

# “There Are Different Truths”:

Identity and Reality in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Glamorama*

Veera Korhonen  
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Faculty of Arts  
University of Helsinki  
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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract <p>Tutkielmassani “There Are Different Truths”: Identity and Reality in Bret Easton Ellis’s <i>Glamorama</i>” käsittelen Bret Easton Ellisin vuonna 1998 ilmestynyttä romaania <i>Glamorama</i>. Romaani sijoittuu Ellisin tähänastisessa tuotannossa keskivaiheeseen yhdessä kohua herättäneen teoksen <i>American Psycho</i> (1991) kanssa. <i>Glamorama</i> näyttää olevan yhteiskuntasatiiria kulutushysterian vallassa elävästä maailmasta, mutta sisältää myös useita muita elementtejä. Teoksen moniulotteisuus tekee siitä myös haastavan analysoitavan.</p> <p>Teoksen tematiikassa korostuvat vahvasti peilikuvien symboliikka, sekä identiteetin rakentuminen ja pirstaloituminen postmodernissa yhteiskunnassa. Näitä teemoja käsittelen myös tutkielmassani. Lisäksi tutkin, kuinka todellisuus rakentuu ja hajoaa romaanin maailmassa.</p> <p>Ellis esittää identiteetin pirstaloitumista postmodernissa maailmassa muun muassa kaksoisolento -motiivin kautta. Käsittelen kaksoisolentoja sekä jungilaisten arkkityyppien että uudempien teorioiden avulla. Analysoin kaksoisolentojen merkitystä niin juonessa kuin identiteetin hajoamisen ilmentymänä. Postmodernin identiteetin käsitettä tutkin myös Christopher Laschin ja Jean Baudrillardin teorioiden kautta. Tämän lähestymistavan kautta käsittelen postmodernin yhteiskunnan vaikutusta identiteettiin ja siihen, kuinka se ilmenee romaanin päähenkilössä Victor Wardissa.</p> <p>Tutkin myös romaanissa esitetyn todellisuuden luonnetta. Romaanissa todellisuus on epävarma käsite ja pyrin selvittämään sen eri tasoja. Päähenkilön esittämä todellisuus on pirstaleinen, vääristynyt ja mahdollisesti myös keinotekoisesti luotu. Apunani olen käyttänyt mm. Jean Baudrillardin teoriaa hypertodellisuudesta sekä Guy Debordin speaktaakkeliyhteiskunnan käsitettä. Analysoin myös romaanin suhdetta omaan aikakauteensa ja siihen, mitä se kertoo aikakaudestaan myös suhteessa tähän päivään. Yhteenvetona totean, että Ellisin pyrkimys satiiriin jää monimutkaisen juonikuvion alle, mutta että teos silti onnistuu kuvaamaan yhteiskunnan pinnallisuutta ja yksilöön kohdistuvia vaatimuksia.</p>		
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## 1.1 Aims and Methods

It is difficult, if not impossible, to focus on just one single aspect in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Glamorama* (1998). The novel is a multi-faceted creation and reading it can be a disorienting experience. On the surface, it is a satire of the celebrity-obsessed 1990s but under the surface there are several other factors at work. At the time of publication, the novel was mostly dismissed as inferior to Ellis's previous works, and scholarly interest in *Glamorama* came later, especially after the terrorist attacks on New York City on 9/11. The novel is rife with possibilities for a literary scholar, as it is a veritable cornucopia of themes. But as it is not possible to grasp them all at once, one has to focus on a select few.

I have chosen to delve into the themes of reality and identity as constructs in *Glamorama*. Identity-building has always been a dominant theme in Ellis's work. Hence, I intend to focus especially on his use of doubles, or *Doppelgängers*, as representations of the fragmentation of postmodern identity. In addition to the classic theory on the subject by C.G. Jung I use some more modern approaches to doubles in fiction. I also consider Christopher Lasch's and Jean Baudrillard's theories on the nature of postmodern society and its effects on the identity, as represented by the protagonist of *Glamorama*, Victor Ward.

Ever since Ellis's most famous novel *American Psycho* (1991), reality and its representations has been a key concept in his works. As I am fascinated by the reality or realities represented in *Glamorama*, I study the nature of the reality that is represented in the novel: its fragmentation, its distortion, and its creation. To decode Ellis's novel, I have applied the theory of hyperreality as described by Jean Baudrillard, as well as several critical readings of *Glamorama*. I have also used several interviews of the author himself to have some of his motivations as comparison. I also discuss the novel in the context of the time it was written and offer some possible readings as to its meaning and aims and its relation to our time.

## 1.2 On Bret Easton Ellis and His Works

Bret Easton Ellis made a powerful impression in 1985 with his first novel *Less Than Zero*. Only twenty-one years old at the time, he quickly became a media darling. He rode on the crest of a wave of edgy young authors, such as Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz, dubbed the Literary Brat Pack in the media, and his personality was suited for the role. Flashy, hard-partying and from a wealthy family in California, he appeared to *be* one of his characters. *Less Than Zero* featured a cast of young, drug-addled, privileged white youths from Los Angeles who were the perfect embodiment of the soulless consumerism and anomie of the 1980s. It was a critical and commercial success and a film based on the novel was released in 1987.

Born in Los Angeles in 1964, Bret Easton Ellis grew up in the affluent San Fernando Valley neighborhood of Sherman Oaks. He developed an interest in writing at an early age, jotting down short stories and children's stories as soon as he could write. His mother encouraged him to read, which he did almost constantly. He took journalism classes in high school which further inspired him to pursue writing as a profession. Ellis has described himself as a "real horror, a really bad kid" (Clarke), since besides his interest in writing he partied and used a significant quantity of drugs. His real passion at the time was music and with that in mind he entered a music program at Bennington College in Vermont in 1982. He slid into life at Bennington effortlessly – mostly into a life of college parties – so much so that he was, in his own words, "on the verge of being thrown out" (Clarke) after his freshman year. His experiences at Bennington helped shape *Less Than Zero*, which had already started to take form when Ellis was still in high school.

The publication of *Less Than Zero* in 1985 led to a media frenzy and Ellis was hailed as the voice of his generation. He graduated from Bennington in 1986 and moved to New York City in 1987, which was soon followed by the publication of his second novel, *The Rules of Attraction* (1987). Both of the novels dealt with the alienation and pain of the so-called Generation X, manifested by copious drug and alcohol use, mindless sex and erratic behavior. They also featured some of the same characters, or at least *versions* of the same characters. This re-use of characters recurs in all of Ellis's novels. Ellis explains it as follows: "It's a way to remind me that all these books are similar in a way; it reminds that books are all connected somehow. There's no grand plan – it just makes sense to me as a writer" (Clarke). The characters appear to be almost the same, but not quite.

This is a thread which is woven into *Glamorama* as the protagonist Victor Ward is first introduced in *The Rules of Attraction*, although then as Victor Johnson. He assumes the name

Ward later for the purposes of his career. Clay, the protagonist in *Less Than Zero* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, is often mentioned in *The Rules of Attraction* as “that guy from Los Angeles,” whereas one of the protagonists in *The Rules of Attraction* is Sean Bateman, brother of *American Psycho*’s Patrick Bateman. Patrick and Sean are both briefly mentioned in *Glamorama*. Interestingly, there is also some overlap with other Brat Pack authors, as Alison Poole, a character created by Jay McInerney for his novel *Story of My Life* (1988), appears in both *American Psycho* and *Glamorama*. In *American Psycho*, she is a marginal character, one of Patrick Bateman’s many victims, but in *Glamorama* she is one of the main characters.

*Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction* set up the world where all of Ellis’s novels except *Lunar Park* (2005) take place. This fictional world looks a lot like the world that Ellis seemed to live in, including the choice of college, that is, Camden College is obviously a very thinly disguised Bennington College. As a result, Ellis was often conflated with his characters. Ellis’s novels appear as a kind of a continuum, unbroken until *Lunar Park*. They all share similar themes and as mentioned before, Ellis has a tendency to recycle his characters. In popular parlance, Ellis has created a universe of his own, an Ellis-verse, if you will. From the discontented and disillusioned college students who look for their place in the world in *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction*, to the serial killer Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* and to the hapless male model Victor in *Glamorama*, the characters all echo the displacement and emptiness of their cultural experience. The main characters share many attributes: they are wealthy, white, privileged and with mostly absent and divorced parents. Their world is blindingly, shockingly white – it is as if people of color do not exist in Ellis’s world. Their behavioral patterns echo each other, be it relationships, recreational drug use and sex without desire or passion. In all the novels, there is an impending sense of threat, as if something bad is about to happen, and often it does.

The media interest surrounding Bret Easton Ellis rose to a whole new level when in 1991 his publisher Simon & Schuster cancelled the publication of his novel *American Psycho* just a month before its publishing. A major influence in this was the National Organization for Women (NOW), which claimed that the novel was nothing but a manual on how to murder and mutilate women. *American Psycho* was eventually published as a paperback by Vintage later in 1991. The furor over *American Psycho* was considerable, as it featured painstakingly detailed descriptions of violence, most of it directed towards women. What was lost in the media hype was the novel itself and Ellis’s actual motives for writing it. *American Psycho* is in its essence a chilling portrayal of the yuppie generation in the late 1980s and as such continues the themes seen in his earlier works. Only the setting is different. Ellis sees Wall Street as the perfect

crystallisation of the mores and morals – or the lack thereof – of the United States at the end of the 1980s. On *American Psycho*, Ellis has said that “I always thought that Patrick Bateman’s violence in *American Psycho* was a reaction to the overwhelming dullness of a society where people couldn’t tell each other apart, where everything was stripped down to product placement and status symbol” (Blume). For Ellis personally, the novel reflects a period in his life when he “sort of got sucked up into this whole yuppie mania that was going on at the time,” a time that for him was very difficult: “I cried a lot, I drank a lot, I did a lot of drugs” (Clarke). The press had dubbed him an *enfant terrible* and he performed the role accordingly.

A collection of short stories, *The Informers* was published in 1994 and although it did not contain the usual cast of Ellis characters, it was thematically very much in the same universe: bored, disaffected, unhappy Angelenos in various situations, either caused by or leading to drug use and with extreme violence. The next novel and the topic of this thesis, *Glamorama*, was published in 1998. *Glamorama* was met with mostly scathing reviews, demonstrated here by Daniel Mendelsohn in *The New York Times*:

It’s a mystery to me why some people are complaining that Bret Easton Ellis’s latest novel is nothing more than a recycling of his controversially graphic “American Psycho” (1991). “American Psycho,” after all, was a bloated, stultifyingly repetitive, overhyped novel about a fabulously good-looking and expensively dressed Wall Street sociopath who tortures and dismembers beautiful young women, whereas “Glamorama,” as anyone can see, is a bloated, stultifyingly repetitive, overhyped book about an entire gang of fabulously good-looking and expensively dressed sociopaths who torture and dismember both women and men – and lots of them. Clearly, Ellis’s authorial vision has grown broader and more inclusive over the past decade. (1999)

The novel was also dismissed as Ellis unintentionally parodying himself, the plot was described as “contrived” and the satire that Ellis had intended to write was dismissed as jaded narcissism (Kakutani). There were dissenting voices as well, such as A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*, who “considers *American Psycho* to be ‘one of the most misunderstood books in all of American literature’ and describes *Glamorama* as a book that ‘in 100 years might be understood as a masterpiece’” (qtd. in Timberg). Naomi Mandel considers *Glamorama* and Ellis’s subsequent novel *Lunar Park* as “reflect[ing] on the implications of the controversy [surrounding *American Psycho*] by thematizing, theorizing and parodying issues as diverse as identity, memory, subjectivity, fame, the media and knowledge” (Bret Easton Ellis 2). While all this may be true, it is worthwhile to consider whether Ellis was able to convey his view to the reader.

