

## MODERNITY'S SIDE EFFECTS: BOREDOM AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY IN J.G. BALLARD'S *COCAINE NIGHTS*

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### Abstract

James Graham Ballard stands out as a speculative author, sometimes also classified as a science fiction author, who distorts the quotidian scenes from his own and the reader's environment and uses them as raw material for his dystopic scenarios. The settings he chooses for his works are usually theme parks, luxury residences, highways, shopping malls and holiday resorts which are spaces that popped out and proliferated in number especially after the Second World War. Written in 1966, *Cocaine Nights* sustains the Ballardian tradition in which the spaces of the new middle class are dystopified. Converging with the detective fiction tradition, *Cocaine Nights* presents a distorted image of the holiday resorts to the reader.

The novel deals with a holiday resort rife with lawlessness and psychopathological behaviour in the south of Spain. Charles Prentice, who arrives in the region after learning that his brother has been arrested for arson and murder, aims to solve the mystery, only to find that there is a logic of lawlessness governing the life in the holiday resort. The kind of community in question is quite "Ballardian" in that it consists of an affluent milieu of society that casts aside the issues of survival and has nothing to do. This paper aims to examine the effects of financial affluence and boredom on the lawlessness presented in *Cocaine Nights*.

**Keywords:** J. G. Ballard, Boredom, Holiday Resorts, Psychopathology, Lawlessness.

## MODERNİTENİN YAN ETKİLERİ: J. G. BALLARD'IN *COCAINE NIGHTS* ROMANINDA CAN SIKINTISI VE PSİKOPATOLOJİ

### Öz

Kimi zaman bir bilim kurgu yazarı olarak da sınıflandırılan James Graham Ballard, kendi çevresinden ve okurun çevresinden gündelik sahneleri çarpıtan ve bunları distopik senaryoları için bir hammadde olarak kullanan spekülâtif bir yazar olarak ön plana çıkar. Eserleri için seçtiği yerler özellikle İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrasında ortaya çıkıp sayıca çoğalan tema parkları, lüks konutlar, otoyollar, alışveriş merkezleri ve tatil bölgeleridir. 1996 yılında kaleme alınan *Cocaine Nights*, orta sınıfın mekânlarını distopyalaştırması bakımından 'Ballardian' geleneği devam ettirir. Dedektif kurmaca geleneği ile de kesişen roman, okura tatil yerlerinin çarpıtılmış bir görüntüsünü sunar.

Roman, İspanya'nın güneyinde kanunsuzluk ve psikopatolojik davranışlarla dolu bir tatil bölgesini konu alır. Kardeşinin kundakçılık ve cinayetle suçlandığını öğrenince bölgeye gelen Charles Prentice olayların ardındaki gizemi çözmeye çalışır. Ancak tatil bölgesindeki hayatı bizzat kanunsuzluk mantığıyla yönetildiğinin farkına varır. Söz konusu topluluk, hayatta kalmak için hiçbir şey yapmak zorunda olmayan toplumun zengin kesiminden oluşmuş olması nedeniyle oldukça 'Ballardian'dır. Bu çalışma, ekonomik refahın ve can sıkıntısının *Cocaine Nights*'ta sunulan kanunsuz ortama olan etkisini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** J. G. Ballard, Can Sıkıntısı, Tatil Yerleri, Psikopatoloji, Kanunsuzluk.

### Introduction

Being one of the masters of dystopian and speculative literature, James Graham Ballard is famous for his extrapolations about the present and the immediate future of Western societies. One of the most salient characteristics of his fiction is that he chooses middle-class individuals either alone in isolation or with their peers in an isolated enclave and later uses their psychological and sociological conditions in order to present a dystopia whose raw material is the here-and-now of these classes. He

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thinks that the social dangers lie not in the future or an external oppressive force but in the very constitution and the worldview of these classes. For this reason, he famously states that “Marxism is a social philosophy for the poor, whereas what we need nowadays is a social philosophy for the rich, which is what most people are” (“An Interview with Jon Savage” 108). Ballard thinks that the rising number of what is called white-collar workers in Europe and America needs to be marked and used for extrapolations about their future. Especially, their overtly individualistic and community-obsessed ways of life become a convenient starting point and framework in Ballardian fiction. In short, Ballard builds his fiction with the latent dystopic possibilities among the rich in the face of a diminishing public space.

