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**DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE**

## American Narcissus: Lacanian Reflections on DeLillo's *Americana*

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Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971), is assembled from a toolkit of psychological tropes. Critics have long recognized the novel's debts to (and parodies of) Sigmund Freud, leading one critic to dub protagonist David Bell as "the American Oedipus." The present article reconsiders the novel from the perspective of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories. Several of Lacan's key concepts—including his seminal articulation of the Mirror Stage, his revisions to Freud's Oedipus Complex, his emphasis on lack as the engine of desire, as well as his reflections on dreams, fantasies, and the gaze—help shed new light on DeLillo's splintered portrait of postmodern subjectivity in *Americana*. The article uses Lacan to explain how and why each of David Bell's attempts at indulging his incestuous maternal desires ends in disappointment, with particular emphasis on his three failed attempts at restaging the primal scene. Lacanian psychology provides a conceptual framework and useful taxonomy for understanding the shifting desires, misrecognitions, obfuscations, deflections, projections, and self-reflections of the American Narcissus, David Bell.

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In *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2002), David Cowart puts theory in its place with respect to art. He cautions that “to overdo theoretical readings of a writer like DeLillo can be an exercise in the redundant and the pretentious. Theory always threatens to make merely less immediate the fictive praxis” (10). He adds, “[o]nly through the stimulus of art can criticism achieve insights worth the world’s time and attention. This is not to say that theory for the sake of theory is objectionable—only that it occupies a branch of learning and pleasure one finds less interesting than art itself” (11). Having issued this disclaimer in his introduction, however, Cowart goes on to deliver some of the most theoretically astute readings of DeLillo’s novels to date. I share Cowart’s misgivings about overburdening DeLillo’s fictional texts with more theoretical apparatus than they can bear. But like him, I also believe that judicious application of theory to DeLillo’s art can prove mutually illuminating for both. I frankly doubt that Don DeLillo is well versed in the writings of Jacques Lacan, and I make no claims for direct, intentional influence. Nevertheless, a number of Lacan’s key concepts—including his theory of the Mirror Stage, his revisions to Freud’s Oedipus Complex, his emphasis on lack as the engine of desire, as well as his reflections on dreams, fantasies, and the gaze—are particularly useful for taking the full measure of DeLillo’s first novel, *Americana* (1971).

The incestuous desires motivating protagonist-narrator David Bell are so blatant as to seem almost a caricature of Freud’s Oedipus Complex. In *Technology and Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo’s Novels* (2010), Randy Laist identifies “the sheer cartoonishness with which DeLillo dramatizes David’s oedipal desire” (39). The first commentator to emphasize the oedipal dimension of the novel was actually DeLillo himself. In a 1972 essay with the cheeky title “Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation (By Someone Else) on the Novel ‘Americana,’” DeLillo declares (in third-person voice) the author’s intentions: “The author evidently constructed two planes of incest in ‘Americana.’ One is based on relations (or near-relations) between the protagonist and his mother. The second might be called political incest—the notion that baseless patriotism is an elaborately psychotic manifestation of love for mother country” (327). Locating his reading at the convergence of these two incestuous planes, David

Cowart dubs David Bell “The American Oedipus” (144). The label sticks. There is no ignoring the Freudian implications of David’s unresolved desires for his mother Ann Bell and for subsequent mother-substitutes, particularly the sculptor Sullivan.

Freudian readings of *Americana* are valid and indeed required, but I find that they only take us so far. Peeling past the label of American Oedipus, I offer a Lacan-inflected reconsideration of the novel as a distorted and destabilized treatment of the postmodern subject. Viewed from this vantage, *Americana* appears less a portrait of the American Oedipus and more a reflection from the shimmering pool of the American Narcissus. Lacan’s Mirror Stage is invaluable to understanding David Bell’s construction of self. The primary narcissism that characterizes infantile ego development remains startlingly active in his adult inter- and intra-personal relationships, and this mirror effect is magnified in his attraction to film. Subsequent developments in Lacanian psychoanalysis provide a framework and language for articulating David’s obsessions. He returns compulsively to a primal eroticized encounter with his mother, reenacting it vicariously on film and in the flesh with Sully. However, unlike Oedipus, David never successfully indulges his taboo incestuous desires. Instead he remains transfixed by fantasies, dreams, and misrecognized reflections from the unquenchable pool of Narcissus.

### **The Mirror Stage**

Lacan’s theories of the Mirror Stage draw upon a number of influential sources, but one of the most important is Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914). Freud complicates pathological views of narcissism by positing that “primary narcissism” is part of normal infantile development. “We say that a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself and the woman who nurses him—and in doing so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone, which may in some cases manifest itself in a dominating fashion in his object-choice” (88). According to Freud, primary narcissism sets the terms for sexual development of object-libido (erotic attachment directed outward toward others) and ego-libido (self-love turned inward). In a series of papers from the late 1930s, Lacan first extended Freud’s theories, in conjunction with

work on infantile development by Henri Wallon, to formulate his own theory of the Mirror Stage. Commenting in *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual* (1938) on the narcissistic structure of the ego, Lacan observes of the Mirror Stage:

The world appropriate to this phase is thus a narcissistic world. In so describing it we are not simply evoking its libidinal structure by the same term to which from 1908 on Freud and Abraham assigned the purely energetic meaning of investment of libido in the body. We also wish to penetrate its mental structure and give it the full meaning of the Narcissus myth. Whether this meaning is taken to indicate death—a vital insufficiency from which this narcissistic world grows; or the mirror image—the imago of the double is central to it; or the illusion of the image—this world, as we shall see, has no place for others. (31)

Already in this early piece, Lacan is beginning to assemble the building blocks for his mature later theories founded upon the mirroring dynamics at work in self-development.

