Trouble in paradise: Crime and extreme capitalism in J. G. Ballard’s *Super-Cannes*

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ABSTRACT

The gated community of Eden-Olympia in J. G. Ballard’s *Super-Cannes* figures forms of institutionalized and controlled violence and crime, propelled by an extreme kind of capitalism. The present article analyzes Ballard’s treatment and description of space in order to elicit the form of tacit control of Eden-Olympia’s inhabitants, which is effected by way of architecture and the way space is organized.

Keywords: Space; Crime; Simulacrum

J. G. Ballard’s 2000 novel *Super-Cannes* posits a curious view of the nature of crime. In a gated community called Eden-Olympia, a sort of European Silicon Valley, just outside of Cannes, France, the future is already here. In an attempt to “hothouse the future” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 15), psychiatrist Wilder Penrose, an “amiable Prospero” or “the psychopomp who steered our darkest dreams towards the daylight” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 3) supplements the system of modern living with ubiquitous security and technology with “healthy” doses of programmed violence and psychopathology. Within Penrose’s therapy program, some acts of violence are needed to preserve the mental sanity of the executives at Eden-Olympia. In order to foster a truly sane and healthy society, these “small” deviations must be allowed, not constituting in any way crimes but safe outlets for repressed emotions that might hamper a balanced life. The pediatrician David Greenwood, however, set out to expose the perverse scheme, and ended up being executed as the author of the biggest crime in the history of the community. Greenwood, the man who tried to kill Penrose and his associates, hovers in the narrative like a ghost, a man who the protagonist, Paul Sinclair, is made to step on his shoes from the very beginning.

The novel is well-set in the genre of detective or crime fiction, wearing the influence of Raymond Chandler on its sleeve with the obligatory femme fatale – played by Greenwood’s former lover, Frances Baring – and the gradual uncovering of the moral degradation of a specific group, as well as the detective getting himself tangled up in the mystery as he tries to solve it. The fateful events with Greenwood have already taken place.
when Sinclair and his wife Jane arrive at Eden-Olympia. Whereas Jane occupies the pediatrician position left by Greenwood, Sinclair, recovering from a plane crash, spends most of the day alone in Greenwood’s house, where they now live. Without work in a world where work is all there is, Sinclair finds himself fascinated with the mystery of Greenwood and his motives, who effectively haunts the exterior space of his house and the interior space of his mind: “It occurred to me that three of us would sleep together in this large and comfortable bed, until I could persuade David to step out of my mind and disappear for ever down the white staircase of this dreaming villa” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 35). Greenwood having also been a former lover of Jane, a dimension of competitive sexuality is added to his obsession, as he questions the reasons of his own interest with the dead man.

The atmosphere of Eden-Olympia is governed by the rhythms of work, and nothing else. The demands and pleasures of the body have no place in it, and is, as Penrose describes, “an obedient coolie, to be fed and hosed down, and given just enough sexual freedom to sedate itself” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 17), akin to what Michel Foucault described as the “docile body,” bodies that not only do what we want but do it precisely in the way that we want (FOUCAULT, 2000, p. 138). Here technology has taken the place of any kind of social exchange, rendering it unnecessary and counterproductive.

Intimacy and neighborliness were not features of everyday life at Eden-Olympia. An invisible infrastructure took the place of traditional civic virtues. At Eden-Olympia there were no parking problems, no fear of burglars or purse-snatchers, no rapes or muggings. The top-drawer professionals no longer needed to devote a moment’s thought to each other, and had dispensed with the checks and balances of community life. There were no town councils or magistrates’ courts, no citizens’ advice bureaux. Civility and polity were designed into Eden-Olympia, in the same way that mathematics, aesthetics and an entire geopolitical world-view were designed into the Parthenon and the Boeing 747. Representative democracy had been replaced by the surveillance camera and the private police force. (BALLARD, 2006, p. 38)

Ethical issues play no part in the citizen’s notions of civility at all, it is “designed,” or even enforced in the inhabitants by the way their space is organized. This kind of diffuse and wide control embedded in space is typical of prisons rather than paradisiacal residential areas, akin to what Michel Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish*. Total control is enforced not by brutal physical punishment, he argues, but the much more intrusive psychological control, demanding inner transformation and conversion to a new way of thinking, conditioning minds and bodies to conform with the dictum that “the soul is the prison of the body” (FOUCAULT,
The inhabitants’ identity is also normalized, effacing their particular characteristics and making them to behave as behaviorist puppets or cogs in a machine. There is no need for representative democracy or town councils, as Ballard puts it, because there is no common identity, as there is no sense of community. All that remains is a skewed sense of individuality, but which is geared towards the professional life.