Ballard’s fiction, especially those written during the 1970s, deals with these possibilities in the urban space of London and mostly on the fringes of the city. His novels like *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) *High-Rise* (1975) secure a position of a critic of modern architecture and urban planning for Ballard. In these novels, the interaction of the middle class with the urban environment and the resultant psychopathologies are explored. However, as an astute observer of the social shifts taking place in western societies, Ballard comes to realize that the cities of Northern Europe were not the only setting that facilitates the production of dystopia. The Mediterranean coastline that attracts the millions of Northern Europeans as a touristic destination has the same dystopic potential in a Ballardian vision of everyday life. As a result, during the 1990s Ballard dislocates his fiction from the urban space and transposes it into the leisure communities along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. Although the theme of leisure societies is also apparent in his fiction during the 1970s (especially in *High-Rise*), it is not the defining characteristic of the communities or people represented in these novels. Published in 1996, *Cocaine Nights* is an example of a *leisure turn* in Ballard’s fiction and this paper aims to explore the effects of the sociological conditions and the phenomenon of boredom on the dissolution of law and order in the novel.

The activities of mass tourism in the west have a history that stretches back to the 19th century thanks to the developments in transportation technologies and the initiatives to organize international package tours (Sezgin and Yolal 74). As it were, the military imperial expansion of the British Empire turned into a civilian activity joined by thousands of people within a short period. After all, tourism can be regarded as just another form of imperialism (Nash 39). For this reason, it is not surprising that the United Kingdom assumed a pioneering role in this field. Another important shift in the development of tourism took place in the first half of the 20th century when salaried holidays were introduced in certain European countries (Yale 37), which provided larger populations with time and economic means for tourism. These developments indicate that tourism and leisure are closely associated with the conditions of modernity. Ning Wang indicates that “under modernity, more people have the necessary sources to transcend the everyday world and search for experiences which are at a distance from daily experiences” (vii-viii). Similarly, Adrian Franklin states that “tourism derives from the condition of life in modernity and the experience of modernity not an escape from it” (26). Traveling for pleasure was an activity that existed during the pre-modern times, as well. However, sociologically there are certain differences between travel under premodernity and modernity. Wang summarizes these differences in three aspects: Unlike premodern travel, modern travel has become a socially and widely accepted practice. Secondly, unlike premodern travel, modernity brought about the institutionalization of touristic activities and lastly modernity transformed this activity from being an occasional event to a mass phenomenon (Wang 13-14). To state more concretely, the pilgrims or the upper-class Romans participated in temporary activities that can be compared to modern tourism. However, such movements ceased to be a privilege of an exceptional class or certain individuals as a result of the atmosphere precipitated by the abovementioned developments. The overwhelming question in this paper is what happens if tourism and leisure become life itself, rather than a part of it. *Cocaine Nights* represents a new phase of tourism in which the tourists are not in a temporary state of an occasional experience but in a much more prolonged or permanent activity.

### **A New Community Based on Lawlessness**

*Cocaine Nights* can be classified as an example of detective fiction but it subverts the genre in that a crime investigator gradually leaves his pursuit of finding the guilty; becomes attracted to the lawlessness and at the end, becomes a part of it. According to Andrzej Gasiorek, the detective in

*Cocaine Nights* deals with “ethnography: [he is] a social explorer in the tradition of reformers who investigated urban slums in the nineteenth century” (171). In the novel, the ethnographer is Charles Prentice who investigates the geographies of leisure and tourism that proliferated especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Charles, a travel writer for a magazine, is called to Spain because his brother, Frank, was arrested for arson and murder of the Hollinger family. He starts an unofficial investigation of the incident in Estrella de Mar to save his brother who pleads guilty. This investigation reveals that the community of Estrella de Mar is governed by a deviant logic that is normally hidden especially from the Spanish police. This logic consists of a wide range of crimes including theft, rape, vandalism, and the use of illegal drugs. Though Paula Hamilton, Frank’s lover, warns Charles about the possible dangers he may face, Charles insists on carrying out the investigation. However, the more he explores the dark side of the community, the more he is lured by it, to the extent that he is no longer concerned about his brother when he finds out the real criminals in the Hollinger case. Meanwhile, Bobby Crawford, the eccentric leader of the community, plans to revive another gated community called Residencia Costasol through petty crimes that would stimulate the residents and employs Charles as his assistant. They have little difficulty in converting Residencia Costasol from an idle and eventless settlement into a live but also crime-ridden community. The novel ends with Bobby Crawford being shot by someone and Charles holding the pistol in his hand when the Spanish police arrive at the crime scene. Due to his death as a result of the community that he has created, Crawford shares the same genealogy with such characters as Royal in *High-Rise* or Maitland in *Concrete Island*.

