# Reading (with) Bateman: Mapping Potentiality of/in Reading

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ABSTRACT: Starting from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of paranoid reading and her call for reparative reading, this article proposes two experimental readings of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). Drawing on the writings of Roland Barthes and Eugenie Brinkema, we consider the text's affective possibilities and potentialities as well as moments when it may surprise its readers, in order to ask what a reparative reading can look like in the case of *American Psycho*. First, we read the novel for its potentialities of different affective modes—in this case, boredom and disgust—by looking closely at its syntactic structure. Second, we impose formal constraints on our reading itself, reading the novel as if it was a comedy. Through these modes of reading, our approach opens up new possibilities for parallel interpretations, instead of positing another master reading of the text.

KEYWORDS: Bret Easton Ellis; *American Psycho*; Reparative Reading; Affect; Roland Barthes; Boredom; Potentiality

## Introduction

"Shuddering I slowly wipe my forehead with a napkin." It is a bodily reaction that Bret Easton Ellis's protagonist Patrick Bateman experiences when he revisits reading a graffito on a toilet wall saying "Kill… All… Yuppies" (374). This is a scene of reading in at least two ways. The 'shuddering' is both Bateman's own reaction to a bit of text and a reflection of what reading the novel might possibly entail for the reader: repulsion, disgust, and horror, to mention just a few possible reactions. At this moment, as at many others throughout the novel, *American Psycho* (1991) plays with the bodily situation of reading. Bateman, who alternates between being subject to intense affect (episodes of panic, anger, disgust, fear) and complete affectlessness (during scenes of torture, rape, and murder) is a diegetic character, whereas the reader, in turn, is subjected to similarly strong affects by the text while remaining outside of it. Reading *American Psycho*'s carefully composed combination of body horror and satire therefore gives us reason to turn to the practice of reading as both embodied situation and critical methodology. How can such an affectively charged text, but also any other text be adequately read? In other words, how can it be read without exclusively focusing on the traits of only one genre the novel supposedly belongs to, or likewise a single one of the novel's affective polarities (e.g., disgust) while ignoring all others? How can the reader's situatedness be considered without turning every account of a text into a singular auto-phenomenology?

## Reader-centric Reading and Affect

An important point of reference for answering these questions is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writing on two distinct ways or modes of reading, which she calls paranoid and reparative. As one of the defining features of reparative reading, Sedgwick points out the relation between the reader and the text's possibility of newness. She argues that

> to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. (146)

To read in the reparative mode means to be open to a text's surprises instead of anticipating and thus neutralizing them from the onset through the preconceived meaning-structures of paranoia. These surprises must be individual, as the reparative is positioned against paranoia's continuous generalization: every reader can be surprised by a text in ways that other readers will not necessarily be. At the same time as the reparative is individual, it opens up to the *possibility* and the *necessity* of surprise.

Sedgwick's arguments, which contest the hegemony of paranoid reading, overlap curiously with those made, at a different moment and in a different context, by Roland Barthes. Three decades earlier, in his book *S/Z* (1970), his aim is not to establish a single, definitive reading, to exhaust the text's possibilities of signification, but rather to develop another reading, followed by another and then another. Thus, he all but formulates a program for a mode of critical reading (the reparative for Sedgwick):

> To read is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the course of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor. […] Yet reading does not consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, a legality of the text, and consequently in leading its reader into 'errors'; it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their finite quantity, but according to their plurality. (11)

He thus proposes to name and rename what he calls systems (of meaning, signification) and, rather than ordering them hierarchically, to coordinate them metonymically.[1] Barthes shows here how a reading for the potentials of surprise can be neither paranoid nor simply an individual phenomenology of reading. To say that I was surprised by this or that is a statement in an entirely different register than to say that a specific moment affected a body, which

[1] See Barbara Johnson's brilliantly concise "The Critical Difference: BartheS/BalZac" for a critical reading of *S/Z*. Her conclusion that "the difference between literature and criticism consists perhaps only in the fact that criticism is more likely to be blind to the way in which its own critical difference from itself makes it, in the final analysis, literary" (13) is pertinent as well: openness to surprise is not simply a form of critical practice but manifests itself also in the critical texts resulting from this practice.

happened to be my body, in a surprising way. The former is, so to say, post-subjective in the sense that it has already been assimilated into a specific subjectivity (mine), but the latter precedes this moment of assimilation, it is affect as pre-subjective. The potentialities of these kinds of surprises are precisely systems that can be coordinated in a text without them necessarily having to be realized in every reader (which would amount to giving a paranoid structure simply a new coat of paint) or even in whoever happens to be the critical reader (which would constrain any analysis to said personal phenomenology). What reparative reading, understood through Barthes, can instead do is map a text's potentialities to surprise.

