Omid Amani
Malayer University, Iran

Hossein Pirnajmuddin
University of Isfahan, Iran

Ghiasuddin Alizadeh
Malayer University, Iran

Unnatural Temporalities and Projected Places in Sam Shepard's *Cowboys #2*

ABSTRACT

Sam Shepard's *Cowboys #2* (1967) belongs to his first period of play writing. In this phase, his works exhibit experimental, remote, impossible narrative/fictional worlds that are overwhelmingly abstract, exhibiting "abrupt shifts of focus and tone" (Wetzsteon 1984, 4). Shepard's unusual theatrical literary cartography is commensurate with his depiction of unnatural temporalities, in that, although the stage is bare, with almost no props, the postmodernist/metatheatrical conflated timelines and projected (impossible) places in the characters' imagination mutually reflect and inflect each other. Employing Jan Alber's reading strategies in his theorization of unnatural narratology and Barbara Piatti's concept of projected places, this essay proposes a synthetic approach so as to naturalize the unnatural narratives and storyworlds in Shepard's play.

Keywords: Sam Shepard's *Cowboy #2*, unnatural narratology, impossible worlds, projected places, postmodernism

Nenaravne časovnosti in projecirani prostori v drami *Cowboys #2* Sama Shepparda

IZVLEČEK

Drama Sama Shepparda Cowboys #2 (1967) spada v prvo obdobje njegovega dramskega ustvarjanja. Drame iz tega obdobja prikazujejo eksperimentalne, oddaljene, nemogoče pripovedne svetove, ki so izrazito abstraktni, zaznamujejo pa jih "nenadne spremembe gledišča in tona" (Wetzsteon 1984, 4). Shepardova nenavadna gledališko-literarna kartografija je v skladu z njegovim prikazom nenaravnih časovnosti. Na tako rekoč praznem odru se namreč postmodernistično/metagledališko prepletene časovnice in projecirani (nemogoči) prostori v zavesti dramskih likov medsebojno zrcalijo in preoblikujejo. Z naslonom na bralne strategije, ki jih v svoji teoriji nenaravne naratologije predstavi Jan Alber, in s pomočjo koncepta projecirane prostornosti Barbare Platt bomo v prispevku s sintetičnim pristopom naturalizirali nenaravne pripovedi in pripovedne svetove v obravnavanem Shepardovem delu.

Ključne besede: Sam Shepard *Cowboys #2*, nenaravna naratologija, nemogoči svetovi, projecirani prostori, postmodernizem

1   Introduction: Unnatural Narratology

The study of unnatural narratives, specifically postmodern narratives, stands as one of the branches of postclassical narratology that "move beyond real-world understandings of identity, time, and space by representing scenarios and events that would be impossible in the actual world" (Alber and Fludernik 2011, 14). Alber and Heinze offer three basic definitions of unnatural narrative, of which (1) is generally accepted, whereas (2) and (3) are narrow ones: (1) narratives that have a defamiliarizing effect because they are experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, nonconformist, or out of the ordinary; (2) antimimetic texts that move beyond the conventions of natural narratives; (3) physically impossible scenarios and events, that are impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic (2011, 2–5). In their recent book, Alber and Richardson attempt to respond to some of the questions and challenges whereby some scholars critiqued unnatural narratology's relationship to mimesis and the mimetic. Alber and Richardson (2020, 7) juxtapose Plato's and Aristotle's theories of mimesis; in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates identifies mimesis with

> 'the art of imitation' […that] merely reproduces empirical reality as we know it and is illusory because it does not take us to the transcendental World of Ideas, where we can grasp the essence of all entities[, whereas for Aristotle mimesis is] the process of representation, projection, or simulation.

Thus, the unnatural is antimimetic only on the basis of Plato's theorization, since it contravenes the typical and conventional representations of characters and events from the actual world (the realist practice) (Richardson 2011, 31). Pursuant to that, Alber, as one of the proponents of unnatural narratology, believes that particularly postmodern fictional narratives have featured a plethora of "physically, logically, or humanly impossible scenarios and events that challenge our real-world knowledge" and that transgress the boundaries between the real world and the fictional world (2016, 3). According to Alber, unnatural narratives can portray impossibilities in character, time and space. To exemplify, Julian Barnes' "The Stowaway" (1989) or Philip Roth's *The Breast* (2016) portray speaking animals and objects; Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003) draws on coexisting of two or more time zones or time travel, and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) as well as Guy Davenport's "The Haile Selassie Funeral Train" (1979) feature unnatural spaces (or containers) and geographies.

