

Reading the Film: Filmic Narrative in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*

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Abstract

Drawing on intermedial theory, this article examines how elements traditionally associated with film are adapted in Bret Easton Ellis's Glamorama, a novel that offers a vivid portrayal of celebrity culture. Ellis uses filmic narrative techniques to mirror the highly visual medium of film with the visual-centric nature of the celebrity world depicted in the novel. Furthermore, he creates a hybrid narrative form that juxtaposes the realist conventions of film with Victor Ward's fragmented, hyper-visual, and often hallucinatory narration. Ellis uses filmic techniques not to ground the narrative, but to heighten its paranoia and instability, highlighting the performative and constructed nature of reality within a celebrity culture dominated by surfaces, spectacle, and image. While the theoretical framework will provide a foundation for analysing the novel's interplay between filmic and literary forms, this article will demonstrate which filmic narrative strategies are employed and what they aim to achieve by presenting specific examples from Glamorama. These strategies include, among others, an establishing shot to situate scenes within a broader visual context, a montage, mirrored by quick, successive descriptions or by events edited together to condense time, space, and information, and a soundtrack, adding an auditory dimension to the predominantly visual narrative.

Keywords: Bret Easton Ellis; *Glamorama*; American literature; filmic narrative techniques; intermediality

Bret Easton Ellis, an American author and screenwriter, is known for his provocative explorations of consumerist society and cultural decay in late capitalist America. His 1998 novel *Glamorama* offers a hallucinatory and hyper-stylised depiction of the celebrity world and media as it follows the story of Victor Ward, a former model turned actor. *Glamorama* can be considered a filmic novel not only as it explicitly deals with celebrities and actors, as well as the movie industry itself, but also because of its filmic narrative techniques which saturate the narration and, on many occasions, the novel's reality and the filming production overlap. Ellis incorporates the filmic strategies into his literary text to enhance and critique the visual-centric nature of celebrity life, reflecting both the allure and the deception of image-driven culture. Drawing on intermedial theory, this article will examine how elements traditionally associated with film, such as long establishing shot, soundtrack, montage, and camera-eye, are adapted into the novel's prose to create a hybrid narrative

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form, which also aligns with the storyline of the novel. *Glamorama's* intermedial character demonstrates that importing filmic techniques into literary text can serve as a disruptive gesture, foregrounding the instability of perception in a culture where film and reality collapse into one another.

To establish any literary text as filmic or cinematic, it needs to be supported by a relevant theoretical framework. The theory of filmic narrative techniques in literature is, to this day, still lacking unified terminology and a concept that applies to all "filmic" texts. In this article, the term "filmic" will be used to avoid inconsistencies. However, "cinematic" can be considered to have the same qualities and will be used in connection to individual theoreticians if needed. Charles Eidsvik (1973) explores in his article the influence of films on novels, writers, and critics as he states that more works are labelled as "cinematic," or influenced by cinema, since "critics have become filmgoers and have developed a cinematic way of reading" (113). According to Eidsvik, it is essential to first identify the text as influenced by film. However, he deems this step rather difficult as "the act of writing puts even the most cinematic of devices and conventions into the devices and conventions of written literature" (114). Since the literary text does not have the same technical qualities as audio-visual media, "even the most cinematic of writers can only *evoke* or *allude* to the cinema" (115, emphasis in original). The cinematic influence should not be only assumed but confirmed through appropriate evidence grounded in the theory. Another question arises in connection with which literary texts can be perceived as cinematic, considering their time of publication. Kamilla Elliott (2003) categorises cinematic novels into two main streams: novels produced after the invention of cinema, and those produced before the cinema existed. The latter is usually connected to the influence of novels on film rather than the influence of cinema on novels. Elliott further elaborates that it is "less problematic when novelists have viewed films and written for films" (113), which is the case of the former. Only these works can be essentially deemed as influenced by the audio-visual media.