Left to his own devices, clearly a fish out of water, Sinclair becomes obsessed with Greenwood and with the help of a security officer, Halder, sets to find out the obscured details of Greenwood’s breakdown. In the course of his investigation, he learns that the official account of the events have been manipulated by the Eden-Olympia management. What seemed clearly an act of madness on the part of Greenwood, as Penrose pointed out, “a deep psychosis ... a profound crisis going back to his childhood” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 28) with no clear motivation, starts to become meaningful for Sinclair, as if Greenwood rebelled against the establishment of Eden-Olympia. This comes at the realization of a number of gaps in official account of the facts when compared to Sinclair’s own investigation with Halder and interrogation of people with whom Greenwood had contact outside Eden-Olympia.

An editorial in Le Monde speculated that the contrast between the worldly power of Eden-Olympia and the deprived lives of the Arab immigrants in Cannes La Bocca had driven Greenwood into a frenzy of frustration, a blind rage at inequalities between the first and third worlds. The murders were part political manifesto, so the newspaper believed, and part existential scream. (BALLARD, 2006, p. 11)

This version of the truth is only partly right, a facile interpretation of the facts to serve the political interests of Eden-Olympia and France and to protect Greenwood’s reputation. By acknowledging the social inequity in the area and Greenwood’s preoccupation with it, the editorial elects him as a martyr for politically correct causes, not even as the madman he is believed to be inside the gates of Eden-Olympia.

This distorted vision of reality is a central theme in the novel, with its numerous allusions to Lewis Carroll and the Alice books, which Greenwood had a library of. Many times Sinclair imagines himself going “down the rabbit-hole” or “through the looking-glass” into the unreal and simulated world of Eden-Olympia, as out of touch with reality as Carroll’s fantasies. Part of it involves the fact that many of its elements, including security (and its police force) are only for show, creating an illusion. Pascal Zander, the head of security,
assures Sinclair that there is “no crime at Eden-Olympia [. . .] the whole concept of criminality is unknown here. At Eden-Olympia we are self-policing [. . .] Honesty is a designed-in feature, along with free parking and clean air. Our guards are for show, like the guides at Euro-Disney” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 83). Real crime is to be found nearby, however, in Nice, Cannes La Bocca, where these acts of “robbery, prostitution, drug-dealing ... seem [to them] almost folkloric, subsidized by the municipality for the entertainment of tourists” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 84). People feel safe as long as there are security cameras and guards around, even if they are not turned on or properly trained. The appearance of orderliness counts more than its effectiveness upon contingency, especially if no contingent situation ever occurs. Greenwood, of course, put these to the test and proved that the simulacrum of security of Eden-Olympia did not work, and that is why he partly succeeded.

In the course of his investigation, Sinclair observes that in some photos taken of the bodies Greenwood’s victims, they were taking part in clumsy and obvious illegal activities, such as drug dealing and consumption. These, he later finds out, are part of the same illusion of Eden-Olympia, as these executives were playing the parts of flamboyant drug dealers and sexual victims, enacting B-movies for the security cameras and other unseen ones. This, along with the so-called *ratissages* in which groups of executives dressed in bowling jackets attack Arab immigrants in the outskirts of Eden-Olympia or steal fur coats from the set of a filming Japanese commercial, are part of the same illusion. These are sometimes even enacted for the benefit of Sinclair, who observes them in vantage points, and their videos are played back to him by Penrose. Later he learns this is all part of a therapy program envisioned by Penrose, who explains that “the health of Eden-Olympia is under constant threat” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 251). Without his therapy program, the executives find themselves developing small illnesses and debilitating amounts of stress described as “an inability to rest the mind, to find time for reflection and recreation,” made the more apparent because of the very characteristics that make Eden-Olympia such an “intelligent city” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 3). Where a detached and machine-like behavior is the norm, madness becomes a sort of cure. “Our problem is not that many people are insane, but too few [. . .] Small doses of insanity are the only solution. Their own psychopathy is all that can rescue these people” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 251), explains Penrose, whose discourse is so enticing and persuasive it manages to involve Sinclair, who, while morally disgusted by the *ratissages*, is intellectually interested in
Penrose’s ideas and what they do to his own psyche:

The display of brutality had unsettled me [. . .] A dormant part of my mind had been aroused – not by the cruelty, which I detested, but by the discovery that Eden-Olympia offered more to its residents than what met the visitor’s gaze. Over the swimming pools and manicured lawns seemed to hover a dream of violence. (BALLARD, 2006, p. 75)

Part of the fascination Ballard’s text holds to the reader is this realization that in a benumbed existence, the “dream of violence” that hovers just beyond the surface of everyday life promises elation and excitement. Much of the allure of detective fiction, and all fiction in general, is their capability to transport the reader “down the rabbit-hole” into a world of vicarious experience of forbidden sensations and feelings. This idea is taken to an extreme in its technological application in the reality of Eden-Olympia and problematized when it is not just an intellectual exercise but involves real moral questions, such as in the *ratissages*.