*Lunar Park* (2005) is presented as an autobiography but of it is, of course, autofiction. The protagonist may be Bret Easton Ellis, and some of the events described are from his actual life,

but it is apparent that the novel is more like a conventional horror story, and as such is the most conventional novel Ellis has written. In *Lunar Park*, we find a middle-aged Bret Easton Ellis in the suburbs with his wife and children with all the appropriate trappings of upper-middle class life. Throughout Ellis's work runs a thread of disaffected families, absent parents, and bored children, and in *Lunar Park* Ellis finally explicitly tackles what has been inspired it – his own father. His father was supposedly Ellis's inspiration for the character of Patrick Bateman and Ellis airs out his grievances with clumsy Hamlet references and ghostly gravestones. In a way, *Lunar Park* seemed at the time of its publication like an end note for all his previous works, for the fictional world he has built by them. As a fictional half-way stop of his own life, he writes about the cult of fame and its trappings. Typical for Ellis, the characters he has created make appearances in *Lunar Park*, too. A serial killer mimicking Patrick Bateman is on the loose, Clay from *Less Than Zero* appears as Bret's college student named Clayton and Victor from *Glamorama* as the family dog of all things.

*Lunar Park*, too, was met by the critics less than enthusiastically. It was seen as “a calculating display of revisionism and self-doubt,” where the reader is “coaxed down the rabbit hole into Mr. Ellis' supposed middle-aged existence as a suburban husband and father. Rarely has an author brought less sincerity to the claim that every word is true” (Maslin). Such criticism is not wholly unwarranted, I would argue. Bret Easton Ellis attempting sincerity is not a good fit. But as ever, opinion was divided, and *Lunar Park* has its defenders and I, too, think it has its merits. One would have supposed that after *Lunar Park* Ellis would move on to completely new things, but instead he returned back to his roots with *Imperial Bedrooms* (2010). The novel is meant to be a sequel of sorts to *Less Than Zero*, and it features mostly the same cast of characters. In a way, it is a sequel, but it can also be read as a re-telling of the events in *Less Than Zero*. If possible, the novel is even more detached and flat than any of its predecessors. Instead of giving readers an update on his characters, *Imperial Bedrooms* feels more like Ellis airing his grievances as a misunderstood *artiste*, even though he keeps insisting he does not care what people think of him. Obviously, he does. The novel is jam-packed with the usual elements, but it offers nothing new. The characters are still jaded but now also middle-aged, and that is about it. Ellis has always written mostly characters who are unlikable, but by this point the characters are mostly just despicable. Personally, I found *Imperial Bedrooms* to be so bad that I struggled to finish it. And it is not a long novel.

Ellis has not published new fiction since *Imperial Bedrooms*, but has written columns for several magazines and newspapers, dabbled in screenwriting, and caused havoc on Twitter. His latest published volume is *White* (2019), a collection of essays. For a man who once claimed that



“us unmarried white men, who make a lot of money, should not be allowed to vote at all” (Papinniemi), *White* is certainly a departure. At the heart of it is the distaste for modern society, which in itself is not surprising coming from Ellis, but the former bad boy of literature is now a middle-aged man, who delights in “triggering millennials” (Cooke). He expresses disgust at political correctness, at identity politics, at cancel culture. Such subjects can and should be discussed, but Ellis’s approach is more of the “you can’t say anything anymore” variety. The neo-puritan tendencies he has showed all through his career have come to fruition. He claims to have spent his career by mocking white, privileged men (Kaprièlian) but fails to see that he has turned into a caricature of one. Ellis has gone from being the voice of Generation X only to a man venturing deep into ‘ok boomer’ territory. In other words, Ellis seems to have become a parody of himself. And for someone who comes from Generation X, the generation whose motto seemed to be “I just don’t care,” Ellis seems to care quite a lot. Ellis condemns moralists but is himself very much a moralist. But this moralist tendency has always been present in his fiction. In his novels, he satirizes and condemns modern society for its addiction to consuming and celebrity. In *Glamorama*, it is taken to the extreme.

### 1.3 *Glamorama*: Plot and Preliminary Analysis

I don’t want a lot of description, just the story, streamlined, no frills the lowdown: who, what, where, when, and don’t leave out why [...] now, come on, goddamnit, what’s the *story*? (Ellis 5)

The story is that there is an attempt at a plot in *Glamorama*. This is the first time Ellis has tried to create an actual linear storyline instead of vignettes. *Glamorama* is a comedy, a satire, a spy thriller, a mystery novel, and maybe even a bit of a romance. There are even elements of science fiction drizzled on top of this mélange. Later in his career, Ellis has said that he finds that plots and solutions to mysteries do not really matter, that he thinks what is more important is the mood of the piece (Pearson). It is quite obvious that he did not feel this way when working on *Glamorama*, which strives hard for a plot. Even though the idea of having a plot is a move towards more conventional literature than Ellis’s earlier work, especially *American Psycho*, *Glamorama* certainly does not follow the narrative conventions of realism. In fact, the narrative is even more fragmented than in *American Psycho*.

In short, *Glamorama* is the story of Victor Ward, or as he was known in his earlier iteration in *The Rules of Attraction*, Victor Johnson. Victor is a hapless male model, who represents all the negative clichés attributed to people in that profession. He strives to be an

actor and club promoter and is dubbed as the “It Boy of the Moment” (Ellis 43), a “hip, happening, gorgeous young thing” (343), all of which is supposed to lead to greater things, but what it really means is that he is a flash in the pan. The really famous and successful one is his girlfriend, supermodel Chloe Byrnes. According to Ellis, Victor represents “a summation of everything I find annoying and repellent about men in my generation” (Blume). Ellis certainly does not shy away from describing Victor’s vacuousness. I find the name Victor to be a kind of a pun, as he is described as being perfect – on the surface. He is supposed to be all-conquering and all-powerful, which is a take on our celebrity-obsessed culture: nothing is more valuable as a currency than being really, ridiculously good-looking. But under his shiny surface Victor is far from victorious. Despite his efforts, he is semi-famous at best and his talents, which Victor imagines as many, are in fact few, or non-existent. He is a vacant shell, communicating with others by spouting song lyrics and film references. This is not unusual in Ellis’s work, as almost all of his characters in his novels use pop-cultural references in order to communicate. It is their idiom and in Victor it is taken to the extreme.

The narrative is also filled with brand names and celebrities, even more so than in *American Psycho* which was filled with lists of names and brands. Should the reader not have intricate knowledge of the popular culture and celebrities of the 1990s, *Glamorama* will make a very confusing read. The novel is inextricably tied to its time, a snapshot of a certain era in popular culture. It is also a testament to the short shelf life of a certain kind of celebrity, as a lot of the real names mentioned mean absolutely nothing to the younger generation. Ellis himself did not think that this would be an issue, that this “wallpaper,” as he calls the descriptions, would not matter as much “because even though I might be writing about a specific time and a specific place, hopefully it’s in such a way that a reader can connect it to a larger metaphor – alienation, pain, America, the overall tone of the culture” (Clarke).

Victor is what can only be described as a live-action coat hanger. He cannot remember what he did yesterday, definitely not what he did in college, but he can remember every single detail of every single album released after 1972. Victor’s extremely bad memory is supposed to be a representation of his empty brain, but holes in memory are also a significant part of the story as we are on several occasions left to wonder what really has happened and what has not. Victor frequently opens conversations with “What’s new, pussycat?” or “What’s the story, morning glory?” thinking himself quite the wit. He is the quintessential blank slate who lends his expressionless face to promote some product or other, and in this way has some kind of meaning projected onto him, or more accurately, onto his surface. When Victor opens his

mouth, he sounds like an advertisement even when he is not working. This also serves as a link to *American Psycho*, in which Patrick Bateman often imagines himself being in an advertisement. I find that this conversation gives a good view of Victor's personality – or the lack thereof:

“*Yoki Nakamuri* was approved for this floor,” Peyton says. “Oh yeah?” I ask. “Approved by *who*?” “Approved by, well, moi,” Peyton says. A pause. Glares targeted at Peyton and JD. “Who the fuck is Moi?” I ask. “I have no fucking idea who this Moi is, baby.” “Victor, please,” Peyton says. “I’m sure Damien went over this with you.” “Damien *did*, JD. Damien *did*, Peyton. But just tell me who Moi is, baby,” I exclaim. “Because I’m, like, schvitzing.” “Moi is Peyton, Victor,” JD says quietly. “I’m Moi,” Peyton says, nodding. “Moi is, um, French” (5).

As is usual for Ellis, the novel is for the most part a first-person narrative. It is also typical of Ellis that we do not get to know the emotions or reactions of the narrator. The effect is that of a film, where events play out but there is no exposition or commentary. The effect is intentional, since for Ellis the narrator “function[s] as a roving camera, taking everything in” (Blume). The effect is also of someone who does not think nor feel, of someone who is all surface. This is not because Victor is avoiding reality, the mundane, and the problems of everyday life. It is simply because there is nothing there: Victor is empty, without meaning. Quoting song lyrics and referencing events in popular culture are his connection to memories and events, as if he is an automaton repeating phrases he has heard. A typical scene is when Victor inanely recites “Take your passion and make it happen” (18), then flashes the emotionless smile of a model and pops a Mentos, just as in an advertisement. Ellis never fails to impress upon the reader that Victor is, in layman’s terms, an idiot. And the other characters are well aware of the fact, too. As one character explains to Victor, when Victor questions why they like him and keep him around: “Because you think the Gaza Strip is a particularly lascivious move an erotic dancer makes [...] because you think the PLO recorded the singles ‘Don’t Bring Me Down’ and ‘Evil Woman’” (315). For them, in essence, Victor is what is known as a useful idiot. Flat characters are by no means unusual in Ellis’s work, in fact, they are the norm, but in Victor this, too, has been taken to the extreme. Ellis describes his narrators as “abstract summations of things that bother me” (Blume). The emptiness of the characters is definitely very much planned, they are mere canvases for Ellis to project ideas onto.

The story, told in six sections and the chapters numbered backwards until the sixth and final section, which proceeds in numerical order, revolves around a rather improbable

scenario of fashion models as terrorists. The story has many twists and turns, so that it is practically impossible to go through all of it within the confines of this thesis. The impenetrable nature of the plot is of course such by design – as readers we are not supposed to understand what is going on, because neither does the main character. I have chosen to briefly study what I see as the main points of the plot and continue with deeper analysis in the next two chapters.

We follow Victor during a chaotic thirty-six hours in New York City, where he is involved with at least two women in addition to his girlfriend Chloe, promoting a new, high-end nightclub and attending New York Fashion Week shows both as a model and as an audience member, zipping through the city on his Vespa. Gone are the limousines and town cars of *American Psycho*, the It Boy of the Moment is a late 1990s man in his transportation method. When everything goes horribly wrong for Victor – relationships are revealed and ended, Victor’s secret plans to open another club are foiled – he is given the chance to get away by a mysterious man named F. Fred Palakon. Victor is offered a large sum of money for a search-and-rescue type mission. Victor desperately needs money. Victor may be the son of a wealthy senator, but he squanders his allowance on parties and drugs, always ending up short on money. As is typical for Ellis, the character’s relationship to his parents is distant and the mother is in fact completely absent – his mother is dead. To earn the money, Victor must find a woman, Jamie Fields, with whom he went to Camden College. Should the reader have read *The Rules of Attraction*, that name might ring a bell. Both Victor and Jamie appear as characters in that novel, although they are very much in the periphery of the main characters.

For what I can only assume are purely for the reasons of the story and not convenience in terms of modern travel, Victor boards the Queen Elizabeth II to London where Jamie has last been seen. If the reader has not questioned the veracity of the story earlier, the narrative while Victor is onboard starts to make its unreliability obvious. In earlier chapters, there have been mentions of mysterious black cars, of film crews appearing and disappearing, of Victor being seen where he claims not to have been but not much is made of them. If it had not been completely clear before, it is made very visible now, on the ocean: Victor is being filmed, by whom and for what purpose is unclear. At times, it appears that Victor knows he is in a film, as a script is discussed and events hashed out, but there appears to be something more going on. Some events are mentioned as “not scripted” (226), sometimes Victor is out of character. Are there several films being filmed? Is Victor going insane? The line between reality and illusion is intentionally blurred and neither readers nor characters are made aware of what is

really what. This is a theme that runs through the whole novel and things are made more and more complicated – or practically impossible – to follow as the story moves along.