Alber's main theoretical issues are concerned with the reading strategies in terms of which the readers would be able to make sense of unnatural narratives by 'naturalizing' them. Alber mentions that the readers "can in fact productively engage with the impossible; even though the unnatural urges us to deal with impossibilities, it does not paralyze our interpretive faculties" (2016, 9). The first strategy is blending of frames in the formulation of which Alber follows the cognitive approach of Turner in which the readers are taken to "blend preexisting frames or schemata […] to adequately reconstruct the unnatural elements of the storyworld" (2016, 48). Alber also brings up Doležel's similar argument, citing the following passage (1998, 181; emphases added):

> In order to reconstruct and interpret a fictional world, the reader has to reorient his cognitive stance to agree with *the world's encyclopedia*. In other words, knowledge

of *the fictional encyclopedia* is absolutely necessary for the reader to comprehend a fictional world. The actual-world encyclopedia might be useful, but it is by no means universally sufficient; for many fictional worlds it is misleading, it provides not comprehension but misreading.

Generification, as the second reading strategy, operates when we "can simply account for the unnatural element by identifying it as belonging to a particular literary genre, that is, a suitable discourse context within which the anomaly can be embedded" (Alber 2016, 50). Subjectification, thirdly, is the reading of impossible elements in the character's interiority such as dreams, fantasies, visions, or hallucinations. Alber believes that this reading strategy is "the only one that actually naturalizes the unnatural insofar as it reveals the ostensibly impossible to be something entirely natural, namely nothing but an element of somebody's interiority" (Alber 2016, 50). Foregrounding the thematic, fourthly, transpires when we delve into the impossible narratives from the thematic approach "rather than mimetically motivated occurrences" (Alber 2016, 51). For instance, in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991), a Holocaust novel, time moves backward at the story level so that, thematically speaking, the protagonist would be able to "undo the moral chaos of his life, including his participation in the Holocaust" (Alber 2016, 51). Reading allegorically acknowledges those types of impossible elements within fictional worlds that can be conveyed on top of everything to "a certain idea rather than [be] represent[ed] as a coherent storyworld" (Alber 2016, 52). Alber cites Kafka's "Metamorphosis" (1915) as an "allegory on the human condition that illustrates that we all occasionally feel like, or treat one another as, vermin" (2011, 56). Moreover, satirization and parody, another reading strategy, contend with the impossible narratives to satirize, mock, or ridicule certain "[p]sychological predispositions or states of affairs" (Alber 2016, 52). Robert Olen Butler's "Jealous Husband Returns in Form of Parrot" (1996) is an example in that the parrot narrator serves the purpose of ridiculing the husband's behaviour (Alber 2016, 64).

Furthermore, in "positing a transcendental realm," Alber claims, "[R]eaders can explain some projected impossibilities by assuming that they are part of a transcendental setting (such as heaven, purgatory, or hell)" (2016, 53). This appears to be particularly pertinent in Beckett's *Endgame* or *Waiting for Godot* due to the fact that the characters are caught or trapped in an "endless temporal loop," that shows "a kind of purgatory without purification" (Alber 2016, 53). Lastly, to illuminate "do it yourself", Alber alludes to Ryan to indicate that in order to makes sense of the logically impossible stories "the contradictory passages in the text are offered to the readers as material for creating their own stories". (Ryan 2006, 671). To put it differently, the story teems with various concurrent impossibilities and it is the reader's cognitive task to naturalize the unnatural by constructing their own storyworld. Alber illustrates this through Robert Coover's short story "The Babysitter", which holds three such impossible storylines for which the reader can opt.

