



DOI: 10.1515/abcsj-2017-0005

Discipline and Murder: Panoptic Pedagogy and the Aesthetics of Detection in J.G. Ballard's *Running Wild*

CORNELIA MACSINIUC

University of Suceava

Abstract

My essay proposes a reading of J.G. Ballard's 1988 novella *Running Wild* as a cautionary crime story, a parable about the self-fulfilling prophecies of contemporary urban fears and about the "prisons" they create in a consumerist, technology- and media-dominated civilization. Interpreted in the light of Foucault's concept of panopticism, Ballard's gated community as a crime setting reveals how a disciplinary pedagogy meant to obtain "docile bodies," masked under the socially elitist comfort of affluence and parental care, "brands" the inmate-children as potential delinquents and ultimately drives them to an act of "mass tyrannicide." Ballard uses the murder story as a vehicle for the exploration of the paradoxical effects of a regime of total surveillance and of mediated presence, which, while expected to make "murder mystery" impossible, allows for the precession of the representation to the real (crime). The essay also highlights the way in which Ballard both cites and subverts some of the conventions of the Golden Age detective fiction, mainly by his rejection of the latter's escapist ethos and by the liminal character of his investigator, at once part of a normalizing panoptic apparatus and eccentric to it, a "poetic figure" (Chesterton) relying on imagination and "aestheticizing" the routines of the detection process.

Keywords: J.G. Ballard, *Running Wild*, gated community, Michel Foucault, Panopticon, surveillance, crime scene, video, forensic psychiatrist, tyrannicide, visibility, escapism

J.G. Ballard was intensely preoccupied, in much of his fiction, with the roots of the craving for the spectacle of violence in contemporary culture, with the emergence of an inordinately morbid taste for atrocity, sensationalism and voyeurism. One important source for this emergent

sensibility is found in the new relationships to both nature and culture that *technology* creates for our minds and bodies. Another significant – and closely related – factor is the increasingly *media*-dominated nature of our civilization, especially the visual media as a privileged form of communication and representation. In his most controversial works, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970) and *Crash* (1973), Ballard probes more daringly into the strange zone in which the human meets the machine, in which the intersection between the organic and the inorganic determines new regimes of desire and consciousness. On the whole, his highly experimental writings display a general prophetic interest in the moral and psychological – and psychopathological – effects of technological mediation on human relationships, on man's giving meaning to the world he builds for himself, and on his sense and definition of reality.

Ballard first established his popularity as a highly original science fiction writer, through several early novels, which include *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Crystal World* (1966), and a number of short stories giving a new twist on the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. However, the generic range of his work is considerably eclectic and hard to divide into fixed categories. In his later career, Ballard experimented with crime fiction narrative, a genre which is co-extensive with the modern ages ridden with social anxiety and unrest and which is constantly re-shaped, incorporating in its conventions and representations its response to the changing interests and perceptions of social and technological realities. Ballard used it as a vehicle for the exploration of his long-standing concerns: the shaping of our inner selves by the presence of technology in our daily lives, the new subjectivities produced by the contemporary urban landscape and the global culture of consumerism, the impact of the media on our perception of and relation to the body social, the effects of rampant consumerism, which keeps us captive in the "iron cage" of materialistic pursuit (cf. Weber 123). This development in his oeuvre starts with the novella *Running Wild* (1988) and includes *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), and his last novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006). Above all, these novels are dystopian projections of the dissolution of the social in an image- and media-dominated consumer age, in which the overestimation of technology has the paradoxical

consequence of both appeasing and creating our fear of the Other, in a vicious circle that leads to the emergence of advanced forms of social self-sufficiency and mediation in human relationships. This exacerbation of separateness in modern times is almost like a disease for Ballard, who sees its analogue in the deadly condition of AIDS:

There's almost a sinister sense in which AIDS is a metaphor for all kinds of processes – whether you call them diseases or not – that are leading, or inviting, similar separations on the viral level. It's almost as if AIDS is a disease that it was necessary for the human race to discover so as to justify all these alienated processes that are taking place on other levels. It's a curious and very terrifying disease. (in Sellars and O'Hara 246)

In *Running Wild*, Ballard uses the crime fiction formula in an unconventional way to emphasize this pathological form that the processes of social alienation may take. The story documents the investigation of a mass murder mystery by – appropriately – a forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Richard Greville, deputy adviser for the Metropolitan Police, called upon as a last resort in the official effort to find an explanation for the death of thirty-two adults in a well-guarded, safety-obsessed, affluent suburban community. The inquiry ends with the disturbing conclusion that the assassins were in fact the now missing children of the estate owners and that the carefully planned execution of their parents and of all the other adults was their radical response to a carceral form of pedagogy which denied them the freedom of privacy and the immediacy and “roughage of real emotions” (Ballard 65).

