

## Mad about the boy? Hollywood stardom and masculinity subverted in 'The Swimmer'

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Mad about the boy? Hollywood stardom and masculinity subverted in *The Swimmer* (1968)

A designer-muscle protagonist jumps in and out of a series of swimming pools wearing tight jeans, his body ogled by every woman –and man– in sight. It's the 1992 Levi's jeans commercial Swimmer, and the man's incessant pool-dipping is explained by the final tagline: "the more you wash them, the better they get." On the soundtrack, Dinah Washington's version of Mad About the Boy references the erotic appeal of male stardom ("on the silver screen / he melts my foolish heart in every single scene") to women, but also to men: the song has homosexual connotations, having originally been written and recorded by Noël Coward as a love song to another man. The lyrics also mention the guilt involved in gazing at 'the boy': "I'm so ashamed of it / but must admit the sleepless nights I've had / about the boy." The commercial is inspired by, and replicates shots from, the 1968 film The Swimmer, directed by Frank Perry and starring Burt Lancaster. This immediately invites attention to the importance of male spectacle in the original film, which famously featured Lancaster in Speedos for the entire running time, and issues surrounding the nature of the spectatorial gaze being solicited.

Steve Neale's 1983 essay 'Masculinity as Spectacle' argued that the elements Laura Mulvey had associated with representations of women (spectacle, masochism, passivity, masquerade, the body as signifying difference) should be considered in relation to men as well. Since then, much work has emerged further interrogating these issues which, following the publication of Judith Butler's Gender Trouble in 1990, has tended to emphasize heterosexual masculinity on screen in terms of construction and performance.<sup>1</sup> As far as Hollywood films of the 'seventies' (pop-cultural shorthand for what might more accurately be defined as the period c. 1967-1976) are concerned, much recent research has focused on

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<sup>1</sup> Examples include Cohan and Hark; Cohan; Mackinnon; Dixon.

the extent to which the period might be considered as being something ‘new.’<sup>2</sup> And arguably, one way in which this was the case was the tendency in this period both to directly dramatize and explicitly acknowledge, far more than previously (and perhaps since), what Cohan and Hark refer to as “the paradox of a masculinity which derives considerable social and sexual – not to say spectatorial– power from being castrated, wounded, and lacking” (2). One way in which the ‘new’ cinema gained its power was through the way it represented the male body. But although the body in cinema has attracted much critical attention in recent years,<sup>3</sup> little has been produced in relation to seventies’ American cinema. We are still somewhat in the dark when it comes to understanding how representations of the male body helped reinforce that period’s particular and unique vision of a manhood that was castrated, wounded, and lacking.

Unlike the muscle-bound heroes popularly associated with the 1950s or 1980s, seventies’ heroes operated in the context of countercultural notions that the body should be represented in its ‘natural’ state. This is evidenced in Arthur Penn’s hippie film Alice’s Restaurant (1969). In the film’s military draft scene, the star Arlo Guthrie sits semi-naked with the other men on a bench; there is no evidence of any bodybuilding, tanning, or hair-trimming, no flattering angles or suggestions of a hyper-virile sexuality, but instead the handheld camerawork lends the impression of unselfconscious, uncompetitive democratic camaraderie, in contrast to the ludicrous macho posturing of the army officer who arrives to impose order on the rabble. I am not arguing that The Swimmer depicts bodies ‘as they really are’ in such a manner. Rather, made just one year before Alice’s Restaurant, it interrogates an old Hollywood ideal of masculinity –the muscular hero of the fifties– informed by similar impulses and assumptions.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include Man; King; Elsaesser, Horwath and King; Krämer.

<sup>3</sup> See Tasker (1993 and 2004); Aaron; Fouz-Hernández.

