

WHEN CONTEXT HIDES CONTENT: A RETROSPECTIVE READING OF *GLAMORAMA*'S (1998) RECEPTION¹

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This essay aims at studying the reception of *Glamorama* (1998), the latest novel to date of Bret Easton Ellis, one of the most controversial contemporary US authors. The analysis of this reception and its conclusions goes well beyond the specific case of a single author and constitutes, rather, a reflection of a cultural trend that usually takes place in the reception of literary works. This study delves into a series of questions: do contemporary authors' public personae play an important role in the way their works are interpreted? Is there an obsession with considering a literary work in relation to previous works of the same author? Do reviews of literary works deal with literary merit/demerit at all? These are questions that pop up as we analyze the type of immediate reviews that the publication of *Glamorama* brought forth in the media, especially newspapers and magazines. The study of this reception will be used as basis to answer these introductory questions and to examine the role that context plays in the reception of literary works.

The fact that these questions arise may support the belief that literary texts cannot be studied on their own anymore. As Tony Bennett claims, when analyzing a literary work one has to take into account «that everything which has been written about it, everything which has been collected on it, becomes attached to it –like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation» (1982: 3) (Klinger 107). Obviously, context should play an important role in the analysis of literary works but critics should also be aware that its excess does not always lead to more complex readings but to more simplistic ones, where the role of literary merit is played

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down or simply ignored. In film studies, context is also acquiring great importance, especially when analyzing non-contemporary films. For example, Barbara Klinger (1997) proposes that both synchronic and diachronic areas of study should be taken into account when analyzing a film and its reception. Synchronic areas of study may include cinematic practices such as film production, distribution, exhibition and personnel: intertextual zones including other businesses and industries, other media and arts and review journalism, and social and historical contexts like the economy, law, religion, politics, class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexual difference, family, ideology and cross-cultural reception. The diachronic areas should cover practices and zones such as revivals and retrospectives, reviews, academic theory, criticism and history, broadcast, satellite, and cable television, video and laserdisc reproduction, fan culture, the biographical legend and cross-cultural reception (113-128). This approach is becoming very popular in film studies and something similar is also taking place in the area of literary studies, mainly due to the increasing popularity and influence of cultural studies.

Cultural studies puts a premium on contextualizing political and intellectual work, which is something Cary Nelson has reflected in his cultural studies manifesto. Two of its sixteen different points are especially relevant in order to understand how cultural studies approaches the analysis of a literary work: «Cultural studies is committed to studying the production, reception, and varied use of texts, not merely their internal characteristics» and

Cultural studies conceives culture relationally. Thus, the analysis of an individual text, discourse, behavior, ritual, style, genre, or subculture does not constitute cultural studies unless the thing analysed is considered in terms of its competitive, reinforcing, and determining relations with other objects and cultural forces. (280)

Although this type of approach brings forth more complex and sophisticated readings of literary works, there is also the danger that literary critics forget one of their main concerns: the assessment of the literary work value. In this paper I will analyze the way non-literary aspects biased the reception of Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*, to the extent of playing down the literary merit of the work and favoring other types of reading too influenced by Ellis's public persona and behavior. Yet, this study does not claim to be a detailed analysis of the artistic value of *Glamorama*, but a consideration of the novel's reception and the problems that such type of reception may bring forth in the analysis of literary works.

Bret Easton Ellis is a very controversial contemporary US writer. Up to the present he has written five novels which have gained him a reputation for being an *enfant terrible* of American letters. His books have always received mixed reviews ranging from those who consider him «the voice of a generation» to those who see him as a simple by-product of marketing hype. Maybe because of Ellis's alluring personality and lifestyle his novels are rarely judged for their literary merit, and they