During the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, Victor meets and romances a woman, Marina, who mysteriously disappears from the ship as if into thin air. This may be due to an act violence, as is suggested to the reader as Victor finds blood, teeth and other human remains in her cabin (225). Her disappearance in addition to many other mysterious occurrences onboard the ship makes Victor increasingly paranoid, but after some persuasion by other travellers he agrees to continue to London. Not long after his arrival in London he meets Jamie, who in fact has not disappeared at all, at least according to herself. She is a model-turned-actress and is in London to shoot a film. As Ellis's literary universe is shifting and ever-changing, Victor barely remembers Jamie from Camden, even though they were a couple there and in fact Victor was obsessed with her in *The Rules of Attraction*. As it turns out, Victor barely remembers anyone or anything from college. One of his girlfriends back in New York, Lauren Hynde, was his girlfriend at Camden, too, but Victor appears to have no recollection of her either. The readers are once again left to wonder whether Victor's memory is really this bad or whether this lack of memory is somehow significant to the plot.

Victor quickly falls in with Jamie and her associates, a group consisting mostly of models and life becomes once again filled by parties and nightlife. There are even more fractures and discrepancies in the story and in the fabric of reality, but Victor's brain is so drug-addled that even when he sometimes realizes that something is amiss, he quickly forgets or is made to forget the whole thing. The leader of the pack is one Bobby Hughes, a former supermodel and a paragon of manhood to whom Victor immediately capitulates. Bobby is quite clearly the alpha male and Victor nothing more than a quivering puppy. Victor quite literally snivels and submits in front of Bobby, psychologically and sexually. The niggling doubts and suspicions in Victor's mind that there is something wrong with all of this are evident when by accident he catches Bobby and his cohorts brutally torturing and killing a young Asian man, Sam Ho. As readers we can question whether this was truly an accident or whether the intention all along was to get Victor to witness this horrible act.

Violence, as ever in Ellis's writing, is described in horrible detail and with cool detachment. The readers may gag, but the author keeps his distance. Ellis has explained the violence in *American Psycho* as "a reaction to the overwhelming dullness of a society where people couldn't tell each other apart, where everything was stripped down to product placement and status symbol" (Blume). *Glamorama* takes the violence even further, with terrorist acts that kill hundreds, maybe thousands of people. I wonder whether this can still be

considered a reaction to the dullness of society: Ellis uses so much macabre detail that it feels as if he is basking in the violence and the discomfort it causes his readers. One cannot feel anything else but horror and disgust at scenes like these:

The mannequin springs grotesquely to life in the freezing room, screeching, arching its body up, again and again, lifting itself off the examination table, tendons in its neck straining, and purple foam starts foaming out of its anus, which also has a wire, larger, thicker, inserted into it. Bunched around the wheels of the table legs are white towels spotted heavily with blood, some of it black. What looks like an intestine is slowly emerging, of its own accord, from another, wider slit across the mannequin's belly. (283)

Victor is describing the victim as a mannequin, because he cannot believe what he is seeing is real. Victor is shielding himself from the truth until the scales fall from his eyes and he is forced to realize that there is no camera crew, that this is actually happening and the mannequin in the slab is the aforementioned Sam Ho. This realization leads to a completely human reaction. Victor has a panic attack and a complete mental breakdown because of what he has witnessed. Bobby and his crew do not even try to cover up their actions from Victor; instead, they feed him full of sedatives and calmly explain that Victor is tied to them now. They have covered their tracks so that it seems that Victor is responsible for the death of Sam Ho, and therefore Victor has no other option but to keep quiet and follow their orders. Even though there was no camera crew like there would be for film scenes, Bobby's crew have of course videotaped the whole horrible event.

From London the story moves to another fashion capital, Paris. Victor has no choice but to follow along, for should he attempt to escape their clutches they will implicate Victor in the murder of Sam Ho. They claim to have fabricated video material of Victor having sex with Sam – or what readers are made to assume is fabricated material. With Victor being pumped full of drugs and the narration unreliable to say to least, readers cannot be certain whether Victor actually participated in the sex act. As the acts of violence and terrorism by the group only accelerate in Paris, it finally dawns on Victor that what he thought was just a group of super-famous supermodels is also a group of super-terrorists. And what better disguise, and what better people than models for the job, as Jamie tearfully explains Bobby's reasoning:

He would use the fact that as a model all you do all day is stand around and do what other people tell you to do...He preyed on that...and we listened...and it was an analogy that made sense...in the end...when he asked...things of us...and it wasn't hard to recruit people...everyone wanted to be around us...everyone wanted to be movie stars...and in the end, basically, everyone was a sociopath. (309)

In a world where beauty and celebrity status are the only things that matter, it is easy to believe that supermodels could really act as a terrorist cell. They can go anywhere, and no-one bats an eye, at least in the world of *Glamorama*. In interviews, Ellis has explained his motivations for combining the worlds of high fashion and terrorism:

“The basic connection that I saw was insecurity. The fashion world survives by foisting a sense of insecurity upon the public. They want you to look a certain way – own these dresses, buy those clothes. What is foisted on you is a desire for something unattainable. For terrorists, the goal is not really the bombing of the embassy or of the airliner; it’s to make you feel unsafe, to give yourself a sense of insecurity about your world. You don’t want to worry anymore, so maybe you give in to their demands. [...] Fear – that was the leap I was making between terrorism and fashion. Also, it interested me to ask what would be a perfect smoke screen for a terrorist conspiracy. Would it be a world where image and surface were the only truths? Could that be the smoke screen?” (Blume).

In an earlier interview, Ellis postulated that

“[t]he connection I’m making has to do with the tyranny of beauty in our culture and the tyranny of terrorism. Of course that’s a metaphor and the idea of models actually blowing up hotels and airlines is farfetched. But the idealization of beauty and fame in our culture drives people crazy in a lot of ways: we resent it, we want it, we love it, we hate it...Fashion – and what makes us attracted to it – is all about insecurity...The point of terrorism is to make us insecure about our safety. What I did in *Glamorama* – or what I propose – is that these two things can be linked; there is a connection.” (An Interview)

Ellis seems to be quite sure of his reasoning in these excerpts, but I do not find its representation in the novel as fully developed as it could be. But this goes for a large part of *Glamorama* – ideas are put forth but not explored further or simply forgotten. I find his reasoning tenuous at best. It feels as if he has drummed up these analogies for interviews and that the terrorist acts in the novel are there merely to disconcert the reader – and Victor. Victor tries to find a reason for the attacks, since surely there must be a reason for such violence and insanity, but the answer is shrouded in mystery. Political motives are hinted at, but the most readers get is “there are many answers” (404), or as Bobby Hughes claims as his logic for the attacks “The government is an enemy” (314), but fails to mention *which* government exactly. Several nations are mentioned but not implicated. Bobby himself seems to work for the highest bidder, traveling from Japan to Beirut to Dubai. By definition terrorism is the use of violence to deliver a message and to bring on political or religious change, but in *Glamorama* the only motivation seems to be to create chaos. In his ideology, Bobby seems more like an anarchist than a political terrorist. Readers never see any reactions to the attacks, so they are not to know how the surrounding society has responded. And of

course, in the 1990s Al-Qaeda, ISIS, or jihadism were not synonyms for terrorism. That is, it would be quite difficult, if not impossible, to write a novel like *Glamorama* in the 2020s. The readers' reactions to this kind of seemingly mindless terrorism would be quite different.

In Paris, the narration is riddled with camera crews and all the accoutrements of a film set. The camera crews circle every scene and there seem to be several different ones which in itself would not be unusual for filmmaking, but here they all seem to be unrelated, all working on different things, maybe creating different realities. Some of the film crews are referenced as "taking care of things," meaning that they have quite literally removed a character from existence. There are French crews, there are American crews and maybe some others. It is impossible to know who controls this all, what is being filmed, what is scripted, and what is not. The characters often refer to a script or otherwise indicate that they are aware of filming, but even they seem to be unaware of all the different permutations in this scenario: "Are we in the same movie?" (279) they occasionally ask each other in confusion. At times, it seems that a so-called snuff film is being made, that is, a film which shows scenes of actual homicide, made for profit, but in *Glamorama* this includes massive terrorist attacks, too. Ellis has been known to be interested in the genre, and they make an appearance in *Less Than Zero*, but it is very much questionable whether actual snuff films exist. The mood of the novel gets more and more oppressive, as Victor follows the mayhem helplessly from the side.

In the beginning of the fourth part of the novel, the narration moves from first person to omniscient narration. This, I feel, is made to make Victor's detachment from the events even more tangible. The tone is flat, affectless. It seems like a mere recitation of events, even more so than when Victor described what was going on around him. What the omniscient narrator does not show is Victor's increasing panic and confusion, which have been evident in his narration. What I mean with Victor being detached is that he imagines himself to be outside of it all, not an active participant in the death and destruction that the group causes. Still, he is forced to participate in some of the attacks. His understanding of what is real and what is imagined is completely gone, but then nobody in the story seems to know the full truth, if there is such a thing. The true identity of all these people is a mystery, sometimes even to themselves. What *is* clear, is that nobody and nothing is what they seem to be.

When people in the group start dying in various violent altercations, Victor starts to plan an escape. With his limited knowledge and vacant mind, he is of course foiled by Bobby, who seems to be the mastermind behind everything. The story plants awfully convenient clues, as if in a game of Cluedo, for Victor to find and to stop Bobby's final big attack, clues that take advantage of his encyclopaedic knowledge of pop music. It is a mystery who planted the clues



for Victor to find. As the conclusion of this segment of the novel approaches, the tone shifts into an action film-like urgency. Things fall apart with increasing speed and it seems as if the whole world is collapsing. In a way it is, at least for Victor. In true action film style, there are various scenes of fighting and dying ending with an inevitable final battle. The hapless bystander Victor has suddenly been granted the skills and powers of an action hero, being surprisingly adept in hand-to-hand combat and handling weapons: “I suddenly raise an arm, slamming my hand into his mouth, and [Bobby] reels backward, turning a corner, skidding. I lurch forward and slam him into a wall. I push the gun into his face, screaming ‘*I’m going to kill you!*’” (433). And in true action film fashion, the final fight is extremely drawn out. Finally, Bobby is dead, and Victor stands victorious for once.

But alas, the clues planted for Victor are of course false and he fails to prevent Bobby’s horrendous plan from coming to fruition. Bobby’s grand finale is blowing up a commercial airliner, a 747 Jumbo Jet at that, to maximize the casualties and to horrify the readers. We are treated to scenes of destruction that at the time of the novel’s publication were almost unimaginable but are now, unfortunately, all too familiar. I say almost unimaginable, because the obvious reference point at the time of publication would have been the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, so the images would already have been in the readers’ minds. But even Ellis did not imagine the real-life horror of airplanes colliding with skyscrapers and the skyscrapers crumbling to the ground. Then, surprisingly, all is suddenly well.

In part five of the novel, we find Victor – or someone who looks like Victor – back in New York City. He is a reformed man, a law student instead of a party animal, in a committed relationship and very much the model – but this time the model citizen. He is doing “[n]o more drinking binges, I’ve cut down on partying, law school’s great, I’m in a long-term relationship [...] I’ve stopped seriously deluding myself and I’m rereading Dostoyevsky” (446). Everything seems perfect for Victor in every aspect in life, too perfect. Is this really the Victor we know? The answer, of course, is a resounding no. This Victor is our narrator in this section of the novel, and it is clear from his narrative voice alone that this is not the same Victor than before, in a literal sense. This narrator is smart and erudite. From very early on in the novel readers have been given hints that another Victor exists and here he is in all his glory. I shall discuss the nature of this double in the following chapters. Plot-wise all we need to know is that he is a member of a clandestine organization, perhaps the one responsible for everything that has happened before. But what has happened to the original Victor?

He is being held captive, taken out of the way. Out of the way of what, we cannot be completely sure. His father’s plans for the presidency of the United States is one answer, but

in this sprawling mess of a story, readers are never to fully know why all this has happened. Or has it really even happened? We cannot even be sure of that. Reality is a fluid concept and especially so in *Glamorama*. I shall discuss the nature of reality further on in this thesis. What we are shown in the final section of the novel is Victor, or *a* Victor, being held captive in Milan. His captors seem to be connected to the people who got Victor involved in the first place. But of course, we do not even know who they are and what their motives are. He is alone, he is scared, and he has no idea why any of this has happened. He pleads for answers but gets none. All he gets is “your role is over, Victor” (471).

