edited by
Alain-Philippe Durand
Naomi Mandel

Novels of the Contemporary Extreme

CONTINUUM LITERARY STUDIES
Novels of the Contemporary Extreme

edited by

ALAIN-PHILIPPE DURAND and NAOMI MANDEL
Contents

Acknowledgements vii
List of Contributors viii

Introduction
Alain-Philippe Durand and Naomi Mandel 1

Part I The Americas
1 "Right Here in Nowheres": American Psycho and Violence’s Critique
Naomi Mandel 9

2 Telling Doubles and Literal-Minded Reading in Bret Easton Ellis’s Glamorama
Henrik Skov Nielsen 20

3 Posthumous Voice and Residual Presence in Don DeLillo’s The Body Artist
Mikko Keskinen 31

4 A Post-Apocalyptic World: The Excremental, Abject Female Warriors of Josée Yvon
Paula Ruth Gilbert with Colleen Lester 41

5 On the Impossibility of Being Contemporary in Nelly Arcan’s Folle
Martine Delvaux 53

6 Media-Portrayed Violence in Alberto Fuguet’s Tinta roja
Jason Summers 64
Contents

Part II Europe and the Middle East
7  Sadomasochism, Castration and Rape: Richard Morgiève’s Nightmare Theater of Primal Scenes  
Ralph Schoolcraft  
   77
8  Dantec’s Inferno  
Lawrence R. Schehr  
   89
9  Michel Houellebecq: A Fin de Siècle for the Twentieth Century  
Sabine van Wesemael  
   100
10 Beyond The Extreme: Frédéric Beigbeder’s Windows on the World  
Alain-Philippe Durand  
   109
11 Amélie Nothomb’s Dialectic of the Sublime and the Grotesque  
Martine Gayot-Bender  
   121
12 Violence Biting its Own Tail: Martin Amis’s Yellow Dog  
Jean-Michel Ganteau  
   132
13 Beauty and Death as Simulacra in Ray Loriga’s Catíos del cielo and El hombre que inventó Manhattan  
Kathryn Everly  
   143
14 Sex, Drugs and Violence in Lucía Etxebarria’s Amor, curiosidad, Prozac y dudas  
Catherine Bourland Ross  
   153
15 On Human Parts: Orly Castel-Bloom and the Israeli Extreme  
Adia Mendelson-Maoz  
   163
Index  
   175
2 Telling Doubles and Literal-Minded
Reading in Bret Easton Ellis’s Glamorama

Henrik Skov Nielsen

While media and reader interest in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Glamorama* (1999) has been considerable, literary critics have paid little attention to the book. This is at once understandable and odd. Understandable because *Glamorama* is so monstrous, strange and fascinating that it is difficult to give even a rough account of the plot and action alone. Odd because the book’s structure makes it difficult to grasp in a single reading, and because a myopic but thorough consideration of such mundane elements as the book’s title, the first and last pages, and basic elements of its plot reveals what appears to be an unprecedented form of double-voiced first-person narrative.

In its graphic descriptions of violence, in its evocation of a society dominated by popular culture and in its blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction (Ellis places literally hundreds of real people in *Glamorama*, including Tammy Bruce, one of his most vehement critics, whose violent death he depicts in this novel [383]), *Glamorama* displays many characteristics of the contemporary extreme. But it adds to this genre two related and interconnected features: firstly, a great interest in the surface and the superficial and secondly, a doubling of the narrative voice. The first of these features is surely common to many contemporary works of extreme fiction and the last to a few, including Ellis’s own novel *American Psycho* with its shift into third-person narration towards the end. In *Glamorama*, these features operate at the thematic level, with important implications for the way in which the story is told and read.

This chapter will explore the consequences, for the reader, of these two features and of the kind of narration that results. Rather than a thematic analysis of *Glamorama*, I focus on the reader and her engagement with the work. For the reader to understand the narrative, her reading must reflect the features of the world described. To understand the superficial world, her reading must, in a certain sense, itself be superficial.

Accordingly I will, to borrow an expression from the book, read “literal minded” (80). If one reads the countless dialogues and listings literally, and not just as idiomatic phrases and clichés, parts of a surprising story appear,
not under the surface, but on it. If the reading that follows remains on the surface level, there is, literally, a world of difference between superficial meaningfulness on the one hand, and the veritable exploration of the surface on the other. Both worlds appear in *Glamorama*, producing a profound superficiality.

