

The Surrealist *Fait Divers*: Uncovering Violent Histories in J. G. Ballard's *Running Wild*

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Abstract

In this paper I read J.G. Ballard's illustrated novella, *Running Wild* (1984), as a subversive example of the surrealist *fait divers*. One of the most ethically challenging fragments in Ballard's often controversial oeuvre, this modified detective fiction presents the reader with a catalogue of contemporary atrocities – parricide, political assassination and terrorism, acts of random violence – and challenges us, the readers, to get our hands dirty. I explore how Ballard negotiates the cultural and historical consequences of global capitalism in *Running Wild*, and how he tests, through fiction, the controversial theory that moral and social transgressions are legitimate correctives to psychological and social inertia. In this context, Ballard incorporates a variety of surrealist texts (paintings, photographs, collages) into his *fait divers*, I suggest, in order to open up moments of critical and ethical reflection, and to provoke the reader into a confrontation with the deviant logics and violent psychopathologies which operate below the polite surface of contemporary history and culture.

René Magritte's *The Threatened Assassin* (1926) haunts the process of reading J.G. Ballard's *Running Wild*. Influenced by the literary and cinematic adventures of Fantômas (the seductive genius of crime whom the surrealists admired), *The Threatened Assassin* offers, at first glance, a transparent narrative of murder and impending capture.¹ We observe the sprawled body of a naked female corpse; blood pours from her mouth, and a white towel lies across her shoulders. A man, whom we presume to be the murderer, stands with one hand in his pocket as he listens to a gramophone record. The presence of his hat, overcoat and suitcase suggest imminent escape. In the foyer, two detectives await the assassin with a bludgeon and a net. In the background, three men peer over an iron railing and observe the murder scene. The story of *The Threatened Assassin* appears to be foretold as verisimilitude counters enigma and mimesis dissolves any sense of mystery. But is this really the case?

Magritte's surrealist exercises in transparency are anything but straightforward. For this painter of visual riddles, evident realities not only reveal that which is visible, but they also, crucially, conceal that which is invisible. Subsequently, transparency becomes a weapon of disorientation for the surrealist artist: it is 'the privileged medium for turning convention on its head and transforming it into an enigma and, at the same time, revealing to the greatest degree possible the mystery that it contains within it.'² Within this formulation, the mystery of *The Threatened Assassin* is never revealed but constantly evoked through concealed situations and alternative events which the painting's realistic *mise-en-scène* hints at. The spectator is encouraged, therefore, to search the visual landscape and to penetrate its latent mysteries: who is the female victim? Why does the presumed murderer pause next to his victim in order to listen to music? Who are the three figures in the background? Are they accomplices or are they witnesses? And what about the ambiguous title of



Magritte's work – who is threatening the assassin, and why is the spectator urged to adopt an ambivalent moral position towards a potential murderer?

It is this line of associative enquiry which Ballard urges his readers to undertake as they step into the literary riddle of *Running Wild*. More of a *why-* than a *whodunit*, *Running Wild* is a work of formal and generic experimentation along surrealist lines of influence. Although Ballard's condensed text has been read conventionally as a novella, I want to suggest here that *Running Wild* should be read within the subversive tradition of the *fait divers*, a narrative form which, according to Roland Barthes, is structurally 'related to the short story and the tale, and no longer to the novel.'³ Evading a direct English translation - 'human interest story,' 'oddy'- the *fait divers* was a rich source of literary and visual experimentation for the surrealists who appropriated the technique of listing scandalous and bizarre news items in order to unsettle consensual hierarchies of knowledge within the modern press. Mapping the 'sensitive outer edges of public opinion,' *fait divers* coverage of daily catastrophes and horrific crimes drew attention to 'the disturbing violence, accidents and irrational impulses below the surface of the everyday.'⁴ Within my process of recontextualisation, *Running Wild* is not only a component of 'insolent mass culture' which displays a 'flagrant disregard to cultural conventions and social proprieties,' but it also unpacks as a surrealist experiment in ideological unchaining or 'désenchaînement' whereby conventional thoughts and perspectives are ruptured by latent, unconscious forces.⁵

Furthermore, in the manner of Alain Robbe-Grillet's elusive criminal investigation *La Belle Captive* (1975) (which is illustrated with seventy-seven paintings by Magritte), *Running Wild* does not ask to be solved, for there is no definitive truth or reality to be recovered. Rather, this short text demands a process of readerly investigation which opens the transparent surfaces of contemporary history and culture up to the revealing powers of paradox and ambiguity. Just as Magritte suggested that Juve (the inspector of the Sûreté and arch-rival of Fantômas) would have to enter one of Fantômas's dreams and participate 'as one of its characters' if he hoped to ensnare the villain, so Ballard challenges us, the readers, to immerse ourselves in the deviant logics and emerging psychopathologies of the text.⁶ This process of going 'undercover' is not only important for confronting difficult and often elusive questions about agency, guilt and moral responsibility which *Running Wild* throws up. But it is also marks an integral and invariably disquieting process of self-reflection: to what extent are we, the readers, implicated in, or complicit with, the criminal horrors of contemporary history?