2 Time and Narrative

Alber refers to five axioms regarding the real-world assumption about time (2016, 149). His first axiom is a reference to Ryan's argument that "time flows, and it does so in a fixed

direction": forward (rather than backward)". The second axiom is that of the "linearity" of time wherein "we conceptualize events in terms of chains or sequences". The third one is that we live in the present time and cannot travel to the past or the future. The next axiom signifies the principle of non-contradiction; we assume that "an event cannot happen and not happen at the same point in time". And the last one is that we cannot "speed up, slow down, or interrupt the flow of time" (2016, 149).

Many theoreticians have addressed the association between temporality and narrative. One of the most significant perspectives, in a structuralist sense, is the focus on developing narratological tools for the objective pinpointing of narrative temporalities. In 1948 Gunther Muller made a distinction between narrating time, text time or discourse time, and, on the other hand, narrated time or story time. "Discourse time is measured in words or pages of text or in the hours of reading time, whereas story time epitomizes the temporal duration and chronology of the underlying plot" (Fludernik 2005, 608). In fact, stories are fixed and as Abbott observes, a story "can be told in different ways", but the story itself "always proceeds forward in time": "All stories move only in one direction, forward through time. (2007, 39–41). Conversely, in unnatural narratives, as Alber holds, "the story is no longer the sacrosanct chronological sequence of events that can then be represented in different ways at the level of the narrative discourse" (2016, 149). In other words, the story itself can also be unnatural, that is, physically or logically impossible. Against this background, Willemsen and Kiss distinguish between nonlinear storytelling and nonlinear storyworlds. In nonlinear storytelling, the narrative is presented in a non-chronological and deviant order whereby "the expected sequential order is disrupted" and also "causal connections between events are lacking" as in flashbacks or flashwords. However, nonlinear storyworlds "form a feature of the diegetic fictional world that is narrated" and appear in the genres of science fiction, time-travel, and temporal loops (2020, 174). In this regard, the reader, by immersing into the text, forms a mental model and "accommodates a world in which nonlinear time organization is somehow the natural state of affairs" (2020, 176). Hence, as mentioned earlier, some fictional narratives deconstruct our knowledge of the real world by playing with time: through time moving backwards on the level of story; through counter-linearity of some circular stories that trap the reader in eternal temporal loops; or by way of fictional narratives that fuse distinct periods, frustrating our knowledge that "the borders between the past, the present, and the future are fixed and impenetrable" (Alber 2016, 165).

3   Projected Places

Many literary works, in Tally's words, are "complemented with maps, whether actually included in the text or merely projected and held in the mind of the reader, which are intended to help guide the reader through the storyworld or geography of the text" (2017, 1). The reader may confront the setting as a "real" place such as Dublin in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), the mythic zone of Dante's afterlife in *Divine Comedy*, or a totally fictional setting (i.e., Thomas Hardy's Wessex or William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha). Likewise, in the postmodern era, geographers and urbanists such as David Harvey, Edward W. Soja, Derek Gregory, and Nigel Thrift have elaborated on how the postmodern condition has given rise to a "reassertion of space" in critical theory (Soja 1989). A highly influential postulation in this

regard is Fredric Jameson's notion of a mutation in built space that has discombobulated our global of "cognitive map", which Jameson mentions as one of the five symptoms indicating the turn toward the postmodern (Buchanan 2010, 379). As Tally (2013, 68) elucidates, cognitive mapping refers to

> an individual subject's attempt to locate his or her position within a complex social organization or spatial milieu, as in the case with a single person who is walking around in an unfamiliar city, attempting to gain a concrete sense of place in relation to various other places on a mental map.

Hence, in postmodern literary cartography, the critics scrutinize "the relations between space and writing", borders or boundaries that are transgressed, erased, or redrawn (Tally 2017, 2).