This would approximate what Barthes elsewhere calls the "text of bliss" (*Pleasure* 14), which he posits as a text that contains the potential to surprise, understood by him less as a material text than as a mode of reading and as the product of a specific practice of reading. Central to this is the individual and unique reading body as the field or surface on which the text works in the process of reading, on which such possible moments of surprise play themselves out. He concludes that "[t]he pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas I do" (17). The moment of surprise, thus, is not one of conscious *reflection*, but rather one of surprising and idiosyncratic bodily *affection*.

The issue of surprise is, we suggest here, intimately linked to that of affect. To outline the modes of reading practiced in this article, we will first briefly sketch our understanding of affect and the way it functions *within* and as the *product of* texts. In the early 1980s, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze defined affect as "sensations" and "instincts" (*Bacon* 38). This definition, in turn, relies heavily on his reading of Baruch Spinoza: "simple bodies […] are only related to one another, through movement and rest" (*Spinoza* 205). Affect, Deleuze argues, may be understood as an impulse (sensation, instinct) setting a resting body in motion. According to Eugenie Brinkema in her book *The Forms of the Affects* (2014), "[a]ffects for Deleuze are not feelings, emotions, or moods, but autonomous potentialities, pure 'possibles' that are linked to a complex series of highly specific terms, such as 'sensation,' 'becoming,' 'force,' 'lines of flight,' and 'deterritorialization'" (24). Brinkema, who in her book focuses on film, criticizes this way of thinking about affect as generalizing, since the Deleuzian emphasis on the potentiality of affects entails, for her, the danger of reading affects as negative or positive. Instead, Brinkema sees affects as autonomous, able to exist as and for themselves (25). What often happens when focusing on affects, so her argument goes, is that they are seen as merely part of certain genres, as 'feelings, emotions, or moods.' They are often grouped in such binary patterns of broadly positive or negative. In order to keep the text, be it literary or cinematic, open for a plentitude of possible readings, therefore, it is important to refrain from characterizing affects on the terms of these binaries.

This, consequently, means that the affects produced by a novel should not be seen as part of a certain genre, e.g., fear or disgust as an affect of horror and sexual arousal as an affect of porn—or as having merely one possible meaning or message. Instead, following Brinkema, as readers and literary scholars we strive for a more differentiated reading of affects and understand them through their potentials to move and being moved. In other words, reading

*American Psycho* as only a horror novel, a psycho thriller, or even a critique of neoliberal yuppie New York City necessarily remains limited. Less exclusiveness can be achieved by engaging a different mode of reading that considers such delimitations in their relationality as one among many possibilities. Because of the oscillation between these genres that have been, and are, readily associated with the novel on the one hand and their ascription and rejection on the other hand, the text may also be regarded in its relation to other such affiliations that are lost when imposing a singular genre or reading.[2] If we conceive of *American Psycho* as "both-neither and-nor" (Vermeulen and van den Akker, "New Romanticism") a horror novel, a psycho thriller, and a critique of neoliberalism, then it may also be read as a satire, a comedy, and so on.[3] Or, as Deleuze and Felix Guattari put it in their discussion of the rhizome, the operative logic here is one of a continuously coordinating "and…and…and…" (26) instead of a subordinating search for the single, correct (and no doubt paranoid) reading: it is a horror novel *and* a psycho thriller *and* a critique on neoliberalism *and* a satire *and* a comedy…

To open up the interpretation of a text toward what Sedgwick called reparative, we, therefore, argue for a reading practice that centers the possibility of surprising affects, without requiring that they are realized in every reader. Instead of looking for signs, motifs, and patterns that will only prove what we as readers already believe to know, we suggest looking for potential affects the reading of a text may offer, while at the same time not characterizing them as negative or positive. To do so, we present two experimental readings, both operating on the text's surface, one focusing on the oscillation between different affects in Ellis's text and the other on the use of formal constraints in reading as ultimately conducive to a wider understanding of the affective landscape produced by a text.

