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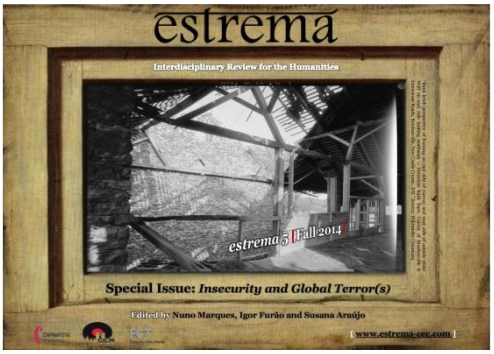

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Systemic insecurity, spectacular violence: Bret Easton Ellis' **Glamorama**[1]

Christian Klöckner[2]

Abstract

The apolitical terrorism performed by fashion supermodels in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Glamorama* (1998) negotiates the epistemological and physical insecurities of a globalized world, and explores the hidden links between the systemic violence of a hyperreal empire of consumer culture and spectacular acts of symbolic, terrorist violence. As embodiments of the "society of spectacle," the models' bodies represent the locus where systemic and symbolic violence converge and where the belief system of politics is replaced by the market technologies of biopolitics. Constantly shifting between different levels of fictionality, *Glamorama* portrays the terrorist as a self that has become its own mediatized, violent Other in the self-destructive, total space of capitalism. Linking this logic to the writings of Jürgen Habermas, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord, I argue that *Glamorama* paradoxically locates the terror of the Other deep in our own cultural scripts of a global risk society.

Keywords: Terrorist violence, Capitalism, Society of Spectacle, Hyperreality, Biopolitics.

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In the post-9/11 public imagination, terrorism has become firmly wed to Islamic fundamentalism.[3] As a synecdochic figure for Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," the terrorist is now most commonly conceived as a Muslim fanatic with a Middle Eastern background. Regardless of its exactitude, such focus on the international terrorist is nothing new: at least since the nineteenth century, terrorism discourse and the images it has produced have been deeply preoccupied with the figure of the alien Other transgressing the boundaries meant to protect a homogenous body politic. By contrast, Bret Easton Ellis' novel *Glamorama* (1998) appears like an outdated product from an age that Francis Fukuyama designated the "end of history." In its projection of fashion supermodels whose terrorist deeds remain without any discernible political motive, *Glamorama* seems to subscribe to the end of all ideological battle after the victories of liberal democracy and the capitalist market. Deftly surfing globalization's accelerating flows of people, goods, and money in the transnational space of capitalism, these apolitical celebrities of American pop culture could not appear further removed from the contemporary imaginary and real landscapes of terror. Yet, *Glamorama* can indeed be read as a narrative of insecurity useful for a sociopolitical analysis in the twenty-first century insofar as it highlights the disorientation of a globalized consumer culture and its links to terrorist violence. And it is particularly through the construction of multiple layers of mediatization, as I will show in the following, that the novel breaks down the boundaries between Self and Other, between inside and outside, as well as between other conventionally separated spheres, and thereby locates the terror of the Other deep in our own cultural scripts of a global risk society.

Similarly to its predecessor *American Psycho*, *Glamorama* joins graphic depictions of extreme violence with prolonged descriptions of the jet set life, this time in the global fashion centers of New York, London, and Paris. After a catastrophic failure to open up a New York dance club, the novel's protagonist Victor Ward accepts a lucrative assignment by an ominous figure, F. Fred Palakon, to find the actress and model Jamie Fields in London. Jamie turns out to be part of a terrorist group whose leader, supermodel Bobby Hughes, pressures Victor to join them after the latter has witnessed a scene of gruesome torture and murder. In Paris, the model-terrorists commit a series of devastating bombings and attend celebrity-studded parties. Victor begins to fear for his

3 This is a revised and slightly enlarged version of an essay that appeared as "The Fundamentalism of a Globalized Hyperreal World: Bret Easton Ellis' Glamorama," in *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 45.1/2 (2012): 125-35 (special issue "Narratives of Fundamentalism," ed. Birgit Däwes).

own life when he realizes that he is caught in a maze of forces and counterforces whose objectives he does not understand. Eventually, he learns bits and pieces of a conspiracy behind his original assignment: Victor's father, a U.S. senator running for president, had approached Palakon to get his unstable son out of the country; Palakon, however, also works for a faction opposed to the father's election and pursues his own plans. In the novel's penultimate part, Victor seems to return to a more responsible life in New York. In the very end, however, he is a hostage in a hotel room in Milan, apparently awaiting his violent death.