In some aspects a reading like this echoes the famous statement towards the end of *American Psycho*. “Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in” (375). This statement seems to simultaneously say that everything is surface and that there is a meaning to be found in the surface. *Glamorama*, read thus, can be said to offer both an emphatic critique of American culture and a strategy for reading that culture and the critique. In *Glamorama* the necessity of reading literally and finding meaning in the surface is taken to the level where – as we will see – it becomes a matter of survival. The literal reading is a strategy necessary for surviving in the narrated world, and a strategic necessity for the reader to understand the narrative.

**THE OPENING**

The title of the book provides the reader with guidelines for reading. It is formed as a neologism, a condensation of a number of words, including “glamour” and “horama.” “Horama,” a Greek term meaning “vision,” “sight” or “view,” invites the reader to assume the position of spectator, while the character of the spectator is suggested by “glamour.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “glamour” as “a corrupt form of GRAMMAR for the sense cf. GRAMARYE.” If one investigates what “glamour” is, one is led in a double sense to “grammar.” The title thus guides the reader by suggesting the advantage of reading literally, of looking for grammar in glamour – this, however, provided that one reads the title literally.

At the beginning of the book the protagonist, Victor Ward, is going to open a new club the next day. He is indignant over some spots on a panel:

Specks – specks all over the third panel, see? – no, *that* one – the second one up from the floor and I wanted to point this out to someone yesterday but a photo shoot intervened and Yaki Nakamari or whatever the hell the designer’s name is – a master craftsman *not* – mistook me for someone else so I couldn’t register the complaint, but, gentlemen – and ladies – there they are: specks, annoying, tiny specks, and they *don’t* look accidental but like they were somehow done by a machine – so 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, though I’m getting the distinct impression by the looks on your sorry faces that why won’t get answered – now, come on, goddamnit, what’s the *story*? (Ellis, *Glamorama* 5)
These rather basic questions — who, what, where, when, why — for which Victor, in the opening page of the novel, demands answers, are also questions that he anticipates will remain unanswered. Victor poses entirely traditional demands on the plot development here; his irritation, shared by many of Ellis's readers, with "a lot of description" evokes Ellis's tendency to provide extensive renditions of chatter, mix-ups, banalities, lists of brands and products, and so on, with the result that it is often difficult to find "the story," and especially to find an answer to "why?". *Glamorama* thus opens in a typical way, with a banal situation (the first several pages devoted to the possible existence of some diminutive "specks") but also with — within the redundant, digressive form — an emphatic criticism of the same. Or from the opposite angle: *Glamorama* begins by framing a (self-) critical voice in a context that becomes ironic both through the form of Victor's own digressive speech, which strikingly contradicts the demand for simplicity, and, on another level, because the apparently inconsequential dialogues and lists anticipate later answers to the questions of "who?" and "why?". After Victor has anticipated the novel's theme of the double, by telling how the designer confused him with someone else, and has put forward his demands for the unity, purity and simplicity of the plot, the dialogue turns, logically enough, to the unity of character.

"Yaki 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," I exclaim. "Because I'm, like, shitting."
"Moi is Peyton, Victor," JD says quietly.
"I'm Moi," Peyton says, nodding. "Moi is, um, French." (5 — original emphasis)

The novel's first page, then, humorously thematizes its own first-person narration. The first question from Victor's opening tirade is answered, but in a manner that changes the character of the question itself. The answer to "who?" is Peyton's "moi," but Victor doesn't understand the French "moi" and therefore unwittingly proceeds to ask who he, himself, is, not in the form "who am I?", but rather with a Rimbaudian agrammaticality, "who is Moi." In this manner, the reader, anticipating disunity in the plot, is confronted with a prophecy of another disunity in the character: "I" is another.

The many long descriptions are therefore not just filler that the reader can skim through. On the contrary, *Glamorama* establishes a way of reading that requires total concentration. As one more forewarning of the fate that is going to befall Victor, one of his favorite phrases, which we repeatedly encounter in the novel, is "spare me." However, this is precisely what does
not happen, at least not in the sense that Victor means it. Victor is not spared anything in the course of the book, and as a result a “spare me,” a surplus “I” emerges. There is a “me” too many, a spare “I.” This will become more obvious as we move on from the first page to the motif of the double.

THE MOTIF OF THE DOUBLE

It is not necessary to search long in *Glamorama* to find the motif of the double, as this motif appears with almost exaggerated distinctness and frequency throughout the book. Victor is to meet with Chloe at “Doppelgangers” (6 et passim), his band is called “Impersonators,” The Who’s “Substitute” is mentioned (303), and so on. The protagonist’s very name enacts this motif in two ways: because he has changed his name, he is known as both Victor Johnson and Victor Ward; his new surname, like Poe’s William Wilson, begins with the letter W, “the double you.” As the book progresses, the fact that Victor has a double becomes increasingly clear. There are indications that this double was produced by terrorists, that Victor is replaced by this double in the final section of the book, and, more specifically, that Bobby is Victor’s double.