## Between Boredom and Disgust: An Oscillation

One possible way of opening up *American Psycho* toward reparative reading is to consider the text's potential to affect and excite its readers. Originating from a time that is already experiencing the limits of postmodern irony, the novel is often analyzed with a focus on the protagonist Patrick Bateman as an allegory for neoliberalism, while using postmodern and often paranoid reading methods (see, for instance, readings of *American Psycho* by Haynes, Godden, or Heise). However, a merely postmodern nihilistic worldview does not hold if one considers the material impact of neoliberalism on its surroundings. In order to acknowledge the material impact of Ellis's novel, we suggest reading it as a well of potentiality instead of a merely passive and ironic postmodern novel, reflecting the lives of yuppies.

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[2] For examples of this mode of reading the novel, see Haynes, Godden, or Heise.

[3] This notion stems from Timotheus Vermeulen and Robbin van den Akker's idea of metamodernism, which they define as "[…] epistemologically with (post)modernism, ontologically between (post)modernism, and historically beyond (post)modernism" ("Notes on Metamodernism" 2).

The following reading, therefore, shows *American Psycho*'s oscillation between two opposing affective modes: boredom,[4] which is not affiliated with a specific genre, on the one side, and disgust, which is an affect connected to the horror genre, on the other. We regard this oscillation as a stylistic device that bears the potential to affect the reader. In her 1964 essay, "Michel Leiris' *Manhood*," Susan Sontag argues exactly this when she writes:

> But what about boredom? Can that ever be justified? I think it can, sometimes. […] We should acknowledge certain uses of boredom as one of the most creative stylistic features of modern literature—as the conventionally ugly and messy have already become essential resources of modern painting, and silence (since Webern) a positive, structural element in contemporary music. (70)

Turning to passages from *American Psycho* moves into focus art's potential to cause boredom. Here, we treat boredom as an affect in itself and suggest concentrating on the potentiality of boredom as an affect in the chapters "Morning" and "Rat," without pinning it to a negative or positive connotation. Although our aim is to provide an analysis beyond classifications, it is important to note at this point that *American Psycho*, and especially the passages provided in this analysis, contain rape and sexual violence. A reader might find them extremely violent and disturbing. Yet, the text's excessive violence is not the only aspect readers frequently comment on. What leads readers to call American Psycho "The most BORING book I have ever read," as a user of the platform Goodreads remarks in their review (Alan)? Why are there passages in *American Psycho*, such as those meticulously describing technical gadgets, items of designer clothing, or skincare products, that seem to bore their readers?

Reading, for instance, the chapter "Morning," passages like the following occur:

> The Painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba; it's a high-contrast highly defined model plus it has a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC with a picture-in-picture digital effects system (plus freeze-frame); the audio includes built-in MTS and a five-watt- beneath the TV set; it's a super-high-band Beta unit and has eight-page memory, a high-band record and playback, and three-week, eight-event timer. A hurricane halogen lamp is placed in each corner of the living room. Thin white venetian blinds cover all eight floor-to-ceiling windows. (Ellis 25)

This passage is exemplary of the lengthy descriptions readers come across in the novel. What makes them ostensibly boring is not merely that they often describe objects which are generally used rather than contemplated. It is their whole syntax that subtly bores. Taking a closer look at the sentence structure, one can see that each of the clauses and subclauses of the passage follows the canonical structure of subject, verb, object, where the subject position of the sentence is always occupied by one of the objects in Patrick Bateman's apartment. Boredom is an effect of this repetition.

[4] Marco Abel has already treated this subject from a different angle in a chapter of his book *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation* (see 45-56).

A couple of sentences later, however, Bateman, who is the first-person narrator of the novel, enters his own description of the interior and takes over the role of subject: "I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up[,] then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottsass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number" (25). Gradually throughout the chapter, Bateman syntactically becomes the subject while interacting with the objects surrounding him, so that the question arises if this equates him with passive objects, or the other way around: does it suggest that objects have agency? The repetition in syntax reveals a lack of nuances that results in boredom, which, as Peter Toohey writes, "becomes worse when a situation becomes valueless" (5). The descriptions, therefore, on a syntactic, but also on a semantic level, suggest that there is either a lot of value to the objects *and* Bateman, or that *both*, objects and Bateman are valueless. If one only sees the material, the elements, and particles, the protons, electrons and neutrons, what makes one particle more valuable than the other?