Lacan's definitive explanation comes in his 1949 essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I." Here, he famously asserts that mirrors and mothers serve comparable functions in ego formation. Between the ages six months and eighteen months, the infant becomes aware of its reflected image (either in an actual mirror or in some external surface that effectively functions as a mirror, most notably the mother's face). When an infant looks into either, it sees an image of the self: not the self as it truly is in infancy—a physically uncoordinated and mentally chaotic mess—but rather the self as it wants to be—a stable, coherent, ideal Gestalt. The child identifies with the image staring back from the mirror or the mother and incorporates it as the bedrock of the ego. "But the important point," as Lacan emphasizes, "is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction" (2). That "social determination" will come later with the acquisition of language and the child's passage from the Imaginary Order into the Symbolic Order.

At this primal stage, however, the “I” is a facsimile of an idealized image, which Lacan refers to as the “*imago*” (“The Mirror Stage” 2). Jung had used the psychological term “*imago*” before Lacan, but the concept has a much longer lineage, harking back to the Judeo-Christian belief in *Imago Dei*: “So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Genesis 1:27).<sup>1</sup> Lacan invokes the *Imago Dei*, but fundamentally reformulates it in terms of self-creation. Humans create themselves in their own images, but those images are fictions, conjuring tricks using mirrors and/or mothers. It is important to note how alienating this version of self-creation is, relying upon identification with an external image and internalizing it as one’s ego. This fundamental misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) continues to exert a distorting effect on all subsequent stages of self-development and adult relationships.

### David Bell’s Mirrors and Mothers

In *Americana*, DeLillo delivers a calculated first impression of David Bell as a thoroughgoing narcissist. David ducks out of a party in the first chapter to spend some time alone with his favorite person—himself: “I decided to go into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror” (4). He is certainly vain—“I was an extremely handsome young man”—but DeLillo is establishing much more than that (11). The American Narcissus displays a fatal obsession with his own image. David claims to find solace in his self-image. In terms that explicitly invoke psychoanalysis, he admits,

“I had almost the same kind of relationship with my mirror that many of my contemporaries had with their analysts. When I began to wonder who I was, I took the simple step of lathering my face and shaving. It all became so clear, so wonderful. I was blue-eyed David Bell” (11). As the novel unfolds, a host of neuroses and unresolved anxieties emerge from behind the blue eyes of David Bell. But he attempts to keep his ghosts at bay with recourse to an *imago* that reflects a Gestalt of composure and success.

David is powerfully drawn to images projected on the magnified mirror of cinema’s big screen. He describes his youthful epiphany of identification with Burt

Lancaster: "When I was a teenager I saw Burt in *From Here to Eternity*. He stood above Deborah Kerr on that Hawaiian beach and for the first time in my life I felt the true power of the image" (DeLillo, *Americana* 12). He worships Lancaster as "the icon of a new religion" and longs to merge completely with *Imago Burt*: "I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image" (13). Psychoanalytic film theorists have long noted the narcissistic dimensions of cinematic spectatorship. In "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (1974), Jean-Louis Baudry explains the spectator's identification with film image in explicitly Lacanian terms:

The arrangement of the different elements—projector, darkened hall, screen—in addition [to] reproducing in a striking way the *mise-en-scène* of Plato's cave (prototypical set for all transcendence and the topological model of idealism) reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the "mirror stage" discovered by Lacan [...]. But for this imaginary constitution of the self to be possible, there must be—Lacan strongly emphasizes this point—two complementary conditions: immature powers of mobility and a precocious maturation of visual organization (apparent in the first few days of life). If one considers that these two conditions are repeated during cinematographic projection—suspension of mobility and predominance of the visual function—perhaps one could suppose that this is more than a simple analogy. (45)

The pioneering psychoanalytic film theorist Christian Metz disagrees somewhat with Baudry, arguing that the film spectator identifies less with the screen image than with the camera as perceiver. Nevertheless, he agrees with Baudry that Lacan provides the psychological blueprint for understanding these imaginary identifications. In his groundbreaking *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Metz describes the Lacanian Mirror Stage as "the durable mark of the mirror which alienates man in his own reflection and makes him the double of his double, the subterranean persistence of the exclusive relation to the mother" (4). Applying this stage to cinematic spectator-

ship, he explains, “[a]ll this is undoubtedly reactivated by the play of that *other mirror*, the cinema screen, in this respect a veritable psychical substitute, a prosthesis for our primally dislocated limbs” (4).

