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# Exploration of the Struggle for Self-Discovery in Don DeLillo's *Americana*

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**Abstract**

This paper traces the continuation of the search for self in Don DeLillo's *Americana*, but also DeLillo's inclusion of terrorism in the novel. The changes in warfare give rise to an anxiety that further complicates the search for self in America. DeLillo's search for self directly contradicts modernism in that it cannot be accomplished by ignoring society and looking inward to some intrinsic truth. The search for self in this novel is stunted by the fact that these protagonists are searching for a now-obsolete modernist form of self in a distinctly postmodern environment. *Americana*'s David Bell acts as a template for DeLillo's later protagonists, as his pilgrimage out west and search for self sets the pattern for DeLillo's later protagonists. The purpose of this novel is not to present the reader with a sense of hope for a better tomorrow; rather, it is to present the reader with a specific moment in the lives of its protagonists that is indicative of their struggle for self-discovery.

**Keywords**: Self-Discovery, Postmodern, Terrorism, Selfhood, Anxiety, American Culture

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**Exploration of the Struggle for Self-Discovery in Don DeLillo's *Americana***

Don DeLillo is a contemporary author who has published fifteen novels, three plays, and various short essays in the last four decades. His works are best-known for its depiction and examination of contemporary American life, and for being considered postmodern literature. He is trying to convey how technology and the current issues in American culture feed and change literature. If we consider the beginnings of postmodernism to occur with the onset of World War II, then his novels can be understood to explore how postmodernism is continuing to develop into the present day. By including terrorism, a distinctly new type of warfare, he is also demonstrating how postmodernism continues to trace the impact of war on literature. As the impact that terrorism has on the postmodern novel mirrors that of World War I on the modernist novel, warfare in sense can be considered an impediment to the search for self.

*Americana* is also DeLillo's most fundamental novel, as the themes that DeLillo explores in Americana are continually revisited in his later works. The most important of these themes is the idea of an endemic American "search for self." The main protagonist is a man who, dissatisfied with life, embarks on a spiritual journey of self-discovery. This is not a ground-breaking plot, as he is simply continuing the modernist tradition of a search for self. What is introduced with Americana is his treatment of this search, and his attempt to make it distinctly postmodern. He uses David Bell as a representative of a new post-World War II American protagonist, in effect "inventing the primitive," as he re-invents the American protagonist to reflect the postmodern world. This phrase, this concept of "invention," is spoken by David twice within the text. It first appears as David, who is narrating the events of the novel from some unknown point in the future, reminisces about his work on his filmed autobiography:

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> The illusion of motion was barely relevant. Perhaps it wasn't a movie I was creating so much as a scroll, a delicate bit of papyrus that feared discovery. Veterans of the film industry would swear the whole thing pre-dated Edison's kinetoscope. My answer to them is simple. It takes centuries to invent the primitive (238).

The second appearance of this concept in the novel occurs when Austin Wakely, an actor in David's film, criticizes the autobiography; David's response is "I'm inventing the primitive" (283). DeLillo, by redefining and re-creating the modernist plot of searching for one's self, is working to change the way the American protagonist is represented. In taking the older modernist tradition of a search for self and changing it to reflect current issues in American culture, DeLillo is attempting to "reinvent" the search for self in the American novel.

The self that David is trying to achieve in the novel can be understood as an outdated modernist form of selfhood, which is, of course unattainable as it comes into conflict with the postmodern world in which he exists. In the novel DeLillo links David to modernism by creating a connection between him and James Joyce's last great modern protagonist, Stephen Dedalus of Ulysses. As a college student, David identifies himself with Dedalus (143), claiming that the book Ulysses "was (his) sacred scroll" (145). As defined by Harvey, modernist literature entails a search for a single answer, and in his search for self David is looking for the single answer to his unhappiness. David is a modernist character in that he is searching for the unifying modernist notion that there exists an "absolute truth." In the novel, David's obsession with the creation of his film can be understood to represent the "key" to finding himself. At the same instance that David is acting as a modern protagonist he is demonstrating himself to be a postmodernist character in that he is re-interrupting his own history, and re-configuring his own memories, as he inserts fictitious narratives into his autobiography, in order to find this modernist notion of one truth. In this way DeLillo is

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creating a new postmodern trope in the character of David Bell as David becomes the symbol of a "postmodern everyman."