G.K. Chesterton noted, in 1902 (“A Defence of Detective Stories”), that, in crime fiction, criminal and detective are placed unambiguously “on either side of the divide between civilization and barbarism,” with criminals as “the children of chaos” and the detective as an “original and poetic figure” (qtd. in Marcus 247). Ballard's *Running Wild* evokes Chesterton's metaphor in an uncanny manner. In his story, the murderers are, literally, children; not “of chaos,” though, but of an excessively ordered and controlled environment, the cold and implacable logic of which they replicate in their murders. The perpetrators are not the potentially dangerous outsiders that those gated communities strove to keep at bay; both the assassins and the victims belong to a more-than-

usually ordered space, an enclave of safety, meant to keep away the urban threat of violence and crime by means of a formidable system of security and surveillance. Placing a twist on the classic pattern of detective fiction, in which the murder is a sudden, unanticipated rupture in the *natural* safety and order of a community, Ballard suggests that contemporary fears are self-fulfilling prophecies when the dream of order and safety turns society into a carceral archipelago.

Gated communities are Ballard's settings of choice in his crime fiction narratives. This kind of setting offers a better opportunity for the analysis of the relation between urban civilization and violent crime, as well as of the "psychological modifications which occur without the knowledge of the inhabitants themselves" in confined places (in Sellars and O'Hara 80). The gated community of Pangbourne Village in *Running Wild* is protected from external intrusion by "high walls and surveillance cameras" (Ballard 14) and appears to be inhabited by the "new race of people who are content in their little prisons" that he talked about in an interview given in 1975 (cf. Sellars and O'Hara 80), while he was writing his novel *High Rise* – an early representation of the chaos that is likely to follow from engineered social segregation.

This phenomenon of social withdrawal into homogenous communities as a response to the uncertain conditions of modern life, which Ballard examines in his crime fiction narratives, reflects the contemporary anxieties of urban civilization, confronted with a mutation of the very meaning of "community." Zygmunt Bauman pointed out that we tend to associate this notion with warmth, safety, friendliness: "In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other" (*Community* 2). But this is only an imagined version of community, "postulated, dreamed of" (4); the "really existing community" places on its members such demands as make its promises of safety and human warmth highly ambiguous. The price for the reassuring sense of belonging is, says Bauman, to be "paid in the currency of freedom, variously called 'autonomy,' 'right to self-assertion,' 'right to be yourself'" (4). In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman argues that the "politics of everyday fear" (he is citing Sharon Zukin) that permeates

western urban civilization deters people from “seeking the art and skills needed to share public life” and his conclusion implies that an entire technology of social atomization has redefined the meaning of community:

Community defined by its closely watched borders rather than its contents; ‘defence of the community’ translated as the hiring of armed gatekeepers to control the entry; stalker and prowler promoted to the rank of public enemy number one; paring public areas down to ‘defensible’ enclaves with selective access; separation in lieu of the negotiation of life in common, rounded up by the criminalization of residual difference – these are the principal dimensions of the current evolution of urban life. (94)

Ballard’s Pangbourne Village, in *Running Wild*, is built on the same foundation of “everyday fear,” taking distance from the agglomeration of the city which, as Bauman suggests, has reversed its historical role as a shelter against danger, becoming “danger’s principal source” (*Liquid Times* 72). But it is not only the fear of prowlers and stalkers; what prompts the building of such urban and suburban islands is rather the more general fear of social mixture, of confronting the alien, the unfamiliar, of failing to cope with and to take in the extraordinary variety of human types and lifestyles that constitute the contemporary city environment. City life, as Zygmunt Bauman shows, is “an *ambiguous* affair,” prompting both *mixophilia* and *mixophobia*. On the one hand, its variety offers “a promise of opportunities, many and different opportunities, (...) fitting all skills and any taste” (96), its very heterogeneity being an attractive alternative to the routine and closed horizon of rural and small town life. On the other hand, the “polyvocality and cultural variegation of the urban environment of the globalization era” is likely to engender tensions, confusions, vexations and fears, which will prompt “segregationist urges” (86). The emergence of gated communities within or without large cities illustrates what Bauman calls *mixophobia*, which manifests itself in “the drive towards islands of similarity and sameness amidst the sea of variety and difference” (87).