*Cocaine Nights* begins with an atmosphere of latent lawlessness felt both in Gibraltar and along the coast of Costa del Sol. Charles Prentice begins to disclose the illegal activities in which the local people are involved. Though Gibraltar and Costa del Sol belong to the United Kingdom and Spain, respectively, the beginning of the novel underlines the inability of the nation-state to enforce its own laws. Charles muses that “I guessed that the economy and civic pride of this geo-political relic were devoted to rooking Spanish state, to money-laundering and the smuggling of untaxed perfumes and pharmaceuticals” (10). Located in a convergence of three states, namely the U.K, Spain, and Morocco, the region surrounding Costa del Sol is replete with border crossings and, thus the promises of law infringements. At this point, one needs to acknowledge the spectre of Shanghai –his place of childhood- that followed Ballard’s writing throughout his career. Just like the region in question in *Cocaine Nights*, Shanghai was a city dominated not only by the British but also by many other sovereign powers during his childhood, which led to the formation of various jurisdictional zones. According to Gray, “the multiplicity of police jurisdictions served to facilitate criminality” (158) in Ballard’s Shanghai, which can be observed in Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*, published in 1984, where the narrator characterizes Shanghai as “the terrible city” (345). However, despite Ballard’s apparent disapproval of the city’s anarchic environment and the possibilities of transgression, it is the deviance and lawlessness that feed his literary imagination in his fiction. The deviance becomes an abject element in Ballard’s writing in the sense that it both repels and attracts at the same time. Just like Shanghai, *Cocaine Nights* presents a British Empire not in a continual search for new territories but one which is defunct and left its citizens to explore their wayward personalities in the conquered territories. In a dialogue about the political and social condition of the region, the car rental official says to Charles that “Everyone at La Linea is very happy- they hope that Gibraltar will remain British for ever” (11) to highlight the leniency of the British government with the smuggling that became a source of income for the people. However, smuggling is just a ‘starter’ for the much more deviant atmosphere that would manifest itself later.

Yet, the main focus of the novel is not the local people who evade taxation, but the middle-class individuals each of whom may be the suspect of the Hollinger fire. Charles believes that his brother Frank covers for the real criminal(s) for some mysterious reason by pleading guilty. Though he does not observe anything suspicious during the daytime, he encounters an absurd event on his first night. A man tries to rape a woman in a car, watched by people, and the woman behaves normally in the aftermath of the attempt (58). This scene implies a normalization of crime in the community of Estrella de Mar and also indicates that the Hollinger fire may not be an atypical incident. At this point, Ballard can be said to play with the sociological condition of the leisure societies. The actions banned by laws or at least frowned upon in the home country are performed with impunity in a Mediterranean

town. Through the activity of tourism, the home identities are loosened. For example, though Charles does not smoke, he is attracted by the permissiveness of this leisure community and buys a pack of cigarettes despite the social reproof about it in the United Kingdom (80) or Bobby Crawford steals a boat to burn it offshore to create a spectacle for the community members (143).

The novel treats tourism and leisure as a centrifugal activity through which the characters could have an opportunity to move away from the constraints of their own societies. The geographical distance of Estrella de Mar facilitates disengagement from the homeland as well as laws and symbols belonging to it. In this regard, the murder of the Hollingers is not only an instantaneous act of violence but an expression of a carnivalesque rebellion against the parent culture. The British expats turn the celebration of the Queen's formal birthday into chaos and massacre, partly as an attempt to disavow the law and order that the empire represents. In parallelism with this, the novel is rife with examples of parental figures who are rendered non-functional. One of the examples of this can be seen at the beginning of the novel when the authority of Great Britain is questioned with a reference to the smuggling activities carried out in Gibraltar not despite Great Britain but partly thanks to it. Similarly, Frank's and Charles' parents are told to have almost no interest in their children, which also led to Frank's petty thefts during their childhood. In the face of the absence of parental figures, the characters are free to explore their psychopathologies.

The spaces of tourism further facilitate this exploration due to the abovementioned dissolution of home identities. In the novel, it is Bobby Crawford, the tennis trainer and psychopath who acts as a catalyst for this transformation. Acting as a charismatic leader, he aims to revive the communities suffering from boredom through unorthodox means. Especially, the pueblos that Charles observes on his way to Estrella de Mar exemplify the bored communities whose sole obsession has been the issue of security. Charles describes these settlements with the following characteristics: "the memory-erasing white architecture; the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system, [...] the apparent absence of any social structure. [...] Perhaps this was what a leisure-dominated future would resemble?" (34-35). However, Estrella de Mar stands out as an insular space among these pueblos in that almost a Dionysian atmosphere holds sway in this community. Crawford has an arcane and eccentric philosophy about the salvation of these communities. According to him, deviant behaviour is the only means by which these bored communities can be freed from their cages. The deviant behaviours range from sexual violence to petty thefts that would stimulate the people without the interference of the Spanish police. It should be noted that the seemingly secure atmosphere of the British communities along the coasts serves as an assurance for the Spanish police forces and consequently the issues of 'security' in these communities have been left to the members of the communities, which, in turn, helps them unearth their psychopathological tendencies with impunity. At this point, one needs to recall the Hollinger fire once again. The outbreak of the fire is not reported to the Spanish authorities by anyone who attends the birthday celebration of the queen. The fire was reported by a motorist who passes by the vicinity by chance (52). This implies that if the motorist did not report the case, the Hollinger fire, under the supervision of the local British security patrols, would continue to be a secret of the community that would bind them in guilt. For this very reason, when this discretion is compromised by the intrusion of Inspector Cabrera and the Spanish authorities, Frank sacrifices himself for the sake of the community for whose creation he previously invested great effort.