In the vein of the conspiracy novel, *Glamorama* implicates terrorist violence in an inaccessibly dense thicket of collaborating and competing state and non-state actors. Yet, the uncertainty reaches even deeper because *Glamorama* does not have any stable and verifiable "reality" in the first place: the terrorist bombings, conspiracies, and torture extravaganzas may as well be part of one or two movies, or a product of Victor's disturbed imagination. *Glamorama* spectacularly negotiates the indeterminacy of a media-saturated reality, in which mediation has – at first almost imperceptibly – completely swallowed up anything with a claim to the real. From the very beginning, Victor's world in New York is full of the media, but things take a significant turn after the disastrous night of the club opening when Victor goes to a diner where "something's being filmed, a camera crew's setting up lights" (Ellis 1998, 167) and "the director leans in to me and warns, 'You're not looking worried enough,' which is my cue to leave Florent" (Ellis 1989, 168). Together with Victor's limited first-person point-of-view narration, these references to filmmaking increasingly turn Victor's life into a cinematic representation, and in doing so, blur several fictional levels:

> Outside, more light, some of it artificial, opens up the city, and the sidewalks on 14th Street are empty, devoid of extras, and above the sounds of far-away jackhammers I can hear someone singing "The Sunny Side of the Street" softly to himself …. "Disarm" by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the sound track 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. (Ellis 1998, 168)

By "walk[ing] into that frame," Victor is literally *mise-en-scène* and enters the diegetic world of his own life's movie. Strangely, Victor simultaneously retains the perception and knowledge of the director and the movie's audience: not only does he regard other people as "extras" or cameramen, not only does he hear the movie's nondiegetic "sound track," but he (i.e., the "I" of the viewer) also notices that he (i.e., the "I" of the actor) does not notice a car.

Heavily borrowing from filmic codes, the experiencing and the narrating selves overlap in Victor's narration and obliterate the typical distance between camera and character, between narrative space and action (Dallmann 2006, 70). In this sense, *Glamorama* becomes a schizophrenic text with simultaneous inside and outside perspectives. We are in the midst of a movie's evolving plot, and yet are constantly pointed to the movie's extradiegetic elements and the terms of its production. Victor begins to call the people he meets "actors" and film cameras become the only reliable validators for a (fictional) reality that otherwise would be too horrifying to fathom: "Is this … is this for real?," he asks at one point and clarifies, "I mean, is this like a movie?" (Ellis 1998, 373; Helyer 2009, 200). Additionally, Victor and the model-terrorists permanently look up "scripts" to find out what happens next or what lines they are supposed to say. At the same time, the soothing sense that his experience is only fictional is countered by nagging doubts that interrupt Victor's voice in second-person narration: "you know that scenes are filmed without you and you know that a different script exists in which you are not a character" (Ellis 1998, 383). The question whether this is reality, a nightmare or a movie is left unanswered by a narration that keeps slipping between different levels of fictionality and a narrator who seems subjected to an indeterminable number of scripts and the whims of film "directors" and thus lacks any autonomy, agency, or even capacity to understand what is happening around him.

From the very first scene, *Glamorama* has prepared us for these kinds of epistemological impasses. Obsessed with some "specks" in one of his club's bar areas, Victor shouts that "everyone's acting like there's a question as to whether these specks are an illusion or a reality," to which his assistant JD rejoins in programmatic fashion: "Reality *is* an illusion, baby" (Ellis 1998, 9). During the quarrel about the significance of the specks, JD admonishes that they should be "realistic—or at least fake it," to which Victor rejoins: "I'm not in a realistic mood, JD, so spare me" (Ellis 1998, 11). Self-reflexively leaving (neo-)realism behind, *Glamorama*'s opening scene also establishes Victor's (and anybody's) conflicted subjectivity when he mistakes the French word "moi" for a name: "'Who the fuck is Moi?' I ask. 'I have no fucking idea who this Moi is, baby'" (Ellis 1998, 5). Victor utterly lacks self-knowledge, and by the end of the novel, *Glamorama* has destroyed any of the reader's ideas who Victor – or anybody else – is. Everybody is constantly mistaken for somebody else, and the characters are often told that they look like the persons they really are. *Glamorama* thus shares with other postmodern novels a fundamental epistemological doubt that we could

ever know ourselves or the Other – and foregrounds motifs of disorientation, doubleness, and schizophrenia.