With respect to novels and short stories, the writer provides a storyworld with a somewhat meticulous description of the setting; the narrator plays a crucial role to help the reader access their projected places through flashbacks and so on. A moot question here is how to address the role of space in a postmodern, experimental drama where the stage is bare, with almost no props. The stage itself, physically speaking, is in a sense part of the real world but it is also the space on/onto which an imaginary world is supposed to be projected. That is, the distinction between diegesis and mimesis seems to be less tenable in theatre. However, the stage does not serve *per se* to conjure up an imaginary world for the audience. As such, the concept of "projected places" appears immensely rewarding to cognitively approach such plays. Barbara Piatti claims that projected places "have qualities that differ from settings and zones of action (where the actual plot takes place), since they are created and called up via the imagination of the main characters" (2017, 179). "Without being physically present," Piatti adds, "heroes and heroines are dreaming of, longing for, or remembering certain places, both existing and imaginary ones" (2017, 179). She (2017, 180, 185) contends that projected places "follow a specific function and add extra layers of meaning to the geography of a narrated world"; they are

> transient fictional locations [that] could be seen as a kind of second-degree fiction since they are made up entirely in the minds of fictional characters…mostly via a triggering element such as another place, a picture, a scent, an object, a word or sentence etc.

Piatti also holds that although projected places do not act as setting, they are tightly intertwined with the plot as thinking nostalgically or critically about past actions or imagining a desirable plan to be worked out in the future. Moreover, during the course of the plot a setting may cease to serve its function and turn into a projected place, and vice versa (2017, 185).

The bare stage as the real setting, in our case study, is substituted by the characters' imaginations, hallucinations and dreams and the projected places in this particular context, pace Piatti's conception of them as acting a "*second-degree construction*", turn out to be the only stage-as-diegesis provided for the reader to make sense of the play.

In what follows, we will examine Sam Shepard's play *Cowboys #2* in the light of the synthetic approach of unnatural narratology and projected places so as shed light on the particular figurations of time and space in the play.

4 *Cowboys Mouth #2*: A Spatiotemporally Unnatural Storyworld

Shepard's theatrical career coincides with the development of the American avant-garde in the 1960s – Off-Off Broadway – which is closely connected with the political and social sensibilities and major upheavals of the era:

> In the 1960s, the festering dark underside of the American century – racial inequality, poverty in the midst of plenty, the threat of nuclear holocaust, and ultimately political assassinations and the disastrous involvement in Vietnam – bubbled to the surface as the nation faced civil rights demonstrations, race riots, anti-war marches, acts of antiestablishment violence, and the emergence of a so-called "counterculture." (Aronson 2000, 75)

The Off-Off Broadway "movement" incorporated small communities in four theatres: Caffe Cino, Judson Poets' Theatre, La Mama, and Theatre Genesis. Bottoms maintains that there existed a "very clear sense of shared community, and a shared resistance to the economic imperatives of mainstream American culture" (2009, 3). The inauguration of the New York's Off-Off Broadway paved the way for Shepard's "countercultural and improvisatory artistic environments" to be nurtured (Krasner 2016, 228). He launched his career with two one-act plays opened at Theatre Genesis, *The Rock Garden* and *Cowboys* (1964). By the same token *Cowboys #2* (1967), another one-act play, is a second, revised edition of *Cowboys*, with a few changes, written three years later. Technically, in this play Shepard's style and structure are overwhelmingly abstract, unlike what we see in the plays published in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the words of poet Michael McClure, Shepard's 1960s and early 1970s works were "vibrations" as they were "abstract collages, elusive but intensely concentrated sketches, fragmentary but resonantly linked anecdotes, characterized by lyrical monologues abrupt shifts of focus and tone, and stunningly visualized climaxes" (Wetzsteon 1984, 4). These plays share with one another an emphasis on the fragment, in word or image.

By and large, in early plays such as *Cowboys* (1964), *Red Cross* (1964), *Icarus's Mother* (1965), and *Cowboys #2* (1967), Shepard draws on the theatre of the absurd to experiment with character, language, and action. In writing *Cowboys #2*, Shepard admitted that he was strongly influenced by Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "the time-filling antics and word games of Shepard's young men were highly reminiscent of those of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon" (Bottoms 1998, 28). In such plays – in which the playwright's debt to Samuel Beckett's psychological state of the characters and the minimalistic empty setting imbued with "existential bleakness" (Bottoms 2002, 50) in *Waiting for Godot* is clear – the characters pass their time in pointless banter about meaningless or insignificant events that never seem to happen. Beckett's bare stage, representing "crisis-in-the-moment", intimates a kind of "postapocalyptic wasteland" (Bottoms 1998, 116) and "the stark austerity of a sensibility on the edge of self-erasure and silence" whereby the characters, paralyzed by an immediate sense of fear or emotion, are spatiotemporally imprisoned and "trapped in more or less claustrophobic" stage spaces with no way out. In line with that, though with some nuances, Shepard portrays characters who long for a freedom and "wild self-release" which remain unattainable; likewise, the stage