'These Children That Come at You With Knives': *Running Wild* and the Logics of Late Capitalism

I look at the things you do and I don't understand ... you say how bad, and even killers, your children are. You made your children what they are ... These children that come at you with



knives, they are your children. You taught them. I didn't teach them ... Is it my fault that your children do what you do? What about your children? You say there are just a few? There are many, many more, coming in the same direction. They are running in the streets – and they are coming right at you!

Charles Manson, Los Angeles Hall of Justice, November 19, 1970.⁷

Charles Manson's analysis of parent-child relationships echoes chillingly throughout Ballard's tale of mass murder. *Running Wild* is set in Pangbourne village estate, an exclusive gated-community situated within convenient reach of London and the M4. The 'newest' and 'most expensive ... of a number of similar estates in Berkshire,' Pangbourne estate boasts a landscape of security fences, state-of-the-art surveillance equipment, well-manicured lawns, and an equally well-heeled demographic of 'senior professionals – lawyers, stockbrokers, bankers – and their families' (*Running Wild*, 12).⁸ On the morning of 25 June, 1988, the estate's plush social fabric is rent by a mysterious massacre: all 32 adult residents have been murdered in their own homes, and their children (totalling 13 and aged between 8-17 years) have disappeared without a trace.

On the face of it, the process of investigation is headed and narrated by Dr Richard Greville, a forensic psychiatrist who is called in by anxious Home Office officials. Together with his assistant, Sergeant Payne, Greville fails, however, to see initially what the reader recognises almost immediately: namely that the Pangbourne mystery is a very clear case of parricide. It is out of this contest of perspectives – the reader pitched against the detective – that another process of narrative investigation emerges. Greville's perceptual obtuseness highlights what Michel Foucault, the historian of vision who also investigated and brought to public attention the parricidal crimes of Pierre Rivière in 1836, criticised as the intellectually immobilising quality of the self-evident.⁹ Although derived etymologically from the Latin word 'videre,' which means 'to see,' self-evidence is that which is accepted unseeingly and uncritically. The self-evident promotes, therefore, a myopia of sorts, a rigid and blinkered modality of seeing which is nourished by habituation and assumption. It is this delimiting social vision, with its attendant discursive structures and established hierarchies of knowledge, which Ballard encourages the reader to scrutinise and dismantle.

For a text in which perceptual acuity is paramount, *Running Wild* opens provocatively on a note of obfuscation:

From the Forensic Diaries of Dr Richard Greville, Deputy Psychiatric Adviser, Metropolitan Police

25 August 1988. Where to start? 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 programmes 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 (*RW*, 1).

In the manner of Alfred Jarry's *fait divers* writings for *Le Canard Sauvage*, Ballard holds the textualisation of historical reality up for critical scrutiny.¹⁰ Recent events at Pangbourne Village estate have been recuperated and reconfigured by the world's press to the extent that a media phenomenon – the Pangbourne Massacre – has been created. A collation of popular hypotheses (which range from 'International Terrorism' and 'Organised Crime' to 'Misdirected Military Exercise' (*RW*, 21-23), official statements and unofficial speculations, 'the Pangbourne Massacre' is a flagrant intertextual and intervisual space in which history, reality and knowledge have been recycled to the point of obscurity. Any notion of origins has been subsumed under a process of mediatisation which immerses the actual historical event within competing moments of surface repetition. As Jean Baudrillard notes, it is this '*universality of the news item* [le fait divers] in mass communication' which characterises contemporary knowledge networks. All political, historical and cultural information is 'received in the same – at once anodyne and miraculous – form of the news item. It is entirely actualised – i.e. dramatised in the spectacular mode – and entirely deactualised – i.e. distanced by the communication medium and reduced to signs.'¹¹ In the absence of epistemological depth and historical specificity, the atrocity of mass murder is refashioned into a reproducible yet wholly inaccessible event. Ironically, the 'Pangbourne Massacre' as media spectacle has become something of an historical blindspot.