But in the first section of the book, before the possibility of his doubling becomes manifest, Victor and his father have a telling exchange:

“I’m a loser, baby,” I sigh, slumping back into the booth. “So why don’t you kill me?”

“You’re not a loser, Victor,” Dad sighs back. “You just need to, er, find yourself.”

He sighs again. “Find—I don’t know—a new you?” (79)

In the same conversation Victor asks his father, “Why are you so literal-minded?” (80), and at this very place reading literally can uncover some important narrative threads. The father, a presidential candidate, wants a more presentable son. He may, indeed, read “literal-minded,” combining Victor’s Beck quotation with his own wish for “a new [Victor].” Victor himself tells his father, “I’m replaceable” (79). Towards the end of *Glamorama*, Victor will be told, by the dying Jamie, that his father “wanted [him] gone,” and that Bobby “needed a new face”: “’Palakon’—she swallows thickly—‘had promised Bobby... a new face. Bobby wanted a man... so Palakon sent you. It fit perfectly. Your father wanted you gone... and Bobby needed a new face’” (423). A perfect fit, then, but the passage remains ambiguous, which in turn depends on “a new face” being read literally. At the end of Part Four, Bobby’s head is shot off: “I look back and where Bobby’s head was there is now just a slanted pile of bone and brain and tissue” (436). The literal-minded reading of this passage would be that Bobby, who “needed a new face,” now has room for one. And in fact, Part Five of the novel opens with an
entirely transformed Victor, a Victor who no longer parties, who is enjoying law school, is in a long-term relationship, and who describes himself as "changed...a different person now" (445). This Victor is not only reading, but rereading Dostoevsky (446), author of The Double. Part Five offers plenty of indications that this Victor is no longer the same person, but the reader is provided with no evidence with which to establish this fact. In a characteristic passage, told, "it's hard to be yourself," the narrator "[starts] smiling secretly, thinking secret things" (451). With the woman referred to as Eva his identity remains ambiguous ("Eva giggles, says my name, lets me squeeze her thigh harder" [461]). But this Eva is referred to, on the following page, as Lauren, suggesting that the two have been switched, and that the narrator must learn to recognize not names but faces. "You have to check those photo books that were given to you," Eva says. 'You need to memorize the faces' " (462). Bearing in mind the considerable evidence indicating that Bobby and his group are capable of creating doubles, of providing "a new face," it is clear that the reader is also in danger of falling for the double's illusion if she assumes that only Victor's behavior has "changed." In any case, the first-person narrator we follow in Part Five is not the Victor that we have followed throughout most of the book. Regardless of who this "Victor" who narrates Part Five is, there is an extra first person, a "spare me," and we follow this person in Part Six, with which Glamorama concludes. A substitution has taken place, and this fact is a precondition for grasping the plot. But more important, perhaps, is the narrative structure that allows this substitution to emerge, and which will be the focus of the following section.

THE DEATH OF THE NARRATOR

In Recent Theories of Narrative, Wallace Martin identifies "[o]ne telltale sign of omniscience" as comments on what a character did not think" (146). Several times in the first-person narrative of Glamorama we are explicitly told what the protagonist Victor does not perceive, things that no personal narrator would normally be able to relate. Among the most striking examples are the rendering of the passengers' last thoughts in the exploding airplane (438) and of the sleeping Chloe's dream (43). Further, the reader is presented with passages like this: "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" (168, my emphasis). Such passages present the reader with a paradoxical narrator, one both omniscient and ignorant; there are two voices present in this sentence. This fact has important implications for the theme of the double in Glamorama, producing a peculiar effect: the double takes over not just the identity and
life of Victor Ward but the narration of the narrative, which itself becomes doubled and double-voiced.

In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the peculiar possibility of a double voice regarding first-person narrative in general, and \textit{Glamorama} in particular. I will argue that the novel creates a new kind of narrative with protagonist and double struggling for mastery all the way down to the enunciation of the personal pronoun. The effect of this new kind of narrative is to produce, in the reader, the effect of a fundamental alterity within the most familiar and personal pronoun, the "I."