The setting in *Running Wild* illustrates in a parabolic way these modern tendencies. The select community of company executives, media tycoons, financiers, successful artists and doctors constitutes a socially

sanitized world, for which safety is a matter of affordability, of the capacity to “consume” technologies of security. These senior professionals enjoy the double social privilege of sheltered privacy of self-sufficient remoteness from the metropolis and the “ease of access” to their high-profile work sectors offered by the proximity of M4 motorway (Ballard 14). As a crime story setting, there is, however, an ominous ambivalence about this gated place. Pangbourne Village is described, in one conversation, both as a “fortress,” by Dr. Greville, impressed by the sophistication of its “defense” systems, and as a “prison,” by his police aid, Sergeant Payne (31). The paradox is that the place, while designed to keep crime out, ends up by breeding crime within its own walls, in a perversion of the dream of a crime-free environment that obsesses modern urban civilization.

Constructing the crime setting in this way, Ballard does not only make a warning commentary on contemporary urban phenomena, but also refers us obliquely to a literary model. As “the newest [...] and the most expensive” of a whole constellation of suburban enclaves, Pangbourne Village shares the name of the real Berkshire small town of Pangbourne, without there being any connection – “social, historical or civic” – between them. This points to its completely artificial nature – not only as a social experiment, as a simulacrum of community, but also in the sense that its “literary” nature is signaled. There is a hint at the fantastic in this utopia of safety and order, designed and built by a group of architects and property developers called “Camelot Holding Ltd.” (Ballard 13). At the same time, the “Village” in its name evokes the closed world of the classic setting of British detective fiction, as epitomized by Agatha Christie’s novels. The conventional environment in these texts is the rural spot of comfort and ease, of stability, continuity, and safety – an orderly realm in which, as R.A. York remarks, “death is an interruption,” an alien disruptive presence, incommensurable “with the small concerns of the everyday and the small proprieties of a hierarchical society” (14). Even if the arrival of strangers often marks the beginning of the disturbance of order in the village community, beneath its homely atmosphere and surface calm “there lurks a seething lava of crimes, sins, oddities and other potential disruptions – of which murder is only the most serious

example” (Barnard 28). The paradoxical nature of the village as crime setting in Christie consists in the fact that, potentially, any of the members of its closed community is a candidate for the figure of the murderer. There is no reassurance that what may appear to be most mundane, settled, and familiar would not turn out to be the fountainhead of evil:

Parents, children, spouses all prove to be lethal family members, while apparent bastions of society – doctors, politicians, wealthy manufacturers, through to the humble ‘companion’ – could also be dangerous. Christie’s texts assume that anyone can be a murderer, no one is exempt, no one totally to be trusted. (Makinen 417)

This sense of the universal potentiality for crime, which usually hovers over the whole narrative until the murderer’s identity is definitely established, is “cited,” in Ballard’s *novella*, by the strong intimation that the “village” is more like a high-tech “prison,” a completely controlled environment, in which the inhabitants – especially the children –, already convicted, live like inmates. The investigator of the mysterious murders, Dr. Richard Greville, notices from the very beginning the carceral nature of the place:

The entire estate [...] is ringed by a steel-mesh fence fitted with electrical alarms, and until the tragic murders was regularly patrolled by guard dogs and radio-equipped handlers. Entry to the estate was by appointment only, and the avenues and drives were swept by remote-controlled TV cameras. (Ballard 15)

A key moment in the investigation is the visit to the Maxteds’ house, as part of Dr. Greville’s meticulous coverage of the crime scene. It is here that he has the full revelation of the extent to which the children’s life in Pangbourne Village was one of confinement and the first intimations about the authors and motives of the murders. Here, he realizes the “oddity” of the whole place, which exuded the “sense of very ordered lives being lived here [...] almost too ordered” (37). Children seemed to have all their time filled with useful, instructive activities, carefully supervised by parents, or on which they were expected to report, and closed-circuit TV was used to monitor every corner of the space in which they moved – including their bedrooms. This constant surveillance,

in the name of safety, coupled with the strict control of the children's time as an efficient instrument in their education, made the whole place "a warm, friendly, junior Alcatraz," as Sergeant Payne describes it (41).