I use the latter term according to Fredric Jameson's designation of schizophrenia as a central feature of postmodern art: a disrupted experience of time and a perpetual existence in an oppressively intense present resulting from a breakdown of meaning (2002, 137-38). On a textual level, *Glamorama* achieves discontinuity through the amnesiac present-tense narration, time-shattering gaps between chapters and the use of short, paratactic paragraphs that often present unconnected scenes, images, and surfaces. And the increasing oppressiveness of the present is indicated by a series of leitmotifs of death and decay: Victor is constantly freezing, various parts of his body keep going limp, a smell of excrement hovers over the action, flies are omnipresent, and confetti appears in the most unlikely places. The confetti "scattered" and "littered" everywhere is a particularly resonant image for the dispersal and atomization of being accompanying the glamor of the celebrity world (Buisson 92).

The novel's first chapter already suggests such schizophrenic disorientation through the breakdown of meaning when Victor and JD quarrel over the booking of a magician for the club's opening:

> "I mean," JD continues, "I think comparatively it's pretty in."
> "But in is out," I explain, squinting to see where we're heading. It's so cold our breath steams, and when I touch the banister it feels like ice.
> "What are you saying, Victor?"
> "Out is in. Got it?"
> "In is…not in anymore?" JD asks. "Is that it?"
> I glance at him as we descend the next flight of stairs. "No, in is out. Out is in. Simple, non?"
> JD blinks twice, shivering, both of us moving farther down into the darkness.
> "See, out is in, JD."
> "Victor, I'm really nervous as it is," he says. "Don't start with me today."
> "You don't even have to think about it. Out is in. In is out."
> "Wait, okay. In is out? Do I have that down so far?" …
> "Right. Out is in."
> "But then what exactly is in?" JD asks, his breath steaming.
> "Out is, JD."
> "So…in is not in?"
> "That's the whole p-p-point." It's so cold my biceps are covered with goose bumps.
> "But then what's out? It's always in? What about specifics?"
> "If you need this defined for you, maybe you're in the wrong world," I murmur. (15)

This passage is not simply about the endless procession of fashion trends: Heading down a staircase to the basement of the club, Victor and JD also enter the "darkness" at the base of language. Here, the opposition of "in" and "out" completely collapses, and the signifiers enter a nonsensical game of repetition that leads to a logically circular conundrum. There is no stable self-identity ("in is *not* in"), and this is precisely not due

to any historical loss (Victor rejecting the suggestion that "in" is not "in" because it is not "in" *anymore*) but a permanent condition: "[I]n is out. Out is in." But whereas Victor is completely unconcerned about the implications this has for language and subjectivity, JD sees the problem of such evaporating boundaries of difference ("But then what's out?"). This exchange then foreshadows the concurrent inside and outside narrative perspectives on Victor's life.

Significantly, Victor's annoyed putdown that clueless JD may live "in the wrong world," directs us to the larger social significance of this conversation: the disorientation is instrumental in Ellis' efforts to explore the new topology of a global capitalist consumer society that no longer has any outside. With its counterpart gone, and hence its limit, in is as out as out is in. This scene in the cold and the dark of an empty dance club then perfectly captures the disarticulation – and disaffection – in the total space of capitalism, a system of limitless immanence. In this homogenizing space of multinational capitalism, history disappears and we are, as Jameson writes, "bereft of spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distantiation" (1991, 48-49).[4] In the face of a "scripted" reality written by the anonymous forces of an all-encompassing system, the individual cannot stand aside. Victor and JD's exchange then alludes to these ongoing reallocations of global power, the redrawing of boundaries, and the seemingly infinite powers of capitalism to shift directions, incorporate and market all kinds and agents of resistance and protest.

This insight is crucial as it elucidates the intersection between the glamor world of fashion and international terrorism in *Glamorama*'s figure of the model-terrorist. A variety of thinkers have explored the links between globalization, the diffusion of borders, and (terrorist) violence. Jürgen Habermas conceives of terrorism as a "panicked response" to the perceived threats of modernity and globalization (Habermas *apud* Borradori 2003, 18-19), a form of "symbolic" violence that responds to the West's "structural" violence of "unconscionable social inequality, degrading discrimination, pauperization, and marginalization" (Habermas *apud* Borradori 2003, 35). The effect of globalization is that this "structural" violence is exported abroad and results, for example, in increasing economic inequality within and across nations and in the replacement of a "collective coherence" with a "cellular" society of "atomized

4 The lack of any significant differences between New York, London, and Paris is indeed an important factor in *Glamorama*'s effect of disorientation. Dallmann correctly observes that the novel's international settings are "even inhabited by the very same people" (2006, 71).

individuals" (Stephenson 283). Slavoj Žižek similarly maintains that eruptions of "subjective" terrorist violence are generated by the latent "systemic" violence consisting of "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (Žižek 2008, 1). In this view, the vilification of terrorists serves to distract from the fact that they are but the distilled versions of globalization's invisible violence (Schmid 2011, 79).