DeLillo is a devoted *cineste* who regularly credits films and filmmakers as formative influences on his art. He scatters cinematic references throughout *Americana* (particularly to Godard, Bergman, and Kurosawa), and David Bell is the first of several filmmakers and cinephiles to populate his fiction. It is a testament to DeLillo’s deep sensitivity to the psycho-physiological mechanisms of cinema that he depicts the phenomena of infantile regression and narcissistic identification induced by film spectatorship years before Lacan’s own writings were widely available in English and well before the leading purveyors of Lacanian film theory (e.g., Baudry, Metz, Laura Mulvey, Slavoj Žižek) had begun to publish their work. DeLillo’s prescient art proves to be a step ahead of the theoretical frameworks most useful for situating it.

As his title *Americana* hints, DeLillo presents the reader not only with a protagonist, but also an entire country besotted with images. The very dynamics that bewitch David in a narcissistic trance have the entire culture mesmerized. During his trip into the dark, unreal heart of the American Dream, David diagnoses his obsession with images as symptomatic of a larger cultural epidemic: “The dream made no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the interlinear notes, the presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one’s awareness” (DeLillo, *Americana* 130). In hindsight, the older David is skeptical of his gullible younger self. Still, he concedes that

“as a boy, and even later, quite a bit later, I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. *One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images*” (130, emphasis added). I suspect DeLillo has read as little of Jean Baudrillard as of Jacques Lacan, but here again his instincts prove unerringly prescient. Like Lacan, Baudrillard latched upon the mirror as a guiding metaphor for groundless simulations



of reality, first in his critique of Marxism, *The Mirror of Production* (1973), and more famously in his diagnosis of contemporary inundation with images divorced from their referents in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Young David Bell is dazzled by the sacramental simulations of commercial America: the groundless, superficial, idealized screen images peddled by his commercial executive father and epitomized by his celluloid *Imago Dei* Burt Lancaster.

Narrating the novel from a distant island in 1999, David finally sees his congenital disease for what it is and implicitly renounces his American birthright. But the David of 1970, the blue-eyed Burt-replica and Bergman-wannabe who heads west to make an autobiographical film, is still completely in the thrall of images. In one of the novel's key passages, he tries to explain his cinematic intentions as essentially an aesthetic of the imago. He tells Ken Wild,

What I'm doing is kind of hard to talk about. It's a sort of first-person thing but without me in it in any physical sense, except fleetingly, not exactly in the Hitchcock manner but a brief personal appearance nonetheless, my mirror image at any rate. Also my voice when I start using sound. It's a reaching back for certain things. But not just that. It's also an attempt to explain, to consolidate. Jesus, I don't know. It'll be part dream, part fiction, part movies. An attempt to explore parts of my consciousness. Not quite autobiographical in the Jonas Mekas sense. I've said part movies. By that I mean certain juxtapositions of movies with reality, certain images that have stayed with me, certain influences too. I mean *you can start with nothing but your own mirror reality and end with an approximation of art.* (DeLillo, *Americana* 263, emphasis added)

Far from rejecting the allure of images, David aims his camera with redoubled intensity into the pool of the American Narcissus. What he sees reflected back, just as Lacan's theories would predict, are images galvanized by his unsatisfied desires for his mother.

“Even from this long way off,” David writes from his island retreat in 1999, “it is painful to write about her. It has taken me this long just to organize my thoughts. And although I think I have come to terms with everything, it will be interesting to see whether I can put it on paper clearly and openly. Or whether I must blow some smoke into this or that passage—some smoke to hide the fire” (DeLillo, *Americana* 166–7). Ann Bell died of cervical cancer during David’s junior year of college. His unresolved feelings for her impinge upon all his subsequent relationships. As Cowart rightly observes,

“almost every woman he sleeps with turns out to be a version of his mother. In his relations with women he enacts an unconscious search for the one woman forbidden him, at once recapitulating and reversing the tragically imperfect Oedipal model: as he was rejected, so will he reject successive candidates in what occasionally amounts to a literal orgy of philandering and promiscuity” (140–41). The most important of these mother-substitutes, in both the novel and in David’s film, is Sullivan: “In Sullivan, at once mother and ‘mothercountry,’ Bell recognizes the most significant—and psychologically dangerous—of these surrogates” (141).

David introduces Sullivan, or “Sully,” as “a sculptor, thirty-seven years old, unmarried, a tall woman who seemed by her manner or bearing or mere presence to change a room slightly, to make it self-conscious” (DeLillo, *Americana* 8). His attraction to Sully is palpable and polymorphous. As a successful artist, she is already doing the kind of work that TV producer David only dreams of. As an attractive woman who hasn’t yet succumbed to his seductions, she stands as a challenge to his insatiable libido. And as a woman nine years his elder, she possesses experience, authority, and gravitas that simultaneously attracts and intimidates him. David inwardly concedes, “Whether on purpose or not, Sullivan always made me feel totally inadequate. I was drawn to her, terribly” (8). The novel’s central road trip to Fort Curtis in the American heartland, and the “long messy autobiographical-type film” he decides to make out there, depends entirely upon Sully’s participation: “Only Sullivan, [he] believed,

could save [him]" (205, 107). He adopts her as muse and potential savior, but most importantly he casts her in his film's lead role: an alter-*imago* for the *Imago Mater*, Ann Bell.