And so, it ends. A man left to his own devices after he has served his role. Victor’s catchphrase throughout the novel is “spare me,” a phrase that signals disaffection and disinterest. But by the end, Victor has not been spared in any way. He has been used, abused, and then erased. As Victor himself has said early on, almost like a prophecy, “and in the end, baby, you...are...alone” (22). The readers are left with hundreds of questions, of who, what where, when – and why. In the following chapters, I shall try to decode some of the questions that the novel raises, focusing on the doubles and the question of identity-building, as well as the representations of reality in the novel.

## 2. The Nature of Identity

As the novel's first part is set in New York City, it is worthwhile to take into account the symbolism of the high-rise buildings and their glossy surfaces. The buildings serve as a perfect backdrop for these characters for whom image is everything, who have substituted fashion for ethics and lifestyles for lives. The buildings reflect the two-dimensional images of these characters who are, frankly, two-dimensional at best. To quote Paul Coates:

The multiplication of reflecting surfaces, mirrors and plate glass in modern architecture enhances the self-consciousness of society, the sight of one's own image ceases to haringer death or trigger a devastating flash of self-knowledge but pops up fleetingly and irritatingly wherever one walks, a slow seepage of identity. The appearances of one's own image become a banal and casual punctuation of everyday life. (35)

The world of fashion and celebrity *is* banal, it is a world of illusion. A world of smoke and mirrors. Mirrors reflect, but it is crucial to remember that mirrors also distort, and that mirrors can reflect the entire universe, but in themselves they are empty. A perfect mirror image does not exist, literally. People who see themselves in mirrors, on billboards, on television never see a true reflection of themselves. It is always someone else in the image, someone they were hired to be. And would that not be scary, a mirror that does not distort but instead shows you as you really are? Victor as a character is a reflection of the environment he lives in, and it certainly is not a pretty sight. His reflection is everywhere, on magazine covers and advertisements, but what the readers see reflected on Victor is the grotesque nature of a society where everything is focused on surface. As Ellis has said,

[i]f your whole basis for being is just as an image, or as a surface, then you're not flesh-and-blood to people – and that's what celebrity does to people: it flattens them out and we never know what they're really like because it's not their job to tell us. So we do a lot of guess work and we project our own fantasies on them. So in a way we invent them. (Clarke)

While Ellis's earlier work, most notably *Less than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction*, are concerned with searching for identity and meaning, *Glamorama* goes further as it presents multiple possible identities. Ellis has chosen to bring these identities to life with the use of doubles, or *Doppelgängers*.

The Doppelgänger is an age-old literary device wherein a perfect double of a character appears, and in *Glamorama* Ellis has adapted it to his own purposes. Traditionally, the Doppelgänger has been seen a harbinger of death, bad luck, or as an evil twin. Descriptions of doubles date back as far as to ancient Egypt, where the double was known as a "*spirit*

*double*,” and to Plato, who suggested that we all had a double to whom we are physically attached (Rosenfeld). According to C.G. Jung’s theory on the shadow, the double is the hidden aspect of the self, the negative side of the personality (9), and the shadow is constituted by the inferiorities of one’s character (7). A very traditional and well-known representation of this is Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), wherein the titular characters represent the dual personality in Jung’s theory. In short, when you combine the original person and the double, when seen as manifestations of the different aspects of the human mind, you end up with a whole person.

In Victor’s case, we are not dealing with an evil twin as such. The double is far more complicated than that. His twin may be evil, in the sense that he seems to be employed by a shadowy organization which engages in acts of terrorism, but on the surface, he has all the good attributes that Victor lacks and that is all that matters. The other Victor is suave, intelligent, reliable, respectable and witty, all words that could not be attached to the original narrator. If anything, he is stupid, mean-spirited, and vain. But considering the double’s nefarious activities, Victor seems almost innocent, almost sympathetic. If we take into consideration Jung’s view of the shadow, the original Victor is inferior. Would that make him the shadow? Perhaps in a Jungian sense he is, but as the story is told mostly from Victor’s perspective, it is hard to imagine that it is so.

As described in 1.3, the novel ends with the double having taken over Victor’s life completely. In a way, this suits one of the traditional descriptions of Doppelgängers as the personifications of death, because in a way, Victor is dead. He is not in the limelight, not in New York, not being photographed or filmed. In this world, it is the same as being dead. While Victor is left to an unknown fate, everyone around the double is astounded by this new, improved Victor, who takes his law studies seriously and is focused on healthy living. What they do not see, of course, is that he is not Victor at all. But how? How can they not realize that this is a completely different person? Because they do not want to do so. They see a classic redemption story and a perfect surface and that is enough. As the double himself says, when someone marvels at the change that has come over him: “You’re just looking at the surface” (453). That is to enough in this world: to look perfect on the surface and to have a good story. Because the world is built on stories. As Fredric Jameson has claimed, “reality presents itself to the human mind only in the form of stories” (Selden 115). And the best story for many is the prodigal son returning home and redeeming himself. We get a description from the double himself, when he is participating in a photoshoot to promote his new life:

Simple before-and-after shots. Before: I'm holding a Bass Ale, wearing Prada, a goatee pasted on my face, a grungy expression, eyes slits. After: I'm carrying a stack of lawbooks and wearing a Brooks Brothers seersucker suit, a bottle of Diet Coke in my left hand, Oliver Peoples wireframes. (451)

Since Ellis is never the one for subtlety, the article for which the photographs are being taken is called "The Transformation of Victor Ward (Uh, We Mean Johnson)." The double is supporting Victor's father's political ambitions and has therefore taken his original name. Senator Johnson is very much aware that this person is not his son, but what is left a little open is the fact whether he was behind the whole thing. He does suggest, early on in the novel, that Victor should "er, find yourself [...] find – I don't know – a new you?" (79) As readers we do not find out the truth just for the simple reason that Ellis does not want us to know. He wants to keep us guessing and forming our own theories. In the 1990s paranoia and conspiracy theories were a popular theme in popular culture, as in the television show *the X-Files*, and Ellis has clearly taken the paranoia and conspiracy theories to heart. Palakon does admit that Victor's father commissioned him to take Victor out of the way for a while (402), but then several other clues are dropped and the plot, once again, is not as simple as that.

It is of course not a new invention to have the double triumph: in Dostoyevsky's short story *The Double* (1846), the main character Golyadkin is superseded by his double, who is in every way his superior. The double is often the materialization of an inner battle or a crisis of identity, which is very much evident in Dostoyevsky's short story. Golyadkin's mental health is very much in doubt from the beginning of the story, and he is finally driven to insanity when the double takes over. The double quite purposefully first befriends Golyadkin, and then, piece by piece, takes over his life. What separates Golyadkin from Victor is that while Golyadkin initially befriends his double, Victor never even meets his face-to-face. Victor's double, in another nod to intertextuality, mentions re-reading Dostoyevsky (446), because of course he is. Victor *hears* of his double, as people often mention having seen Victor somewhere where he decidedly has not been. Or are we to trust Victor's ailing memory? Has Victor completely forgotten being at a fashion show, or was it someone who appeared to be just like him? This being a world where "only the events that are reported, those that are recorded or photographed, can be said to have occurred" (Baelo-Allué 86), there is proof that Victor – or at least his likeness – has indeed been at a fashion show, despite Victor's protests to the contrary. Because of course the fashion show has been televised and photographed and there sits Victor:

There's a picture of you at the show in WWD, baby," Rick says. "You're with David and Stephen. In the second row." "Someone find me that photo and you shall be proven wrong," I intone, rubbing my biceps, freezing. "Second row my ass." One of the twins is reading today's WWD and cautiously hands it to me. I grab it and find the photos taken at yesterday's shows. It's not a clear photograph: Stephen Dorff, David Salle and myself, all wearing '50s knit shirts and sunglasses, slouching in our seats, stone-faced. Our names are in bold type beneath the photo, and after mine, as if an explanation was necessary, the words "It Boy." (60)

Victor's reaction is anger, because he has no idea what is going on in the photo. Although to be fair, what he is most enraged about is the fact that he is in the *second* row and not the first. He does not show any signs of having an identity crisis or an inner battle, he is simply confused, but tries not to show it. Therefore, a crisis of identity would not be the primary explanation for Victor's double.

Traditionally the double appears after the onset of such a crisis, but this double seems to have been in existence for a longer time. It is typical, however, for the double to appear as a shadowy figure at dusk or even as a floating face or a torso (Coates 4). Victor's double is originally only seen in photographs and spoken of by others, a mere cipher of a being. Readers are led to believe, in the first part of the novel, that it is always a possibility that Victor simply has been so spaced out that he cannot remember the things he has done and the places where he has been. The emphasis on Victor's extremely bad memory is perhaps meant to distract us from the fact that all this cannot simply be due to lack of memory. Ellis is setting up the story at this point and confusion is key. But it is inevitable not to start to question the appearances of the supposed double. In a world where reality is more than a fluid concept and sinister forces seem to be at work, anything can happen.

Another feature of the Doppelgänger in literature is that the double is often pursuing the original, usually with the intent of harming the other (Vardoulakis 69). Victor's double is indeed always at his tail, unseen by Victor but seen by many others. In New York, he appears at fashion shows, in London, at parties and in Paris, he is almost everywhere. Victor's double seems to be living Victor's life for him, the most striking example being the double impregnating Victor's girlfriend in New York, while in the story the original Victor is in Paris (Ellis 411). The double keeps moving closer and closer to Victor, but Victor never sees him eye to eye.

If Victor is not confused enough after the first part of the novel, the journey across the Atlantic definitely has him doubting his reality. He has several conversations with people over scripts and scenes, so we are to assume that this is all being filmed. For what, nobody really

seems to know. Victor's identity sways between a confident actor and the hapless man in New York. I would argue that Victor's confidence as he is performing stems from the fact that he is good at one thing: doing what he is told, which is also behind Bobby Hughes's reasoning for models as terrorists. Victor has no reason to be uncertain, because he is given a script and with it lines to say and advice where to stand. He does not need to think at all. The double makes an appearance here as well and this is the first time Victor is face-to-face with him, as Victor comes across some photographs: "There are eight photographs of me [...] but my nose is different – wider, slightly flatter – and my eyes are set too close together; the chin is dimpled, more defined; my hair has never been cut so that it parts easily to one side" (225). To Victor's horror, he realizes that he has never been to the locations where the pictures have been taken. Still, this does not yet trigger a crisis within him.

The Doppelgänger is often seen as a feature of "male" literature, partly due to the fact that the main characters and their doubles are almost invariably men (Spooner). Ellis can definitely be classified as very much a "male" author: all his novels deal with white men and their various crises, female characters do not amount to much, and people of color are rarely even mentioned. The female characters are mostly like cardboard, one-dimensional and thin. They are present but they often do not get a voice. They are there for as sex objects, and to remind the male protagonist of their absent mothers, and, occasionally, are maimed and killed in various grisly ways.

However, I am intrigued by Eve Sedgwick Kosotky's theory that in male literature the double is often a representation of male relationships in a homophobic society in which male bonding is nevertheless a mechanism of power, and the relationships between men are not necessarily representative of homosexual desire but of the mechanics of a homosocial society (see Spooner). Homosexual desire has always existed in Ellis's work, either as implied or explicit. But like every sexual relationship in Ellis's novels, gay intercourse is almost always joyless and pointless. In *Glamorama*, Victor is repeatedly making homophobic jokes, expressing true distaste at homosexuality and ridiculing the gay people around him. Read in the context of the time the novel was published in, the constant gay-bashing may not have seemed so jarring, but twenty years later what comes through is the feeling of Victor's self-hatred. Victor seems to shun homosexuality, but other characters continually bring up Victor's supposed affairs with other men, strenuously denied by Victor. Still, homosexual desire has room in Victor's homosocial relationship with Bobby Hughes.