Finally, according to Jacques Derrida, terrorists are both instrumental to the capitalist system and among its major beneficiaries: Globalization exponentially increases their access to financial power, advanced technology, and media coverage and fosters their recruitment, formation, and training efforts. Neither capitalism nor the terrorists depend on conventional geography and "territorial" determination: "The relationship between earth, *terra*, territory, and terror has changed" (Derrida *apud* Borradori 2003, 101). Thus, the haunting terror of terrorism is founded in the self-destructive possibilities of capitalist, Western-styled globalization. Derrida argues that the "most effective" terrorism is the one that "recalls that the enemy is *also always* lodged on the inside of the system it violates and terrorizes" (Derrida *apud* Borradori 2003, 188n). This is why Derrida introduces the metaphor of a failing immune system of the global body politic. He interprets terrorism as a symptom of the global system's "autoimmune disorder" by which he means the "strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its 'own' immunity" (20, 94 [emphasis original]).[5] For W. J. T. Mitchell, the body's failing immune system is an apt metaphor for international terrorism as in both of these the "limits, borders, boundaries of the body (politic), its relations of inside/outside, friend/enemy, native/alien, literal/figurative" are at stake (2007, 281). In fact, Mitchell adds, the metaphor of the body resurfaces in the frequent rhetorical figuration of terrorism as "virus," "cancer," or "sleeper cells hidden in a body" waiting to be activated (2007, 280). Ruth Mayer concurs that the blurring boundaries of the "age of globalization" has turned the virus into the terrorist trope of "interrelation, mix-up, complication, subtlety, and subversion": a formerly foreign element that has invaded the body and makes use of the host's resources to amplify itself (2007, 1). Crucially, all

5 In other words, the body's immune system spontaneously, i.e., without any known cause, attacks its own cells. Derrida understands 9/11 as such a symbolic suicide rooted in the West's support and training of its future enemies during the Cold War. Bush's "war on terrorism," Derrida argues, continues those paradoxical autoimmunitary processes (Borradori 2003, 95, 100, 111).

these rhetorical metaphors center around the body, which, as we will shortly see, is particularly resonant for a discussion of *Glamorama*.

Clearly, *Glamorama*'s model-terrorists are insiders of the system who freely circulate "the curvature of the earth" (*Glamorama* 311) with only minimal territorial need. But *Glamorama* not only suggests a linkage of symbolic/subjective and structural/systemic violence in the global interpenetration, collaboration, and competition between clandestine state agents and terrorist groups; it further locates the links between systemic and subjective violence in the body. Asserting the cultural damage wreaked by the fashion industry's prefabricated images of beauty, Ellis associates their emotional violence with the visual spectacle of terrorism. Consequently, Bobby's claim that the model-terrorists are "just reflections of our time" (Ellis 1998, 310) suggests that both their beautiful bodies and their terrorist acts perfectly adhere to the inner logic of the global consumerist system: The model-terrorists are the embodiments of what Guy Debord has called the "society of spectacle." With the "spectacle," Debord captures the dominance of the image in the media-saturated market society where "everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." Crucially, the spectacle should not be simply understood as the constant proliferation of images in the media – rather, the spectacle is "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 2009, 24). Debord understands the spectacle as the materialization of a particular worldview and the distillation of the dominant mode of production in images (Debord 2009, 33). In the "society of the spectacle," life is reduced to mere appearances and we are compelled to fill the (predetermined) roles of consumers, managers, or shareholders. Martin Jenkins makes a good case why celebrities are the epitome of these mechanisms:

> The status of celebrity offers the promise of being showered with 'all good things' that capitalism has to offer. The grotesque display of celebrity lives (and deaths) is the contemporary form of the cult of personality; those 'famous for being famous' hold out the spectacular promise of the complete erosion of a autonomously lived life in return for an apotheosis as an image. (Jenkins 2009, 17)

Victor, his fellow terrorists, and the glamor world of fashion depicted in *Glamorama* are perfect examples of a life fundamentally replaced by the image. As if Victor's depthlessness, the affirmation of surfaces and the fusion of reality and mediatized virtuality were not enough evidence, *Glamorama* explicitly indicates such a reading when Victor notices Bobby's "Hermès rucksack with a copy of a book by Guy Debord hanging out of it" (Ellis 1998, 266-67).