### **The Oedipus Complex and Desire as Lack**

The central unresolved conflict of David Bell's youth, and the climactic scene of his autobiographical film, involves a fateful encounter with his mother. DeLillo's subversive treatment of the so-called "primal scene" constitutes one of *Americana's* finest achievements. In order to appreciate the various ways he invokes and unravels the primal scene, one must first reconsider the Oedipus Complex. Freud regarded this phenomenon as the cornerstone of childhood psychosexual development. The Oedipus Complex was as important to Lacan as it was to Freud, though he conceived of it in markedly different ways. Lacan crucially inserts a fourth member into the family drama: the phallus. The phallus emerges in Lacanian psychology as the primary signifier of the Oedipus Complex and the transitional harbinger leading from the Imaginary Order to the Symbolic Order of language and social systems. The phallus certainly retains associations with the penis; it is a metonym for the paternal function—that which defines, prohibits, and decrees—the Law and Name-of-the-Father. But its significance for Lacan extends beyond anatomy and patriarchy. The phallus is the chief signifier of desire, that which the mother presumably desires and which the child crucially lacks.

Lacan asserts in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language" (1953) that "man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other" (58). In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (1973), he expresses it even more cogently: "Man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan 235). Note that Lacan does not focus on desire *for* the Other but on desire *of* the Other. In a subtle but crucial departure from Freud, Lacan focuses on the child not as desiring subject but as the object of desire. Inferring the phallus as that which the mother desires but lacks, and recognizing the father as the supposed possessor of

the phallus, the child longs not merely to possess but to become the phallus. This sets up a jealous rivalry with the father, which is the hallmark of the Oedipus Complex. Desire rooted in, yet propelled forward by, Lack—this is the driving logic behind all of Lacan's pronouncements on the Oedipus Complex. Through the father's prohibition, the child learns that it can never become the phallus, passing through the Oedipus Complex by renouncing this doomed pursuit. In exchange, he is initiated through language into the Law and Name-of-the-Father, a passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order. This is not a one-way, irreversible trajectory, however. With varying degrees of frequency and intensity, the subject reverts back to the idealized narcissistic conditions of the Mirror Stage. As mentioned earlier, one venue for such regressive tendencies is the cinema. But the Imaginary Order and the primal scene of its overthrow can also be revisited through fantasies and dreams. David Bell retraces these regressive circuits in *Americana*, oscillating between Narcissus and Oedipus over and over again.

David's devotion to film and images marks him as a man with a foot still planted in the Imaginary realm. Yet, we also have ample opportunity to see him at work in the world of his father. Clinton Bell is a legend in the world of commercial advertising. He has mastered the art of the image for market exploitation. When David was growing up in Old Holly, his father's idea of an entertaining evening at home was to gather the family in the basement and watch old reels from his collection of TV commercials (DeLillo, *Americana* 84–85). David fancies himself an artist and has enjoyed some moderate success as the creator of an unconventional television series called "Soliloquy" (24). However, as the reader witnesses his mind-numbing routines around the network offices, consisting of callous flirtations, meaningless affairs, inane meetings, and drunken lunches, we realize that David has essentially gone into the family business and is well on his way to becoming his jaded father's son. The novel's justly famous opening line sets the mood of malaise: "Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year" (3). David admits to himself, "I was wasting my life" (8). While suffering through rounds of Christmas drinks with Clinton, David silently seethes with unresolved oedipal hostility: "I wished he were dead. It was the

first honest thought which had entered my mind all day. My freedom depended on his death" (85). Searching for that freedom, David turns his back on the world of his father, the world of shallow commercialism and proto-Baudrillardian simulacra. His journey westward represents more than an escape from daily drudgery. It is a regression in Lacanian terms from the Symbolic register back to the Imaginary on a quest to reunite with his dead mother.

David and his entourage make it to Fort Curtis where they take up residence and begin shooting his "mirror reality" movie. The center of the film and of David's personal obsessions is a pivotal encounter with his mother. This scene is so resistant to recapture that David reenacts it in three separate forms: 1) his narrative recollection of a mysteriously erotic exchange with his mother when he was sixteen years old; 2) his filmed dramatization of that scene featuring Sully as Ann Bell and adolescent Bud Yost as David; and 3) his carnal tryst in a motel room where he tries to satisfy his incestuous desires vicariously through Sully. All three of these reenactments conjure up maternal fantasies and oedipal anxieties, and all are characterized by obfuscation, deflection, slippage, and misrecognition—the *modus operandi* of the American Narcissus.

### **Primal Scene, Take #1: Bell Pantry, Old Holly, circa 1958**

The Bells hosted a cocktail party for their Old Holly neighbors one September evening around 1958. The banal circumstances of a suburban soiree hardly seem propitious for a life-altering epiphany. And yet, by the end of that evening, David's repressed feelings for his mother were dredged up to the surface in a strange confrontation that he has struggled to assimilate ever since. The party itself is nothing special. David drifts aimlessly in and out of conversations. Like Cowart, I find the ambience is akin to Benjamin Braddock's party in *The Graduate* (1967), complete with Old Holly's own Mrs. Robinson, "the Collier woman," who salaciously tells David: "You're a young man now and there's no reason why you shouldn't know this. You've grown to almost your full stature. You have a man's body and a man's appetites. This is what I want to say. Women love to be loved" (DeLillo, *Americana* 191). Rather than feed his appetite or hers, however, David ducks out of the party for a while, preferring the

voyeuristic company of a neighbor woman ironing clothes visible through an open window. Eventually, he returns home as the party is winding down.

