-Plough* switches between the scripts because of Karen's sexual appeal.

Besides being the land of forged dreams and corrupt benefactors, Hollywood is also a central sign for loss and vacuity in the two plays. Images of emptiness and hollowness abound. In *True West* Shepard expands the connotations of the desert to comment on character, culture, society at the apropos of setting. Both Lee and Austin are depicted as profoundly empty inside, able to trade personalities primarily because their hollowness enables them to fill and re-create themselves from the cliché-like patterns of the other as they please. As Nischik writes, the dramatization of the lure of the film industry, which trades with illusions, and the selling of the replica for the real, almost always serves as an apropos in Shepard to create individuals for whom the differentiation between simulacra and the real poses a problem (74). Reality, the real, truth, identity, authenticity all gain dramatic expression through their negation, grasped in the central conceit of illusion, "imaginative escapism: alienation [and] a

derivative non-identity" (Nischik 74), Hollywood.

The absence of the protagonists' father and mother in *True West* emphasizes the lack of models, values and norms their identities might be nourished from. The dysfunctionality of the parents is revealed in truly Shepardian turns of the story about the father's lost false teeth, denoting defenselessness, or the mother's surrealistic reappearance-as-absence motif, spelling absurdity and a confrontation with a void on all levels.

The same desert-like vacuity is pointed up by Mamet through the empty movies Gould makes, which in a way perfectly rhyme with the emptiness of his own personality. Fox' comment to this effect: "He takes his coffee like he makes his movies: nothing in it" (25), brings home a reality (the inner shallowness) which applies to both of them in fact. There is a long line of motifs linked to the idea of emptiness in *Speed-the Plough* also: from the artsy work, which is almost art but not quite, through the temporary secretary, who is a substitute for the regular one, to Gould the boss, who in reality is only a subsidiary to Ross the real boss. The real vs. the copy, presence vs. absence schemes only extend the central metaphor of loss, fakery and absence: Hollywood itself. Hollywood, the central topos of the American mass media and mass entertainment that markets the "simulacrum of the real" (Baudrillard qtd. in Nischik 72) for the real becomes a metadramatic device for both Shepard and Mamet to critique the "createdness" and "mediatedness" of our present reality, as well as the dilemma of the postmodern author facing the challenge of originality. Therefore in these dramatic reworkings Hollywood does not simply emerge as a complex border-metaphor, but it evolves as a conceit of postmodern existence (an epistemological sign), and a correlative of postmodern art and the author. Mamet's and Shepard's meta-theaters undo the problem of how to access reality through the very metaphor of mediatedness by revealing the createdness and performative aspect in its varied layers, thus exposing their vacuity and unreality. In the authorial critiques Hollywood stands as a negation of reality, humanity, and values, being transcribed as a central sign for devastation, inhumanity and materialism. By centralizing the dilemmas inherent in representation and reception these playwrights take a conscious move away from the creation of dramatic illusions towards the exposure of processes vital in the creation of those illusions.

Conclusion

Strangely enough, it is not this harsh authorial critique of Hollywood that readers or viewers take away from the two plays, and neither is it the utterly illusionary perception of the characters which lingers on in memory. Instead of the bitterness of the social realities or the idealism retained from the characters' escapist philosophy, we, the audiences, leave the theater with a feeling of having been served perfect entertainment. As the characters commute from the degrading realities of their everydays to the saving illusions of their fantastic rise, we too ride away on the humor and the grotesque antics of the miniature movies that Shepard and Mamet create. The final moments of

Shepard's play recreate a truly movie-like moment in the pulsating afterimage of the Lee-Austin pair, while Mamet's characters stand in front of their audience almost envisioning the would-be movie of their making. Hollywood in these last moments becomes a dramatic presence in the plays, only to slip from us almost right away. For Hollywood's essence really lies in this ungraspable slipperiness between the real and the dream, fact and illusion, presence and absence, which both playwrights understand so well. In the final analysis Hollywood, the mythic border ultimately signifies the liminality of the dream itself, hesitating between the time of waking and sleeping. The enchantment of the magical fantasy world appears so attractive because and only in the light of that which is its other: the real; and Hollywood—at least in these dramatic recollections—does show both of these sides.

NOTES

[1]Reingard M. Nischik's complex study on film both as technique and theme in the dramas of Shepard highlights the manifold influences Hollywood provides to enrich the playwright's artistic universe.

[2] Katherine H. Burkman sees in the characters of these dramas (as well as in the plot, the setting, the theme) reflections rather than the truly different "Others" of their respective original. They are duplicates offering no difference or divergence from their pairs, she argues (113-19). Burkman, however, refutes the concept of the "Other," or the double because it misfits her reading of the plays as a recreation of the myth of Narcissus, and it is for this reason she blurs and disregards the oppositional patterns I have identified above.

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