Of course, the digital age has only intensified the preponderance of the image that

Debord diagnosed in 1967. In *Glamorama*, the images have created their own world and become models that endlessly produce "directly lived" life. Throughout the novel, Victor is confronted with pictures of himself in situations that he claims have not taken place in this way or at all (e.g., 60, 80, 224-25, 228). By digitally manipulating photographs, Victor later discovers, the terrorists are able to "move planets" and "shape lives," and they succeed in "erasing people" and "inventing a new world, seamlessly." Victor panics when he sees altered pictures that supposedly show him with his father and sister (Ellis 1998, 358), a scene that foreshadows the novel's ending: Held hostage in Milan and being shown a news segment about his father's U.S. presidential campaign, Victor learns of his replacement by a doppelganger who subsequently tells him on the phone to stop bothering the family. For the reader, it is impossible to decide whether the "real" Victor has been replaced by a "fake," whether this is yet another of Victor's delusions, or whether we have all along followed only an "actor" or split-off persona of Victor's. One thing is clear, however: the reader has herself been tricked by the novel's penultimate part, in which a chastened and newly responsible Victor quits modeling and returns to law school. Whoever this Victor is, it is not the same "I"-narrator as the one caught up in Europe. It may as well be the terrorists' manipulated image that has come to life and cut off Victor from the mastery over the "I"-narration (Nielsen 2006, 26-27).

At this point, where images precede reality and become "models of a real without origin or reality," we have entered Baudrillardian hyperreality (1994, 1). In this simulated world without an outside, Baudrillard writes as if speaking about *Glamorama*, "[w]e are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance" (1996, 27). The omnipresent cameras of *Glamorama*, furthermore, represent the only reality we can access: "The TV and the media long since left their media space to invest 'real' life from the inside, precisely as a virus does with a normal cell" (1996, 26). This hyperreality of free-floating, exchangeable signs without reference to any outside – which absorb the terrorist event into an image-event that follows certain "scripts" and self-reflexively refers to other image-events – is structurally similar to goods circulating in the totalized space of the globalized economic system. Their linkage is even evident in the metaphor of the virus: Just like the media is the "virus" of reality, terrorism is the "virus" of the global capitalist order. Which could also lead us to the conclusion that the spectacle of mediated terrorism is a virus in the hyperreal space of globalized consumer culture.

Baudrillard claims that terrorism is a form of symbolic violence without "specific content or end" that is as hyperreal as it is uncontainable (Baudrillard 1994, 21).[6] The terrorist violence in *Glamorama* is uncontrollably threatening precisely because it neither has any political cause nor "real" end. Bereft of political significance, the terrorist attacks become exclusively spectacular image-events in the globalized hyperreality of the media. Bobby's weak claims that the "government *is* an enemy" and that the CIA has conducted more violence than any terrorists are mere simulations of political arguments (Ellis 1998, 314). Such depoliticization of terrorism captures an important trend in contemporary thought, Walter Benn Michaels claims: Politics, as the belief in the possibility of an alternative or *outside*, is considered obsolete and replaced by a biopolitics intent on inventing new identities and bodies. *Glamorama*, "a novel of manners more alert to the technologies of self-transformation," as Michaels writes, thus emphasizes the possibilities and consequences of leaving all belief behind (Ellis 1998, 174). *Glamorama*'s focus on the fashion world emphasizes this shift and portrays the fundamentalism of a postideological world. As Bobby sees it, Victor has great terrorist potential precisely because he does not have "an agenda" and is not "afraid of changing" (Ellis 1998, 287, 286). Similarly, Jamie claims that her recruitment as a terrorist was based on the fact that she never believed in any social consequences of her modeling "because no one we knew was real … people just seemed … fake and … Bobby liked that I felt this way. … It 'helped,' he said" (Ellis 1998, 311).