Marco Bellardi (2018) lists "present-tense narration, the montage in general, a 'certain' visual quality of the texts, the camera-eye narratorial situation, a 'dry' dialogue, and the use of specific cinematic techniques such as travelling, pans, and zooms" as the most common and stereotypical features of filmic writing (25). However, Bellardi also argues that more is needed to identify the text as cinematic. The most thoroughly worked-out theory that applies to filmic features in literary texts is that of Irina O. Rajewsky (2002, 2003) [1]. In the broad field of intermedial theory, Rajewsky centres her ideas on literature and its relationship with another medium, predominantly, though not solely, film. In her work *Intermedialität*, Rajewsky categorises these relationships between media and introduces a systematic approach (2002: 78–180) that will serve as a primary base for the following analysis. Rajewsky

builds her theory on the existence of intermedial reference, divided into intermedial mention of the system (*die intermediale Systemerwähnung*) and system contamination (*die Systemkontamination*) (158). Intermedial reference is defined as a process of constituting the meaning of a medium product by referring to a product or the semiotic system or specific subsystems of a medium, conventionally perceived as distinct. It is important to note that only one medium is ever present in its materiality (199). As such, only an illusion – an “as-if quality” (*der Als ob-Charakter*) – of the foreign media can be created. To maintain clarity, this paper will refer to all foreign media as contact media, since they encounter the primary source (which, in this case, is exclusively literature) and permeate it with their techniques, though in a textual way.

Since Ellis’s *Glamorama* uses filmic narrative techniques somewhat irregularly keeps the conventional narration typical of literary text, this article will not delve further into the system contamination for it entirely modifies the primary medium with the features typical of the contacting medium. As such, literary text would be fully textually structured in similarity to the film medium, for example, written as a film script. Moreover, the text is continuously structured in relation to the contacting medium, not only in the passages, as is the case for *Glamorama*. In this analysis, intermedial mentioning of system, which is further divided into “explicit reference” and “reference via transposition,” provides the necessary theoretical framework to confirm that *Glamorama* can be categorised as a filmic novel. To understand the filmic quality of literary texts, the socio-cultural and temporal background needs to be taken into consideration as well. Since *Glamorama* focuses on the celebrity culture in the United States of the 90s, readers can recognise certain markers that can potentially signal an intermedial character of the book. The markers in the form of explicit references (*die explizite Systemerwähnung*), i.e. references which explicitly “talk about” or “reflect on” the contacting medium (Rajewsky 2002: 159), serve primarily as a guiding factor for the reader. They indicate and verify possible further intermedial implicit references and function as markers of references which would not be otherwise easily identifiable (Rajewsky 2002: 114). In case of films, explicit references can be found in technical vocabulary connected to film production, as well as in mentions of the Hollywood film-making industry and its celebrities, referring to famous movies, actors and screenwriters of the 1990s. Victor plans to invite many A-list Hollywood actors and actresses to the club opening, expects to get a role in *Flatliners II* movie, a continuation of the 1990 sci-fi thriller starring Julia Roberts, or gets angry because “the movies being shot all over SoHo tonight are backing up traffic everywhere” (Ellis 2000: 134). In *Glamorama*, the explicit reference can also be found on the plot level since the novel centres around Victor being part of the film production. However, explicit references alone cannot establish a literary

text as filmic; on the contrary, their absence should not deny the existence of filmic narrative as long as other intermedial markers are present.

Remaining references which are not explicit are called “reference via transposition,” which is divided into evocation, simulation, and partial reproduction (Rajewsky 2002: 205). Contrary to explicit references, transposed references ought to create the illusion of contacting media without explicitly referring to them. Since literature cannot be strictly categorised, it should be noted that individual categories might overlap, and an explicit reference to film might easily also become an evocation based on similarity with the film medium, depending on the context. Frequent mentions of celebrities such as Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, Richard Gere, Jennifer Aniston, and many more in the first part of the book can be considered an explicit reference to famous actors; however, their presence can also work as a possible evocation of the film industry in general due to their close association with it. As previously mentioned, in the case of intermedial reference, only one medium is physically present. The “as-if” presence of the contacting medium is thus solely on the level of “illusion”, which is created with the help of textual strategies. Evocation is a reference which thematises the system of the contacting medium or its components. In contrast to the explicit reference, the contacting medium is not explicitly mentioned, as it works with readers’ mental processes. It is based on the reader’s previous experience with the contacting medium, in this case a film, and a relationship of similarity is established between the object of comparison and certain components of the filmic subsystem (Rajewsky 2002: 93).