The Swimmer, emerging at a moment when the ‘old’ Hollywood gave way to the ‘new,’ often lacks consistency and coherence, compounded by too many cooks having involved themselves in the broth. Following shooting in 1966, the director-writer team of Frank and Eleanor Perry produced a rough cut of ninety-four minutes, but after producer Sam Spiegel excised the material he disliked, fifty-four minutes remained. The Perrys were removed from the project and a replacement half hour of footage was shot by at least three additional, uncredited directors (including Sydney Pollack), with Lancaster also reportedly involving himself. The film then sat on the shelf for almost two years before its release in 1968, when it bombed at the box office. These problems largely emerged out of conflicting attitudes towards masculinity in a confused transitional period. Though in certain respects the film appears to align itself with newly emerging trends and engage in a conscious critique of an earlier form of masculinity, the presence of Lancaster – perhaps the emblematic ‘transitional’ Hollywood star – renders questions of subversion more complicated.

The Swimmer belongs to a wave of late sixties’ films contending the emotional superficiality and crass materialism of American suburban middle classes.<sup>4</sup> Based on a short story by John Cheever, its protagonist is the middle-aged Ned Merrill, who resides in wooded, suburban Connecticut. One day he decides to ‘swim the county’ on his way home, running cross-country, stopping to swim a length in each of his friends’ swimming pools. Disturbed and physically exhausted, Ned finally returns to discover his house empty and dilapidated, with his family evidently long since departed. His entire journey has been induced by an insane delusion. The film’s emphasis on Ned’s ‘performance’ of a role (the family patriarch) he has in reality failed to play, reflects Cheever’s preoccupation with status anxiety, “the paranoid fear of losing one’s place in society,” which as Robert Beuka has

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<sup>4</sup> For example, The Graduate (Mike Nichols 1967), Faces (John Cassavetes 1968), Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (Paul Mazursky 1969), Goodbye, Columbus (Larry Peerce 1969).

noted, conflicted with the myth of ‘classlessness’ promulgated by the media in the postwar years (106). Ned’s madness is an extreme form of the allegiance to pretence typical of the culture in which he lives.

Initially Lancaster, appearing from the pool covered in bronzing cream, with trimmed chest hair, epitomizes a fifties’ model of muscle-bound masculinity. Cohan argues that Picnic (Joshua Logan 1955), starring William Holden, aims to associate “an ideal, physical masculinity with culture, not nature, as a means of establishing its claim to dominance,” yet in following bodybuilding conventions, Holden’s exposed body is openly eroticized as spectacle, thereby “configuring the possibility of an alternative masculinity through the image’s solicitation of an assortment of possible gazes across a continuum of gendered/sexed viewing positions” (199). A decade later, The Swimmer explicitly acknowledges that Ned displays his body as a status symbol, a conception of masculinity the film treats as yet another symptom of the obsession with artifice, both contradictory (it arouses social envy, but results in the sleaze and adultery which threaten the integrity of the ‘decent’ household) and inappropriate as a vehicle for self-definition, as with ageing the body will inevitably deteriorate. After an antagonistic encounter with a former mistress, Ned is left freezing cold, shivering and isolated in the pool. He raises his fists at the sky in anger, tensing his body, then collapses under the strain of the effort. A shot tracks him at close range whilst, holding his aching waist with one hand, he pitifully paddles with the other.

Such scenes align the film with a Naturalist tradition, which seemed to be re-emerging in late sixties’ American cinema. Developed as an artistic form in the late nineteenth century, Naturalism implies an impulse to objectivity, a tendency to emphasize observation or description over narrative. Crucial to Naturalism is the suspension of the desire to ascribe meaning, which reflects its desire to treat humanity, quasi-scientifically, as subject *matter*. The essential meaninglessness of physical matter informs the focus of Naturalist description

on the complex disorder of life: its mess, and potential for disintegration. Such as Naturalist narratives exist, they tend to take the form of trajectories of physical and moral decay. These themes are evidently relevant to seventies' cinema: the films of John Cassavetes or Martin Scorsese, for example, are routinely, if often uncritically, designated 'naturalistic.'