Glamorama's dramatization of globalization's forms of systemic violence in the figures of the model-terrorists thus needs to be understood in the context of a hyperreal media society and such controversial 1990s notions that the world had finally arrived at "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" (Fukuyama 1992, xi). In its depiction of the fashion world and the figures of the models-slash-terrorists, the novel dramatizes globalization's own forms of violence, the "more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation" (Žižek 2008, 8). "Everyone's involved" in this (biopolitical) violence, as Bobby puts it (Ellis 1998, 315), and the models' investment in hyperreality particularly "helps" to commit terrorist acts whose disastrous results remain as unreal as anything else. Much like fashion, terrorism in *Glamorama* is staged for the camera and its effect depends on its dissemination through

6 For Baudrillard, terrorism is uncontrollable because the terrorists' assumption of death is a form of symbolic exchange, a "gift" that the West cannot reciprocate but by bringing about its own death: "The system must *itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide*" (Baudrillard 1993, 37 [emphasis original]).

images, as in the following scene featuring a gay "actor playing [a] NYU film student" (Ellis 1998, 304) and two models:

> A telephoto lens slowly moves in on the Prada backpack sitting on Brad's lap.
> The force of the first explosion propels Brad into the air. A leg is blown off from the thigh down and a ten-inch hole is ripped open in his abdomen and his mangled body ends up lying in the curb on Boulevard Saint-Germain, splashing around in its own blood, writhing into its death throes. The second bomb in the Prada backpack is now activated.
> Dean and Eric, both spattered with Brad's flesh and bleeding profusely from their own wounds, manage to stumble over to where Brad has been thrown, screaming blindly for help, and then, seconds later, the other blast occurs. …
> What's left of Brad's corpse is hurled through a giant Calvin Klein poster on a scaffolding across the street, splattering it with blood, viscera, bone.
> Eric is blown through the window of the Emporio Armani boutique across the street.
> Dean's body is spun onto a spiked railing that separates the sidewalk from the boulevard and hangs there, jackknifed. …
> From behind the cameras on rooftops and inside various vans so much of it is the usual: bleeding people running out of thick black smoke, the screams of the wounded and dying, a man crawling along the boulevard vomiting blood, gasping for air, charred bodies hanging out of cars that happened to pass by Café Flore in the instant the bombs went off, shopping bags standing in blood outside the entrance. The shock, the sirens, a hundred wounded – it's all so familiar. The director is relying on a top-notch editor to put the footage together and he tells the crew it's time to move on. (Ellis 1998, 305-06)

This passage is typical for the way in which *Glamorama* defamiliarizes the all too "usual," "familiar" scenes of terrorist violence by highlighting their mediatized character. Before anything has happened, we "zoom in" on this bombing through a camera's "telephoto lens"; the presence of the "cameras on rooftops," "the director," and a "top-notch editor" turn the gruesome bloodshed into nothing more than "footage." Furthermore, in the hyperreality of this image-event, it's always "time to move on." This all seems to be suggestive of Baudrillard's claim that any terrorist event can only be grasped in its mediatized simulation, without any reference to an outside real.

However, we ought not take *Glamorama*'s hyperreal fictionality too lightly. Because, ironically, a number of *Glamorama*'s terrorist attacks do seem to have such an outside relation to reality: They are, in fact, fictionalizations of a series of terrorist attacks in France in 1995 and 1996 that were plotted by the Algerian *Armed Islamic Group* (GIA) and killed ten people and wounded 300 more. One of the more deadly incidents was a subway bombing at the Port-Royal station, which in part corresponds in minute details to a bombing described in *Glamorama.* The only differences are the following: in the novel, this particular attack does not take place at the "Port-Royal" station but at the "Pont Royal," and while the actual attack caused two deaths and injured eighty people, in the novel these numbers are inflated to seventeen casualties and 130 wounded people. Staccato sentences in *Glamorama* like, "[s]hots of body parts—legs and arms and

hands, *most of them real*—skidding across the platform. Shots of mutilated people lying in piles" (Ellis 1998, 319; my emphasis), inject a dose of surrealism into the carnage – are there artificial or fake body parts? – and therefore do not attempt to closely represent the actual news footage. Yet, these sentences still parody the sensationalism typically disguised in matter-of-fact objective news reporting, as in this CNN account of the "real" Port-Royal bombing: "Investigators said the body of the woman who died had been mutilated by nails. The death toll might have been much higher if she had not taken the full force of the explosion, police said" (Humi). By recalling the Paris terrorist events, yet changing their authorship along with inflating the number of casualties, I argue, Ellis does not only highlight the media's symbiosis with terrorism but also presents the phantasmagorical allure of violence in our collective consciousness. In this way, Ellis' jarringly absurd mayhems of violence can indeed be considered a form of biting social critique, as Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney had argued in *Shopping in Space* (1992) with respect to blank generation writers in general (xiv). Being blown through Calvin Klein posters and Armani windows, Brad and Eric truly become "fashion victims" in a satiric fantasy of revenge: As these yuppies literally die by their immersion in Western luxury consumer culture, capitalism's systemic violence is the chicken that has come home to roost. Tellingly, the only objects left "standing" in this scene are blood-drenched "shopping bags."