are seen instead under their sociological significance or as reflections of Ellis's public persona. This attitude has led to some absurd situations, especially in 1991 after the publication of his very violent novel *American Psycho*. The protagonist of this novel, Patrick Bateman, is a racist, sexist, xenophobic yuppie serial killer who tortures and kills men, women, children, and animals. His friends and acquaintances ignore this fact and consider Bateman a model of success by the standards of the 80s greedy ascendance of the yuppies. Bateman, in his two-faced personality as yuppie and serial killer, is the ultimate consumer in a society obsessed with appearances and money. The publication of *American Psycho* brought Ellis the panning of the critics, public vilification, a boycott against the book on the part of feminists and even death threats, due to which he had to cancel the advertising campaign of the book.² The reviews of *American Psycho* rarely dealt with the book itself and concentrated instead on its author, who was seen as a reflection of Patrick Bateman. This situation led Ellis to explain that he had nothing to do with the serial killer of *American Psycho*. In an interview for *Rolling Stone* he stated the obvious: «to put it as simply as possible: The acts described in the book are truly indisputable vile. The book itself is not. Patrick Bateman is a monster. I am not» (Ellis in Love 49). Time has blurred this controversy and has even recovered *American Psycho* as a work of literature that is taught at universities and is considered one of the most representative US novels dealing with the 80s. Through the analysis of the reception of *Glamorama* (1998) we will see to what extent Ellis's previous status as a controversial writer has hindered critics from judging his work.

Glamorama deals with the superficial world of fashion and fame. Its main character is Victor Ward (née Johnson), who is a 27-year-old model-cum-actor-cum-club promoter who is immersed in the shallow world of celebrities where appearances are all and only the beautiful count. The novel has two very different parts. In the first one Victor is trying to open a club in New York, thus, in this section readers follow Victor in the 48 hours previous to the opening of the club. His activities include constantly having Xanax, reviewing endless lists of celebrities that will attend the opening of the club, arguing with his girlfriend—a famous supermodel called Chloe—, having sex with his business partner's girlfriend (Alison), interviewing DJs, doing a photo shoot, being interviewed for MTV, having sex with his business partner's lover (Lauren) and finally attending the opening of the club. At the club his simultaneous affairs with Alison and Lauren are discovered and, as a result, he is beaten up by his partner's goons. This first part is written in Ellis's unmistakable style: first-voice narrator, short sentences, quick dialogues, long lists of brand names and a toneless narrative voice. Ellis's characteristic use of mass and popular culture is seen in the way Victor seems to talk through the language of songs, films and advertisements. Thus, we read how he constructs sentences using song lyrics like: «Hey Anjanette, what's up pussycat», «Take your passion and make it happen» (18), «So what's

² For a complete analysis of *American Psycho*'s reception and the role that censorship played see Freccero 44-58 and Zaller 317-325.

the story morning glory?» (78), etc. There is a continual confusion of reality and fiction, to the point that there is a film crew filming everything that happens; real and imaginary people become interchangeable and are reduced to lists of names. Thus, long lists of brand names, which have always been present in Ellis's previous fiction, are here replaced by long lists of celebrity names: the new «brand names» of our culture. When checking who is coming to the party we hear Victor ask: «Beau! How are the As shaping up? [...] Carol Alt, Pedro Almodóvar, Dana Ashbrook, Kevyn Aucoin, Patricia, Rosanna, David and Alexis Arquette and Andre Agassi, but no Giorgio Armani or Pamela Anderson» (8). People have become commodified and their exchange value is equivalent to their celebrity status.

In the second part of the book Ellis constructs a plot that is actually a deconstruction of a conspiracy thriller. He transports stale genre clichés into a postmodern meta-narrative construct. In a labyrinthine plot Victor is paid by a mysterious man to find an ex-girlfriend, now a model-cum-actress. He finds her in London and discovers too late that she has been ensnared in an international terrorist ring formed by glamorous models willing to plant bombs in Louis Vuitton bags. At this point his life becomes a script recorded by an ever-present camera crew who seems to be filming everything, thus, the reader does not know if Victor is a character in a film or if he is seeing visions after having too much Xanax. The terrorist acts may or may not be part of a movie since reality and fiction are constantly blurred and people are not who they seem to be. Victor, who does not know whom to trust, ends up trapped in Italy where he realizes that a doppelgänger of him may be in New York living his life. For Ellis the connection between the fashion world and terrorism lies in the fact that fashion has been a form of torture for women for decades and so is becoming for men. It is a kind of emotional violence, equivalent in a way to the actual violence caused by terrorism (Ellis in Clarke 95). Ellis seems to favor in his fiction these kinds of extreme allegories since he used a similar one in *American Psycho*, where he connected the consumerism of objects carried out by yuppies with the literal consumption of people done by serial killers. This is not the only connection of *Glamorama* with other novels written by Ellis: Victor Ward and Jamie Fields were characters in Ellis's *The Rules of Attraction* (1987), and Patrick Bateman has a cameo role in the book.