Ned's self-image is rooted in a cultural, rather than a 'scientific' understanding of physical matter (the matter being his body), thus is doomed to decay along with his muscles: The Swimmer dramatizes the physical and moral disintegration of an older cultural ideal of masculinity. As such, it clearly aimed to exploit the sense that Lancaster was subverting his earlier persona. Having worked as a circus acrobat prior to becoming an actor, Lancaster had, in the fifties, been particularly associated with roles emphasizing his sporting physicality: Jim Thorpe: All American (Michael Curtiz 1951), The Crimson Pirate (Robert Siodmak 1952), From Here to Eternity (Fred Zinnemann 1953) and Trapeze (Carol Reed 1956). Yet by 1966 it was questionable whether the fifty-three year old star's body was capable of attracting the same kind of eroticized gaze as previously.

Perhaps Lancaster, in acknowledging the reliance on performance that had conditioned many of his fifties' incarnations – what Cohan refers to as the body transformed into a 'mask' (185) – was now exposing their hollowness. Yet he had never really embodied the muscle-bound hero without a significant amount of ambiguity or parody. Many of the films in which his bare chest had been the centre of attention were especially transparent in their acknowledgement of the 'feminizing' gaze being elicited. In the opening scene of The Crimson Pirate, Lancaster swings into view and talks directly to the camera, delivering deliberately arch dialogue ("gather round, lads and lasses, gather round") before telling the audience that only half of what they see is real. Similarly, Lancaster's earlier outing in Speedos, From Here to Eternity, exploits Lancaster's muscular sex appeal, but this results in the iconic, adulterous kiss in the surf with Deborah Kerr's character. The disciplining of the

body sits uneasily alongside the social disciplining of behaviour along lines of ‘propriety’ or ‘decency.’

Unlike his more conventional contemporaries, for example Charlton Heston or Gregory Peck, Lancaster had an inconsistent and constantly evolving image, remarking in 1973, “I’ve never really had a consistent image, so I’ve had no happy fiction to project” (Ottaway 61). His varied career invites attention to several cinematic traditions (the ‘liberal issue’ film, the social problem film, film noir, the gritty western) from which more naturalistic depictions of male physicality in the seventies would take inspiration. For example, The Swimmer bears many similarities to the impression of weary, futile bodily struggle in Lancaster’s earlier film noir Criss Cross (Robert Siodmak 1949). In a climactic scene, his wounded thug lacks the stamina to resist a gangster who sadistically bends his broken arm and kidnaps him from hospital, leading him to certain death.

If it is questionable whether Lancaster had much to subvert in the first place, then his presence in The Swimmer nonetheless affected the film’s focus. In the first place, the swimming pool had decidedly different connotations on the East Coast than in Hollywood:

Burt Lancaster...has a little \$30,000 layout in Bel-Air, with a heating system, a waterfall and a tributary running into the living room. It was too splashy for Cheever country, so Lancaster & Co. had to go East. To add insult to imposition, Hollywood He-Man Lancaster was required to take three months of swimming lessons first to cure his mild hydrophobia. (“OK Everybody Out of the Pool” 51)

Pool complexes were symbols of Hollywood’s ostentatious displays of wealth, what Richard Dyer refers to as stardom’s “conspicuous consumption” (38-39). Yet Cheever, whose stories had first been published in the New Yorker and were set on the Upper East Side, the Westchester suburbs, or various Massachusetts villages, told one magazine feature: “My

sense of the pool – and I know the Perrys are in agreement – is that it is a kind of civilization. Pool manners can be very involved” (Stang 9). But if Cheever and the Perrys had been more interested in pool culture, then Lancaster conceived the film as another opportunity to make a liberal statement along the lines of Sweet Smell of Success (Alexander Mackendrick 1957), Elmer Gantry (Richard Brooks 1960) or Birdman of Alcatraz (John Frankenheimer 1962). He referred to The Swimmer as “Death of a Salesman in swimming trunks,” (Buford 244) which, given the star’s own Bel-Air layout, inevitably raises questions of Hollywood hypocrisy.