Bobby Hughes is the man Victor has always wanted to be, his *ideal* double. When Victor first meets Bobby in London, he is starstruck. Victor breathlessly narrates the details of Bobby's illustrious career as a model and finishes off with:

And now he is here in the flesh – four years older than me, just a foot away, tapping keys on a computer terminal, sipping Diet Coke, wearing white athletic socks – and since I'm not really used to being around guys who are so much better-looking than Victor Ward, it's all kind of nerve-racking and I'm listening more intently to him than to any man I've ever met because the unavoidable fact is: he's too good-looking to resist. He can't help but lure. (267)

Victor realizes he has met his superior and immediately signals his submission to Bobby by stumbling over words and acting like a puppy in general. Bobby assesses and accepts the situation immediately. Right from the start there is a sexual undertone in their interaction, but it is also very much clear that Bobby is in control. Bobby is the alpha male, Victor the submissive omega. Victor obeys Bobby in everything, first eagerly and when he realizes the true nature of Bobby's activities, out of fear. But the sexual undertone is not gone. Finally, Bobby grants Victor access to his female, Jamie, but only via Bobby, and Victor is happy to comply. It is as if by submitting to Bobby, Victor is trying to imbue himself with Bobby's desirable qualities, to become Bobby, but of course it does not work. In the end, instead of destroying his own double, Victor destroys Bobby. And as is suitable for this kind of exorcism of personal demons, Victor shoots at Bobby's head in order to destroy his face. "I look back and where Bobby's head was there is now just a slanted pile of bone and brain and tissue" (436). Victor emerges unscathed.

In addition to Victor's Doppelgänger, there are several more doubles and they seem to have a similar story to Victor's double. They are replacements, designed to take over from their original counterparts. It is obvious that they are for the purposes of this shadowy organization behind the terrorist attack. I am inclined to think that they are terrorists-for-hire and that might as good an explanation as any. By the end of the novel, we have learned that the people Victor was supposed to have known in college – Lauren Hynde and Jamie Fields – have been replaced a long time ago. I suppose we are to think that Victor's inability to recognize them from college stems from the fact that they are quite literally different people, which would be understandable if it were simply a case of unfamiliar faces, but Victor does not initially even recognize their names.



As a novel by Bret Easton Ellis, the references to doubles and double lives are by no means subtle. Victor frequents a restaurant called Doppelgangers and manages a band called the Impersonators. At the fateful club opening that sets Victor's life spiralling, his paramours appear wearing the same dress. A song running through Victor's head almost constantly is U2's "Even Better Than the Real Thing." There are several examples of references to doubles and twins. As in *American Psycho*, people are continually being taken for other people, as a comment on the interchangeability of the victims of the fashion world. Patrick Bateman often comments in *American Psycho* that everyone is replaceable, a sentiment that Victor echoes to his father in reference to himself and expresses a desperate wish *not* to be replaceable, to be his own man (79). Victor does recognize that the society he lives in is focused on the surface and even has the awareness that he is far from being unique. But he also recognizes the possibility of identity-building, of changing his identity to suit the occasion. The identity is performed and constructed through media, and the identity is deconstructed through media. In a way, due to the ubiquity of surveillance cameras, people are performing for the camera whenever we are out in public. Of course, in Victor's double, constructing an identity is taken to the extreme. Perhaps the doubles are a commentary on the fact that the roles we play as humans, and especially the roles played by the characters of *Glamorama* are all artificial.

The self is always a performance consisting of many characteristics which ideally form a rounded personality. But in a world like Victor's, the personalities have fallen short of rounded and ended up as flat images, and in Victor the flatness is taken to the extreme. Most of the other main characters at least seem to have an inner life and are able to communicate without constantly referencing popular culture. The double is also a comment on the society where people are bombarded with images, symbols and stimuli – people become inured to it all. But also, in this world, there is no such thing as a true self: only a performative image, an image masquerading as a personality. Victor's world is a hall of mirrors.

This hall of mirrors is a postmodern existence. Of Ellis's novels, *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* represent most obviously the postmodern and the postmodern condition. A defining quality of postmodern fiction is the experience of emptiness, of superficiality, and of meaninglessness, and this is what Ellis shows. If Patrick Bateman's violence is a reaction to such qualities in society, then in *Glamorama* Ellis goes further and breaks the fabric of reality. Another defining quality of postmodernism is the destruction of order, and what else is there in *Glamorama*? Everything Victor knows is destroyed, literally and metaphysically, and the world seems to be completely out of order, as we shall see in the next chapter. As an example of the postmodern condition, Christopher Lasch has posited that contemporary

western – and more specifically, American – society is narcissistic (17). Lasch discusses narcissism as a societal and cultural phenomenon that has pervaded our lives, and helps us fill our inner emptiness with self-interest. A defining quality of narcissism in psychology is an overinflated sense of self, and in *Glamorama* almost all of the characters display this characteristic. They would rather be envied than respected, as they see themselves as superior. Lasch was writing of the 1970s, of ‘the Me decade’ as it was dubbed by Tom Wolfe, but Lasch’s theory holds up well to *Glamorama*, and has also seen a surge of interest in the 2020s. I find it significant to note that in psychology, one of the defining characteristics of narcissism is self-hatred. This is clearly a characteristic that can be applied to several of Ellis’s characters.

People try to fill that inner emptiness with consumption and a perfect example of the role of consumption is Ellis’s sardonic description of a dinner party:

We’re at a dinner party in an apartment on Rue Paul Valéry between Avenue Foch and Avenue Victor Hugo and it’s all rather subdued since a small percentage of the invited guests were blown up in the Ritz yesterday. For comfort people went shopping, which is understandable even if they bought things a little too enthusiastically. (360)

Although this may seem a brutal description of the vapidness of humans, it also rings true. Consumption is key in capitalist society, and the people in *Glamorama* are the ones selling anything. Simply in being themselves, they are the advertising. The advertising of a lifestyle people are supposed to covet. Celebrities are seen as something that almost everyone wants to be, and they represent ideals that are practically impossible to achieve. But if people buy the product they are selling, then perhaps people can become like them. The products in themselves are not just products, but signifiers that tell us what people are supposed to be like. This is, of course, the purpose of all advertising, to make us want things and maybe become like the people in the advertisements. We live in a society where how you look is more important than what you are, or as Victor keeps insisting, “the better you look, the more you see” (27).

In contrast to Lasch's view of postmodern society's narcissism, other theorists such as Jean Baudrillard have posited that the postmodern existence is a schizophrenic one (Ecstasy 132). For Baudrillard,

[t]he schizo is bereft of every scene, open to everything in spite of himself, living in the greatest confusion. [...] What characterizes him is less the loss of the real, the light years of estrangement from the real, the pathos of distance and radical separation, as is commonly said: but, very much to the contrary, the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things [...] He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play or stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen. (133)

Victor certainly could be classified as schizophrenic in nature, as his personality shows signs of being fragmented in many ways most of which can be attributed to the overexposure of "sensory stimuli of postmodernity" (Woods). His description of the world he lives in is rather schizophrenic. Nothing makes sense and people are not what they seem, but can we attribute that to Victor's schizophrenic nature or is Victor really seeing this? We can never know. We are never given signals as to whether Victor really is insane – in this case, schizophrenic – or whether Ellis simply is using Victor's state of mind as a symbolic representation of a Baudrillardian schizophrenic society. Of course, it could be argued that the changing narrative voices are an indication of a schizophrenic personality. Angela Woods also argues that, in the context of *Glamorama* the assumed schizophrenics make perfect terrorists, because

[w]ithout attributing a political agency to the schizophrenic predicated upon sanity, rationality, or even intentionality, *Glamorama* portrays the schizophrenic as an exemplary terrorist, and in so doing, suggests that terrorism operates through a schizophrenic logic not unlike of that of the celebrity fashion industry. Seen through the eyes of our schizophrenic narrator, terrorism is, like fashion, staged for the camera (I am the fucking reaper).

Woods also argues that this schizophrenia makes Victor a highly effective terrorist, but in my reading, Victor is anything but. The others in Bobby's entourage, may even display some glee in their horrible acts, but not Victor. He is extremely reluctant to participate, and at first has to be fooled into placing a bomb. It is at this point in the plot that Victor perhaps starts to become a person instead of being a schizophrenic collection of platitudes. Even as his world spins further apart, he finds at least some focus, the knowledge that he does not want to play the role Bobby has cast him in. Earlier, Victor has been playing his role as an actor would, doing as he is told and on some level thinking that what is happening is not real, or just a film. As I noted earlier, Victor has been confident because he was sure that he was acting in a film and he was just doing as he was told, but as it starts to dawn on him that not everything is a

film, that people are actually being blown up and that the explosions are not special effects, his confidence is shattered. And as that confidence is shattered, so is Victor's persona, as he no longer has any idea who he really is. What he does know, is that the role of terrorist is not for him.

As discussed above, Ellis's characters often use pop-cultural references to communicate. In *Victor*, this is taken to the extreme, as almost every pronouncement is either lyrics from a song or a tagline from an advertisement. I think the most fitting description of Victor's parlance is "brain-dead bricolage," coined by Elizabeth Young in her review of the novel (*Life in*). Victor's dialogue reflects back to the fact that everything, and everyone, is a performance or a product. Perhaps this also illuminates the fact the characters are empty, that by escaping in their vernacular to the ready-made world of music and advertisements, they are also escaping the emptiness within themselves and avoiding the real. In Victor's case this is most obvious, because there simply is nothing inside him. I do not think Victor is escaping anything in this sense, he simply has nothing else to say, and "[t]hat's the way, uh-huh uh huh, I like it" (107). Victor has no memories, but he always has song lyrics to offer. They are his memories, essentially. Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that these intermedial references establish Victor's identity (87), which is true, inasmuch that Victor has an identity at all. She also argues (87) that these references to pop lyrics and advertisements replace Victor's own language, which I disagree with to some extent. These references *are* Victor's language, there is no other way for him to communicate. I do not see them as replacing anything, this is his idiom. When Victor is pressed to produce a real emotion or a sentence that is not pop lyrics, he stumbles. He does not know any other way to communicate. Ellis's earlier characters and other characters in *Glamorama* have retained the ability for some kind of human discourse which could be considered normal, but Victor is just a walking, talking automaton.

It is also notable that in this way of speech, the descriptions of people have vanished. Almost the only description we get of how someone looks is from Victor, and it is of course a description of himself as he stares at his reflection: "high cheekbones, ivory skin, jet-black hair, semi-Asian eyes, a perfect nose, huge lips, defined jawline" (16). Most other characters are described by which celebrity they resemble the most. In a world saturated with celebrity images, it is a convenient shorthand in replacing long descriptions, but it also requires that one is familiar with the names being used. Most of the celebrity names Ellis uses in *Glamorama* are real, so there is a reference point for the descriptions, should the reader be familiar with the names. Also, in a world obsessed with celebrity, being compared to someone who is deemed extremely attractive gives people clout, as if the celebrity in question has

spread his or her aura upon them. The celebrity names also act as symbolic currency in Victor's world. No matter what the occasion, the only thing that makes it matter is who was there. But they are also symbolic of the shallowness of this world – once again, only surface matters. People are only defined by their external qualities. Victor's endless, breathless recitations of lists of names fill many pages of the first part of the novel. Victor is a prime example of Baudrillard's statement that "[t]he need to speak, even if one has nothing to say, becomes more pressing when one has nothing to say" (Ecstasy 131). The void that is Victor's life must be filled with noise to hide the fact that there is nothing there.

### 3. The Nature of Reality

Reality *is* an illusion, baby. (Ellis 9)

I find myself often thinking about the nature of reality. When considering a novel such as *Glamorama*, reality is a fluid concept. I have chosen to approach *Glamorama* as it is written and presented – as profoundly unrealistic. In the context of the novel, nothing is real.

Everything we know is artificial. There is no one single reality, but perhaps several realities – or several simulations of reality, with mostly the same characters. Reality is just an idea, a reflection. And I have chosen to regard Victor as a reliable narrator, at least in the sense that he believes what he is seeing is true, until he no longer can tell. Some others have argued that Victor is imagining the cameras filming him, that the whole story is just his imagination, but I do not think we are offered enough proof for such a reading. I have suggested that Victor's world was schizophrenic, but that is on a metaphorical level rather than a psychological level.