At first glance, Greville's forensic diaries promise to puncture this prevailing climate of media fictions with a counter-narrative of empirical enquiry. A self-conscious framing device used commonly in detective and gothic fiction, the diary form functions conventionally to contain an 'inexplicable event' (*RW*, 13) within a rational and authoritative framework. As Greville's textual investigation unfolds, though, the reader soon realises that Ballard's framing device functions as a red herring. Indeed, Greville's forensic document is as promiscuous in form and meaning as the equivocal media discourses which cloud his vision. His diaries are composed, for instance, of brief narrative extracts (including a 'Reconstruction' and a 'Postscript') which boast various titles – '*The Missing Children*', '*Marion Miller, the First Hostage*', '*The Pangbourne Massacre: The Murderers Identified*' (*RW*, 44, 78). Reminiscent of newspaper headlines, these titles establish a (false) hierarchy of information which directs the reader to aspects of the enquiry which the author-detective deems to be salient (abduction and murder). Furthermore, the sensationalist impact of these typographically bold and emphatic titles sets the tone for a narrative which indulges in the kind of emotive verbal poetics that characterises much media discourse. Averting his eyes from 'files' of incriminating evidence – 'Extensive scuff-marks, bloody handprints and shoe impressions that match the children's known shoe sizes indicate that almost all the children were present at the scenes of their parents' murders' (*RW*, 18) – Greville



presents a profile of the children and their families which ignores the textual signatures, and which draws instead on a media-authored lexicon of victimisation, innocence and vulnerability. Seduced by the media's 'melancholy parade of murder and kidnap victims,' the detective ponders the loss of 'enlightened and loving parents' who were 'guiding their sons and daughters towards fulfilled and happy lives when they were cut down so tragically'; he tortures himself with recurrent thoughts of 'these orphaned children' and their 'desperate attempts to resist the kidnappers' (*RW*, 10-16).

Replete with recycled platitudes and well-worn phrases which frustrate the reader, Greville's response to the Pangbourne massacre gestures to a double logic embedded within the text. Firstly, Greville's diaries, which he is revising 'for publication' (*RW*, 3), are implicated within an invasive media-capitalist logic which is dependent upon the perpetuation of a certain ideological framework for its continued profits. The world's press, Ballard reminds us, have fetishised the Pangbourne children, transforming them into media merchandise. Carefully selected photographs of 'a group of thoughtful and pleasant adolescents smiling out of their school speech-day portraits and holiday snapshots' (*RW*, 17) have been selected by editorial powers in order to trigger fierce emotional responses in the reader. To rework an Orwellian axiom: all atrocities are newsworthy, but some, and especially those involving white, middle-class children, are more newsworthy than others. The national press's organisation of a 'marathon of manhunts' and of 'ransom funds, which received millions in public donations' (*RW*, 74, 46) has nourished a cultural psyche which seeks the illusion of agency in the face of utter disempowerment. In this context, however, agency can never be anything more than the act of buying a newspaper or, in Greville's case, the act of writing a text which will merely extend the burgeoning library of Pangbourne fictions and which will, in turn, cultivate the media-capitalist process.

Greville's conditioned reader-response also gestures to a prevailing cultural logic of denial. As his list of *Bizarre Theories* on the Pangbourne murders reveals, the detective's myopia is not idiosyncratic, rather it is symptomatic of a wider cultural condition:

(9) *Bizarre Theories*

There remain a few outlandish possibilities.

- (a) A unit of Soviet Spetsnaz commandos, targeted on the residential quarters of the NATO headquarters staff at Northwood, received an incorrect war alert order and were parachuted by error into the Pangbourne estate during the night of 24 June. They slaughtered the adult residents, assuming they were senior military personnel, then realised their error and abducted the children.
- (b) An experimental nerve-gas projectile fell from an RAF or USAF military aircraft into the Pangbourne area and deranged a group of nearby residents who committed the murders. They then destroyed all traces of the children before suffering retroactive amnesia that erased any memory of the crime. Unaware of the murders they carried out, they have now returned to ordinary domestic life.



- (c) The murdered residents and their children were, unknown to themselves, deep-cover agents of a foreign power. Their mission accomplished, the parents were 'instructed' to murder each other, and the children disappeared into the cellars of the foreign embassy before being spirited abroad.
- (d) The parents were murdered by visitors from outer space seeking young human specimens.
- (e) The parents were murdered by their own children (*RW*, 24-25).