space – America – creates a sense of entrapment which fails to fulfil the promises of liberty and self-actualization (Bottoms 1998, 5). Shepard constructs a postmodern man (a character) who makes notes on events happening onstage in real time, in the TAW[1] in Ryan's terminology, signalling an erosion of the notions of time and history altogether (1992, 24).[2]

The setting of the play is situated somewhere in the southwest of America wherein the place of action is a bare stage, faintly lit. The sounds heard on the stage are those of a saw and a hammer –the sound source is physically present, not illusory. There are two pairs of characters: Stu and Chet (Mel and Clem, when they turn into old men), and Man Number One and Man Number Two, who are heard mostly offstage. According to the Sam Shepard Web Site (2005), Stu and Chet "play what seems to be a game of cowboys and Indians, re-enacting key episodes from western mythology – episodes which lead to decay, stasis, and the apparent death of one of the characters". The play begins with a dialogue about rain. Both Stu and Chet check the dark sky regularly, since, as American cowboys, they celebrate rain as a symbol of hope and happiness, and also need the rainwater to wash their clothes and take a bath. Stu changes his voice to an old man's, asking Chet "How long's it been since ya' seen 'em dark as that?" and Chet answers: "could be two or three years since I seen 'em all dark like that" (Shepard 2012, 262). Considering the mythic cowboy as a busy person whose heroic actions such as riding and fighting for justice are so well known, the passage accords with the reading strategy of satirization and parody; the two cowboys here are trying to construct a history, or project places, out of nothing for themselves by mentioning the length of time they have been waiting for the rain. Rain for them is like Godot for Vladimir and Estragon. It finally rains and Chet, triggered, as an old man, likens it to "the great flood of 1683" as if he has been alive at that time, which is impossible (Shepard 2012, 267). In fact, the reader/audience has to come to terms with his cognitive mapping in that the seventeenth century, he says, is a time of the celebration of the American frontier and heroic cowboys, when the Europeans, he imagines, came to America in search of fortune, rode from the east to the west in search of gold and killed so many Native Americans to capture their land.

After a while, and with another trigger, Chet in an old man's voice projects another place and says "Clem, I thought we was in the Red Valley", and Stu in the same mode responds: "Red Valley? […] this here's the Red Valley area" (Shepard 2012, 269). They imagine being in "Red Valley," recalling of the old western frontier; they also pretend to be hearing the sound of horses getting louder each moment followed by the sound of the Indians screaming from far away. When they are certain that the Indians are approaching, they prepare to fight them with their imaginary rifles (i.e., as if the rifles are real and the Indians are physically present):

> STU: Fire!
> CHET: Fire!

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[1]   Marie Laure Ryan refers to "three distinct actual worlds" that one perpetually encounters in a fictional universe: the *AW* or the actual world is the one we, the readers, live in; in the textual universe there exists a center which is the *TAW* or textual actual world; and finally, the TAW is proposed "as an accurate representation of an entity external to itself, the textual reference world" or *TRW* (1992, 24; emphasis added).

[2]   On the cognitive approach to narrative and drama, see Pirnajmuddin and Amani (2019).

STU: Damn! Look like Apaches!

CHET: Some of 'em's Comanches. Clem!

[…]

STU: Your left, Clem! Got him! Tore him up!

CHET: Good boy. Got him in the head that time. Right in the head. Watch

it!