The swimming pool was a typical domain for the display of the Hollywood star body, and the camera’s gaze focuses explicitly on Lancaster as an object of desire, a risky strategy considering that the film’s agenda is to challenge the muscle-bound body as an appropriate gauge of masculinity. Take the scene where Ned and his young companion Julie practice athletics. Edited in slow-motion and set to a jaunty, upbeat score, the sequence is an exercise in unabashed fetishism that captures every ripple of Lancaster’s moving flesh, every minute change of facial expression, as he propels his body through the air over the various hurdles and fences.<sup>5</sup> Just what kind of gaze was the film aiming to attract? Like much of the rest of the film, the scene inevitably appears camp to recent audiences. Similarly, the Levi’s commercial relies heavily on a camp appreciation of the earlier film. The references in Mad About the Boy to the shame of desiring men further lends the impression that The Swimmer suffered from a guilty conscience. After all, for a film to have its star spend his entire screen time in a pair of Speedos would seem to suggest that there evidently *was* something worth gazing at.

Yet it is difficult to discern whether or not The Swimmer was supposed to be a parody in the first place. Susan Sontag writes,

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is an extreme example, see Mackinnon for further elaboration upon homoerotic objectification in images of male sportsmen (170-186).



Probably, intending to be campy is always harmful...Perhaps, though, it is not so much a question of the unintended effect versus the conscious intention, as of the delicate relation between parody and self-parody in Camp. (282)

But in The Swimmer it is often impossible to identify the nature of this relation, or indeed who the 'self' is in the first place. Perry had a particular interest in parodying old Hollywood behavioural forms, demonstrated in his later films Diary of a Mad Housewife (1970) and the Joan Crawford biopic Mommie Dearest (1981). Yet there is no significant mention of camp or parody in any contemporary reviews of The Swimmer, and furthermore, it cannot be said with any certainty that the athletics scene, as with much of the rest of the film, is Perry's work at all. For one of the disputes which led to the director's removal from the project was that Lancaster disliked his emphasis on detached, objective observation, noting:

it needed some kind of strange, weird approach to capture the audience and make them realize that, in a way, they were not looking at anything real... it was all part of [the protagonist's] imagination. But it was played in a realistic sense – so when you come to the end of that film, instead of being sympathetic and heartbroken for the man, you were surprised and shocked.  
(Crist 74)

Lancaster wanted the audience to identify with his protagonist, but also be left in no doubt that he was mad. Spiegel agreed, and after Perry's departure many of the re-shoots were geared towards making the film operate more from Ned's subjective perspective, whilst the footage shot by Perry (which comprises roughly two-thirds of the final film) would have been edited with this in mind. New dialogue was introduced making Ned's madness explicit, as were devices like blurring, slow-motion, speeded-up perspective shots, and the repetition of shots to suggest that Ned is covering the same ground twice. All these are examples of the

kind of post-production manipulation which the Perrys elsewhere sought to avoid (Capote, Perry and Perry 39-43, 261). We also know from Cheever that the sweeping, dreamlike orchestral score was not Perry's choice; he had wanted a jazz soundtrack (Gioia, Dillon and Stillman 64).

This new emphasis on subjectivity in the depiction of Ned's madness entailed the increased fetishization of Lancaster's body: by the star's reasoning, the audience needed to indulge in Ned's macho fantasies in order to fully appreciate his later deterioration. Just as Ned is mad about himself, the audience needed to be mad about Lancaster. The excess of many scenes veers dramatically away from the "understatement, plus clarity" favoured by Perry (Stang 9), and operates along lines favoured by Lancaster. Could a narcissism perhaps comparable to that of Ned Merrill be a factor in the film's construction? One might note the manner in which Lancaster seems to have imagined his own body as something of a cultivated asset on set. Joan Rivers, at the time an aspiring actress with a small part in the film, refers in her memoirs to the old Hollywood practice of "touching the money" (62-63). If a bit player touched the star during a scene, then for clarity the film would need to show to whom the hand belonged: thus a reaction shot or a pan would be required, and the bit player was more likely to appear in the final cut. A single touch of an established star could further one's own struggle along the road to stardom, which invests the star body with almost magical properties. But in The Swimmer, Lancaster forbade Rivers or any other bit player to touch him at all, whilst Cheever's cameo had to be cut short because following a petty disagreement, Lancaster refused to shake his hand during the scene (Weaver 191-192). This exertion of control through the bestowing of bodily proximity was complemented by various physical strategies for drawing the camera's attention. This complicated dance is what "acting in the old Hollywood movies must have been like with those big stars fighting for their screen time, using every trick" (Rivers 63).