The very feature of a voice that does not unambiguously belong to Victor referring to Victor in the first person is one of the many elements in the book that causes the narrative’s words, and even the words “I,” “me” and “my,” to be open for the intrusion of the double and for double-voiced discourse. The words “Who the fuck is Moi?” on the novel’s first page become the starting signal for a game of hide and seek, where the reader is invited to guess: “Who is ‘I’ now? Who is now saying ‘I’?” As readers, we are unable to refrain from equating “I” with “I,” but in the novel this “I,” both for the reader and for Victor, is constantly in danger of being revealed as an other. \textit{Glamorama} is a narrative about replaceability rather than replacement, the destruction of a narrator rather than a narrative of destruction.

Towards the end of his influential \textit{A Theory of Narrative}, Franz Karl Stanzel addresses the problem constituted by the death of the narrator in first-person narrative. Stanzel calls the chapter “Sterben in der Ich-form” (Dying in the First-Person Form) (290) and inserts as a preamble the last words from Arthur Schnitzler’s \textit{Fräulein Else}. Here is the passage in context:

What song is it? They’re all singing. The forests, too, and the mountains, and the stars. . . . I’ve never seen such a clear night. . . . I’m dreaming and flying. . . . I’m flying. . . . I’m dreaming. . . . I’m asleep. . . . I’m dream. . . . I’m dream. . . . I’m fly. . .

(158)

Stanzel describes how the moment of death is an ultimate problem for the first-person narrator, and to Stanzel’s account one might add that representing the first-person narrator’s death is particularly incompatible with the retrospective conception of first-person narrative as a subject’s narrative about previous occurrences and experiences. In the concluding lines of \textit{Glamorama}, Victor looks at a mural with a mountain. The final words of the book read:

. . . behind that mountain is a highway and along that highway are billboards with answers on them — who, what, where, when, why — and I’m falling forward but also moving up toward the mountain, my shadow looming against its jagged peaks, and I’m surging forward, ascending, sailing through dark clouds, rising up,
a fiery wind propelling me, and soon it’s night and stars hang in the sky above the mountain, revolving as they burn. 

The stars are real.

The future is that mountain. (482)

This passage is not only strikingly reminiscent of Schnitzler; it evokes the opening page as well. Here, on the last page of the book, the very questions that Victor asked on the first page are repeated: “who, what, where, when, why.” Victor sees these questions answered in the painting. Yet for the reader the answers appear merely as a repetition of the questions.

“The stars are real” is obviously an extremely ironic conclusion to Glamorama’s description of the life of the stars, but it is worth noting that the last lines in Ellis’s and Schnitzler’s texts are remarkably similar regarding structure and the descriptions of the night, stars and mountains. Given Stanzel’s situation of the Schnitzler text as a preamble to a discussion of the problems posed to narrative by the death of the first-person narrator, it is easy to imagine that the Uzi described in a previous chapter has now been put to use, and that the words “falling forward, but also moving up” (482) express Victor’s thoughts at the moment of death. One Victor Ward— and everything seems to indicate that he is the one we have followed throughout the majority of the book—dies in Italy while the other Victor, his double, enjoys life in New York.

The remaining first person, “the spare me,” has been eliminated and the double has finally triumphed and overtaken the identity of the first person. Given the conventions for narratives of doubling, this is not unusual. The odd thing about Glamorama is that not only does the double overtake the identity of the first person on the thematic level and in the narrated universe, but that it does so even as the enunciator of “I.” The doubling in Glamorama affects the enunciation of the narrative in a way previously unheard of for first-person narrative, in that the take-over of identity also occurs on the pronominal level.

The question is, then, how it is possible for a narrative related in the first person, present tense, to be polyphonic in this way? What is it about the “I” sign that allows its reference to shift throughout the book? When Victor tells Palakon about his plans to go to Paris, Palakon warns, “That would be self-destructive” (205), to which Victor answers, “that’s what my character is all about” (206). Victor may be correct in the banal sense that the role of Victor Ward in Glamorama is a self-destructive one (Victor is in fact destroyed as a result of this decision). But in a more subtle, and also more literal, sense “my character,” in this context can also refer to “I.” “I,” which is the sign, “the character” that refers to every first person, is self-destructive in a very special way, and this is why the reader of Glamorama can never be sure that “I” is not another. At the end Victor makes a desperate call to his sister:
"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...
A click.
I'm disconnected. (476)

All the assurances in the world that "it's really me" cannot create a necessary connection between person and word. "I'm disconnected" forms a kind of poetics for the book, where the first person on all levels is "disconnected:" the word "I" is not connected to a person or any stable enunciating element. Victor is cut off, not only from the telephone conversation, but from any mastery over the "I."