In David's search for self he struggles with postmodern hindrances; the main hindrance in the novel is the existence of simulacra. Simulacra and the loss of the real affect David in the form of technology, namely photography and film. In an attempt to find and understand himself David uses film to recreate his past; he creates an autobiography with actors that re-enact important events and memories from his adolescence and young adulthood. But in creating this film David also creates events that never actually took place within his life, such as the scene of his father re-telling his involvement in the Bataan Death march. David's father never shared these events with him; rather David gathers the historical background information for this scene from a local library and invents a narrative that simulates what a re-telling of this event by his father would have looked and sounded like.

David's autobiography becomes a postmodern issue in the book because David's scripted film effectively replaces his own memories; hence David's use of film as a means to help find himself ultimately fails. In "For Whom Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo's Americana" David Cowart examines David's inability to find himself. Cowart claims that *Americana* represents a re-thinking of identity and alienation as a theme in American Literature after the end of World War II (602). DeLillo's David Bell has to deal with the fact that postmodern identity is not something temporarily eclipsed, and not something ultimately recoverable. DeLillo uses David Bell as a postmodernist exemplar, a dazzling demonstration of the subject's inability to know a definitive version of itself. In this sense DeLillo's real subject can be understood as the insidious pathology of America itself, a nation unable, to achieve self-knowledge. David Bell, in his failure to find himself, can thus be understood as indicative of a larger American reality, a reality in which the traditional notions of self no longer exist. The loss of identity and the search for self in a postmodernist novel becomes

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more complicated than it had previously been in a modernist novel. David is essentially handicapped by the postmodern culture.

The inability to achieve self-knowledge in postmodern culture is tied to consumerism. David is very much a part of, and a contributor to, American commercialism and consumerism. His first introduction to consumerism comes at an early age as his father exposes David to American consumer culture and mass media. As an ad agent David's father spent quality time with his children by having them watch and analyze commercials in their basement. After college, David, with the help of his father, takes a job at a television network, and continues his participation in American mass media culture. This job, and David's experiences with his father as a young boy, can be understood to influence David in his decision to use film as his central tool to find himself. Film is a part of American consumer culture, but, for David, it also takes on a religious connotation. Going to the movies as a young boy, David remarks: "I was glad I had not asked anyone to come to the movies with me as this was religion and it needed privacy" (135). David recognizes the true power of the image as an adolescent when he goes to see *From Here to Eternity*. For David the possibilities of film are endless, a statement which testifies to the power and mutability of the image, as not only are the possibilities for representation endless, but the power behind images are inherently religious. This is why he uses film as the medium for his own historical narrative. DeLillo, however, does not view the commercial aspects of American culture in a positive light; instead he considers consumerism to be a form of mass anaesthesia. It has its own artificial and dulling language, its four-color mosaic of images and patterns. It causes unfulfilled desires to rise above the rooftops. It makes people lonely.

In "Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in Don DeLillo's Early Fiction," Mark Osteen examines the strong link between cinematic representation and consumer culture in DeLillo's novels. Osteen claims that David's search for originality,

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demonstrated by his attempt to make his movie, is futile as it is "based upon an outmoded notion of originality and identity no longer recuperable in postmodern America" (451). David, however, is blind to this notion as he cannot see outside the film culture in which he exists. David's journey throughout the novel is characterized by the conflict between consumerism and self-identity. David's misguided use of technology in his search for selfhood extends to automobiles, which he also views as religious objects. His journey towards self discovery begins with a pilgrimage westward. His drive west arises from the aura he attaches to cars, and the act of driving. He tells Sullivan that he wants to drive cross country because he wants to do something more religious. He later comments that his red Mustang is an infinitely more religious vehicle than the T-bird he owned in college. He tells Pike's girl that he cannot fly out West because his journey is a religious journey. "Planes aren't religious yet. Cars are religious" (49). David's obsession with cars and driving does not deviate from American literary convention: the journey westward is for David just as religious as manifest destiny rendered it in the nineteenth-century, but his use of technology makes it postmodern.