If this seems narcissistic, then it is worth bearing in mind that Cheever's short story was originally conceived as a myth of Narcissus, which has implications for the particular nature of the gaze the film aimed to solicit. The author wrote the story in 1963, at the height of his confusion over his bisexuality, which seems to have played a part in his changing perspective on the myth as he wrote the story. Cheever was evidently wrestling with the popular association of homosexuality with narcissism. Michael Warner explains:

To the extent that our culture relies on the allegorization of gender to disguise from itself its own ego erotics, it will recognize these ego erotics only in the person of the homosexual, apparently bereft of the master trope of difference. If it were possible to admit that any relevant forms of otherness operate in homosexuality, then the main feature of heterosexual self-understanding would be lost. (202-203)

Though initially adopting the Narcissus myth as the anchoring component of The Swimmer, Cheever appears to have abandoned this during the writing process:

The possibility of man's becoming infatuated with his own image is there, dramatized by a certain odor of abnormality, but this is like picking out an unsound apple for celebration when the orchard is full of fine specimens. I've done it before; I would like to do better. Swimming is a pleasure, a gulping-in of the summer afternoon, high spirits. It is natural and fitting that a man should in some way love himself. (Cheever [2] 187)

Narcissism is too restrictive: Cheever wants to free male self-love from its connotations of abnormality. It is, of course, ambiguous whether or not he considers homosexuality part of narcissism's abnormality (thus to be avoided) or irrelevant to narcissism's abnormality (it can affect men of any sexual orientation). In his later journal entries, he seems to come down in favour of the latter. Here, the swimming pool is the site of sexual encounter between Cheever

and an unnamed lover: “at the edge of the swimming pool –twilight, of course– D. and I sit bare-arse, smoking, undisturbed by each other’s nakedness” the same D. who “likes himself, and jacks off frequently. He also likes men who resemble him sufficiently to make the orgasm narcissistic” (Cheever [2] 245-147). ‘D’ is one of many homosexual men he mentions, yet the only one who achieves sexual satisfaction in this manner. Narcissism is now a characteristic of particular individuals rather than something intrinsic to homosexuality, and it is no longer especially threatening or abnormal.

Cheever’s thoughts deserve consideration in the context of the ‘butch shift’ which occurred in gay culture in the late sixties, where many donned the construction overalls of workers, the leather of bikers, and the denim of cowboys, in an ironic adoption of traditional macho stereotypes. Partly this involved the camp mockery of an image denied to homosexuals by society. But perhaps more importantly, as Martin Humphries noted, “the shift to machismo has redirected our attention to ourselves as objects of desire and this results in a radical reversal of the self-image of many gay men” (71-72). Gay machismo did not simply challenge stereotypes of gay effeminacy. It revealed that a characteristic which had previously been ascribed only to women, the ability to solicit a desirous gaze, was in fact something that men, whether homosexual or heterosexual, could do as well – and which in fact, they had always been doing. Cheever’s writings, and those whose activities are described by Humphries, appear to have reached similar conclusions on male sexuality: that there is nothing wrong or abnormal in configuring oneself as a potential object of desire, and that a large factor in this is turning the gaze inwards, perhaps even loving oneself, which

obviously has a resonance in the context of sixties' countercultural notions of 'finding oneself.'<sup>6</sup>