[…]

STU: You lousy red-skinned punks! Think you can injure my body? Lousy red assholes! Come back and fight! (Shepard 2012, 271)

First, if we read this scene – which metonymically stands for the whole play – in terms of Ryan's model of possible worlds (1992), one interpretation is that the imaginary rifles and fighting are supposed to mean real ones that exist in the TAW, but the stage image does not show them. After all, in novels, too, not everything that exists in the TAW is represented, and it is the reader who must complete the picture or fill in the gap cognitively. The other construal is that Chet and Stu are deluded, that is, they are transported to F-Universes.[3] They think they hold rifles and start to fight but the rifles and the battleground do not exist, hence, their K-world misrepresents the TAW. Operating here would be the subjectification strategy; that is, we attribute the spatio-temporal inconsistencies to the private world of these two characters. Yet another way of construing this is that the characters might be playing a game of make-believe, so that they imagine themselves in a world where they hold rifles and fight, but this world is not the one shown on stage. The repetition of the word "imaginary" ["imaginary mud," "imaginary rifles," "imaginary arrow" (Shepard 2012, 270–71)] provides more evidence for this reading. At work here again is subjectification but also reading allegorically (the scene allegorizing the impotence of the myth of the West but also the existential, angst-ridden waiting for meaning/salvation). One last way of reading the scene, and by extension the whole play, is to consider the characters as acting in a play. The ending of the play in which Man Number One and Man Number Two enter the stage holding the script of the play and reading it cues us to such a construal. What is involved here is a kind of metatheatricality, a stage embedded in another stage. The readers/viewers would naturalize the inconsistences by drawing on the conventions of drama, especially modern drama (the absurdist, Beckettian influence is clear) as well as those of the genre of the western (the strategy of generifiction). Arguably, the strategy of foregrounding the thematic would be operant in approaching the play too, as the theme of the persistence of myths (of the West, of masculinity, the American Dream) in American (popular) culture dominates the play.

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[3]   Marie-Laure Ryan proposes some alternative possible worlds (APWs) that constitute the narrative universe. She restricts them "to the private worlds in the minds of characters rather than by treating them as operatives of world-construction" (1992, 9). The private worlds or virtual worlds are as follows: (1) Textual Actual World (TAW): what is presented as true and real in the story; (2) Knowledge World (K-World): what the characters know or believe to be the case with the T/AW; (3) Prospective Extension of K-World: what characters expect or hold to be future developments in TAW; (4) Obligation World (O-World): the commitments and prohibitions constituted by the social rules and moral principles which the characters are subject to; (5) Wish World (W-World): the wishes and desires of the characters; (6) Intention World (I-World): the plans and goals of the characters; (7) Fantasy Universes (F-Universes): the dreams and fantasies of the characters and the fictions they construct (1992, 113–23).

It appears that Ryan's theorization does not fully account for the impossibilities projected here. However, as we saw, in terms of Alber's formulation the scene triggers almost all the naturalizing strategies, indicating the cognitive complexity of the play despite its seemingly modest form. The reader encounters a fusing of distinct temporal realms; in other words, we have an instance of "chronomontage" (Yacobi, qtd. in Alber 2016, 165), that is, "elements belonging to different […] periods combine within the fictive world at a single point in time to form an action, a scene, a context of utterance" (qtd. in Alber 2016, 165). As long as the fusion transpires, spatio-temporally speaking, the borders between the past, present, and future are blurred and penetrable, since the play fuses two historical periods and places: the Old West in Red Valley in the past and the New West in the present. Now, the question is: what is the significance of this unnatural narrative projected in this manner? In their quixotic fighting with the imaginary Indians, Chet and Stu consider themselves as the heroes and the Native Americans as villainous barbarians whom they have to fight. In other words, the cowboys hanker after restoring a sense of their lost identities and heroism; they aspire to go back to their roots. This Shepard scathingly criticizes as a pernicious assumption in American pop culture. Hence, the real mythic cowboy (having disappeared or shattered), to use Pavel's theoretical parlance, is narrated as a 'non-actual possible world,' a fictional or made-up world, indeed (1986, 57).