Crime, according to Émile Durkheim, is a perfectly normal aspect of social life, an integral art of all healthy societies (DURKHEIM, 1964, p. 45). A society possesses a “collective conscience,” consisting of a number of social values, and an act is criminal when it breaks deeply held aspects of this “collective conscience.” If an act does not “shock” the conscience, it is not a crime (DURKHEIM, 1964, p. 51). This implicates that an act may not be criminal, even if goes against moral values, if it escapes the conscience -- something that happens in communities such as Eden-Olympia where crime has lost its power to subvert and shock and has effectively become invisible. When ideology has the power to make such acts imperceptible, it can control the population at will, because they will be unaware of any kind of manipulation.

The administrative headquarters of Eden-Olympia displayed an almost imperial grandeur, with its classical pilasters rising to a stylized post-modern pediment. This was the first office building to be constructed at the business park, but after a bombastic overture the architecture that followed was late modernist in the most minimal and self-effacing way, a machine above all for thinking in. (BALLARD, 2006, p. 191)

Here Eden-Olympia reveals its fascist tendencies at its core: the first building and moral center betrays the tacit domination of the rest of the city. Penrose also slips a few fascistic ideas when explaining his program: “Psychopathy is its own most potent cure, and has been throughout history. At times it grips entire nations in a vast therapeutic spasm. No drug has ever been more potent” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 251). Ultimately, this is what a state-wide,
invisible manipulation -- even one dictated by capitalism -- will turn into, a totalitarian state in which the moral order is inverted, the madmen involved in random acts of violence, drug and sex trafficking do it to preserve their sanity. The freaks are Greenwood and his follower Sinclair in their “crazed” rebellion.

Eden-Olympia, an “ideas laboratory for the new millennium” is a place beyond morality, explains Penrose. In his rationale, the old morality belonged to a cruder stage of human development. It had to cope with packs of hunter-scavengers who’d only just left the Serengeti plain. The first religions were forced to deal with barely socialized primates who’d tear each other’s arms off given half a chance. Since they couldn’t rely on self-control they needed ethical taboos to do it for them. (BALLARD, 2006, p. 95)

What Penrose sought to create with the therapy program is to discover this new morality, one dictated not by the rules of jungle, atavistic impulses or ancient religions but by the gaze of the security camera and the speed limits of superhighways. “Unless you own a Ferrari, pressing the accelerator is not a moral decision [...] We can rely on [the maker’s] judgment, and that leaves us free to get on with the rest of our lives. We’ve achieved real freedom, the freedom from morality” (BALLARD, 2006, p. 95). It is no wonder, therefore, that it turns out that Sinclair has been inserted into Eden-Olympia in Greenwood’s house precisely to make him obsessed with its previous occupant. To put him in Greenwood’s space, infusing him with his preoccupations is their way of using Sinclair as a behaviorist puppet, their way of conducting an experiment to find out why Greenwood broke down in the first place. Sinclair’s detective work and awakening to the moral corruption of Eden-Olympia is not an act of self, but part of the system, proving once and for all that there is no escaping the networks of control. The book closes with Sinclair planning to continue Greenwood’s plan to assassinate Penrose and expose Eden-Olympia, but it is clear that he has gone way too deep into the rabbit-hole and the system has engulfed him: he had partaken of the ratissages and had become close to Penrose. Moreover, his rebellion would be a crime, just as Greenwood’s, and Eden-Olympia would do anything to cover it up as another madman on the loose.

Super-Cannes is an indictment of projects of modern living that efface identity, social exchanges and moral decisions. In Eden-Olympia morality is designed and embedded in the landscape, spaces projected for an invisible control of people, such as airports, highways,
shopping malls and other sites of extreme neutrality. Ballard warns us that their neutrality is only apparent and hides “a dream of violence” and the seed for a new, more insidious form of totalitarianism. It is important to be aware of the mechanisms of control to see beyond the illusion and prevent such a dire future from taking place.
Bibliografia


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