In life and in art, it could be argued, there is no such thing as reality. There is only our perception of reality and every single one of us has their own perception. There is no unifying concept of real. There are things that are agreed upon as real to make life easier for us humans, but ask anyone you know what they perceive as reality and the answers will differ wildly. There is an argument to be made that is pointless to try and represent reality in art, because reality is what each of us makes of it. The 'real' is unrepresentable. There is no one single defined reality, and, as science tells us, our senses only give us a limited amount of information of the surrounding world. In addition to the information being limited, our senses and brain can misinterpret and distort the input from our environment. Our eyes are notoriously easy to confuse with simple tricks of light. In addition to our senses being unreliable, our brains can certainly play tricks on us. Even though we often feel that our memories are absolute and true, this may not be the case. Our memory is fallible, and no memory is to be absolutely trusted.

In the case of *Glamorama*, readers can certainly question whether what Victor sees, hears, and experiences is an accurate representation of his reality. The world filtered through him is an extremely chaotic place. From very early on in the novel, we are given hints that everything is not as it seems, that there is something wrong here, but it is impossible to point out quite what it is. It is quite normal for the time the novel is set in to have an MTV camera crew filming events at a celebrity-filled nightclub, but when camera crews appear elsewhere, as on the street or at someone's apartment, we may feel that maybe they do not belong there.

Of course, Ellis is also parodying the obsession in the 1990s with Music Television. Wherever Victor goes, there is MTV, or VH1, or Entertainment Tonight, or some other lifestyle channel documenting his existence.

Sonia Baelo-Allué argues that this intermediality is an expressive means to construct the personality of Victor (85). I agree up to a point, but I think that the intermediality is even better at setting the timeframe of the novel. I think it is an excellent representation of the media culture of the mid to late 1990s. Having grown up with the visuals that are represented on the pages of *Glamorama*, I feel as if I am going back in time, so vivid are the images. I do agree completely with Baelo-Allué on this:

In the long first part of the novel, intermedial references establish a context in which images substitute for, and even establish, reality. Print, aural, and visual intermedial references establish character, setting and theme. Magazines, photos, videos and songs are crucial currency in a world where celebrities construct their selves through their media image. Therefore, references to media are prominent in Part 1, as cameras pop up almost everywhere creating a series of pseudo-events that start to blur the difference between reality and fiction. (86)

Victor's world is indeed saturated with products, whether physical or not. Everything is a product, everything is just surface and there seem to be no deeper meanings attached to them, which is a typical feature of postmodern literature. As an intermedial reference, one song that recurs in Victor's narration is U2's "Even Better Than the Real Thing" and especially the line "we'll slide down the surface of things." The song's title is of course an obvious reference to the doubles in the novel, but the sliding down the surface of things seems to refer to situations where the boundaries of reality – or Victor's reality at least – become blurred. It can also be a reference to Victor being able to stay on the surface, to being only surface. Victor keeps sliding on the surface, but never going through. As I mentioned before, the readers are given signals early on that the reality presented by Victor's narration might not be the only reality here. Victor is constantly being filmed, which in itself is perfectly normal for these people, but suddenly there appear mentions of *other* camera crews, who seem to be filming a film. But a film of what? Of Victor? Is everything that is being narrated by Victor a part of a film? Occasionally, Victor refers to camera angles (111) and removing himself from shots, which would imply that he – or everything – is being filmed all the time. Victor also mentions a script that he follows, but it is impossible to tell when he is reciting from the script and when he is being himself. At one point, somebody yells "Action!" (145) but to whom? There are passages that seem to suggest that Victor lives in a reality of his own, or in his own film-as-

reality, because no-one else seems to react to such markers, but still are aware of different films being filmed.

Confetti appears in almost every scene, either as a stray piece on clothing or covering whole surfaces. Victor keeps swiping it away, but it always re-appears. Victor is also constantly noting how freezing it is, be it inside or outside but this, too, goes unnoticed by other characters. Victor sees frozen surfaces and even ice, where others see nothing out of the ordinary, and he is followed by the smell of shit wherever he goes. No explanation is ever given for any of these occurrences and I have puzzled over their meaning. Ellis leaves the interpretation to his readers: “[t]here really wasn’t an intellectual approach to [the confetti]. Confetti is a frivolous, useless invention and using it as an element in scenes of torture just felt right. I really don’t know why every room in this book is freezing [...] it’s always so much more interesting when a reader gives his own interpretation” (Clarke). In the previous chapter I noted that Bobby is Victor’s ideal double. Bobby is also the only one who reacts to the freezing temperature that only Victor seems to be feeling, on the first day they meet (266). So, Bobby might – at least in that moment – be in the same reality as Victor. Bobby is also mentioned as wanting to kill Victor (424), which could be read as another sign of the theme of the doubles and the double destroying the original.

My reading of these elements is that they seem to denote a shift in the fabric of reality, or realities. They could also be read as a warning of imminent danger. Ellis has always used recurrent motifs in his novels, most often phrases, and here he expands his use of repetition as including the physical. If only it were even that simple, that we have here a story of a man living in at least two realities at the same time, or that his life is a film. The characters are performing for cameras, but they are also performing to the world as a whole. What should also be taken into account when considering the characters and their perception of reality, whatever that may be, is that they are constantly on drugs. They take cocaine, take sedatives, and smoke marijuana. All of these drugs have the side effect of causing memory problems, hallucinations, and confusion. Everything the characters do and say is filtered through drugs. They consume drugs in a search of immediate pleasure, which is once again a defining feature of postmodernism.

Once Victor sets sail for Europe, events get even more confusing. The readers have been able to deduce from the first part of the novel that Victor is aware that he is in a film, and that he seems to be able to differentiate between filming and reality, whatever that means for him. In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman occasionally imagined himself as being in a film, even narrating a whole chapter as if it were an episode of a crime procedural, but in *Glamorama*



this idea is taken further and Victor *is* in a film, or films, of whose making, we never find out. But we also have to take into account that this is a world where “only the events that are reported, those that are recorded or photographed, can be said to have occurred” (Baelo-Allué 86). As we might say colloquially today, “jpeg or didn’t happen” – meaning of course, that if there are no photographs of a certain event, there is no proof that it ever occurred. While Victor is onboard the Queen Elizabeth II, Baelo-Allué argues that everything is replaced in what is known in Baudrillardian terms *virtuality* (88), which means “we are no longer spectators, but actors in a performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of the performance” (Baudrillard 27). As mentioned in 1.3, events on the ship include several discussions over what happens in the script, actors replace people, and there are mentions of Victor being “out of character” (193). Victor is also handed out a warning by a member of the film crew:

“Haven’t you read the rest of the script?” he asked. Don’t you know what is going to happen to you?” “Oh man this movie is so over.” A semi-restlessness was settling in and I wanted to take off. “I’m improvising, man. I’m just coasting, babe.” “Just be prepared,” Felix said. “You need to be prepared.” [...] “You *need* to pay attention.” “This isn’t really happening,” I yawned. [...] “Victor,” Felix said. “Things get mildly...er, hazardous.” “What are saying, Felix? I sighed, sliding off the barstool. “Just make sure I’m lit well and don’t play any colossal tricks on me.” “I’m worried that the project is...ill-conceived,” he said, swallowing. “The writers seem to be making it up as it goes along, which normally I’m used to. But here...” [...] “I think things will be getting out of hand,” he said faintly before I wandered away. (195)

The sense of impending doom gets stronger as the ship moves on the ocean and the unexpected events, that Felix warns Victor about, increase. Such an event is the disappearance of Marina, of whose existence the film crew is not even aware, or at least of whose existence they deny any knowledge. She disappears as if into thin air, and Victor seems to be the only one onboard who has met her. As Victor discovers blood and teeth in her cabin, it finally starts to dawn on him that maybe Felix was not wrong in his warning.

As discussed in 1.3, it is in London that Victor’s suspicions are confirmed and he crashes hard into another reality, but not before the readers have been treated to several scenes where it is impossible to know whether what is told is reality or film. People – or actors – start re-appearing as other characters, the songs that have always played in the background come into focus as a soundtrack, and Victor’s script and reality start colliding. Even on the Queen Elizabeth II – and back in New York – the mechanics of filming were made visible, as scenes were scrapped and re-written, but in London readers cannot no longer know from Victor’s narration in which reality the action occurs. At times, it feels as if Victor is the camera, simply

following the events and not commenting on them. The descriptions run like a shooting script or a storyboard. Ellis is highlighting the constructed nature of all reality by making the mechanisms of story-telling visible. He is shattering the illusion of reality with almost Brechtian alienation techniques (Selden 97). Alienating his readers is typical of Ellis. In Paris, the narration – and Victor – turn schizophrenic as events pass by with increasing urgency and Victor no longer has any idea of what his reality is. He tries to placate himself by convincing himself that this is all a film, this is not real, as body parts – fake and real – fly on the streets of Paris and buildings collapse: “Stay indoors, go to sleep, don’t get involved, view everything without expression, drink whiskey, pose, accept” (349). Unfortunately, this resolve does not help Victor. He is involved, and he has no choice in the matter. As Victor tries to warn Felix, the cinematographer from the Queen Elizabeth II, Felix and the hotel he is staying in are blown to smithereens during the phone call. This marks the end of at least one film being filmed, one reality being destroyed, but there is still at least one more, maybe several. As Victor finally wanders back to the house where he and Bobby’s crew are staying, he is finally confronted with a terrible realization: you cannot trust anything you see.

If this has not yet been completely clear to Victor until now, the true magnitude of the matter is revealed at the house, where Victor finds one of Bobby’s accomplices, Bentley, on a computer:

Bentley starts tapping keys, landing on new photos. He enhances colors, adjusts tones, sharpens or softens images. Lips are digitally thickened, freckles are removed, an axe is placed in someone’s outstretched hand, a BMW becomes a Jaguar which becomes a Mercedes which becomes a broom which becomes a frog [...] license plates are altered, more blood is spattered around a crime-scene photo [...] Bentley adds motion blur (a shot of “Victor” jogging along the Seine), [...] he’s adding graininess, he’s erasing people, he’s inventing a new world, seamlessly. “You can move planets with this,” Bentley says. “You can shape lives. The photograph is only the beginning.” (357-8)

The horror of the world changing right before Victor’s eyes is too much, his whole existence in doubt, at least to him. The existence of everything Victor knows is in doubt, since there is no way of knowing what is altered and what is not. The dissolution of Victor’s personality and the dissolution of the whole world he inhabits is happening right before his eyes and there is no way out. Victor’s carefully cultivated persona is crumbling. But he still has not fully comprehended the meaning of what he saw on Bentley’s computer. As the plot proceeds, Victor is once again faced with Palakon and with this conversation his dissolution is almost complete:

“So you’re telling me we can’t believe anything we’re shown anymore?” I’m asking. “That everything is altered? That everything’s a lie? That everyone will believe this?” “That’s a fact,” Palakon says. “So what’s true then?” I cry out. “Nothing, Victor,” Palakon says. “There are different truths.” “Then what happens to us?” “We change.” He shrugs. “We adapt.” (406)

It is unbelievable how prescient this conversation is. At the time of publication, Ellis was painting a dystopian picture of a technology-obsessed world, but right now this is our reality. And we do not even need shadowy cabals to alter reality, each of us can do it on our smartphones. For Victor, of course, this is a nightmare vision and causes him to physically collapse.

But once again, what *is* real for Victor? As Per Serritslev Petersen puts it, “the epistemological ground rule of *Glamorama* is that you can never be quite certain whether you are sliding down the real surface of things, with old U2, or down an imaginary surface, in a cinematically imagined fiction or nightmare” (142). David Punter describes this epistemic instability inherent in *Glamorama* as “a constant sliding between worlds, between a sense of the real and a sense of the filmic; in being an actor in another script, of the *virtual*.” Punter has chosen as an example a scene from the first part of the novel, which I agree is a very good representation of the sliding between worlds that is a constant in *Glamorama*, that is if anything can be called a constant in this world:

The director leans into me and warns, “You’re not looking worried enough,” which is my cue to leave Florent. Outside, more light, some of it artificial, opens up the city and the sidewalks on 14<sup>th</sup> Street are empty, devoid of extras, and above the sounds of faraway jackhammers I can hear someone singing “The Sunny Side of the Street” softly to himself and when I feel someone touch my shoulder I turn around but no-one’s there. [...] “Disarm” by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the soundtrack and the music overlaps a shot of the club I was going to open in TriBeCa and I walk into that frame, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that the cameraman pans to.” (168)

Punter argues that the ghostly touch on Victor’s shoulder could be a person located in the ‘real’ (whatever that is) and therefore edited out of the film version, or a character within the film which would make it a ghost, since it is unseen. Either way, I think the ghostly person is between at least to worlds, if not more.