Furthermore, all those objects, be they technological appliances, interior design, fashion, or beauty products, reveal another reason for boredom: surfeit, which "boredom is connected to" tightly (Toohey 15). Experiencing those descriptions as boring, one cannot help but approximate what Bateman himself might feel when being stimulated by the objects surrounding him. It is not surprising, then, that lurking behind the plane of boredom (or even playing itself out on the plane of boredom) there is violence. As a reader understimulated by the monotonous syntax of this chapter, it is easy to miss the first hint at Bateman's brutality; clothing of a child he has likely murdered: "Grabbing my raincoat out of the closet in the entranceway I find a Burberry scarf and matching coat with a whale embroidered on it (something a little kid might wear) and it's covered with what looks like dried chocolate syrup crisscrossed over the front, darkening the lapels" (Ellis 30).

While in the beginning of the novel, hints at violence are rather implicit, they become increasingly more explicit toward the novel's end. The chapter "Rat" contains a long list of technical devices Bateman recently ordered and partially already received:

> Included in the Sony CCD-V200 8mm camcorder is a seven-color wipe, a character generator, an edit switch that's also capable of time-lapse recording, which allows me to, say, record a decomposing body at fifteen-second intervals or tape a small dog as it lies in convulsions, poisoned. The audio has built-in digital stereo record/playback, while the zoom lens has four-lux minimum illumination and six variable shutter speeds. (307)

The abundance of explanatory relative clauses in the chapter, mostly introduced by "which" or "that," imbues the sentences with triviality, which increases the danger of skipping the described violence. Toward the end of the chapter, however, the syntax changes from monotonous to diverse, which adds speed to the reading: "Perched on the seat of the toilet is a large wet rat that has—I'm assuming—come up from out of it. It sits on the rim of the toilet bowl, shaking itself dry, before it jumps, tentatively, to the floor" (308). The use of dashes and

inserted subordinate clauses speeds up the narration and reflects the horror of Bateman's encounter with the intruder. The rhythm of the lists, therefore, becomes more fast-paced as Bateman's own panic and disgust, although calmed on Halcion (308), is hanging in the air, such as when he picks "the thing up, sending it into a panic, making it squeal even louder, hissing at me, baring its sharp, yellow rat fangs, and dump[s] it into a Bergdorf Goodman hatbox" (309). The horror of the rat encounter is finally calmed because it is trapped, which brings Bateman back to his practice of listing: "I sit in the kitchen thinking of ways to torture girls with this animal (unsurprisingly I come up with a lot), making a list that includes, unrelated to the rat, cutting open both breasts and deflating them, along with stringing barbed wire tightly around their heads" (309). After the fast pace of the sentences describing his fight with the rat, the way in which Bateman makes plans for torturing women has an unsettling calmness about it. This is the moment the syntax reverts to relative clauses; this time, however, without relative pronouns, making it seem like Bateman daydreams.

This scene eventually leads to one of the most gruesome and sadistic episodes of the novel, which bears the potential to cause disgust in the reader: the torturing and murder of a nameless girl in the chapter "Girl." Bateman, like a cat playing with a mouse, catches the girl, just to release her for a little while, only to catch her again eventually. The desperation he creates in his victim is also mirrored in the chapter's language:

> Her breasts are high and full and firm, both nipples very stiff, and while she's choking on my cock while I'm fucking her mouth roughly with it, I reach down to squeeze them and then while I'm fucking her, after ramming a dildo up her ass and keeping it there with a strap, I'm scratching at her tits, until she warns me to stop. Earlier in the evening I was having dinner with Jeanette at a new Northern Italian restaurant near Central Park on the Upper East Side that was very expensive. Earlier in the evening I was wearing a suit tailored by Edward Sexton and thinking sadly about my family's house in Newport. Earlier in the night after dropping Jeanette off I stopped at M.K. for a fund-raiser that had something to do with Dan Quayle, who even *I* don't like. (327)

During the scenes of rape and sexual violence, the use of conjunctive sentences increases the pace and provides a speedy rhythm of Bateman's account of the abuse, supporting the reader's disgust that is already caused by the text on a semantic level. When he thinks back to the events preceding it, however, the sentence structure becomes simpler as the sentences become very short. The three sentences starting with "earlier" add monotony to the simplicity of the sentences. After the built-up tension and the disgusting description of the torture, those three sentences, through repetition and for only a short moment, create more than rest. They create boredom.