It is during David's journey Westward that he succeeds in having symbolic sex with his mother by having sex with Sullivan, whom he consciously sleeps with as a means of satisfying his desire to sleep with his mother. While they're having sex, David mentally repeats the same two words: "lewd" and "abomination" (332-33). After they have had sex, David mentions that he "smelled the cookies baking," and that his "black wish was fulfilled" (334). He knows his obsession with sleeping with his mother is wrong, yet pursues it to its pseudo-fruition. This sexual relationship with his mother, who acts as the centre of David's relationship with and understanding of religion, severely handicaps David. The linking of Christianity with his mother irreversibly warps David's understanding of Christianity; this is why it is possible for him to give religious significance to things that normally are considered

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completely secular. David's warped sense of religion coupled with his assignment of religious meaning to aspects of American consumerism highlights the fact that he is using an outdated means of self discovery; he is inadvertently combining older methods of self discovery with aspects of American culture that are linked to postmodernism, thus making it impossible for him to succeed in his journey of self discovery.

It is also David's relationship with his mother that first elicits anxiety about death. Ann dies of ovarian cancer at a relatively young age, and it is her death that begins David's obsession with youth and death. Death, for DeLillo, is another distinctly postmodern American obsession. A flood of information brought on by technology has worked to alienate people from the idea of death as the ultimate promotion. Benjamin Bird, in "Don DeLillo's *Americana*: From Third- to First-Person Consciousness," looks at how David is affected by his fear of death. Bird claims that DeLillo uses Bell to represent an archetype of "American pathology," a pathology rooted in "death-anxiety," which DeLillo presents as "being endemic to American culture and causing Bell to fear and avoid subjective mental experience" (186). David's fear of death causes him to close himself off from the world around him, as "his consciousness does not offer him reliable access to the world," (making) "it impossible for him to create any recognizable form of selfhood" (185).

For David, his death anxiety manifests itself in his anxiousness over his physical appearance. He is obsessed with the ages of his fellow employees in the work place; he has to be the youngest in his level of authority at the network. David wants to be a physically healthy and strong man, as seen by his attitude towards sports, and his fight with Wild and Brand. He constantly asks women to judge him based on his physical appearance and becomes upset if he feels de-valued by their opinion. What Becker and Bird classify as the American pathology of death anxiety becomes a physiological handicap for David. His obsession with youth and appearance is one of the major reasons he does not change at the

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end of the novel, as he begins and ends the novel by checking a mirror to see if he has any dandruff. References to his dandruff in fact appear three times in the novel, not only creating a perverse holy trinity, but demonstrating how David is unable to change on his spiritual journey of self-discovery.

David ends the novel without succeeding in his search for self; instead, the reader is left with the insinuation that David is living off in obscurity on a remote and distant island still watching and adding segments to his film, thus he is still looking for a modernist notion of self. David's link to modernism negatively affects him in that it impacts the methods which he uses in his search for self. He at first turns to religion to help find himself, as his journey Westward carries a distinctly religious connotation, yet his attempt to use religion fails because of two key factors: he combines with religion postmodern ailments, namely technology and consumerism, and he defines religion through his troubled relationship with his mother. The search for self becomes a commonplace issue in DeLillo's novels. Although war only plays a cursory role in Americana, it is important to see how David is affected by his father's role in World War II, and by the then current conflict of the Vietnam War, as the effects of war in DeLillo's novels will continue to grow and become much more widespread.

DeLillo effectively concludes *Americana* with a continuous loop, as the narration implies that David Bell will always be watching, and adding to his autobiography without every coming to terms with his search for self. For David Bell there is no "out"; he will never find himself, and he will never have closure to his search. That this novel end with regression does not diminish the importance of the search for self; what DeLillo is attempting to show is how the struggles in these novels are indicative of the struggles of everyday life. As the world changes, the novel changes, and what these three novels demonstrate is the growing impact of postmodern hindrances and war, as a general sense of a loss of origin and terrorism, have now become a daily facet of American life.

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