In the gated community of Pangbourne village we may easily recognize the features of the institution of the Panopticon, described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1995). Jeremy Bentham's attempt at the reformation of the penitentiary system on the basis of a simple architectural idea (the circular disposition of the bodies in separate cells) and an optical principle (the existence of a central surveillance tower), never achieved in practice in its author's time, provided, according to Foucault, a blueprint for the workings of most modern institutions. The Panopticon makes the exercise of power highly efficient, by means of a *disciplinary* technology relying on constant surveillance. *Disciplines*, in Foucault's analysis, are methods by which meticulous control and constant subjection of individuals is achieved, with a view to ensuring their *docility* and *utility* (cf. 137). Foucault traces the genealogy of disciplinary techniques from the monastic mode to the more modern forms such as the school, the military, the factory, and the hospital. Such methods involve a careful distribution of bodies in space, which "sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed-in upon itself" (141), as well as a strict "control of activity" (149), through the device of the time-table. In Pangbourne Village, the gated community itself constitutes such an enclosure, where the presence and absence of every individual is permanently established by the ubiquitous surveillance cameras; moreover, each of the ten houses had its own internal system of panoptic control, which made children's physical and emotional privacy practically impossible, in spite of the fact that they had their own space generously allotted in their homes. The control of all their time, through the tightly packed schedules, was another means by which the children's continuous availability to discipline was ensured. The role of the time-table as a disciplinary procedure, according to Foucault, was, traditionally, to "establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition" (149), operating, in its modern versions, on the principle of exhaustive use. In Pangbourne Village, the wall diaries and bulletin boards which established every

activity – the school reading assignments, the homework reminders, the TV programs to be watched and discussed, the exclusive social events in which both children and parents were taking part – were techniques of turning all time into “disciplinary time,” making the children subjects of an intensive pedagogical project of creating what Foucault called “docile bodies.”

“Village” life in Ballard’s novella is a reflection of the principles of the Panopticon and its disciplinary technologies, whose role, as Foucault pointed out, was not only to punish, but also to *educate*. The Panopticon “could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals” (Foucault 203); [t]hanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men’s behavior” – it was a “laboratory of power” (204). The Pangbourne Village parents’ efforts to prepare their children for the life of a social elite, sheltered from the risks attending a mixed community, relies on subtle but inescapable coercive methods, which alter also their emotional life. Dr. Greville remarks, unnerved, on the “surveillance of the heart” carried out in the Maxteds’ home (Ballard 38), realizing, as the investigation proceeded, that the supposed happiness and comfort in the children’s life was in fact a burden, that their parents’ excessive care, in spite of all good intentions, was felt as tyranny, curtailing their freedom and keeping them in the condition of inmates. The “Pangbourne Massacre,” as the press constantly referred to it, was, as Dr. Greville suspected, “a desperate rebellion, [...] an act of mass tyrannicide” (56). The “soft” power exercised by the Panopticon is no less damaging for its softness, and the investigator’s conclusion is that “[t]he Pangbourne children weren’t rebelling against hate and cruelty. The absolute opposite [...]. What they were rebelling against was a despotism of kindness. They killed to free themselves from the tyranny of love and care” (59).

The irreducible ambiguity in the nature of Panoptic power – which in Ballard’s novella is represented by the blurred dividing line between excessive care and parental tyranny – is manifest in the capacity of the prison for “fabricating delinquency” (Foucault 256). Analyzing the relation between the rise of the “disciplines” and the formation of scientific discourses, Foucault argues that the modern prison is

the place where the power to punish, which no longer dares to manifest itself openly, silently organizes a field of objectivity in which punishment will be able to function openly as treatment and the sentence be inscribed among the discourses of knowledge. (256)