Yet, this desire of critiquing consumer culture cannot alone account for the extremely graphic nature of Ellis' scenes of violence. What do we make of the prolonged torture scenes and all these bodies "splashing" and "writhing" in their death throes, with intestines that keep sprawling out of still living bodies? What about the novel's final plane bombing where shards of metal fly into a woman's face, "halving her head but not killing her yet"; where "someone's head is completely encased with intestines that flew out of what's left of the woman sitting two rows in front of him" where another man is ripped "in half" by the fuselage, "but he just goes into shock and doesn't die" until the plane has crashed (Ellis 1998, 439); and where others experience a "minute of falling while still conscious" (Ellis 1998, 440). How are we to respond to a narrative making cruel jokes on its victims, for instance, when "Susan Goldman, who has cervical cancer, is partly thankful as she braces herself but changes her mind as she's sprayed with burning jet fuel"? (Ellis 1998, 440).

These excessive descriptions of suffering stand in stark contrast with the earlier assertion of the omniscient voice that these gory scenes do not matter at all. Alluding to

the anarchist notion of the "propaganda of the deed," this narrator muses on the symbolic challenge of the bomb:

> The extent of the destruction is a blur and its aftermath somehow feels beside the point. The point is the bomb itself, its placement, its activation – that's the statement. … It's not the legs blown off, the skulls crushed, the people bleeding to death in minutes. The uprooted asphalt, the blackened trees, the benches splattered with gore, some of it burned – all of this matters just as much. It's really about the will to accomplish this destruction and not about the outcome, because that's just decoration. (Ellis 1998, 296)

In fact, at the end of the climactic plane bombing, bodily matter has become "just decoration": Trees will have to be cut down "to recover the body parts that ornament them, yellow strings of fatty tissue draped over branches, a macabre tinsel," only to be perfected by the gold glitter and confetti that was part of the plane's cargo and now rains down on them (Ellis 1998, 441). But if we are to take the narrator's point at face value that the bomb alone is the "statement," why do we still have to endure page after page of such gruesome "decoration"?

One reason, I argue, is that these scenes invoke – and eventually discard – the materiality of the body as the site of what Alain Badiou has called the twentieth-century "passion for the Real" (Badiou 2007, 56). The logic of fashion, which flattens the body into a globally exchangeable and commodified signifier and dismembers it in photography (Fuss 1992, 718), propels Bobby and the other terrorists to search for a direct experience of the non-signifying Real, in the "physical reality of the human body *in extremis*, as the agent or victim of extreme violence, torture or disease" (Petersen 2005, 140). The models, who have become numb and cold from sliding down the surface of media reality, hence search for true physical and emotional sensations in bodily transgressions, the sadistic torture of their victims, and terrorist spectacles.[7]

But if the torture scenes and the detailed descriptions of mutilated bodies in *Glamorama* thus call up the terrorist's – and the writer's – dream that violence represents a possible access to the Real, the omnipresence of the media indicate that this dream of representing the unrepresentable only results in a delusionary obsession with representation (Schmid 2011, 81-82). Consequently, the "passion for the Real," as Žižek has elaborated, in fact "culminates in its apparent opposite, in a *theatrical spectacle*" (Žižek 2002, 9 [emphasis original]). *Glamorama*'s mayhems of violence, their absurd

7 In fact, the novel throughout is obsessed with different transgressions of body boundaries, e.g., in the recurrent motifs of gender crossings, vampirism, or in the unprotected sexual intercourse between Bobby and Victor. Considering that AIDS lurks very much in the background of *Glamorama* (9, 88-89), the latter scene again ties the terrorists to the metaphor of the virus.

comedy, and the glamorous finale of the plane crash make this abundantly clear. The novel therefore also negotiates the ways in which mediation aestheticizes violence into "terrorist chic" (Redding 2011, 98) and how even the supposedly transgressive possibilities of violence have long been absorbed and commodified by the entertainment industries (Redding 2011, 98, 104). Françoise Buisson has correctly pointed out that the evisceration of bodies leads neither to experiencing the *jouissance* of the Real nor to finding any meaning in the body or in death – on the contrary, it presents the "evacuation of Being" and "gives birth to Nothingness" (92 [my translations]). In this sense, finally, the mutilated bodies are truly mere "decoration," because body matter, as the narrator slyly puts it, "matters just as much": it cannot ever be anything other than silent, inaccessible matter.