After the final guests leave, David wanders into the kitchen: "My mother was in there. The refrigerator door was open. She was wearing just one shoe. The other was on the floor, a black shoe, upright, near the wall. She held a tray of ice cubes in her hands and she was spitting on the cubes. She disappeared behind the refrigerator door and I could hear her open the freezer compartment and slide the tray back in" (DeLillo, *Americana* 195). David replicates Ann's bizarre act of spitting on ice cubes at the chronologically later but narratively earlier opening party, and Sullivan unknowingly repeats Ann's act of standing in one shoe at that same party (7). In retrospect, it becomes clear that the entire novel is constructed as a hall of mirrors leading to and from this primal scene.

The erotic epicenter of David's flashback lies in the darkest recess of the kitchen. He recalls returning downstairs later in the evening to find his mother alone in the dimly lit pantry. "It was only a matter of time," she intones. "There is nothing but time. Time is the only thing that happens of itself. We should learn to let it take us along. The Collier woman is a fool" (DeLillo, *Americana* 196). There's a lot to unpack here. What was only a matter of time? That her husband Clinton would have an affair with Mrs. Collier? Or that the foolish Collier woman would lose interest with Bell *père* and set her sights on Bell *fils*? Perhaps Ann refers to her present encounter with David as inevitable, an evening of reckoning for repressed (and possibly mutual) desire. Certainly Freud and Lacan would agree that the oedipal encounter is inevitable, but this scene takes an unconscious drama and makes it all too literal, not to mention about a dozen years too late. More foreboding still, Ann's pronouncement, "[i]t was only a matter of time," may refer to the cancer that lurked dormant inside her, a mother's intuition that the death knell for this Bell will soon toll for her. Whatever Ann's oracles in the pantry may mean, it is less her words than her actions that remain emblazoned on David's psyche.

Facing his mother in the dark, David surrenders himself to the moment: "I did not move. I felt close to some overwhelming moment. In the dim light her shadow behind her consumed my own. I knew what was happening and I did not care to argue with the doctors of that knowledge. Let it be" (DeLillo, *Americana* 196). The head doctor

of that knowledge, Sigmund Freud, would call this the primal scene, an oedipal fantasy turned startlingly real. But David doesn't trouble himself with such definitions or scruples. He does pause, however, to acknowledge the shadow of Thanatos within this Arcadian realm of forbidden Eros: "Inside her was something splintered and bright, something that might have been left by the spiral passage of my own body" (196). This thought can only be inserted after the fact by the elder David, who did not know at the time that his mother would eventually die of cervical cancer and so could not yet have blamed himself for planting the seeds of death in her womb. For the moment, he seems more interested in spiraling his way back into his mother:

She was before me now, looking up, her hands on my shoulders. The sense of tightness I had felt in my room was beginning to yield to a promise of fantastic release. It was going to happen. Whatever would happen. The cage would open, the mad bird soar, and I would cry in epic joy and pain at the freeing of a single moment, the beginning of time. Then I heard my father's bare feet on the stairs. That was all. (196–97).

There may be no coitus here, but there's certainly interruptus. Tellingly, the father intervenes before the son and mother can act upon their desire.

The oedipal dimensions of this primal scene are so overdetermined as to seem almost a parody of Freud. A Lacanian perspective on the scene, however, casts it in a different light. For all the overtly sexual language of build-up and release in David's description, the encounter between son and mother is a dramatization of the disappointment of desire. "Let it be," announces the receptive son; "Thou shalt not" replies the paternal footsteps on the stairs. Whatever it is that David demands, and whatever it is that Ann needs, neither succeeds in satisfying the other before the father's prohibition. The scene reads like a dramatization of Lacan's oft-cited definition of desire in "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958): "Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting" (287). The phallus drives the wedge in that splitting.

While it remains unclear precisely what happened before Clinton Bell's intervention, the primal scene as narrated demands an even more fundamental question: *Did anything happen at all?* DeLillo includes a strange interlude between the ice-cube spitting scene and the erotic pantry scene. David goes to his bedroom upstairs and falls asleep: "After a long time I passed into a thin dreamless sleep, less a state of mind than a dislocation of senses. Coming up out of it for only seconds at a time, I did not know where I was or whether it was morning or the middle of the night" (DeLillo, *Americana* 195). After drifting through this "dislocation of senses" for an indeterminate period of time, he claims to have awoken. However, "[i]t was my body that was awake but not my mind" (196). Then he goes downstairs, where we're asked to believe that his mother has been waiting alone, perhaps for hours, in hopes that he would return for an intimate rendezvous. Could this really have happened? David wants to think so, but DeLillo makes the reader doubt it. The author's subsequent "Notes Toward a Definitive Meditation" is no more definitive on this subject, teasingly referencing the "relations (or near-relations) between the protagonist and his mother" (327).