The “delinquent” is the individual constituted “under the authority of medicine, psychology or criminology” as both “offender of the law and the object of a scientific technique” (256). Children in Pangbourne Village are indeed such objects in a laboratory of power: in the house of the Maxteds – significantly, a couple of psychiatrists –, Dr. Greville finds a “mutilated copy of Piaget’s classic text on the rearing of children” (Ballard, 48), which is one of the few clues to any attempts of resistance and rebellion against the programme of scientific education, with its cold rationality, enforced on the young “inmates.” The close surveillance under which they are kept ensures not only their safety, but also their “normalization,” their behavior according to a pre-defined set of expectations. The paradox is that, by being submitted to this normalizing education, they are *a priori* “branded” by the system as potential delinquents. In other words, they are criminalized before they even start plotting their murders. In their voluntary confinement in the enclosed, socially “pure” space of the gated community, their parents assume the role of the guardians, but this role is purely functional in the Panopticon: what matters is not who is watching, or even if anybody is watching, but that the inmate is permanently conscious of being watched. In the Panopticon, “the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action”: the principle on which the Panopticon was conceived by Bentham was that “power should be visible and unverifiable” (Foucault 201).

In Pangbourne Village, the replacement of the central tower by a multitude of closed-circuit television cameras, dispersed all over the estate, reinforces the principle of the unverifiability of the observer and of the continuity of surveillance. The permanent scrutiny of the place by the indiscriminate eye of the surveilling television cameras, for which all “objects” are suspicious, makes, as it were, “crime mystery” impossible. It is significant that in order to carry out their plan successfully, the

children's first move is to annihilate the thorough system of surveillance.

The mediation of CCTV de-realizes even more the human presence, at both ends, and contributes to an atmosphere of clinical detachment, of emotionlessness, which Dr. Greville concludes to have had a catalytic role in the children's murderous outburst. The careful, cold planning of the murders, their perfect synchronization, and their instantaneity (the killing methods were chosen so that the murders should be "carried out in a short period, perhaps no more than ten minutes" – Ballard 57) display the same affectless, "technological" rationality as that of the system in which they were inmates. Viewing the police video recorded within a few hours after the murders, Dr. Greville gives a first description of the almost literally post-human landscape of the panoptic utopia of Pangbourne Village: "[E]verything is strangely blanched, drained of all emotion, and one seems to be visiting a set of laboratories in a high-tech science park where no human operatives are employed" (6).

In *Running Wild*, much of the children's lives had become televisual. The surveillance cameras turned their existence into a spectacle directed by their parents, who could intervene and wisely rectify any deviation from the script. This mediated existence was attended by a depletion of the meaning and reality of their life. In the panoptic regime of their childhood, the meticulous recording of all the details of their lives teaches them that "nothing but the representable counts" (Foster 521). David A. Foster argues convincingly that Foucault's Panopticon makes the interiority of the subjects that it constructs redundant. If in the case of Freud's superego the voice of authority was internalized in the form of a conscience which punishes through guilt, the Panoptic subjects – like the Pangbourne Village children, who are, in David A. Foster's terms, "superficially mapped" – will identify themselves with their image mirrored in the watching eye and thus "they finally become only what is known, find themselves nowhere but in the eyes of the watcher" (Foster 521).

Murdering their surveillants, the children slip out of visibility altogether – "they've vanished through some window in space and time" (Ballard 4) –, leaving a bafflingly empty crime-scene and no material evidence to help the united institutions of "the police, the CID and the intelligence services" (4) identify the authors of the massacre. When the

narrative begins, they have already carried out their typical activity of meticulous observation, registration and recording – methods by which individuals are kept in the sphere of the “visible” by their objectification. Panoptic power cannot tolerate invisibility – its efficient working relies on “a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault 187). The bureaucratic part of the police investigation process, the recording and registering of all traces, pieces of evidence, and testimonies, the files which substitute for the absent author of the murder a body of knowledge meant to span the “hollowness in comprehension” (McKeown and Stowell-Smith 110) created by the breach in the panoptic order – the equivalent of the notion of intrusive *evil* –, constitutes a technology of mastery in itself, whereby the temporary absence of the murderer – the enigma of his identity –, is restored, symbolically, to presence and visibility. In *Running Wild*, the failure of the police, with its tested routines and established techniques, to accomplish this restoration by building acceptable hypotheses regarding the perpetrators’ identity led to the delegation of the investigation task to Dr. Richard Greville, who, as a forensic psychiatrist, seems quietly self-satisfied by his quasi-eccentricity to the system: he mentions his “unpopular minority report on the Hungerford killings” (7) and his awareness of his superiors’ perception of him: “The senior people at both the Home Office and Scotland Yard regarded me as a dangerous maverick, overly prone to lateral thinking and liable to come up with one embarrassing discovery after another” (8).