The partial reproduction is based on the reader’s familiarity with the whole system or components of the contacting medium. This reference is based on a reproduction of characteristic content elements, characters, character constellation, dialogue or plot structures of this genre, without explicitly referring to them (Rajewsky 2002: 104). However, one cannot compare this reference to adaptation. Here, the reader needs to be well-versed in the medium of film to transfer specific images connected to it mentally. At the same time, authors should take into consideration how familiar and well-known the subject of the partial reproduction is to the target audience, which can differ geographically, culturally, or among readers with a more profound familiarity with the subject matter. Although Ellis does not partially reproduce any specific movie or characters, he focuses on the generic structures of particular genres, restaging their logic through literary techniques. Victor’s journey to Europe aboard the ship QE2 is reminiscent of spy films as Victor unknowingly becomes a part of a covert mission. Similarly, readers are reminded of reality TV shows during his stay in the house in Hampstead. Since Victor is constantly being a part of film productions, different parts of the novel are constructed as various genres.

In *Glamorama*, the prevailing strategy is evident in the textual simulation of techniques commonly associated with camera work. Simulation is thus one of the most recurring references to the system of film medium in this novel and is realised by using techniques such as long establishing shots, montage, zoom-in, and more. The book merges 1st-person narrative with the objectivity of the camera lens, which is predominantly used to describe people, surroundings, and locations. These descriptions created through filmic techniques are used in contrast to Victor's narration of his experience, which is, on many occasions, unreliable. Ellis (2000) often begins new chapters using long establishing shots:

A street in Notting Hill. In a row: a new Gap, a Starbucks, a McDonald's. A couple walks out of the Crunch fitness centre, carrying Prada gym bags, appearing vaguely energised, Pulp's "Disco 2000" blaring out of the gym behind them as they pass a line of BMWs parked tightly along the curb on this street in Notting Hill (237).

Establishing shot is "the opening shot of a sequence, which establishes location but can also establish mood or give the viewer information concerning the time and general situation" (Konigsberg 1997: 122). Through this technique, Ellis provides details which would typically be communicated through novel's events and dialogue, yet after this opening segment, none of the setting details are repeated. According to Manfred Jahn (2021), in films, "primary focalizer is the filmic composition device (FCD) – it envisions, sees and hears everything that unfolds in the here-and-now of the film's actual or virtual performance. At any point in time, the FCD can approximate, shift to, or adopt the vision/audition of two types of secondary focalizers" (9). In *Glamorama*, many chapters start in similar ways to the FCD, creating a camera-eye-like perception, and only then coming back to Victor's point of view. By incorporating establishing shots connected to the visual practices of filmmaking, Ellis points to the artificiality of the novel's world revolving around appearances. "Consequently, space appears as thoroughly artificial. Space and time merge without Victor taking notice of it" (Dallmann 2006: 71). Readers are continuously reminded of appearances and superficiality of celebrity culture not only through the filmic techniques adding to the visual world of the novel, but also through obsessive descriptions of fashion labels, brands, and advertisements. Added to that is Victor's overall nonchalant attitude, emphasised by the line from the U2 song, "*We'll slide down the surface of things...*" (Ellis 2000: 144, emphasis in original), followed by Victor "not really hearing the things that are being said in the back of the limousine, just words" (144). That is consequently demonstrated by Victor's relatively calm and unfazed response to the information that the club's missing DJ Mica has died by evisceration (149). Victor is instead more concerned about a

photographer who takes “three, four, eight shots in rapid succession before [he] can straighten [his] tie” (150).

Ellis uses focalization itself as a tool for Victor’s depersonalization. The story is almost exclusively narrated through Victor’s point of view, although some passages or parts of the book seem to be presented to the reader through the camera’s point of view. “The novel’s structure, through the double-voicing of the narrator, reveals both the violence of symbolization, in Victor’s depersonalization, and the consequent liability of the gapped, depersonalised subject of 1990s culture...” (Colby 2011: 96). Drawing on Gerard Genette’s (1980) model of focalization, Victor’s narration is transmitted through internal focalization that represents the world through his eyes and consciousness. However, internal focalization is supplemented by external focalization, which describes places, events, and objects from the outside (193–194). This external focalization can be perceived as a camera-eye technique and, at the same time, Victor’s attempt at distancing himself from the world he inhabits. However, the narration usually returns to the internal focalization shortly after, restoring Victor’s position as the sole focalizer:

On a small soon-to-be-hip block in TriBeCa and up a flight of not-too-steep stairs and through a dark corridor: a long bar made of granite, walls lined with distressed-metal sconces, a medium-sized dance floor, a dozen video monitors, a small alcove that can easily convert into a DJ booth, a room off to the side cries out for VIPs, mirror balls hang from a high ceiling. In other words: The Fundamentals. You see a flashing light, and you think you are that flashing light.