In The Swimmer Lancaster is enacting something akin to the 'butch shift,' putting on his Speedos, rather than workers' overalls or cowboy denims, in an attempt to self-consciously mock an outdated stereotype, and to the extent that the film is able to marshal the gaze directed towards Lancaster for subversive purposes, it achieves this. Yet in other respects, particularly when one considers the star's own, considerable, role in the film's construction, The Swimmer seems to create a space for an older form of stardom. To the extent that the film indulges Lancaster's body as a muscle-bound spectacle, a product to be cultivated and sold, it enacts rather than critiques a particular cultural model (an older form of *star* physicality— that of the muscle-man) which in fact deserves a fuller interrogation in terms of its relationship to the film's ostensible subject matter (an older form of *male* physicality). In its auto-erotic infatuation with its star's image, the film tends to have the effect of consolidating an outdated association of narcissism with an extra-ordinary (in this case, 'star') sexuality, in contrast to developments in gay culture at the time (reflected in Cheever's thinking as he wrote the short story upon which the film is based) which strove for a conception of male self-love which connoted something more than sexual 'abnormality' in the conventional psychoanalytical sense.

From the mid-sixties, countercultural discourses increasingly emphasized looking inward, finding oneself, in a manner that was considered personally 'authentic' rather than socially-conditioned. To the post-war baby boomers who increasingly comprised cinema audiences, older star types such as the muscle-man seemed emblematic of the alleged

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<sup>6</sup> A quintessential statement of sixties' radicalism was the 1962 Port Huron Statement of Students for a Democratic Society, which looked to the creation of a society in which everyone could find 'a meaning in life that is personally authentic.' ("Port Huron Statement")

contradictions and hypocrisy –the narcissistic madness– of mass society and the older generation. The hippies in Alice's Restaurant, for example, consider the war in Vietnam and the domestic suppression of counterculture to be expressions of the same senselessness which characterizes 'square' society. As a star, Lancaster hardly appeared to be 'finding himself' in The Swimmer; instead he seemed to be losing himself in his own image, courting mockery with his athletic posturing. In contrast to the new wave of films such as Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn 1967), Bullitt (Peter Yates 1968), or Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper 1969), The Swimmer seemed anachronistic, and its release date – May 1968 – could hardly have been worse. At a moment when young radicals were perhaps more visible than ever before or since in their criticism of a capitalist ideology which they claimed had served the older generation in a self-satisfied manner, often by having been disseminated through classic Hollywood films, who wanted to see Burt Lancaster running around in a pair of Speedos?

The Swimmer was an arena in which the tensions of Lancaster's image were played out; a curious product, and in financial terms a casualty, of the confusion in the period 1966-70 over the direction of star masculinity. Yet because of, rather than despite, its messiness as a transitional work, The Swimmer offers unambiguous proof that audiences enjoyed gazing at Lancaster's body– and always had done. There was, after all, nothing particularly 'mad' about audiences wanting to gaze at 'the boy.' Nor was there anything wrong with men wanting to look at themselves. The Swimmer reinforces the impression that the real madness lay in a cinema which, in promoting a particular conception of masculinity, encouraged a homoerotic gaze whilst simultaneously seeking to conceal, excuse, or deny it. Especially given the traumatic context of the Vietnam war, there was an increasing tendency in liberal popular discourses to diagnose mainstream society as being 'mad,' as operating without sense or meaning: this encouraged artistic responses, like Naturalism, whose very subject matter was meaninglessness and mess.

If older ideals stressed the male body as being defined by culture rather than nature, seventies' depictions would increasingly adopt a Naturalist perspective, forsaking muscles for a few years, and instead attempting to depict bodies 'as they really were.' Wiry, untoned, hairy, and sweaty physiques were now fashionable, as was an emphasis on the materiality and disintegrative potential of the body. Integral to these new trends was a new emphasis on male self-regard, rendered in a manner which relied on an often explicit invitation to gaze at the male body in terms of a naturalistic spectacle. Inevitably, the 'authentic' hero was paradoxically as much of a fiction as the muscle-man had been. If the physicality and sexuality of straight white men was now being pushed to the forefront of cinema, then this was often done at the expense of, for example, women or the non-white, whilst the attempts by many filmmakers to insist upon an artificial distinction between male self-regard and homoeroticism or homosexuality became a major area of tension. One set of fictions about bodies and gazes replaced another. In its own way, the 'new' cinema of the seventies would still be rather mad when it came to dealing with the boys.

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