Running Wild is full of very funny lists like this which collapse into cliché or absurdity. I disagree with Andrzej Gasiorek's flat assertion, therefore, that 'there is nothing funny about *Running Wild*.'¹² Ballard's *fait divers* is, in contrast, an audacious experiment in surrealist black humour which (in the tradition of André Breton, Jarry, Guillaume Apollinaire and Jean Genet) employs comedy as a mobilising and eruptive force. A defense 'against the objective reality of the external world, and a perversion of its representation,' *humour noir* is a site of critical and imaginative resistance, the political dimensions of which were recognised and exploited by the surrealists.¹³ The po-faced tone with which Greville delivers his hypotheses, for instance, is undercut radically and ironically by the ridiculousness of their contents – botched terrorist activity, a bio-chemical accident, retroactive amnesia, psychological de-patterning (brainwashing) and alien abduction. Moreover, Greville's incredulous denigration of 'parricide' to the most 'outlandish' of possibilities creates a comedic and critical jolt which, moving beyond the detective's obtuseness, alerts the reader to a latent cultural logic which also refuses to see 'the obvious' (*RW*, 3). On a literal and symbolic level, parricide is such an affront to patriarchal authority, to conventional notions of 'the family' and to social propriety that the dominant cultural psyche buries unpalatable truths beneath the convenience of stereotype. 'Too much emotional capital had,' after all, 'been invested in the notion of thirteen orphaned children' (*RW*, 79). Following Sigmund Freud's reading of jokes as forms of psychological effectiveness which 'set themselves up against an inhibiting and restricting power – which is now the critical judgement,' Ballard's *fait divers* employs the convulsive energies of surrealist black humour as a means of exposing and dismantling a prevailing social consciousness which flaunts a reified ideological process of semblance rather than substance.¹⁴

Visions of Murder: *Running Wild* and the 'Papin' and Nozières affairs

Running Wild is a palimpsest of real and imagined terror. When Greville eventually identifies the Pangbourne children as the murderers, for instance, he invites comparison with the 'Hungerford' massacre, 'the Baader-Meinhof gang, the French Action Directe or the Italian Red Brigades,' 'the Jonestown massacre,' and the Manson 'Family' (*RW*, 19, 22, 81, 84.). For my reading of Ballard's tale of parricide, though, it is pertinent at this stage to introduce two more murderous intertexts which



scandalised 1930s France, and which provided the surrealists with a source of intellectual and creative enquiry.

In February 1933, Christine and Léa Papin murdered their mistress, Mme Lancelin and her daughter, Geneviève, in a shocking display of domestic violence. Armed with a hammer, a kitchen-knife and a pewter-jug, the Papin sisters bludgeoned their mistresses, before mutilating their battered bodies. The suggestion (which would later come from psychoanalytical case studies) that the sisters' heinous crime was of an oedipal nature was born out of one particularly gruesome detail: the servants had torn out their victims' eyes whilst they were still alive and with their bare hands.¹⁵ If the Parisian bourgeoisie were shocked by the action of servants 'rising up to attack the citadel of bourgeois privilege,' then they were soon to witness an unprecedented threat which 'came from within the very ranks of the respectable classes.'¹⁶ During the trial of the Papin sisters, Violette Nozières was arrested for the murder (by poison) of her father and for the attempted murder of her mother. Nozières's claims that she had been the victim of a sexually abusive father incited accusations of 'double-parricide' from an outraged public. Not content with killing her father, this 'vile' and 'promiscuous' daughter also wanted to sully his memory.¹⁷

For the surrealists, the 'Papin' and 'Nozières' cases possessed a double resonance. Firstly, these young assassins joined the list of 'surrealist anti-heroines', keeping company with, amongst others, Germaine Berton, who assassinated Maurice Plateau, the 'Action Française' leader in 1923, and to whom the surrealists paid homage in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924). In this visual collage a central image of Berton is surrounded by photographs of the surrealists and their progenitors (including Freud). The text at the bottom of the page reads, 'It is woman who casts the biggest shadow or projects the greatest light in our dreams.'¹⁸ Within the surrealist imagination, Berton, Nozières and the Papin sisters had retaliated poetically rather than criminally against the repressive social and political order. André Breton especially felt a 'visceral commitment' to Violette Nozières's case, believing 'that Monsieur Nozières, not his daughter, had been the guilty party.' Even more important, for Breton, 'was the bad light in which this affair seemed to put the bourgeois family institution.' For the surrealist artist, 'supporting Violette Nozières meant spitting in the face of the parents he still resented.'¹⁹