“Ah,” I sigh, looking around the room. “The club scene” (Ellis 2000: 50).

It could be argued that these neutrally depicted passages are still based on Victor’s personal perception; however, a camera-like approach creates in readers a feeling of detachment, in contrast to internal focalization, where no emotions are present. Rajewsky (2003) discusses camera-eye narration and its literary implications, comparing definitions and theories of this audio-visual technique. Since the camera, as a technical instrument, solely represents objects on screen neutrally and in a highly alienated way, this type of narration is thus associated with neutrality and the depersonalization of the representational process (159). Through what we might call a camera-eye technique, Victor alienates himself, placing himself both on the horizon and in the centre of the action as a character in the movie. It also corresponds with his alienation from reality, which deepens as the story progresses. In some cases, Victor’s character is presented externally in a movie scene through the literary filmic composition device. In the following extract, Victor entirely loses his subjective narration as he becomes one of the narrated characters:

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A montage: hundreds of police officers arriving at the area beside the bridge that crosses the Seine and leads to Notre Dame. Victor walking by the Gap while someone in an oversized Tommy Hilfiger shirt Rollerblades by. Victor having a drink at a brasserie on Rue Saint-Antoine, playing with his Ray-Bans (Ellis 2000: 319).

Moving on to the novel's aural aspect, song lyrics, along with other sounds and noises, serve as a soundtrack rather than a simple textual addition. Victor often quotes famous lyrics corresponding to the given situation, for example, telling his disappointed father: "'I'm a loser, baby,' I sigh, slumping back into the booth. 'So why don't you kill me?'" (Ellis 2000: 79), adding the aural dimension to the text. Here we can possibly apply Rajewsky's evocation and its implications. Famous song lyrics evoke not only the sound, but also the presence of pop and rock music celebrities, and consequently of popular music industry in terms of a bigger framework. These mental images are usually connected to the idea of surface culture. Georgina Colby (2011) comments on Victor's recurrent use of lyrics by stating that "the insertion of indie lyrics into Victor's linguistic register underlines the extent to which the fleeting surface culture absorbs all forms of attempted independent expression within its desublimated cultural framework" (98). Through Victor's acceptance of someone else's language, or lyrics in this case, while giving up his own, he becomes his depersonalised and detached self, concerned only with visual images and artifice. In a broader aspect, Victor's loss of authenticity can allude to the power popular culture has over people in general, as it influences their speech, looks, and minds.

Use of soundtrack, apart from the song lyrics, occurs throughout the novel continuously in many forms as Victor himself comments on the use of possible tracks with a montage he takes part in aboard the ship QE2:

The Dave Matthews Band's "Crash into Me" played over the montage, not that the lyrics had anything to do with the images the song was played over, but it was "hunting," it was "moody," it was "summing things up," [...] But then I suggested other music: "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails, but I was told that the rights were sky-high and that the song was "too ominous" for this sequence. Nada Surf's "Popular" had "too many minor chords," it didn't fit the "mood of the piece," it was – again – "too ominous" (Ellis 2000: 193).

Furthermore, the use of soundtrack is again mentioned in the scene where "Tammy casually picks up a Vuitton box sitting on a chrome table in the hallway, the opening piano strains from ABBA's 'S.O.S.' begin playing and the song continues over the rest of Tammy's day, even though on the Walkman she wears throughout the city is a tape Bruce made for her" (Ellis 2000: 294). It should be mentioned that, in both instances, it is up for discussion to what extent the characters' participation in film production is real or constructed by

Victor's imagination and hallucination. Soundtrack, along with other filmic features, often bridges the realistic narrative of the novel with Victor's unreliable perception of events. Its use underscores the idea that the world Victor inhabits is produced and directed, and it is supposed to erase any sense of authenticity. As Punter (2001) puts it: "There is a constant sliding between worlds, between a sense of the real and a sense of the filmic; of being an actor in another script, ... (69). On many occasions, Victor is switching between the real and the artificial, represented by his commenting on the parts of a script, which may not even exist in reality: "He smacks me across the head, then he does it again, and when he does it a third time I wonder if that third slap was in the script," (Ellis 2000, 170) or in the following passage:

"Well, I think Paris," I say. "Actually, Cherbourg, then, um, Paris."