Another facet that I found intriguing was trying to decode the timeline of Victor’s life, because if you are thinking in the terms of reality and how we perceive it, it makes no sense. But in a novel where reality makes no sense either, it is to be of course expected. The novel’s pop culture references place it quite firmly in the late 1990s but then there are conversations,

which reveal that if we are indeed at that point in time, then the years given as markers of events simply do not work. Even some of the pop culture references are a little anachronistic, but this can be explained by the fact that Ellis started writing the novel in 1989 and finished in 1997, and perhaps he was not all that bothered about exact accuracy in what he deems ‘wallpaper’ (Clarke). Still, there are major discrepancies in the timeline of the novel that cannot be explained by the time it took to write it. So, if we are to assume that all his novels happen in the same universe, the timeline should match. At least in theory, because they are also independent works and Ellis is always changing details. It is often mentioned that Victor is 27 years old and that he is close in age to his girlfriend Chloe, who is given the birthyear of 1970 (32). This would make sense. But Victor often mentions events that he would have been much too young to remember, let alone attend. The biggest discrepancy becomes apparent when Victor first meets F. Fred Palakon. They discuss his years in college and if this were the same Victor who appeared in *The Rules of Attraction*, as we are led to understand by several references to attending Camden College, this is impossible:

“Did you attend Camden College in New Hampshire during the years 1982 to, ah, 1988?” Palakon asks gently.

Staring back at him, I blankly answer, “I took half a year off.” Pause.

“Actually four of them.”

“Was the first one in the fall of 1985?” Palakon asks.

“Could’ve been.” I shrug. (115)

If Victor were born circa 1970, this would make him twelve years old in 1982. Not exactly college age, and we can be fairly certain that Victor was not a child genius. We are given no explanation as to why the years do not match. Even when taking into consideration that we have no exact year for the events of *Glamorama*, this still is not a viable timeframe. And where was Victor during those four years he “took off” Camden? He has a few conversations with Lauren – or “Lauren” – about Camden, in which Lauren indicates that Victor is somehow different. Are we to assume, that during those four missing years, there might have been already one Victor replaced? We learn later on in the novel that Lauren herself was replaced in 1985, after the original died in a car crash. Whichever way we look at this, there is absolutely no way to make this timeline make sense. This is another example of the epistemic instability inherent in *Glamorama*.

However, there is also something else to consider: as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, reality is a fluid concept and we each have our understanding of what is real. But so is time. Time is not a fixed constant in our heads and our perception of time is as our conception of reality – varied. Theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli argues that time is an

illusion, that reality is just a complex network of events onto which we project sequences of past, present and future (Jaffe). And in this sense, anything can really happen at any time. Now, I am by no means competent to argue about theoretical physics, but I can posit that Ellis is playing with time, or more accurately, our conception of it. The several different realities presented in *Glamorama* do not seem to follow the same timeline, which is a popular device used in science fiction. It is simply impossible for all the events to take place when they are said to have taken place and it is easy to mask these discrepancies behind Victor's disintegrating mind. When in Paris, Victor is constantly drugged, even more so than before, and his conception of reality is tenuous at best. The timelines are not running separate of each other, but blending, just as the realities that are represented. I would argue that we are dealing with another fictional trope here, which is dreams within dreams – or in this case, films within films, wherein time proceeds in different speeds and where observations and memories cannot be trusted. Lately, this has been exemplified for instance in the films of Christopher Nolan, such as *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020), which constantly play with our perceptions of time and place.

Another common device used in science fiction is the concept of parallel or alternate universes, that is, the suggestion that there are other universes besides our own and therefore other realities, similar but not identical to ours. This could almost be a possibility in *Glamorama*, but after close reading I had to dismiss the idea, as the double and Victor definitely exist in the same universe. This is proven towards the end of the novel, as the captured Victor watches television and sees himself. Walking through a park like there is no care in the world (475). The final nail in Victor's metaphorical coffin is when Victor tries to reach out to his sister for help:

I'm calling my sister again. It rings three, four, five times. She picks up. "Sally?" I'm breathing hard, my voice tight. "Who is this?" she asks suspiciously. "It's me," I gasp. "It's Victor." "Uh-huh," she says dubiously. "I'd really prefer it – whoever this is – if you would stop calling." "Sally, it's really me, please –" I gasp. "It's for you," I hear her say. The sound of the phone being passed to someone else. "Hello?" a voice asks. I don't say anything, just listen intently. "Hello?" the voice asks again. "This is Victor Johnson," the voice says. "Who is this?" Silence. "It'd be really cool if you stopped bothering my sister," the voice says. "Okay?" Silence. "Goodbye," the voice says. A click. I'm disconnected. (477)

Thus, Victor has been replaced, completely and utterly, disconnected from the matrix. Yet somehow the double is haunted by the same things Victor was. Somebody quietly singing "On the Sunny Side of the Street" almost beyond earshot, confetti, flies, and the smell of shit

(458). Are we to infer that the same cycle is about to start again? *Glamorama* makes us question its reality – or realities – often, but it also questions itself. Is there yet another level, a level the reader knows nothing about, but a level of reality that has sinister designs on our characters' lives?

If, then, we are not seeing parallel universes in *Glamorama*, what are we seeing? One of the theories most commonly associated with the novel is Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as a simulation of reality, where reality has been replaced by *simulacra*, or copies of things that no longer have an original (k.i.s.s.). And what else is Victor's nightmarish world than a world where everything is replaced. Due to everything being filmed, it *is* a simulation, a performance. To Baudrillard, this simulation of reality is "not really fake, a mere copy of something real. It is another reality, that has power and a meaning that is, if anything, greater than that of the 'real' real" (k.i.s.s.). The "real" real, in Baudrillardian terms, has disappeared: in a modern world it is impossible to reach, because it has disappeared into the flux of media representations. The images in media are more real than reality, the real is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves (Selden 205). Once again, we come back to the fact that is an event was not filmed or photographed, it did not happen. Christopher Lasch writes that "[m]odern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions – and our own – were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to unseen audiences [...] the proliferation of recorded images undermines our sense of reality" (47-8).

In *Glamorama*, Baudrillard's *simulacra* truly come to life. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he posits that the *simulacrum*, the copy, becomes more real than the "real," it becomes truth in its own right (Poster). This certainly happens in the case of Victor's double, as the simulacrum replaces the original. Above, I described Victor as being removed from the matrix, which is a reference to the popular science fiction film *The Matrix* (1999). The film is heavily influenced by Baudrillard's theory, as it represents a world where everyone is literally living in a simulation. This has also been considered in physics by various scientists, but there really is no proof that we live in a simulation even though some find it a theory worth considering. In a way, Victor is living in this kind of a matrix, too. As he is replaced by his double, his copy, he is disconnected. The end of the phone call, where Victor ends up hearing his double's voice and is then disconnected, signifies that the replacement of Victor is complete. Not only does the double take over Victor's life, he takes over the narration, too, in the fifth part of the novel, a narrative which Henrik Skov Nielsen titles "doubled and double-

voiced” (25), schizophrenic, as discussed in Chapter 2. Victor is disconnected and made to disappear. But Naomi Mandel argues that

[...] Victor’s disappearance is not, merely, the effect of violence; he has always, already, disappeared. In the novel’s originary scene (a pool party at a house on Ocean Drive), Victor recalls: “The future started mapping itself out and I focused on it. In that moment I felt as if I was disappearing [...] floating above the palm trees, growing smaller in the wide blank sky until I no longer existed (Disappear Here 102).

What Mandel leaves out in this quote, is the end of the sentence: “and relief swept over me with such force I sighed” (481). Victor may have always disappeared, but he may have always wanted to disappear, because he realizes the kind of path he has chosen in pursuing celebrity:

I was just becoming famous and my whole relationship to the world was about to change [...] on that afternoon in the house on Ocean Drive a few decisions had to be made, the priority being: I would never dream of leaving any of this. At first I was confused by what passed for love in this world: people were discarded because they were too old or too fat or too poor or they had too much hair or not enough, they were wrinkled, they had no muscles, no definition, no *tone*, they weren’t hip, they weren’t remotely famous. This was how you chose lovers. This was what decided friends. And I had to accept this if I wanted to get anywhere. (480-1)

Victor knows he is choosing another reality to live in. This is the most self-reflection Victor has ever shown. For Victor, self-reflection has meant what he sees in the mirror. It is also notable that at that point in time and place, there is no mention of camera crews or any other signifiers of any other reality than the one Victor is in. But this is before the events of the novel. How does this Victor have insight, when the one presented to us as readers seems to have none? Are we to believe that in his pursuit of fame and celebrity status he has left behind a piece of him? What separates us from Victor is that *we* have no way of knowing if our lives are indeed a simulation, a computer program. Victor knows he is in an artificial reality; he has chosen to live in it. And although Victor is painted in the novel as a complete idiot, which the reader cannot but agree with, he still possesses the ability to try to control his image. Despite his stupidity, he is well-versed in the language of his world and knows that image-building is the only way for him to go forward. For him, forward of course means being more famous, and famous equals success. This is the only thing on his mind. A reporter tries to dig deeper into his motives, and Victor’s answers are emblematic of his mindset:

“You’re really into this,” *Details* girl says.

“What’s wrong with looking good?”

She ponders this semi-thoughtfully. “Well, what if it’s at the expense of something else? I’m not implying anything. It’s just a hypothetical. Don’t be insulted.”

“I forgot the question.”

“What if it’s at the expense of something else?”

“What’s...something else?” (57)

Victor is not being facetious here. He is being extremely serious. Victor is living in Guy Debord’s society of the spectacle, where “all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance” (14). What Debord means with society of the spectacle is that all social life is replaced with a representation of social life. Debord was writing in the 1960s, but the society of the spectacle seems a very apt description of the world Victor lives in in the 1990s: the celebrity culture is nothing but appearance. In Debord’s spectacle, the quality of life is by definition inferior, and we should strive to destroy our dependence on consumerism and material things. What Ellis is showing in his novel are the destructive effects of such a society, on personality and on society, heightened by the use of terrorism as a device of creating spectacle.