The second source of fascination for the surrealists lay in the prevailing textual response to the women's transgressions. In the aftermath of the murders a miscellany of newspaper articles, medico-legal commentaries and psychoanalytical case studies emerged which tried, in varying ways, to locate these violent crimes within a socio-economic context. *Humanité* ran a series of newspaper articles – 'Christine and Léa Papin Give the Reasons Why they Mortally Beat Their Mistresses' and 'The Murderesses of Le Mans Are the Victims of Exploitation and Servitude' – which re-presented the case within a narrative of material deprivation.²⁰ As Jonathan Eburne points out, it was precisely the 'challenge to the possibility of explaining, or justifying such violence as something fully conscious' that made the Papin and Nozières affairs so 'significant to surrealist political thought.'²¹ Less interested in



class or political motives, the surrealists were more fascinated by the question of what ‘such an outburst of abject violence’ revealed about ‘motive, desire and breaches in the basic structure of every day reality.’²²

The surrealists responded to the Papin and Nozières affairs with characteristic imagination. In 1933 Breton collaborated with sixteen other artists (including Paul Eluard, René Magritte, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Hans Arp, Salvador Dalí, E.L.T. Messens) on the *fait divers*, *Violette Nozières*. A collection of poetry, prose, illustrations and photographs, this surrealist work asserted ‘the legitimacy of Nozières’s act as a strike for freedom, linking her parricide with a liberation from an economy of rape (the “viol” encoded in “Violette”) and from the repressive values of petit-bourgeois family life.’²³ In constructing their textual response to the case, the surrealists recycled certain elements from the *fait divers* rubric: press photographs were built into collages, circumstantial details (such as Monsieur Nozières’ pornography collection) appropriated from news reports were written provocatively into poems.²⁴ Counter to the linearity of conventional crime narratives, *Violette Nozières* presented a series of unstable and equivocal narrative fragments which teased the rigidity of ratiocinative thought with the playfulness of associative anticipation.



Figure 1: The Papin sisters, 'before' and 'after,' *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, 1933.

The surrealists rejoined official explanations of the Papin affair with equal insolence. Two photographs of the sisters, ‘before’ and ‘after,’ were published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* with the short text: ‘They emerged fully armed from a song by Maldoror’ (1933) [fig. 1]. Gesturing to the gratuitous evil of Comte de Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868), Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret’s caption works contingently with the image in order to open analyses of



the Papin affair up to irrational forces.²⁵ At first glance, the images invite a straightforward reading of radical transformation: docile submission has been corrupted somehow into diabolical subversion. Yet, when the images are reconsidered in conjunction with the text, a process of verbal and visual juxtaposition is initiated which invites further questioning: are the manifest signs of violence (in the second image) not also present, though latent, in the first?²⁶ Calling for a re-examination of the transparency of the surface image, the surrealist *fait divers* accentuated the enigmatic, psychological depths of the Papin affair which the majority of media and medical commentators flattened into statements of motive and causality.

Ballard similarly incorporates visual images into his *fait divers* in order to excavate invisible social and psychological dimensions of the Pangbourne massacre. Although *Running Wild* is commonly known as a text-only work, it was published originally as an illustrated 'novella,' featuring six illustrations by Janet Woolley. Due presumably to financial restrictions, these visuals have fallen out of subsequent editions, but here I want to restore them to the critical frame [figs. 2 and 3]. In the first instance, it is worth noting how the colour has been drained from Woolley's images. Although the reasons for using black and white copies of original colour prints (the book cover features a colour portrait of the thirteen child assassins) may, again, be financial, the presence of these monochrome plates is nevertheless open to figurative interpretation. Just as the 'Police Video' of Pangbourne Village uses a 'minimalist style of camera-work' which 'exactly suits the subject matter, the shadowless summer sunlight and the almost blank façades of the expensive houses – everything is strangely blanched, drained of all emotion' (*RW*, 4), so Woolley's illustrations present chilling visions of murder.

Both illustrations return us, the readers, to the scenes of the crime, thus transforming the reading process into an act of witnessing. Admittedly, the initial impact of these illustrations on the reader is more comical than horrific. Resembling pictures from a comic-book or newspaper, Woolley's drawings contrast markedly with Ballard's psychologically realist prose. Indeed, the artist's use of perspective coats these murder scenes with a veneer of innocence and harmlessness so that, at first glance, the diminutive assassins do not appear to pose any real threat. But appearances are clearly deceptive in *Running Wild*, and as the reader/witness looks more closely at these scenes, so our initial sense of distance breaks down. Against expectation, the tiny guns (they are smaller than Mrs Reade's earrings and hairclip) which enter the visual frame are not, as perhaps first thought, toy pistols [fig. 2]. They are weapons of execution. The horrific dimension of Mr and Mrs Reade's murder lies less in the method of assassination, however, and more in the fact that this heinous crime could only be executed so effectively and efficiently through a violation of love and trust: 'both have been shot by assailants who have crept so close to them that the cutlery beside their napkins is undisturbed' (*RW*, 9). As this snapshot of familial togetherness conveys, intimacy can also be the harbinger of death.