GLAMORAMA AND THE OTHER

I will conclude this chapter and reading of *Glamorama* by arguing that the truly extreme and original aspects of *Glamorama* are to be found not in the violence or the very detailed sexual descriptions, nor in the social indignation or cultural critique, but in the character of the voice that brings all of these forward. In this chapter I hope to have shown that first-person narrative can go beyond a framework in which "the consciousness of an individual" is the "source" of the narrative. *Glamorama* is simultaneously innovative and paradigmatic as a first-person narrative because it makes clear to the attentive reader that words are put into the first person's mouth that cannot come from there and because it shows that the reader of literature can encounter an entirely different voice. This voice cannot be separated from the "I" but will always separate it, or, as it says in the book over and over again with an elliptic anaphor, "I split" (167 et passim). First-person narrative fiction does not produce a coherent, individualized voice that speaks to the reader; instead, it provides an opportunity to transgress the limits of the personal voice, to transcend the limits that voice posits to knowledge, vocabulary, memory, and so on.

Deconstructively oriented thinkers like Nicholas Royle3 (in *The Uncanny* and *Telepathy and Literature*) and Jonathan Culler (in his 2004 essay "Omniscience") have long, and with increasing frequency, attempted to formulate alternatives to what they see as the tendency of a predominant narratological vocabulary to naturalize literature. Culler warns against naturalizing narrates by "making the consciousness of an individual their source" ("Omniscience" 32), referring to Royle's concept of telepathy. Culler's objective is to problematize the intimacy with which much traditional narratology endows the narrator. The great majority of these discussions have, like Culler's, concerned the third-person narrator.
In *Glamorama*'s first-person narration, the reader is caught in the peculiar illusion of this sign, "I," even though the narrative clearly demonstrates that its sentences do not stand in an existential indexical relation to the first person. As readers we cannot form a conception of "I" without allowing "I" to be the one who, besides having experienced what is told, also relates the story. Otherwise the "I" sign remains empty, without reference, without object. In response to this unprecedented narration, the reader involuntarily invents a subject that the "I" sign is assumed to have as indexical object and as enunciator. It is thus not, simply, a narrator who produces the narrative; the reader is a participant in this process: in her encounter with the narrative, she invents a narrator and institutes a double production whereby the "I" is at once the creator and creation of the sentence. As Victor puts it, in a motto that distributes its meanings on predicates about both subject and object, "The better you look, the more you see" (27 et passim).

In recent years, deconstructive and narratological thinkers alike have also participated in what can be described as a veritable "ethical turn." Despite the difference between how deconstruction and narratology engage in ethical thinking (in a catchphrase, narratology considers the book as a friend, deconstruction considers the friend as a book) both schools of thought are greatly invested in an ethics of reading. In "Deconstruction and Ethics," Geoffrey Bennington convincingly argues that in order to depart fully from the equation of reading with deciphering, one must be inventive.

Being inventive means not being merely dutiful. A dutiful ... reading never begins to fulfill its duty, in so far as it tends to close down the opening that makes reading possible and necessary in the first place: and indeed this logic can be extended to the concept of duty in general... In this sense an ethical act worthy of its name is always inventive... in response and responsibility to the other (here the text being read). (Bennington 278–9)

Bennington thus makes the ethics of reading the question of ethics par excellence. The encounter with the text is also an encounter with the other. In *Glamorama*, this encounter does not occur in the form of a calm meeting between two first persons. The first-person narration of this novel does not proffer the voice of a friend and companion. The question is not merely what the story is about, but, rather, how the story is told, and *Glamorama* presents us with a certain way of telling that demands a certain way of reading. To sum up, one might say that *Glamorama* makes the demand for a creative invention literal, work which becomes more difficult and necessary when the alterity produced by an encounter with the literary work is not merely that of, as Attridge puts it, "the singularity of the work in a new time and place"
("Innovation" 333), but a voice that is not only another’s but another’s other voice – another’s voice in the other. To engage in an encounter with Glamorama the reader has to expose herself to the risk of telling doubles.

NOTES

1 I wish to thank Naomi Mandel for reminding me about this point.
2 In a recent article ("The Impersonal Voice") I have shown how similar circumstances are evident in as dissimilar works as, for instance, Moby Dick (1851), The Golden Age (1999) and The Lady in the Car with Glasses and a Gun (1966).
3 I wish to thank Nicholas Royle for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
4 See Royle for instance. See also the discussions within narratology, for example Phelan and Fludernik.
5 See Phelan and Attridge.
6 See Attridge ("Innovation" 333) on the literary work as a stranger as opposed to or as a supplement to Booth’s descriptions of books as friends in The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction.

WORKS CITED

Novels of the Contemporary Extreme