Adapting Marco Abel's reading of *American Psycho*, however, I claim that *Glamorama*'s excessive depictions of suffering are not only unavoidable but indispensable for the novel's precognitive affective force. Understanding *Glamorama*'s violence exclusively in terms of globalization's systemic violence turning back on itself domesticates that violence, to follow Abel's argument, by putting it into the service of knowledge-making. However, the violence of Ellis' texts is far more unsettling by making the reader complicit in its production. In the case of *American Psycho*, the "violently boring" lists of consumer culture items make the reader yearn for action of which she then gets a "boringly violent" overdose of serial killing (Abel 2001, 140). For *Glamorama*, it may be the reader's desire for anything that can pierce through the novel's ontological and epistemological confusions. In any case, by refusing to legitimate or provide any (political) explanations for the terrorist attacks, Ellis preserves that violence in its incomprehensibility "without reducing it to something other than what it is: the ultimate Other" (Abel 2001, 147). For Abel, the critic's task is to resist the urge to harness Ellis' violence by making sense of it. Instead, *Glamorama* can be seen as asking us to respond "to the Other (violence) *as* Other, as that which does not signify anything, as that which can be encountered merely through its forces that produce specific affective effects" (2001, 147-48).

This approach to violence involves the force of a literature that goes beyond the question of representation. The point and "statement" of terrorism "is the bomb itself, its placement, its activation," *Glamorama*'s narrator claims, and it is really about "the will to accomplish this destruction" (Ellis 1998, 296). We can, at last, understand this cryptic passage as a self-reflexive, poetological comment: *Glamorama*'s, if not

literature's, point is not its representation – that is just decoration. The "statement" is the force of the book, its will to overwhelm and destroy, and its refusal to salvage this destruction by making it comprehensible. As *Glamorama* confronts violence in its indestructible Otherness, it destroys the meaning-making power of any kind of (formerly) stable boundary: the borders between nations and differences between locations in a global empire of consumer culture; the line separating reality and fiction in a mediatized hyperreality; the demarcation of past, present, and future in the confetti-strewn, incessant present; the differences between signifiers in a language where "in" is always "out" and vice versa; the stability of inside and outside narrative perspectives in the cinematic fusion of actor, camera, and audience; and lastly, the self-identity of Victor in the confusion of narrating doubles. These then are the destructions that the text has wreaked on the narrator, the narration, and its readers. Their combined effect is devastating, as Victor puts it at one point: "Everything suddenly seems displaced, subtle gradations erase borders, but it's more forceful than that" (Ellis 1998, 347).

But if this "will to destruction" is the "statement" of the book-bomb, what does it actually communicate? Without being able to ascribe meaning to *Glamorama*'s violence, we are thrown back onto the interminable suffering of its victims. Their experience is similar to what Maurice Blanchot once called the "impossibility of dying" (1981, 47): death neither confers any meaning on life nor could it ever be experienced or grasped. With their limbs severed and their heads halved, they simply go into shock and horribly live on. There is neither meaning nor comfort nor, as cancer patient Susan Goldman learns during the plane bombing, any preferable way to die. The narrator's detached voice speaks a cruel truth: "The problem is that so many people are not ready to die" (Ellis 1998, 439). Yet, they will be forced to comprehend "that dying is inevitable in what could be a matter of seconds. They realize there is no hope. But understanding this horrible death just stretches the seconds out longer as they try to prepare for it" (Ellis 1998, 440).

In *Glamorama*, Ellis attests to the intimate connection between the virtualized reality of the late twentieth century and its "undead" victims who "bear endless pain without having the escape into death at his or her disposal" (Žižek 2002, 12). In its radical commitment to an epistemological indeterminacy in our contemporary mediatized hyperreality, the novel dramatically showcases the violence inscribed into this ostensibly belief-free ideology and its attendant economic system, global capitalism. To bear witness to such suffering may be the novelist's responsibility. Yet, Ellis brings the

paradoxes of writing to their brutally honest conclusion: the writer cannot but turn the Other's suffering into a theatrical spectacle.

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