Figure 2: Janet Woolley, illustration for Ballard's *Running Wild*, 1988.

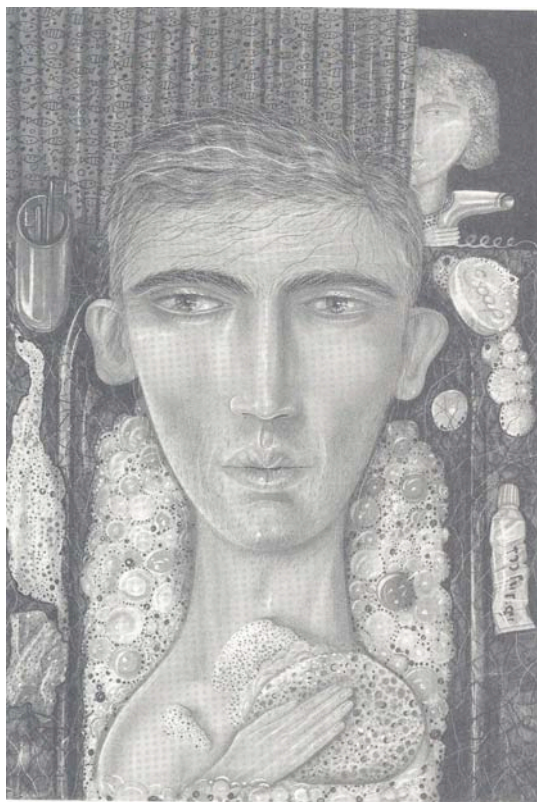


Figure 3: Janet Woolley, illustration for Ballard's *Running Wild*, 1988.



In mood, tone and perspective, fig. 3 is equally unnerving. The faces of the soon-to-be victim and the assassin are blank and emotionless; father and daughter return the reader's gaze unflinchingly. Contradicting Greville's initial speculations on the psychological profile of the killers, Mr Miller is not, we see, murdered by a 'deranged loner,' a 'crazed gunman' or a 'thrill killer' (*RW*, 20). He is assassinated, instead, in the privacy of his own bathtub by Marion Miller, his eight year-old daughter, and by Robin Miller, his thirteen year old son, who is concealed from view. The literal (Mr Miller is 'well over six feet tall, a former amateur boxer,' *RW*, 55) and symbolic enormity of the children's crime is conveyed through disproportion; the father figure looms large in the foreground, unaware of the oedipal revolt emerging from behind the shower curtain. Moreover, the depiction of oversized objects – a sponge, a bar of soap, a tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush holder and brushes (which are as big as, or bigger, than Marion) – disorients the reader/witness to the extent that we are encouraged to reassess the function of these uncanny objects. Reminiscent of Magritte's and Paul Nougé's *Homage aux Soeurs Papins* (1934), in which a jug is deliberately misplaced on the floor in order to accentuate its unexpected place within a 'litany of household torture devices used in the Papin affair,' Ballard's *fait divers* employs the surrealist technique of *dépaysement* in order to expose and explore an invisible logic of violence which resides below the unassuming surface of the quotidian.²⁷ Holding a hairdryer, 'with a pistol grip' (*RW*, 53), Marion Miller will drop the household weapon into her father's bathwater. Then Robin Miller will emerge from the adjacent bedroom and stab his 'stunned' father with a 'kitchen knife' (*RW*, 54). Within this process of re-contextualisation, the means for exacting violence and cruelty are never far from reach.

Revealing what Barthes terms 'a false innocence of objects; the object hides behind its inertia as thing, but only to emit an even stronger causal force, which may derive from itself or elsewhere,' *Running Wild* calls for an investigative reading process which is aleatoric and contingent.²⁸ The Pangbourne mystery is not 'constituted by a quantitatively accumulated force, but rather by a mobile energy, active in small doses.'²⁹ Greville's meticulous accumulation of forensic evidence – the parents' reading lists, 'an A-Z of once modish names from Althusser and Barthes to Husserl and Perls'; displays of 'electronic affection,' such as 'Well done Jeremy!' which intrude across the children's computer screens; a 'mutilated copy of Jean Piaget's classic text on the rearing of children' (*RW*, 35, 36, 47) – remains, therefore, inconsequential to the investigative process proper. Although our myopic detective finally accepts the 'strange logic' of parricide, he remains reluctant to immerse himself in its complex psychopathologies. Subsequently, he forges an alternative, yet still rational and coherent narrative, out of a miscellany of information:

By a grim paradox, the instrument of the parents' deaths was the devoted and caring regime which they had instituted at Pangbourne village. The children had been brainwashed, by the unlimited tolerance and understanding that had erased all freedom and all trace of emotion ...