On balance, the evidence suggests that David dreamt the encounter with his mother. But the substance of his fantasy is no less revealing for being only a dream. In "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power" (1958), Lacan defines dreaming as "a narcissistic folding back of the *libido* and a disinvestment of reality" (260). This language implies regression back to the Mirror Stage. The most salient feature of David's encounter with Ann in the pantry is their direct confrontation and the fantasy of merger that it conjures for David—a merger that regresses farther back than oedipal sexuality to pre-oedipal identification, spiraling his way back into the maternal imago. Commenting in the same seminar on the function of fantasy, Lacan asserts that "in its fundamental use the phantasy is that by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire, vanishing in so far as the very satisfaction of demand hides his object from him" ("The Direction of the Treatment" 272). Instead of conceiving of dream and fantasy as manifestations of wish fulfillment, Lacan suggests the opposite: they suspend the moment just before desire vanishes, just before the desired object eludes capture.



### **Primal Scene, Take #2: Yost Pantry, Fort Curtis, circa 1970**

As a 28 year-old auteur, David attempts to recapture the primal scene by fixing it on celluloid. “The camera dislikes evasiveness,” remarks David. “As Mr. Hitchcock says, one must not use flashback to deceive” (DeLillo, *Americana* 285). David’s climactic pantry scene breaks Hitchcock’s rule, deceptively reenacting a scene that never really happened in the first place. However, his intent seems finally to undeceive himself about what transpired that night. Instead, he ends up becoming even further ensnared in misrecognition and thwarted desire, compounding his failure from the past with a reconfigured but equally disappointing misalliance in the sequel.

Staged in the Yost family’s pantry in Fort Curtis, David evicts Glenn and Laura Yost from the kitchen and frantically begins shooting the scene between Sully/Ann and Bud/David. Every impetus behind the film has led to this pivotal sequence—and he completely botches it. David makes mistake after mistake, and he knows it. Rather than pause to collect himself and shoot the film properly, he rushes recklessly forward:

I felt no power doing it this way. The light was worse than bad and I hadn’t made the proper readings. I was going too quickly. I was not framing. I was ending shots too soon. But I had to do it and be done with it and maybe this was the best way, to obliterate the memory by mocking it, no power at all, spilling seed into the uncaptured light. (DeLillo, *Americana* 317)

The onanistic imagery of that final line identifies this scene as the cinematic equivalent of masturbation. As Mark Osteen notes in *American Magic and Dread*, “the masturbatory image implies that the light and sounds of the past can neither be captured nor banished: to abolish the echoes is to silence the singer as well” (28).

This climax may fail aesthetically as film, but as psychological exercise it is quite revealing. With the 16mm film rolling, David collapses back in time to his sixteen year-old former self, and back further still into a narcissistic fantasy of union with mother:

Then I began to shoot the last sequence and I found I could not stop. Through the viewfinder I saw them, motionless, supremely patient, steadfast, her

long fingers knuckle to tip visible over his shoulders, her left eye looking past his ear and into the eye of the camera, and I kept shooting for two or three minutes, lost somewhere, bent back in twenty-five watts of brown light, listening for a sound behind me, and of all the things I wondered that evening the last was how much she knew. (DeLillo, *Americana* 317–18)

By the end of that sentence, it is impossible to tell whether “that evening” refers to the past in Old Holly or the present in Fort Curtis, and whether “she” refers to Sully or to Ann. For David, such distinctions are temporarily suspended. As Randy Laist argues,

David’s movie seems to be a way of striking out the contradiction between past and present by compiling them into a single image. The past is imported into the present; the borderline between past and present, between imago and real presence, is set quivering, vibrates, and phases out into indeterminacy as a result of the magic of the filmic conversion. Flesh-Sully and Imago-Sully [. . .] flow into the same electric channel. (54)

In David’s eyes, Sully seems poised to dissolve with him into the Mother Imago.

At least that’s the fantasy. In practice, however, the reenactment on film simply repeats the initial failures of the primal scene in a different genre. DeLillo’s description of David locking eyes with Sully during this scene draws attention to a dimension of cinema that came to dominate psychoanalytic film theory: the gaze. In Laura Mulvey’s landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (published in 1975 four years after *Americana*) she demonstrates the ways in which “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (57). Mulvey coins the term “the male gaze” to describe the fetishized depiction of women’s bodies in traditional narrative cinema, designed to feed the scopophilic appetites of the spectator. Mulvey explicitly credits Lacan’s Mirror Stage as a seminal influence on her own theories (60–61). The masturbatory language with which DeLillo describes David’s view of Sully-as-Ann anticipates the voyeuristic undercurrents of scopophilia that Mulvey would soon codify into “the male gaze.”

It would be a mistake, however, to interpret David's film reenactment purely in terms of visual pleasure. As Mulvey notes, the image of woman on screen is also a subliminal source of anxiety:

But in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure [. . .] Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. (64)

The elusive phallus, signifier of absence, disappointment, and lack at the heart of desire, drove a wedge into David's reenactment of the primal scene as a sixteen year-old, and it intervenes to dispel David's fantasy once again in this second reenactment: "I focused again, her hands on his shoulders, a strange, a very strange expression, something like the curiosity that follows a man out of a room, a totally uncharacteristic look in her eyes" (DeLillo, *Americana* 317). Far from visual pleasure, David stands transfixed in the Medusa-like gaze of the (M)other.