There is an implication, in this self-description, that his professional non-conformism is perceived as a liability to the system, and his assignment to the Pangbourne Village murders inquiry may be seen as a way of neutralizing his eccentricity, of absorbing and “normalizing” unconventional approaches which might otherwise expose the weakness of the system. As we learn from his diary record a few days into the inquiry, Dr. Greville is again prepared to antagonize his superiors by the idiosyncrasy of his conclusions: as it turned out, the Pangbourne children case “challenged everything held most dear by conventional good sense” and “needed to carry total conviction if it was to overcome the reflex objections of the Yard and the Home Office” (59).

As a narrator, Dr. Greville gives his account of the murder

investigation in an equally idiosyncratic way. The “forensic diaries” from which he claims to extract his narrative are themselves a problematic genre, in which the association between the most personal and intimate, on the one hand, and the public and legal, on the other, seems intended almost as a parody, a literary artifice. The contents of these extracts are eclectic: from systematized information about the Pangbourne residents, sometimes in the extreme form of orderliness which is the list, and the meticulous accounts of evidentiary findings, to the reconstruction of the murders and their “tentative explanation,” rehearsed hypotheses and personal speculations. The dialogues between him and his aid, Sergeant Payne, which occupy a considerable part of the whole account, show Dr. Greville’s progress in the understanding of the mystery, a process which often reveals him in an unflattering light. The pair he forms with the sergeant seems often an inversion of the classic couple Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson: the professional credentials of Dr. Greville are sometimes belied by his apparent dullness, while his sarcastic companion often seems to be more insightful and already in possession of a truth that his superior is slower to grasp – not so much from lack of acuity as from being, in spite of his reputation as a dissenter, sufficiently caught up in what Foucault calls the “carceral net” (297) of the system to not be able to see its effects “with a clear eye” (Ballard 3).

As a forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Greville is a liminal detective figure. On the one hand, he harks back to the earlier ages of crime fiction, to the “fantasy of amateurism” era (cf. Knight 153), when the detective’s personality, logical skills, sense of observation, speculative rationality and even imagination were primary attributes. For the latter, the “visible” is almost a hindrance, delaying the discovery of a truth which is accessible solely through the native power of the mind to probe beneath deceptive surfaces. The images of the police video, for all their penetrative range, distract Dr. Greville from “recogniz[ing] the obvious” (Ballard 5) by their depthlessness. The “few imaginary interpolations” (85) with which he completes the reconstruction of the events when the tangible evidence is scarce, and which are at odds with institutionally defined notions of rationality and objectivity, bring him closer to the type of the amateur detective, in which hypostasis his insistence on the imagination as an

instrument for the restoration of order makes him truly Chesterton's "poetic" figure.

On the other hand, in the earlier decades of the 20th century, as Stephen Knight points out, professionalized detection came to replace the aura of the amateur genius detective, with the accompanying change from the emphasis on logical deduction to that on procedural techniques, often involving equipment and technology (153). The forensic psychiatrist as professional investigator is part of an "apparatus," and his insightfulness and efficiency is to a considerable extent the result of scientific training, therefore issuing from the system. Scrutinizing human behavior, finding the innermost springs of one's actions, does involve linking the "seen" to the "unseen," making the latter intelligible, but in the case of the forensic psychiatric expert this process has a deeper social import. His scrutiny also involves branding behavior as normal or abnormal, anomalous or deviant – the "medicalization (or psychiatrization)" (Mason 91) of the individual, his consigning to a definite cell in the social Panopticon, is part of a disciplinary process of "normalization."

The first sentence in Dr. Greville's diary is the question "Where to start?" (Ballard 3). Identifying the right point of departure in an investigation is crucial, and the narrator's opening hesitation is explained by the exhaustive coverage of the gruesome event in the media and the multiplicity of accounts offered to a public hungry for sensationalism:

So much has been written about the Pangbourne Massacre, as it is now known in the popular press throughout the world, that I find it difficult to see this tragic event with a clear eye. In the past two months there have been so many television programs about the thirty-two murdered residents of this exclusive estate to the west of London, and so much speculation about the abduction of their thirteen children, that there scarcely seems room for even a single fresh hypothesis. (3)

In his capacity as an official investigator, Dr. Greville has to "forget" these popular accounts and build his own narrative of the events, in their objective causal sequentiality. Procedurally, the first step should have been a visit to the site of the murders, even if he knew that, in the meantime, it "had been tramped over by an army of heavy-footed investigators" (4), and the perusal of the daunting load of police files,

which he anticipates as “probably useless” (4–5). In this state of initial bafflement, and to the bewilderment of his superior, Dr. Greville chooses, atypically, another starting point in his quest: “Then I remembered the comfortable seats of the viewing theater in the Whitehall basement, and as an afterthought asked if I could see the police video recorded at Pangbourne within a few hours of the crime” (5).