Surprisingly, a similar monotony occurs a little later, when it becomes clear that the girl will not be released again: "Later, predictably she's tied to the floor, naked, on her back, both feet, both hands, tied to makeshift posts that are connected to boards which are weighted down with metal" (327). This sentence resonates with the novel's pages-long descriptions of technological devices, of which the Toshiba television set and the VCR are mentioned in this chapter (327-28). The indifferent description of the girl's torturing, and Bateman's passive

reflection upon it, which suggests that what happens to the girl is inevitable and has nothing to do with his actions ("predictably she's tied to the floor"), reflects what Bateman "can imagine," namely "that [his] virtual absence of humanity fills her with mind-bending horror" (327). However, it does not fill merely the girl with horror. Through the alternation of boredom and disgust, it also fills the reader with horror. What is more, the oscillation between boredom and disgust created through the interplay between the novel's syntax and its semantics does not reflect the first-person narrator's feelings as much as it transmits a negative thereof to the reader. Bateman's stimulation through objects causes boredom in the reader, while Bateman's boredom and indifference during the torture of women, for instance, may indeed cause the adverse effect of disgust and horror in the reader.

The chapter, with all its descriptions of the girl's torturing, is almost unreadable to an empathetic reader. They produce a bodily reaction of disgust, which in itself indexes a fundamental uncertainty underlying this reaction, since, according to Brinkema, "disgust is the expression of an ugliness that fails to represent, that cannot therefore be reinscribed into an aesthetic" (128). Hence, disgust is "incomprehensible" (Ellis 329), just as the noises of his torture victims are to Bateman. Like boredom, it is a herald, since "disgust advises us that the worst is always yet to come" (Brinkema 132).

The chapter "Girl" illustrates how the novel's constant oscillation between boredom and disgust transmits feelings of senselessness and horror; two feelings that are highly connected to a lack of empathy, which, in turn, is often associated with neoliberalism. Showing a high level of indifference while, at the same time, describing a high level of violence and inhumanity leads to the conclusion Bateman formulates while torturing the girl: "this all would have happened anyway. […] This is the way the earth works" (Ellis 328). Stating this, Bateman, in addition to showing a lack of empathy for his victims, also puts into words in his neoliberal zeitgeist a level of (maybe postmodern) resignation and even a refusal to take responsibility for his actions. The perpetual oscillation between boredom and disgust in the novel also suggests a constant state of in-betweenness. In the world Bateman lives in, which he creates with his narration and his actions, there is no way out of the vicious circle, he himself at least partially maintains, of indifference and violence, boredom and disgust. It is therefore comments like blogger Swytla's conclusion in her review of *American Psycho*, who warns to "[s]tay away from this story or you'll be slowly driven mad with alternating boredom and horror," that most accurately put into words the affectiveness of Ellis's novel. We, however, strongly disagree with her suggestion to stay away from this novel. One should, to borrow and repurpose Swytla's words, let it drive one mad with alternating boredom and horror. Yet, even more than exaggerating each other, the oscillation between boredom and disgust creates the potential of surprise and transmits a negative of Bateman's experienced and described feelings. Although he is the first-person narrator whose thoughts and emotions a reader experiences first-hand, an empathetic reader, generally, does not identify with Bateman. The experienced affection, usually, relates to the descriptions of his victims. Consequently, this

sets apart Bateman and the reader and gives the reading body rather a sense of neoliberalism's impact on its surroundings, than a reflection of its protagonists.