Glamorama is a very interesting piece of literature full of postmodern devices in which the shallowness of the world of celebrities and its commodification is richly portrayed. In spite of all this, the book has not been seriously analyzed or even reviewed. The many reviews that appeared after its publication were mainly concerned with criticizing Ellis's lifestyle and comparing him with the protagonist of the novel. This attitude of critics can be traced back to Ellis's beginnings as a writer, when he was considered a «Brat Pack» member. During years Ellis's name has been linked to two other fellow writers: Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz. The three of them became famous in the 80s with the publication of their first books, which became instant best sellers. These books were McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1986), Janowitz's *Slaves of New York* (1987) and Ellis's *Less than Zero* (1985).

The three writers had in common their youth and also the fact that they attracted a young audience who saw part of their lives reflected in this fiction. They depicted sex, drugs, alcohol, money, music, power relations and Wall Street, showing a clear preoccupation with their time and place. The books were seen by some critics as light, empty and commodified, a criticism that intensified after the publication of their second novels which were widely dismissed. For critics like Jeffrey Giles (1987) the members of the «Brat Pack» were writing disposable books and were only speaking for themselves and their jaded friends. Other critics like Terence Rafferty have also insisted in the disposable quality of their books, since he considers that they do not have story, plot, character, pattern or rhythm: they only have marketing. His claim is certainly questionable because many postmodern novels lack traditional depictions of character and plot but are not considered disposable because of that. Rafferty even claims to know why these novels have been published: «they contain large, even toxic, doses of the elements that stimulate sales: lots of sex, lots of drugs, brand names on every page, and a cynical tone that's perfect for readers who want to lap up the decadent behavior and then feel righteously shocked at its emptiness» (144). In this line David Lehman even believes that they offer the intellectual nourishment of a well-made beer commercial (72). In the last years this generation of writers has been reconsidered and valued by serious scholars such as Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney in *Shopping in Space: Essays on American «Blank Generation» Fiction* (1992) and James Annesley in *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture and the Contemporary American Novel* (1998). All of them agree that these writers were dismissed by critics because they became celebrities too young, partied too publicly and did not hesitate to increase and use their celebrity status to promote their books.

Taking this critical context into account, it is understandable that the dissolute past of Ellis, together with his youth, fame and success has fascinated critics more than *Glamorama* itself. In fact, a large number of magazines and newspapers chose to interview or profile the author rather than review his book. This was the case of the *New York Post* (Mazmanian 1) or the *Washington Post*, which profiled Ellis twice commenting upon his literary career and mentioning the plot of *Glamorama* but without any further analysis or review (Grove C1; see C2). Curiously enough, the cult of personality is precisely what the book criticizes. However, even though this is something criticized in the book, it is also something that Ellis still uses in real life to promote his books. Some months before the publication of *Glamorama*, in the summer of 1998, Ellis willingly participated in a documentary about his life and books. It was called «This is not an Exit: the Fictional World of Bret Easton Ellis.» The Institute of Contemporary Arts in London hosted the film premiere, which was actually a television program –BBC's South Bank Show– and some weeks later it was released on television. In the US the film opened in April 2000, timed for the imminent release of the film adaptation of *American Psycho* and the paperback version of *Glamorama*.

The fact that Ellis has participated in a documentary about his life is not per se censurable; the problem was the kind of attitudes and behavior that the documentary

showed. As Ian Parker complained in *The Observer*, a serious writer was treated as a pop culture object. He is shown in a nightclub and shopping but we do not even see a word processor or anything related to his life as a writer (13). Not without reason *The New York Times* considered it a «flaccid infomercial» (Van Gelder E32) since the fictional scenes resemble trailers for the movie adaptation and advertisements rather than serious critical analyses of Ellis's work. Ellis himself has acknowledged that the tone of the documentary was not the right one, even confessing «I am a victim of my own vanity and narcissism» (Ellis in Health 117), or that flattery blinded his judgment (Raven 4).