Altogether, the children existed in a state closely akin to sensory deprivation ... The same schizophrenic detachment from reality can be seen in the members of the Manson gang, in Mark Chapman and Lee Harvey Oswald, and in the guards at the Nazi death-camps. One has no sympathy for Manson and the others – an element of choice existed for them all – but the Pangbourne children had no choice. Unable to express their emotions or respond to those of the people around them, suffocated under a mantle of praise and encouragement, they were trapped for ever within a perfect universe. In a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom (*RW*, 82-84).

In an ironic intertextual reversal of materialist readings of the Papin affair, Greville argues that the Pangbourne massacre is an expression of imposed emotional and material excess. The murderers, within this formulation, are victims of atomisation, the death of the imagination, the rationalisation of desire, alienation and affectlessness. Echoing Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's anti-Enlightenment proposition, 'Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,' it is tempting to accept Greville's revised logic at face value.³⁰ Indeed, in his review of *Running Wild*, James Marcus was so convinced by Greville's final analyses that he questioned the efficacy of Ballard's text as a social critique on the basis of them: 'The assumptions *Running Wild* is supposed to challenge,' he criticised, 'such as the fairy-tale version of family happiness, haven't been widely accepted for decades.'³¹ Seduced by the textual surface, Marcus does not read *Running Wild* beyond what he sees as the limits of its Enlightenment critique. Consequently this myopic critic, like the detective, fails to see the bigger picture.

I agree with Dennis Foster and Andrzej Gasiorek when they observe that Greville's concluding thesis is yet another comfortable delusion which allows society to avert its eyes from further offensive truths.³² More than a rebellion against a coercive regime of tolerance, the Pangbourne massacre is also this 'social order's most perfect expression.'³³ Irreducible to one cause, the Pangbourne massacre should be read within a network of complex and contradictory logics at work within late capitalist society. The meticulously planned and executed killings (which took place within 'ten minutes') would not have been possible, for instance, without either the vast network of surveillance and security equipment on the estate, or the parents' own ruthless systems of observation – 'Scarcely a minute of the children's lives had not been intelligently planned' (*RW*, 32). Equally, the killers' escape in blood-stained clothes could only have gone unnoticed in a community blinded by social disconnection – no one would have noticed 'a party of jogging teenagers, while the drying blood would soon have resembled mud-splashes of an arduous obstacle race' (*RW*, 103).

Furthermore, Greville's revised yet interminably reductive reading of events conceals another manifestation of the text's prevailing logic of denial. Comparisons cannot be made, he insists, between the morally reprehensible crimes of Manson, Chapman, Oswald and Hitler, and the Pangbourne children's cries for 'freedom.' Persistently short-sighted in its scope and emotive in its rhetorical



expression, Greville's theory is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, his propensity to consider historical atrocities collectively and relatively demonstrates an uncritical historico-cultural perspective which collapses complex knowledges and psychopathologies into ready-made and consumable profiles. Secondly, by divesting the children from any sense of agency, Greville exercises a doubly-repressive logic which seals the Pangbourne mystery off from both conscious and unconscious activity. Ironically, though, the detective's palatable explanations actually raise a number of unpalatable questions about history, agency and moral responsibility which the reader cannot ignore: if the children 'had no choice,' then to what extent is Manson's moral indictment of a capitalist society that produced and nurtured his psychopathology justified, albeit unwittingly, by Greville's analyses? What kinds of ethical tensions does this throw up for the reader? And, what about the possibility that the children acted randomly, and without motive. Greville considers this difficult proposition only to dismiss, and by extension contain, it within a narrative of insanity. But can we shut down the unconscious energies of 'the Pangbourne massacre' so readily?

Uncertainty and ambiguity are clearly anathema to the myopic detective. Just as the authorities invest in a clean-up operation which will fill in 'the deep ruts left in the finely trimmed grass' and thus restore 'the once-immaculate surface' of the Pangbourne estate (*RW*, 5), so Greville's closing remarks attempt to contain the murders within a narrative which society will accept uncritically and subsequently forget. Yet the challenges and complexities of *Running Wild* ask that we, as readers, resist convenient surface narratives and immerse ourselves instead in the text's poetics of ambiguity. Despite Greville's repeated efforts, the Pangbourne mystery remains, and indeed has to remain unsolved. For it is the function of the *fait divers* to preserve 'at the heart of contemporary society an ambiguity of the rational and the irrational, of the intelligible and the unfathomable.'³⁴ It is the evocation of mystery, rather than the revelation of it which Ballard's surreal detective fiction demands.