## Reading As If

At this point, we also want to raise the question of surprise from a different perspective or position. This entails a shift in scope, up from the precise mechanics of Ellis's syntax to the movements of different genres and affects throughout the text. By way of example, the chapter "At Another New Restaurant" presents a satirized set of romcom tropes: a romantic dinner, a deep conversation about the future of the couple's relationship, and a culinary surprise. As it happens, the dinner is devoid of all romance, Bateman's conversation with Evelyn, at this point still his girlfriend, is superficial and trivial (even as he breaks up with her), the surprise is a urinal cake glazed with chocolate Bateman arranges to be served to Evelyn. Like many other scenes of the novel, everything seems to take extremely long, as their conversation constantly digresses into trivialities or is interrupted by Bateman's internal monologue of extremely violent ideation. Still, the scene is oddly funny, as one of the few moments in which the continuous non-communication between characters who constantly mishear what others are saying, confuse names, and drift from topic to topic without any sustained interest in either is punctured, in the eventual break up, by a moment of seemingly working communication. More romcom clichés circulate (making a scene at a restaurant, Evelyn's desperate self-degradation), continuously interrupted by Bateman's violent fantasies about blinding his dinner date with a pair of chopsticks and other assorted brutalities, which are at this point in the text nothing other than clichés of a different genre, body horror rather than romantic comedy. A dry chuckle could escape any reader quite easily when reading that the scene concludes with a near-laconic Bateman declaring, "[b]ecause of your outburst, I'm not paying for this meal" (343). The stark opposition between the matter-of-fact tone of this statement and the excessiveness of the rest of the chapter, including the exaggerated inversion of clichés, the simultaneity of Bateman's completely affectless brutality and his constant almost-mental breakdown, can produce affects that express themselves in (some amount of) laughter.

In a sense, this chapter is one of many primers for a specific reading throughout the text: *American Psycho* is not simply a text that deals in postmodern irony consistently, as for example David Foster Wallace's critique of the text suggests (see McCaffery),[5] but also a comedy. Now, this is a somewhat outrageous statement to make, especially for most of those who have made it through the rodent episode, both in the novel and in its discussion above. Rephrasing is necessary: *American Psycho* extends an invitation to be read as a comedy. The text not just allows for, but in a sense suggests that its readers shift positions; rather than as

[5] See also Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" on irony especially in relation to TV, which itself figures prominently in Ellis's novel.

a splatter-horror critique of neoliberalism, read this text *as if* it were a comedy, *as if* all of this were funny. Doing so brings with it a reading that is open to surprising affects instead of foreclosing them by constraining itself within a single frame of reference (a genre, a poetic mode etc.). This method of reading is a formalism in the sense that it imposes formal limitations on the mode of reading itself. Here, constraints can function as a form of liberation to reading, as Nicholas Rombes puts it in the subtitle to his *10/40/70* (2014), in which he approaches digital film with a similarly critical attitude. To impose formal limitations on one's reading from the start proves for Rombes to be a way of thinking about film differently and productively. We suggest that it can do the same for a (re)reading of *American Psycho*.

Take the seemingly endless and entirely unsuccessful telephone conference of the chapter "Another Night." The chapter goes on for seventeen full pages, incorporating a dynamic known well from any number of comedies, often slapstick: repetition of the trivial or even the ridiculous ultimately has it take on a comic quality.[6] Situated late in the text, after the most gratuitous violence has already passed, this chapter makes it possible to mobilize affects quite different from those likely preceding it. The constant repetition of putting each other on hold, suggesting and vetoing restaurants, non-sequiturs as well as Bateman's escalating-yet-inconsequential state of panic by and by produce the possibility to laugh. The temporal extent of the chapter is a key element for this. At some point Bateman remarks: "An hour later. We're still debating" (322), but after this, there is still a significant part of the chapter left to go, the game of sending people to non-existent reservations and canceling other ones, equally fictitious, yet goes on. That the chapter cuts off in the middle of an ongoing conversation and on a doubled non-sequitur at that—three lines of dialogue that start of at wanting to buy drugs, in a first break of the conversation jump to a cellular phone plan and then, in a second break, to the *Patty Winters Show*—rounds out the comedic effect of this part of the text. The consistent inability of any of the characters to maintain a coherent conversation coupled with Bateman's deadpan commentary and bouts of extreme panic (which can in themselves be funny) here produce the affective potential necessary for comedy. The chapter is not unique in doing so, however: from the Christmas party, through the numerous discussions of fashion and business cards, to other equally vapid though shorter conversations, Ellis's writing at several points mobilizes potentialities that are structured quite similarly.