The woman immediately glances over at her husband when I say this but ultimately it's awkwardly done and the director has to retake this simple reaction shot four more times before proceeding to the rest of the scene.

"Action" is called again and in the background extras resume their positions: old people milling around, the Japanese splashing all over the pool.

"Really?" Stephen asks. "What takes you to Paris?" (202).

Colby (2011) further comments on Ellis's use of hallucination and illusion in the novel as she claims that these passages are "paradigmatic of the ambiguity inherent in the novel as to whether Victor is being filmed or merely sees himself in this mediated/mediatised way" (101). As the novel progresses, Victor succumbs deeper into his filmic presence, blurring the lines between reality and illusion.

Ellis does not overlook the practical aspect of filmic narrative techniques as he uses certain strategies to skillfully fast-pace the flow of the text. In *Glamorama*, descriptions of action or unpleasant gore scenes, typically connected to the novel's terrorist plot, are often written through the filmmaking technique of montage. Montage is "a sequence of a passage in a film with many brief shots which are edited together in quick succession, usually connoting the passage of time" (Kuhn and Westwell 2020: 315). Ellis uses this technique to edit a sequence of short shots to quickly convey information about time, space, and action, creating a particular mood and thematic effect. Hong Diao (2024), in his article on the cinematic literary translation of techniques used in martial arts films into literature, elaborates on the textual implications of montage, explaining that "the suddenness and abruptness of this fast-cutting montage strengthen the dramatic effect and accelerate the narrative pace" (143). Similarly, Ellis (2000) aims for the same result as he uses montage predominantly in action-driven scenes:

Outside, the sky is gray, overcast.
An apartment building on Quai de Béthune.
I'm turning the corner at Pont de Sully.
A black Citroën sits parked at the curb on Rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Isle and
seeing the car causes me to walk faster toward it.
Russel drives us to an apartment building on Avenue Verdier in the
Montrouge section of the city.
I'm carrying a .25-caliber Walther automatic.
I'm carrying the WINGS file printouts, folded in the pocket of my black
leather Prada jacket.
I swallow a Xanax the wrong way then chew a Mentos to get the taste off
my tongue.
Russel and I run up three flights of stairs (369).

The extract above shows how montage not only encapsulates the time and space of the action segment but also fastens the narrative's pacing and, thus, readers' perception of this scene. Moreover, abrupt cuts are visually represented on paper, with each sentence separated from the others, creating a mental image of watching a sequence of fast-paced scenes in film. Adding to the visual impression is Victor's detailed description of places (locations) and things (props). Victor swallowing a Xanax can signal his distorted understanding of the situation, as he is, once again, high on drugs, and projects himself as a character in an action film, considering the extract is conveyed from Victor's point of view.

In conclusion, although *Glamorama* is generally considered a filmic novel, this paper offers an analysis grounded in intermedial theory. Individual strategies are viewed through the lens of film theory and connected to the literary text through the meanings they typically carry in audio-visual media. In consequence, each filmic technique is significant to individual scenes, and when all the techniques are connected, they produce a filmic novel. Even though the theory of filmic narrative techniques lacks a unified terminology, most theories share the same concept. They agree that a literary text can solely imitate or evoke the foreign media, and they express the need to ground individual filmic narrative techniques in a greater framework so as to establish the novel's (or any other literary genre's) intermedial character, meaning a literary text has to have certain markers so as to be labelled "cinematic". Irina Rajewsky's theory is, so far, the most technical and categorised system of filmic features applied to literary texts, dividing the filmic influence into intermedial mention and system contamination. Accordingly, her theory serves as a tool for more thorough analysis of filmic texts and draws connections between the use of filmic narrative and its purpose. In *Glamorama*, filmic narrative techniques heighten the surface-level, highly visual world of celebrity culture, Victor's depersonalization and alienation, or can be used simply for a practical reason, such as fast-pacing the tempo of reading. The meaning of individual

techniques can change depending on the context, yet they will most likely be executed in the same way, since these seemingly filmic but actually literary techniques derive from the technical practices of audio-visual media.

Notes

[1] All translations of Rajewsky's (2002) *Intermedialität* and (2003) *Intermediales Erzählen in der Italienischen Literatur der Postmoderne* are done by the author of this paper.

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