Debord and Baudrillard are often used in readings of *Glamorama*, and to me they seem the most fitting texts when considering the nature of reality. However, David Schmid argues that

Victor does not wander schizophrenically among the simulacra (as Jameson or Baudrillard-inflected readings would have it). *Glamorama* is an anti-Baudrillardian, anti-simulacra book (it is terrorist mastermind Bobby Hughes who possesses a copy of Debord), and Victor consistently, if ineffectively, attempts to determine the difference between what is real and what is not. (72)

I find this a puzzling reading. If anything, Victor seems to have no interest in determining what is real and what is not until the very end. He has surrendered his life to be filmed and he is very much aware that there are different realities but for the most part of the novel he does not consistently pursue the truth. He may be concerned, but he does not have the capacity or will to consider the issue further until it is laid before his eyes in all its horror. And what else are the copies wandering around the novel but simulacra? Schmid calls Victor “an unlikely seeker of truth” (71), but I find him to be simply thrust into these circumstances where he has no other impulse but to try and survive. To me, William Stephenson’s reading is far more tenable: “Victor’s perception of the world as alternately simulation and reality is so rapid as to allow him to make no firm distinction between them, or even to characterize such a



distinction problematic” (qtd. in Schmid). The shifts between realities are indeed so quick, that no-one could possibly follow, as they may shift in the middle of a sentence.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have read *Glamorama* time and time again. I have puzzled over the method in the madness, over what Ellis has been trying to say over all these convoluted pages that try to pass as literature. Is he a genius? Or is he just a poser? A provocateur? And I never realized that the truth was staring my right in the face. Right there on the first page of *Glamorama*. There it is. As Victor demands the whole story from his minions, he reflects:

“[...] I’m getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that *why* won’t get answered.” (5)

There is no overreaching answer, no explanation. There are millions of threads that maybe lead somewhere, maybe they do not. The truth is, there is no truth, in is out, Out is in (15). We humans are pattern seeking animals and we always try to find the method in the madness, the teaching to the story. To make sense of things. *Glamorama* offers us no such relief. As Baudrillard puts it, “we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason” (Simulacra). I highly doubt that Ellis himself would admit to any Brechtian influence, but I cannot help but think that Brecht applies here: “The dramatist should avoid a smoothly interconnected plot and any sense of inevitability or universality” (see Selden 97). Is this not what Ellis is doing, and has been doing throughout his career? Even though he can hardly be classified as a Marxist, he presents a critique of capitalism. My initial personal interest in the novel began for this very reason, to try to make sense of it. Surely there must a meaning in all of this? I have gone through the novel line by line, page by page. I have drawn patterns on paper like a detective in a crime film trying to connect the dots, as well as read dozens of articles on the novel. And in the end? Nothing. There is no grand plot, no grand statement. Just a lot of open threads. But the threads leave a lot to contemplate, and after initial disinterest from the world of literary studies *Glamorama* has provided a multitude of approaches to consider. In this sense *Glamorama* is also one of the most frustrating objects of study. It gives readers so many directions to go, but in itself it provides no answers. Ellis invites us to make a Barthesian reading, in other words to produce a meaning. Barthes has described the ideal text to be “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; ...we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach” (see Selden 159). Barthes is discussing a hypothetical text but in some ways this reading can be applied to *Glamorama*. There are a multitude of ways to approach it and no one can say which is the right one, and each reading gives a different meaning.

One meaning that can be deciphered in the novel is that Ellis is trying to say that we are all replaceable. The human obsession with material things, with brands, with appearances, is all surface. What construes our identities are mere markers for others to see and decode. Everything is a performance. The loss of identity is a theme often seen in postmodern literature.

What pervades all of Ellis's writing is how everything looks. The characters strive to look and appear as perfect as possible in their frame of reference, to fit in and at the same time to be the most successful one. And they all end up looking and sounding the same, to the point of being indistinguishable from each other. In *American Psycho* characters are often confused for each other, as a kind of comment on the yuppie clones of Wall Street, and in *Glamorama* it is taken even further with actual doubles. The recurrent use of characters in Ellis's work is also indicative of the replaceability of people: the characters have the same names, but are they really the same? As Baudrillard says of the people of New York, "they smile more and more, though never to other people, always at themselves" (*America* 14). People look inside themselves, not at others. In fact, an inside is something Ellis's characters do not really seem to have, they are all surface. This is most apparent in what Naomi Mandel calls his mature period (*Bret Easton Ellis* 1), where the characters are mere apparitions in the sense that they do not seem to have much of an inner world and they spout out mostly meaningless phrases, as if they were in advertisements. As I have noted, this is a defining feature in Ellis's work.

Ellis's novels up to *Glamorama* all are presented as episodes rather than coherent narrative structures. Events are presented mostly in a chronological order, but they do not progress from a clear starting point to a conclusion which ties all the threads together. But especially in *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction*, I find that the structure works, and they form coherent and cohesive wholes. Having read them recently in preparation for writing this thesis, I think they stand the test of time. *American Psycho* does away with all narrative convention and presents a story that could be about a fractured, schizophrenic mind. As stated above, in *Glamorama* there is an attempt at a plot, at an identifiable narrative, but no obvious conclusion.

There is no doubt that Ellis is trying to satirize the continued obsession with consuming, celebrity, and money, to summon up questions of our western society, but unfortunately in *Glamorama* he does not entirely succeed. *Glamorama* as a novel is very much like its characters: form without function, style as the only signifier of meaning. The world of *Glamorama* is filtered through pop culture, and Ellis's satire is filtered through the story it offers. But Ellis's attempt at criticizing the emptiness of this particular point in history only

ends up as a representation of it. Then again, art is the mirror and witness of its time, so maybe we can determine this emptiness as a statement. The thematic whole of the text is almost impossible to reach due to its sheer complexity. The satire of the superficiality of the celebrity world and its ideology gets lost under Ellis's layers of complicated plot. Ellis is perilously close Baudrillard's artist, who "is always close to committing the perfect crime, saying nothing" (qtd. in Baelo-Allué).

Several reviewers thought that the long first part of the novel would make a good satire on its own, but the rest of the novel is inferior. They are not wholly incorrect, as the structure is at times incoherent, but I would not go so far as to dismiss the novel completely. Ellis has always been hyper-conscious of his writing, developing his style through the years. He has a remarkable talent for dialogue and snappy one-liners, and even as I cannot see *Glamorama* as Ellis's masterpiece, I can see some merit in it. Others disagree, such as the literary critic Elizabeth Young, who called *Glamorama* "a sort of idiot's guide to *American Psycho*" (On *Glamorama* 47), since "Victor's narrative, like Patrick Bateman's before him, contains numberless discrepancies and inconsistencies, but this time they are positively bellowed out and emphasized so heavily that not even the dimmest reader could miss them" (50). In fact, I think the first part of *Glamorama* is rather hilarious in its description of 1990s New York City and its glitterati, and he does raise relevant points about the formation of identity and image and the role of celebrity in our society. He is right in pointing out that in the cultural climate of the day – and even of today – the way you look and the way you present yourself to the surrounding society has become more important than what you actually do. What is also always present in Ellis's work is the joylessness of life. His characters never seem to enjoy life, but do not reject it. Happiness does not exist in Ellis's literary world, and he is ever the nihilist.

I find that Ellis's literary technique is very much in the Brechtian tradition of defamiliarizing and distancing the audience. The constant breaks in action, the film crews, scripts, and extras are making it explicit to the readers that this is not reality. And it is not even reality for some of the characters of the novel. They are either willing or unwilling actors in a cruel play, where no-one knows where the script ends and real life, if there is such a thing, begins. I would like to think that Ellis himself has an idea as to how the universe of the novel functions, but I feel that he to some extent fails at communicating his idea to his reader. I am certain that he is being deliberately obfuscating but a little less obfuscation might have worked better. *Glamorama* certainly has the feel of the Barthesian principle "[t]he virtuous

writer recognizes the artifice of all writing and proceeds to make play with it” (see Selden 156). Ellis plays with his words, but his play is not always accessible to his reader.

Naomi Mandel argues that Ellis is an important but underappreciated artist, and the reactions to his works, “this violence and vehemence [is] what makes Ellis so intriguing. He has been hailed as timely and significant and dismissed as substanceless and derivative” (*Bret Easton Ellis* 3) At times, Ellis seems to have revelled in the hatred he has generated and even spurred his detractors on, and, at times, he has claimed himself to be blasé about the whole thing, as evidenced by his comments in an interview: “Ellis himself claims to be in a phase in which he *just doesn't care* about anything – a middle-aged wrinkle on the old Ellis ennui. ‘The only thing I care about, [...] is valet parking and a full bar’” (Timberg). Ellis also had one of his detractors, Tammy Bruce, horribly killed in *Glamorama*, so maybe he is not as unaffected as he would like us to think. As for Ellis’s importance, Mandel claims that “[s]ome critics and reviewers have insisted that each of Ellis’s novels is progressively worse than the first; others claim that Ellis’s achievement in *American Psycho* marked the apex (still others the nadir) of his career” (13). Mandel goes on to argue that “[w]hether or not the author, or his novels, are traditionally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ may not be the most interesting, important, or relevant question to ask” (13). Which I have to agree with. In postmodern literature nothing is neat, or tidy, or logical: the destruction of order is the purpose. The function of art is to question and to make bare the mechanisms that move our society. Ellis may not be the best of writers, but he certainly is an interesting one. If his work is meaningless, as some have argued, then why has it generated so much discussion and study? Meaning comes in many forms. In presenting a constructed fictional reality, he has perhaps made his reader consider the nature of their own lived reality.

It should also be noted that it would be quite impossible to write *Glamorama* now, in the 2020s. In 1998, it was ahead of its time with its themes, but the world has changed so much in the years after *Glamorama*’s publication that most of its key plot ideas would not work. In the 1990s the internet was still marginal and even though mobile telephones are in use by the time of *Glamorama*, they are still mostly *just* telephones, instead of multimedia devices. At the time of publication, it was inconceivable that an ordinary citizen would have such a powerful device at their disposal and that manipulating images is what so many of us are doing every day. In the age of deepfake videos, where anything and everything can be made to look realistic through computer technology, the altering of images that Bobby and his accomplices do looks rather quaint now, and not as scary as it would have been in the 1990s. Being the

nihilist that he is, Ellis, among others, foresaw the terrifying possibilities offered by this technology.

What would have been completely realistic, had the novel been written in the 2020s, is Victor's celebrity status. Victor would definitely have been a star in the Instagram age. Pretty poses and platitudes can get you far in this world and Victor is a walking meme. In a way, Victor still exists in 2020: there is a Twitter account under his name, where he continues to offer his wisdom. That is, Ellis has a habit of maintaining a virtual presence for his characters and Victor is the most active of them. Notable in Victor's online presence is that it seems to be the original Victor from the novel, not the double. In fact, Ellis himself believes his themes are timeless:

“even though I might be writing about a specific time and a specific place, hopefully it's in such a way that a reader can connect it to a larger metaphor – alienation, pain, America, the overall tone of the culture. My novels might be period pieces now but I think the scope of the books is larger than that and I think they touch upon more universal themes” (Clarke).

Ellis offers his readers a mirror and they have to decide what they see in it.

I have mentioned conspiracy theories, and in this sense *Glamorama* would be topical even today. The story, in essence, is a giant conspiracy theory with one plot twist after another. We are living in the age of the perhaps wildest – or at least most widespread – conspiracy theories with QAnon and the like, and therefore a plot based on a conspiracy is relevant today. But the conspiracy plot in *Glamorama* seems rather tame and more like from a spy film in comparison to what we are facing today. Living in the age of Donald Trump, we would shrug at Victor's father's political machinations, because we are living in a reality where conspiracies to interfere with elections are now a part of our everyday media landscape. They might have always been, but in the kind of media climate we live in, they have been made visible.

*Glamorama* also presents to us the Generation X familiar from Ellis's other novels, a generation which supposedly was proud of its ignorance and uncaring. This rings true in relation to our current society as well, where social media has made it possible for people to broadcast their ignorance and indeed their pride in it. The descriptions of Generation X overlap with description of our millennials. They had Ronald Reagan; we have Donald Trump.

Were Ellis to write a novel like *Glamorama* today, terrorism would probably have to be removed as a plot device. After the events of 9/11, the use of such blithe descriptions of terrorist acts would most likely be considered very bad taste. Terrorism in *Glamorama* seems to have no political purpose, it seems to be performed for the spectacle alone. The attacks have no stated intention, and do not seem to be directed at anyone. Their main purpose is the spectacle and the destruction. As ever, Ellis is the provocateur, eliciting responses of disgust and horror from his readership. The scenes of terrorism have been described with such close attention that it makes the readers want to close their eyes. Somehow this terrorism without no obvious motivator is more even more frightening. I was about to argue that after all that has happened in the past twenty years, we have become inured to terrorism and that the attacks in *Glamorama* are just more of the same. But that is simply not true. Terrorism induces terror. From a past perspective *Glamorama* seems almost prescient: it foretold the coming age of terrorism and the ubiquity of fabricated images in our lives. In a way, Ellis predicted the fake news we are now faced with every day.

And so it is with the end of *Glamorama*. There are no definite answers. Truth, identity, reality, time are all relative. If you squint, you could perhaps detect elements of a Bildungsroman: Victor goes through a journey and he emerges with at least a little bit of insight. Victor's story ends not with a bang, but mostly with a whimper. The readers do not know what becomes of the original – if he is even the original – but there is already a replacement taking his place as if nothing has changed. The thing is, nobody notices, because nobody cares.

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