This mediated access to the crime scene offers at the same time the comfort of detachment from the “grim stuff” which the Home Office Secretary warns he will see (5) and the prosthetic support for the inevitably limited human vision. The quick-witted genius of the classic amateur detective is replaced by the advantages of technology: the camera eye’s superior power of penetration, its access to aspects of the object that are inaccessible to the human eye.

It is remarkable that what is first invoked by the detective is not the practical, functional utility of the police video as a “witness” to the crime scene, but the *comfort* of watching it from a distance, of exploring the murder site as a cold, sanitized representation, and not a disturbing reality. His withdrawal into the viewing theatre, with its safe remoteness from the horror scene, is the analogue of the Pangbourne residents’ desire to shut out of their comfortable lives the disorder, the violence, the social clash. In this tranquil environment, the forensic video material becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation: “as I relaxed in the viewing theater, I soon realized what a remarkable film this was, and how well it conveyed the curious atmosphere of Pangbourne Village – in its elegant and civilized way a scene-of-the-crime waiting for its murder” (6).

Dr. Greville appreciates the video as an art object, apparently showing interest not primarily in the “what” but in the “how,” paying attention to the cinematic narrative techniques, to atmosphere and style; his narrative accompanies the camera and registers what it shows, what it fixes on, what it turns on to and what it leaves, the quality of the light and its shadow effects (6–7). The aesthetically satisfactory form of the police video is the result of *discipline*, of a technology of (aesthetic) mastery, which is itself an object of Dr. Greville’s contemplation and implicit admiration: “The minimalist style of camera work exactly suits the subject matter, the shadowless summer sunlight and the almost blank facades of

the expensive houses” (6).

The estate itself, in the doctor’s further description, is a masterpiece of refinement, with its clean and noiseless grounds and the desirable combination of money and taste (30) apparent in its every detail. Even the natural setting – the “finely trimmed” grass, the “immaculate surface” of the lawn (7), the ornamental trees and shrubs – is aestheticized, becoming a figure of social style. Dr. Greville refers to Pangbourne Village as a “private Parnassus,” where “every strain of dirt and untidiness” has been removed (9), but its socially aesthetic perfection, with its Apollonian order and balance, is destroyed by the dark underside of uncontained instinct and frenzy, by the desublimated energy of long-repressed aggressivity, the most intractable of the human instincts. The “antiseptic” quality (8) of life in Pangbourne Village, which is inferred by Dr. Greville from the images in the police video, turns out to signify more than a mixophobic social aesthetics of purity and self-containment. The examination of the Maxteds’ home reveals, hidden beneath copies of *Playboy*, a more sinister clue: “gun and rifle publications,” with pages “carefully marked” and “appreciative comments in the margins” (39) – the “real porn,” surmises the detective. If sexual curiosity and vicarious satisfaction were tacitly tolerated by the parents, violence was the ultimate taboo in the overly civilized world of Pangbourne Village, where, as Sergeant Payne comments, handling a firearm would be “worse than molesting a child” (69).

Breaking this absolute taboo takes first the “aesthetic” form of a video fantasy that the children put together before the announced visit of a BBC television team, who were supposed to shoot a documentary about Pangbourne Village and the success of that estate. The remarkable achievement was likely to lead, as was presumed in the architectural press, to plans for the construction of more such communities, which would eventually be “amalgamated in a super-Pangbourne with its own schools, community clubs and resident youth counselors, protected by even more elaborate security systems” (84–85). The children’s own video, made “with the happy co-operation of the parents,” was a 17 minute-long film, capturing in “glossy colour and tableau-like settings” (71) the pleasant life on the estate. However, as Dr. Greville discovers, the disturbing final version of this home-movie, which had circulated only

among the children, contained some additional twenty-five seconds of footage of exceedingly violent images – “car crashes, electric chairs and concentration-camp mass graves.” These images had been culled from the public spectacle of violence offered by the media and they displayed, as the forensic psychiatrist noted, the repertoire of the killing techniques which were to be used on the parents: “Scattered at random among the scenes of their parents, this atrocity footage transformed the film into a work of eerie and threatening prophecy” (71).