Considering Ellis's public persona many critics saw *Glamorama* as a reflection of the novelist's problems as a celebrity. In the *Observer* Ellis claimed that *Glamorama* was «about my feelings being famous [...] in many ways this book is a criticism of what's going on in my life» (Ellis in MacDonald 4). In the same interview he also talked about those feelings as a famous person:

I'm kind of happy hearing that I contradict myself, because it just tells me, in some weird way, that I'm really human. You know, it helps when you have a life where you're photographed, where people are making a documentary about you... it makes me feel more real, more three-dimensional, that I do otherwise. (4)

This is one of the problems he sees and criticizes in his book, the fact that celebrities' «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» (Ellis in Clarke 9). *Glamorama* is thus a book written by a celebrity author that criticizes the superficial celebrity world, a world that Ellis researched by immersing himself in the fashion world, going to shows and meeting designers (Clarke 86). Knopf printed 100,000 copies of this very ambitious book which had a 16-city author tour (from Los Angeles to NY), a national marketing campaign, advertising on websites, even a 3-D poster. As a result, Ellis certainly captured the attention of the most important newspapers and magazines, which have strongly panned Ellis's latest novel. James Wolcott (1998) for *Vanity Fair* attacked Ellis nearly in personal terms a month before the novel was published. In the same article he also commented upon Jay McInerney's *Model Behavior* (1998), since, as it has already been pointed out, Ellis and McInerney are always linked together as part of the «Brat Pack.» Wolcott's review starts by saying: «An obsession with models is something most men outgrow unless they're knuckleheads» (71), implying quite obviously that that is what McInerney and Ellis are. He believes that Ellis nurses an «angry feeling» for models because he feels a deeper aversion to women, who are tortured and killed in his fictional universe. To support this statement he claims that in the documentary broadcast on the BBC's *South Bank Show* Ellis half confessed his homosexuality, thus, he infers there might be a homoerotic component in his hatred for women. He even accuses both, McInerney and Ellis of building up models to

make all women feel inadequate, which is precisely what Ellis tries to denounce in the book and what the fashion world may do, not Ellis.

The New York Times reviewed Ellis's book twice. The reviews on the *New York Times* usually exert an important influence on the sales of the reviewed books and on the academia's general opinion of them. For Richard Ohmann, «the single most important boost a novel could get was a prominent review in the *Sunday New York Times* –better a favorable one than an unfavorable one, but better an unfavorable one than none at all» (202). The ones Ellis received were certainly unfavorable and also quite personal, in line with *Vanity Fair's* attitude. Michiko Kakutani opened fire by saying that «Bret Easton Ellis doesn't need the National Lampoon to turn him into a parody –with *Glamorama*, he's done it himself. This glutinous hodgepodge of a book takes all the most glaring flaws of Mr. Ellis's recent work [...] and tries to pass them off as a novel» (1). For the same newspaper Daniel Mendelsohn also accuses Ellis of not having evolved much in his novels and of being celebrity-obsessed. He thinks that Ellis knows far more about the celebrity world than mere journalistic curiosity requires: «he reminds you of those Southern judges who simply had to watch hours and hours of dirty movies in order to determine that yes, they were pornographic» (8). Scott Reyburn for *New Statesman* also suspects that Ellis actually takes the world of male modeling seriously and he is indulging in wish-fulfillment (49). Craig Lindsey even came as far as to say that one could not help but see Ellis's reflection when Victor checks himself out in the mirror or describes such trivial goings-on as bumping into a famous face at a club. For him *Glamorama* does not reveal the shallowness of fame and celebrity, but the shallowness of its author (23). Ellis himself has declared that his interests in fiction concern mainly shallowness, vanity, narcissism, and finding the truth in surfaces (Ellis in Heath 119). However, it is unfair and far-fetched to establish that an interest in surfaces in fiction also implies that the author is a superficial person in real life, or that this subject matter makes the novel superficial or worthless. As Ellis himself has declared the book should speak for itself: «I grew up thinking Look at the art, not the artist. The artist's marital problems, drug problems, wild nights out –they mean nothing. It's the books, the films, the records that I connect with emotionally» (Ellis in Blume 3).