Another disturbance to David's visual pleasure surely comes from his compromised vantage point. More troubling than anything David sees or fails to see through his viewfinder is the fact that, as a third party viewing this scene between Sullivan and Bud from the outside, David is essentially occupying his *father's* position in the oedipal schema, intruding upon the sham-idyllic mother-son union. Having come so far to escape his father's world and retreat into narcissistic fantasy, he ends up reconfirming his inheritance of the Name-of-the-Father. When the American Narcissus stared again into the reflecting pool, he did not expect to see the image of Clinton Bell scowling back at him. From the perspective of late Lacanian theory, however, the gaze is always a source of more anxiety than pleasure because it is inevitably misdirected and misapprehended. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan maintains, "[f]rom the outset, we see, in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, that there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure. When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*" (102–103). He adds, "[c]onversely, *what I look at is never what I wish to see*" (103).

### **Primal Scene, Take #3: Motel Room, Fort Curtis, circa 1970**

Having failed to satisfactorily merge with the *Imago Mater* in either pantry scene, David determines to act out his incestuous desires vicariously by melting into the too, too Sully'd flesh of his surrogate mother. It should come as no surprise by this point that David fails again in his quest, though the extent of his failure has not been fully appreciated by *Americana's* critics. The motel episode begins promisingly enough. Naked in bed and primed for action, David seems on the brink of finally consummating his maternal desires, albeit by proxy. However, having fed on fantasy for so long, David seems to have lost his appetite for any other fare. Assured by Sully "I'll do anything you want me to do," David defers gratification and chastely responds, "[f]irst, before anything else, I want you to tell me a story" (DeLillo, *Americana* 320). A bedtime story as foreplay? At this point, no perversion of the oedipal drama is off limits. Sully rises to the occasion with a gripping story about the fraternal rivalry between her Irish Catholic father and her "bloody Ulsterman of an uncle" (320). The tale culminates with Sully caught in a boat during a storm with her mad Uncle Malcolm. Between the lines of his song (" . . . So I lay with my man from the North Country" [327]) and his howl at the height of the tempest ("*Damn your eyes, daughter*" [330]), Sully pieces together that her "uncle" was secretly her biological father. Appropriately, the prologue to sex between David and the woman cast as his mother is a bedtime story about incest.

The succeeding chapter finally delivers in graphic detail the long-awaited sex scene, punctuated by David's occasional editorial asides of "Abomination" (DeLillo, *Americana* 333). Multiple critics have pointed out that David's consummation with Sully proves to be an anti-climactic flop. Cowart concludes that this one-night stand "is remarkable for its sustained negative affect" (141). In *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006), Peter Boxall contends, "the novel is saturated with the disappointment, the anti-climax of this moment, the failure of the filmic and the bodily to converge in a new, transfigured homeland" (34). According to Joseph Dewey in *Beyond Grief and Nothing: A Reading of Don DeLillo* (2006), "The encounter turns out to be something less than we (and Bell) expect. The sexual positions are graphically rendered; thus, the scene never touches the transcendent or even the erotic (it is all about biting and licking and holes and fingers) but stays unappealingly fleshy,

described in graceless metaphors of military occupation" (22). The first critic of David's shortcomings is Sullivan herself. The morning after, she speaks down to him less as an underwhelmed lover than as a disappointed mother to a naughty son: "David, I truly love you and hate you. I love you because you're a beautiful thing and a good boy [. . .] And I hate you because you're sick. Illness to a certain point inspires pity. Beyond that point it becomes hateful" (DeLillo, *Americana* 336). Worse than her dwindling love, her emerging hostility, and her threadbare pity, Sully exposes David as an outdated caricature of psychosexual angst: "You're such a lovable cliché, my love, and I do hope you've found the center of your sin, although I must say that nothing we did last night struck me as being so terribly odd" (336). Laist sums up David's post-coital condition best as an image-driven protagonist stripped of all his purloined imagos:

All of the ways in which David has tried to master his self-image have themselves been derived from pre-existing images. Rather than being the artist who edits this collage of selfhood into a subjective self-representation, he is arranged from without by Sully as the most pitiful kind of cartoon, the cartoon that cartoonishly denies its own cartoonishness. (59–60)

Critical consensus maintains that David's crime isn't so much in having tawdry sex with Sullivan, as in being deluded enough to think intercourse of any kind will cure what ails him. However, the critics leave a fundamental question unasked: *Do David and Sully actually have sex at all?* I don't think they do. In an uncanny mirroring of his primal scene reenactment as a teenager, the motel consummation seems the stuff that dreams are made on. As with the earlier Old Holly scene, David takes a nap during intermission, and all the incestuous desires indulged thereafter amount to little more than a wet dream. Sully's tale about Uncle-Father Malcolm has the typical effect of a good bedtime story—it puts David to sleep. He claims to awake, but this claim is dubious: "I woke in the middle of the night. Sullivan was gone. The wind blew a piece of paper across the bed and I got up and lowered the window. Then I smelled cookies baking" (DeLillo, *Americana* 331). The baking cookies provide a smoking-gun detail

carefully prepared for in an earlier chapter. Visiting his friend Brand before the road trip west, David wandered into Brand's kitchen pantry:

How long had it been since I had stood in a pantry at midnight, the dark shelves lined with cookie jars, jam and spices? Taste and smell can safecrack memory in the shadow of an instant, and in that pantry, nibbling dry cookies with the compulsive fervor of a penitent seeking the message of his past, I returned to a tight hot room in another town, the idle perfume of a summer. (115)

The pantry triggers memories for David as vividly as Proust's madeleine: pantry→cookies→mother→primal scene. Later in the motel, DeLillo interjects a calculated chapter break after David allegedly wakes. Perhaps the time it takes to turn the page is just long enough for the reader to pause and wonder: "How the hell is Sully baking cookies in their motel room?" She is not. David is dreaming. In his enchanted mind, he is not in a motel with Sully, but back in the kitchen with Ann. The vicarious consummation conjures an ur-scene which itself never took place outside the realm of imagination. This is all narcissistic fantasy—a reflection of a reflection of the idealized mirror-image encounter with Mother.

Dream logic allows David to enter not just the body of Sully, but also her mind:

I began to think her thoughts or what I imagined to be her thoughts. I became third person in my own mind. (Or her mind.) And in her as deep as I could go, hard and wild as I could strive, I listened to what she was thinking. Little mothers' sons. He wants to wake up alone. Michelangelo's David. Wasp of the Wild West. He is home at last. (DeLillo, *Americana* 333–34)

Just as David fantasized being "spliced into the image" of Burt Lancaster (13), here he imaginatively splices his way into Sully. But projection screens are impenetrable and only reflect back imagos of the self. The next morning David has to ask, "What took place? What occurred or happened? It seems to have slipped my mind" (336). Sully avoids specifics: "It stopped raining and the fantasies came out to play. Your home movie had put you in a state of anguish. I tried to console you. You wanted

to be drenched in sin, and so I made it my business to help you along. Old friends have obligations to each other" (336). Critics have assumed David had sex with his surrogate mother, and that is certainly what he fantasized doing. However, I contend that Sully's contributions to drenching David in sin are discharged not sexually, but narratively: through the stormy tale of Uncle Malcolm, matching his confession of incestuous longing for his mother with her confession that she was a byproduct of incest (the *Hamlet* variety) between a wife and her husband's brother. The consolation she offers him isn't sex, but language. She tells him a story.

*Americana's* shift from film to narrative, and ultimately to narrative-about-film, traverses the Lacanian register from specular fantasies of the Imaginary to the socialization and language of the Symbolic. None of these routes leads to absolute truth, stable identity, or crisis resolution, but instead loop back and forth in an endless circuit of signification. David Cowart was the first to detect a Lacanian undercurrent in the novel:

The subject cannot know itself, and language, the Symbolic Order, discovers only its own play, its own energies, never the bedrock reality it supposedly names, glosses, gives expression to. Hence DeLillo actually echoes Lacan [. . .] in speaking of "interlinear notes" to the text of appearances, a presence at the edge of mirrors, a "truth beneath the symbols." *Americana* is the record of an attempt to break out of the endlessly circular signifying chain of images replicating and playing off each other to infinity. (136)

The attempt fails. The "truth beneath the symbols"—what Lacan terms "the Real"—remains permanently out of reach. David Bell, like the Lacanian child, longs to be folded into the depths of maternal plenitude. However, like the mythical Narcissus, David can never penetrate past the reflective surfaces that bounce back images of himself.

\* \* \*

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Narcissus laments, "Alas, this fatal image wins my love, as I behold it. But I cannot press my arms around the form I see, the form that gives

me joy. What strange mistake has intervened betwixt us and our love?" For Lacan, Narcissus is the epitome of the postmodern subject whose "strange mistake" begins with the primordial confusion of self and other. There is no avoiding this confusion. Alienating misrecognition stands as a sort of Lacanian original sin from which no one is exempt: it accompanies the sin of being born. All of us are inevitably, irreparably splintered subjects from our earliest experiences this side of the womb. What makes David Bell so interesting in the present context is the compulsiveness and ingenuity with which he attempts to deny this rupture and to restore an idealized union, even in the face of repeated failure. In *Family Complexes*, Lacan characterizes such fantasies as "nostalgia for wholeness": "If we had to define the most abstract form in which it is found, we would characterise it as a perfect assimilation of totality to being. In this formula [. . .] will be recognised the nostalgias of humanity; the metaphysical mirage of universal harmony; the mystical abyss of affective fusion; the social utopia of totalitarian dependency—all derived from the longings for a paradise lost before birth and from the most obscure aspirations for death" (23). Lacanian theory does not abide such pipe dreams, nor does DeLillo's art. David's utopian aspirations, at once deeply personal and representatively national, are systematically exposed in DeLillo's extraordinary first novel as the insubstantial illusions of the American Narcissus.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See for instance C. K. Jung's *Psychology of the unconscious* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1952).

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