The other inconsistency contributing to the above-mentioned unnaturalness is describing Stu and Chet as dressed like cowboys (black pants, black shirts, vests and hats), whereas Man Number One and Man Number Two are described as dressed in suits. This contradiction in the appearance of the characters indicates two different stages of time and projected places. It becomes further acknowledged when these characters precipitously shift to the contemporary urban America that lacks rural features:

> STU: …Used to be lots of orange orchards around here, you know.
> CHET: Really?
> STU: Yep. Lots. All over. You could smell them… they were all over. Then they cut them all down, one at a time. One at a time. Every one. Built schools for kids and homes for old flabby ladies and halls for heroes and streets for cars and houses for people… Peacocks. Peacocks for mansions. For gardens. …tail feathers that people put in vases and set on top of fireplaces and dust collects on them. They dust them off… you can't eat peacocks. They're too tough…then the turtles die and the water gets all green and slimy and smells…the chickens walk all over it… their feet rot after a while…their skin gets all blue and pus starts coming out their noses… (Shepard 2012, 10–11)

Stu's account pictures modern times. The feeling for the lost natural beauty of rural America when it was discovered is wistfully nostalgic. The orange trees have been cut down and the peacocks, symbolizing the nation's pride, glory, awakening and immortality, have been killed and their feathers used as home decoration. In like manner, by the time "*car horns are heard offstage*" (Shepard, 2012, 273), capitalism has fully taken over. Thus, the amalgamation of rural values and modern technology on the same stage could be accounted for by the reading strategy of foregrounding the thematic.

As Chet and Stu talk about the realities of the modern life, the real sounds become louder on the stage: car horns and the conversation between Man Number One and Man Number Two placed in contrast to the sounds of the Old West (the Indians' horses). The merging of sounds indicates the removal of the boundary between the past and the present. Chet carries on talking but his dialogue with Stu turns into a monologue as Stu stays silent. Chet describes his breakfast for Stu while at the same time the two men talk about the rent as well. Stu seems to have gone unconscious.

In Robinson's view, the play ends when Stu is "shot" by the "Indians." (2002, 92). If this is the case, one approaches another logical impossibility in the narrative, violating the principle of non-contradiction (that is, Stu is killed by what he imagined in his own world). In terms of reading allegorically, the death of Stu stands for the decline of American masculinity and the mythic cowboy. This applies to Chet as well who, though still alive, is metaphorically in a state of life-in-death. Generally, they "become trapped in, and victims of, their fantasy" (Weales 1992, 12).

Another instance of unnaturalness is the insertion of the following in the text of the play (Shepard 2012, 275–76):

| CHET: And eggs. Poached eggs. on toast, with hot milk and butter, and when you break the yolks the yellow part drips down into the hot milk and mixes with the toast. Salt and pepper and coffee and hot chocolate. Then just something plain on the side a little sour cream maybe, on the eggs. Then some sau-sage. Bacon. Or eggs sunny | MAN NUMBER ONE: the rent's down to a dollar a month now. MAN NUMBER TWO: Oh yeah? How did you mange that? MAN NUMBER ONE: Something about the City Health Depart-ment or Rent Commission. MAN NUMBER TWO: Well, that's good. MAN NUMBER ONE: I guess so. MAN NUMBER TWO: We got enough food to last for a while. |

Here the unnaturalness lies in the typographical experiment or the "worlds on paper", in McHale's term (2003, 180). Normally, in a dramaturgical sense, a play is written to be performed on stage where the director is in charge of the actors and the actors play their roles. In this setting, the boundary between the stage and the spectators is rather clearly marked. What Shepard does in this play, as a postmodern playwright, is to intricately make the reader cognitively engaged in the "play script" as a participant in the action to identify the projected worlds. McHale describes such a condition as follows: "the text is split into two or even three parallel texts, forcing the reader to decide on some arbitrary order of reading, since *simultaneous* reading of two or more texts at once is, strictly speaking, impossible" (2003, 180;

emphasis in original). Moreover, such typography is not accessible to the audience, but to the reader, since this stretches the possibilities of stage representation where the dialogues of both columns (which are parallel and on a single page) would have to be spoken simultaneously. The peculiar typography appears to be an attempt to represent two different spaces of the storyworld, not only on the paper, but also on the stage. The stage as a whole, then, would stand for the storyworld of the play, not for individual locations. "The material book," Roman Ingarden proposes, "although in a sense it does not belong to the text's ontological structure, nevertheless constitutes a kind of ontological subbasement or foundation, without which the structure could not stand" (qtd. in McHale 2003, 180). Hence, if we follow the strategy of foregrounding the thematic, the voices of Chet and Stu are blended with those of Man Number One and Man Number Two while the Old West is no longer heard in the hotchpotch of the city life.