Once these potentialities are explicated, the question remains: what if the novel really is a comedy? How can we, as readers who do not find any number of the text's episodes all too funny, reconcile this with our own affects while reading it? First, as sketched above through Barthes, an affective potential need not be realized equally (or at all) by every reader, to exist as a potential product of a text. Second, as an extension of this point, it is easy to see what is at work here: we are simply not in on the joke. This yields both a certain degree of horrifying

[6] This can be understood as an instance of Henri Bergson's famous definition of the source of laughter: "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" (49). In general, the question of the origins of humor, and its affects, would have to be considered in a more detailed version of this reading. Given the spatial constraints, we omit this discussion here.

insight into the neoliberal milieu of the novel, but also to a much more fundamental point. No reading is ever *not* situated. To think of *American Psycho* as a text that could never possibly be a comedy is to take a specific position from the start, it is to take on a formal constraint but one that is far less visible than the one we have previously assumed here. The novel's reputation for excessive violence is what most reliably brings forth such preconceived positioning, while the text itself makes possible any number of other positionings during the process of reading as well.

What this kind of reading practice then makes visible are the plethora of other affective potentialities in a text by insisting on a plurality of possible positions of reading. Though comedy, as in the two chapters of the novel we discussed above, is one of the more frequently occurring potentials throughout *American Psycho*, it is not the only one. It is also possible to read the text as a romance novel or a thriller, through the episodes involving Bateman and his secretary or the detective episode, respectively. The task then would be to identify the affective situations that activate or invite such a reading and to locate them throughout the text. This brings forth both a clearer understanding of the construction of the text and how it can affect a reading body as well as the pre-positionings that these affective genres, here and elsewhere, bring with them. It is the equivalent of taking a far more circuitous route to one's destination, only to find that the very destination has been transformed by the taken path. The counterintuitive can be an organizing principle for reading that is just as sound as what a text may present as intuitive, certainly in a text in which the narration itself is as unreliable and marked by contradiction as it is in *American Psycho*. To adopt this practice of reading can then be a reparative method in Sedgwick's sense. Rather than a paranoid reading that finds the justification of its own presumptions in any and all texts, imposing formal constraints on one's reading leaves room for surprises. What might be made of a text by reading it this way can never be clear from the onset, but that is exactly the point: to read for potentialities in this way means to read in such a way as to maybe be surprised.

## Conclusion

If Sontag's call for an "erotics of art" ("Against Interpretation" 20) is taken literally, it could be likened to this: to trace the excitable fields of a text, not unakin to erogenous zones. This implies both the openness toward the text's possibilities and a commitment to its unevenness at the same time. The two experiments of reading that we have presented above are doing exactly this. We have outlined two possible ways of reading differently, of practicing critical reading otherwise. In this, our emphasis has been on staying close to the text, to pay close attention to a select few peculiarities in the relief of its affective landscape. The method of reading we propose here is open toward the text as well as to non-universal and non-universalizing readings. It takes seriously the uniqueness of each reader, meaning that certain affective potentials are produced by a text generally, without being necessarily realized in all readers uniformly.

As such, and this is the second point, the way of reading proposed here is on the side of the reparative rather than the paranoid. As Sedgwick made clear, a reparative reading has nothing to do with avoiding unpleasant texts. *American Psycho* can be read differently, reparatively, without masking or disregarding any of its violence and irony. Rather, it is a reading against the grain of a paranoid criticism, bent on unmasking always-hidden and always-similar structures of meaning. Instead, we have stayed on the surface of the text in the sense of the zone where it touches and affects the reader.

Third and finally, our readings pay attention not only to the particularities of the text, but also to those of affects. The point is not to generalize, declare some affects desirable and others undesirable. It is instead a question of what a text does to the one reading it, what a perhaps counterintuitive, certainly unexpected combination of affects it will have on the reader-body. Our goal has been and our appeal for future readings is, speaking again with Deleuze and Guattari, not to ask "what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities" (4). In this sense, we plead for a reading that centers the relations between text and its possible function with and on the reading body. To do so means to read outside of the comfort provided by generalizations and universal meaning. At the same time, our readings operate against the backdrop of genres and a self-imposed formalism, exploring the connection between their restrictions and new potentialities, whose visibility may in part benefit from these restrictions. Reading on the side of the reparative makes it possible to read in a way that opens up possibilities of reading the same text in many different ways, exploring the plurality of its potentialities.

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