The gradually increasing de-realization of their lives in the carceral utopia of Pangbourne Village under the panoptic regime of visual mediation makes them take this extreme stand against their parents and everything they stood for, as Dr. Greville concludes (cf. 56). As the home movie testified, the boredom, eventlessness, and “phoniness” (73) of their confined, even if affluent and secure, lives could only be shaken into the reality of strong emotion and excitement by a violent gesture. The revelation of the home video as “a blue-print for the murders” belongs to Sergeant Payne, who spells it out for the doctor: “It’s as if the film came first for them” (72) – implying, in Baudrillardian fashion, that the reality of the murders was “created” by its video representation, in a strange precession of the image to the real (cf. Baudrillard 88).

The experimental movie made by the children is underpinned by the same logic of escape as the sexual fantasies recorded in their secret journals – the same impulse to create “a richly imagined alternative to life in the estate” (69). As a matter of fact, Dr. Greville notices that all the children’s hobbies and recreational activities were marked by their “obsession with the theme of escape,” apparently “into a more brutal and more real world of the senses” (69). In *Running Wild*, the desire to escape is itself a crime and receives its inexorable punishment: disappearance, disintegration, dissolution. The adults’ desire to escape the fluid world of uncertainty and danger led them into a prison of their own making, where they meet with the violence they fled from; while the children’s attempt to obliterate a “choking” regime of “love and understanding” (65) condemned them to exile to an unmapped social territory of public invisibility.

The ending of Ballard’s novella does not provide the reassuring

solution which made the detective fiction of the Golden Age, with its “lightweight treatment of crime” (Knight x), a form of escapist literature. Ballard does not offer the reader the privilege of detached contemplation of the moral and aesthetic closure which redeems the typical response to crime fiction: the “shameful, guilt-ridden” enjoyment of crime and violence (Scaggs 86). Instead of the expected objective certainty of completion, he allows for more questions to be raised concerning pressing issues of contemporary civilization. Bending the formulaic constraints of the genre, Ballard turns crime fiction into a vehicle for prophetic proclamation, making it cautionary instead of escapist, trying to draw attention to the double bind we face: in the context of a disciplinary, panoptic – or post-panoptic –, society, with its complicity between power and crime (cf. Foucault 283), fear of crime will match the mass-mediated consumption of crime. Ballard’s avoidance of an escapist outcome in his story (by having the criminals successfully escape the “apparatus”) suggests, ultimately, his simultaneous awareness of and resistance to the “disciplinary” ethos of the crime genre itself.

Works Cited

- Ballard, J.G. *Running Wild*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1988. Print.
- Barnard, Robert. *A Talent to Deceive. An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*. London: Collins, 1980. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. “The Evil Demon of Images.” Trans. Paul Patton and Paul Foss. *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*. Ed. Steve Readhead. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. 83-98. Print.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.
- . *Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. Print.
- . *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Print.
- Knight, Stephen. *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000. Detection, Death, Diversity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Makinen, Merja. “Agatha Christie.” *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Eds. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 415-426. Print.
- Marcus, Laura. “Detection and Literary Fiction.” *Cambridge Companion to*

- Crime Fiction*. Ed. Martin Priestman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. 245-67. Print.
- Mason, Tom, ed. *Forensic Psychiatry. Influences of Evil*. Totowa, NJ: Humana Press, 2006. Print.
- Mason, Tom. "An Archaeology of the Psychopath: The Medicalization of Evil." Mason 89-108.
- McKeown, Mick, and Mark Stowell-Smith. "The Comforts of Evil: Dangerous Personalities in High-Security Hospitals and the Horror Film." Mason 109-134.
- Scaggs, John. *Crime Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print. The New Critical Idiom.
- Sellars, Simon, and Dan O'Hara, eds. *Extreme Metaphors. Selected Interviews with J. G. Ballard, 1967-2008*. London: Fourth Estate, 2012. Print.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. With an Introduction by Anthony Giddens. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- York, R. A. *Agatha Christie. Power and Illusion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.