Yet in another sense, as Brienza observes, *Cowboys #2* would stand as a rehearsal of a play; she insists on "Shepard's dismissal of the illusion", or his anti-illusionist technique (1990, 376). She believes that Man Number One's and Man Number Two's appearance on the stage dressed in suits, and not in western costume like the cowboys, while reading from the scripts in their hands, signifies Shepard's "dramatizing an early 'read through' of a play" that highlights "the actor as performer, and the drama as in-process" (1990, 376). This adds more to the unnaturalness of the play when the metalepsis takes place: the actors are from the AW, transposed on the stage in the TAW of the play as Man Number One and Man Number Two.

According to Robinson (2002, 92–93), the main inconsistency or tension of the play is that between a nostalgic desire for a mythic past and the brute reality of modern times:

> A play that, at its opening, seemed designed to celebrate imaginative kinship and showcase the range of its inventions, ends by confirming each player's alienation – from an imagined world, whose falseness grows undeniable as the lights brighten and the real-world noise of car horns fills the barren stage, and finally from each other.

The unnatural spatiotemporal inconsistencies incorporated into the play highlight and complicate this central tension, rendering this dramatic piece cognitively complex and compelling.

5   Conclusion

Our discussion of these projected impossibilities through the reading strategies proposed by Alber – supplemented by Piatti's discussion of projected places – is one of the ways of exploring the implications of the incorporation of the "unnatural" in Shepard's drama. The present research was an attempt to shed light on the rather abstract, intricate and fragmented fictional world of Shepard's experimental play *Cowboys #2*. Although the setting in the play is scarcely furnished, Shepard filters the events of the storyworld through the imagination of the characters where they, as the subjects, virtually become time travellers and provide a genuine geography of the American West as projected places over the course of distinct historical periods. In other words, the sense of unnaturalness is obtained through the collation of

several temporal domains in one specific moment within the projected places imagined by the characters which are in Alber's conception "measured against the foil of 'natural' (real-world) cognitive frames and scripts that have to do with natural laws, logical principles, and standard human limitations of knowledge and ability" (2016, 3). By virtue of Alber's reading strategies, we, cognitively speaking, aimed to concretize/naturalize the unnatural and the oddities projected onstage so as to reconstruct the storyworld of the play, or as Doležel aptly put it, make "a discovery of new ways of meaning production" (1998, 160).

The engagement with the unnatural in Shepard's drama, especially in his early plays, is in line with the stretching of the realistic in American drama in the 1960s and 1970s. "[N]otable for radical shifts of character, tone, and even dramatic medium – shifting suddenly from, say, expressionism to realism to allegory – for jazz-like rhythms of action and speeches that resemble jazz riffs", the early plays of Shepard well exemplified the anti-realistic tendencies of the American theatres (Gray 2012, 691).[4] However, compared with the works of contemporary playwrights such as John Guare, Jack Gelber and Arthur Kopit, Shepard's work seems more resistant to the constraint of realism.[5]

Ultimately such figurations of unnatural temporalities and projected places are to be considered in the larger context of the "spatial turn", what Murphet calls "the reemergence of spatial consciousness" in postmodernism, a central feature of which is the collage-like juxtaposition of disparate spaces (2004, 118–19).[6]

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[4] The prime examples whereby the interface of Alber and Piatti's theoretical frameworks can also be approached are Blue and Willie's interaction in *The Unseen Hand* (1969), and Yahoodi and Kosmo's tour around different places and temporalities in *Mad Dog Blues* (1971); replete with such inconsistencies, these plays represent "a chaotic, subjective world" (Shepard 1986, xi).

[5] For instance, the experimentation in Kopit's absurdist *Indians* (1968), also exploring American mythmaking, tends to be less radical than in Shepard's *Cowboys #2*.

[6] In this context Murphet quotes Foucault who insisted that "the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space" (2004, 118). Arguably, space is dominant in Shepard's drama generally (cf. a more recent play such as *A Lie of the Mind* (1985)) and time is mostly presented in a series of memories or wishes (projections) investing space with emotions/passions and, above all, mythic overtones.

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