¹ The written series *Fantômas* was composed by Pierre Souvestre and Marcell Alain between 1912 and 1914. Louis Feuillade's serialisation of *Fantômas* (1913-14) thrilled and disturbed a cinematic audience which included Apollinaire (*Fantômas* was his favourite film); Suzi Gablik, *Magritte*, London 1970, 41-65.

² Jacques Meuris, *Magritte 1898-1967*, Cologne 1998, 37.

³ Roland Barthes, 'Structure of the *Fait-Divers*', in *Critical Essays*, translated from the French by Richard Howard, Evanston 1972, 185-195, 187.

⁴ Barthes, *Critical Essays*, 70.

⁵ Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Poplar Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2000, 3-5.



⁶ In his own description of Juve, Magritte concludes that 'Juve has failed again this time. One means remains for him to achieve his end: Juve will have to get into one of Fantômas's dreams – he will try to take part as one of its characters.' René Magritte, *Distances* (March 1928), cited in Gablik, *Magritte*, 48.

⁷ Charles Manson reprinted in Vincent Bugliosi (with Kurt Gentry), *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*, New York 1975, 524-31.

⁸ All quotations are from the 1997 Flamingo edition of *Running Wild*, London 1997. Hereafter abbreviated to *RW*.

⁹ Michel Foucault, ed., *I, Pierre Riviere, having slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother* Harmondsworth 1978.

¹⁰ *Le Canard Sauvage* was a weekly illustrated review dedicated to the *fait divers* which ran from March-October 1903. See David Walker, *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the 'Fait Divers'*, Oxford 1995, 20-21.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London 1998, 37. Emphasis in original.

¹² Andrzej Gasiorek, *J.G Ballard*, Manchester 2005, 143.

¹³ In *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, Aragon wrote that in 1931 Lewis Carroll's work was written at the same time as the English massacres in Ireland. He added that *Les Chants de Maldoror* and *Une saison en enfer* were written in the same decade, suggesting that we make the connection with the crushing of the Commune. Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939) was also published in the face of Fascist ascendancy in Europe. Breton perceived humour 'as a powerful force for revolt, as the origin of an avalanche, the political repercussions of which could go on indefinitely,' Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. Vivien Folkenflik, New York 1990, 90-91.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, edited by James Strachey, New York 1960, 162.

¹⁵ Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader, *The Papin Sisters*, Oxford 2001, 5.

¹⁶ David H. Walker, *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the 'Fait Divers'*, 94.

¹⁷ For a fascinating, in-depth analysis of the Nozières case see Jonathan P. Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania 2002, 280-300.

¹⁸ Translated and reprinted in Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism and Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, New Haven and London, 1993, 177.

¹⁹ Mark Pollizotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, New York 1995, 393.

²⁰ Jonathan P. Eburne, 'Surrealism Noir,' in Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss, eds, *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, Aldershot, 2003, 91-110, 97.

²¹ Eburne, 'Surrealism Noir,' 101.

²² Eburne, 'Surrealism Noir,' 95.

²³ Eburne, *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*, 285.

²⁴ David H. Walker, *Outrage and Insight*, 77.

²⁵ Eluard and Péret published their own series of *fait divers* called 'Revue de la Presse' (Reviews of the Press) in the May 1933 double issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*. 'Revue de la Presse' is translated and reprinted in Eburne's essay, 'Surrealism Noir,' 98.

²⁶ I am following Eburne's in-depth analysis of the double portrait of Christine and Léa Papin, 'Surrealism Noir,' 91-93.



²⁷ Eburne, 'Surrealism Noir,' 109.

²⁸ Barthes, 'The Structure of the *Fait Divers*,' 191.

²⁹ Barthes, 'The Structure of the *Fait Divers*,' 190

³⁰ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, London 1944; 1997, 3.

³¹ James Marcus, 'In Short,' *New York Times Book Review*, December 17 1989, 19.

³² Dennis A. Foster, 'J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority,' *PMIA*, May 1993, 519-32, 523 and Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, 147.

³³ Gasiorek, *J.G. Ballard*, 147.

³⁴ Barthes, 'Structure of the *Fait Divers*,' 194.

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