Ellis's willing participation in advertising campaigns and documentaries has led Mendelsohn to conclude that Ellis's novels are advertisements for himself, thus, *Glamorama* becomes another artifact of the culture it pretends to criticize. For this critic, the only people who will enjoy these novels are those whom the novel clandestinely celebrates: the actors, models, celebrity writers and so on. Henry Hitchings for the *Times Literary Supplement* certainly reaches the same conclusion since he believes that the existence of the novel «validates and perpetuates the evils against which it ostensibly rails [...] the people who will enjoy this novel most, almost impervious to the darkness of its design, will be the very people it attacks» (19). Hitchings and Mendelsohn might be right since in the pages of *The New Yorker* we read that Donovan Leitch, the Manhattan perennial «It» boy has proudly claimed that the book is based on his life (Wallace 30-31). Certainly, he is married

to a supermodel, he is a club promoter, he plays in a rock band and has played in a movie, just like Victor Ward in *Glamorama*. The fact that he is not ashamed of being a mirror image of such superficial character may bring some doubt into the success of *Glamorama*'s message. In the same way, one of the few good reviews that *Glamorama* received came from the pages of *Vogue* (Kourlas 96) where it was acknowledged that the book was a wicked parody that would undoubtedly unnerve some, but it had all the positive aspects of Ellis's fiction «brimming with unsettling details, ironic dialogue, and black humor» (96).

Even those reviews that were positive adopted a very aggressive attitude towards Ellis. This is the case of Walter Kirn for *New York* who stated that «Bret Easton Ellis would not know a good novel if he wrote one himself. The proof is that he *has* written one himself» (49). In spite of this «positive» initial statement, he quite incongruously explains that «In a one-man race to the literary bottom Ellis completes in a single book, alone, a process of degradation that ought to have taken years and scores of books by a whole generation of writers» (49). It seems that Kirn really likes the first part of the book where Ellis makes art out of vacuous night crawlers and brand names. However, he detests the second part where Ellis tries to make a point. Even so his final words recommend reading the book since «there's enough high amusement in *Glamorama*, enough illegitimate literary fun, to more than make up for its tedious tilt toward meaning» (50). By contrast Jeff Giles for *Newsweek* considers Ellis a good entertaining writer line by line but «if he knows what all this means he's not saying» (93). It seems he misses some interpretation on Ellis's part, precisely what Kirn despises in the novel. Dennis Cooper from *Spin* still has a third interpretation to offer since he believes that Ellis's noncommittal tone and his refusal to state the obvious –that his characters' behavior is inexcusable– is his greatest strength (1). To sum up, both Kirn and Giles despise Ellis, the former because Ellis gives an interpretation of his intentions in his work, the latter because Ellis gives no interpretation at all; whereas Cooper believes Ellis gives no interpretation and that is what makes his writing especially enjoyable. These contradictory reviews may illustrate one of the dangers of letting context overflow and overwhelm the interpretation and analysis of novels. The authorial intentions are difficult to guess and understand, thus, it is the authors' written work, their novels, that should receive the critics' main attention in order to prevent critics from falling victims to narrow textual analyses and losing trace of other contextual aspects.

The reception of *Glamorama* has clearly been distorted by Ellis's reflection on his work. The novel has been panned using as main argument his lifestyle and status as a literary celebrity. If we retake now the questions that were posed in the introduction to this paper, in the case of *Glamorama* Ellis's public persona has played an important role in the way his work has been interpreted. His previous works, especially the controversial *American Psycho*, have established a set of expectations about how the novel should be interpreted which have blinded critics, preventing them from seeing other new aspects and approaches. On some occasions the literary merit of *Glamorama* has been denied or ignored to focus instead on

more contextual aspects, which, although interesting as complementary studies, have substituted a proper analysis of the literary work itself. *Glamorama* is a novel that deserves a serious analysis in spite of its author and its context. This is not to say that we should erase contextual analysis of literary works. Writers' biographies, their previous literary work, the books' publishing campaigns, the cultural and historical context or the social approaches are all welcome to understand a literary work but they cannot substitute for the analysis of the work.

The fact that cultural studies cuts across diverse social and political interests drawing from whatever fields are necessary to produce knowledge (Grossberg *et al.* 1-16) is something positive that enriches literary analyses as long as we do not forget that we are still dealing with literature and as long as we do not forget to analyze the novels themselves.

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