In his analysis of *Cocaine Nights*, David Ian Paddy associates the prevalence of violence, crime or any other kind of transgressions with Žižek's idea of objective violence that is intrinsically embedded in the structure of 'normal' conditions of the free-market capitalism. He propounds that subjective violence, which is the explicit disturbance of social order, "become[s] the invisible violence that becomes the ordinary systematic running of the community" in the novel (270). However, the violence in the novel is not only the latent aggression of free-market capitalism but also particularly the result of boredom that is concomitant with free-market capitalism. It needs to be acknowledged that none of the characters in the novel is from the lower strata of society; they instantiate a social class that began to emerge from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on. Concordantly, the phenomenon of boredom has a history that stretches back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In his dialogue with Charles, Sanger, a psychiatrist whom Ballard uses as a mouthpiece, explains the problem of leisure societies as follows:

Our governments are preparing for a future without work, and that includes petty criminals. Leisure societies lie ahead of us [...] People will still work [...] but only for a decade of their lives. They will retire in their late thirties, with fifty years of idleness in front of them. [...] Politics are a pastime for a professional cast and fail to excite the rest of us. Religious belief demands a vast effort of imaginative and emotional commitment. The only thing [...] which can arouse people [...] [is] crime and transgressive behaviour. (180)

Though statistical data do not show any rapid downward fluctuation of the pension age in the UK over the 20th century, a study carried out by Huberman and Minns (2007) demonstrates the diminishing working hours of the workers in various countries including the UK. The carnivalesque community in Estrella de Mar is a reaction to the leisure domination and anaesthetization of western societies that do not have to work anymore. In this context, it is no surprise that Sanger, the psychiatrist, is the most despised person in Estrella de Mar as it can be clearly observed during the funeral of Bibi Jansen who died in the Hollinger fire. Paula explains to Charles that “medicinal-quality heroin and cocaine are Crawford’s answer to benzo-diazepines we doctors love so much” (199). In fact, cocaine and heroin are Crawford’s answer to not only benzo-diazepines but also to inertia and boredom. While Crawford tried to keep Bibi as an active member of the community on the beach, Sanger endeavors to treat her with his tranquilizing drugs and in this way keep her away from deviant behaviours that are fostered by Crawford.

In fact, despite his seeming central position about the crimes committed in Estrella de Mar, Crawford’s role is no more than a facilitator. He does not preach people to commit crimes, yet the atmosphere he creates provides a fertile ground on which crime and transgressive behaviours can easily develop. What he needs is to take the residents out of their houses by stimulating them by some petty crimes. From the moment Charles meets Crawford, Charles (and also the reader) strongly suspects that Crawford is the arsonist in the Hollinger case due to his capacity to mobilize the people around illegal activities. However, when Paula relates what really happened in the Hollinger fire, the reader learns that the only person who is completely unaware of the incident is Crawford. This unexpected information reveals the violence-prone characteristic of the leisure societies suffering from boredom. Indeed, some psychological studies find a correlation between the phenomenon of boredom and impulsive behaviours. According to the findings “subjects with a high level of boredom resistance show a low interest in social deviance activities, they have higher capacity to self-entertain compared with the other one” (Boden 183). The deviance resulting from boredom does not aim to harm for a specific reason or self-interest but for sensation seeking. When the people are locked into gated communities obsessed with the issues of security, virtually nothing happens, which, in turn, leaves them susceptible to crime and sensation seeking. As Charles muses upon his arrival in Spain, “the residents of Costa del Sol lived in an eventless world” (33). Just as he accomplishes his project in Estrella de Mar and introduces a frenetic world to its residents, Crawford plans to revive Residencia Costasol which is one of the security-obsessed gated communities where the residents are practically disconnected from each other and the rest of the world. At this point, one needs to remember the concepts of Logos-modernity and Eros-modernity as they are conceptualized by Ning Wang. As such, Residencia Costasol represents what Wang calls Logos-modernity with its emphasis on surveillance and security. As an epitome of instrumental rationality, this gated community obliterates the human agency in an environment that leaves no space for social friction. While in Estrella de Mar, an embodiment of Eros-modernity, the issue of ‘security’ is handed over to the members of the community, in Residencia Costasol, it is the CCTVs that take over the human agency that leads to a state of constant boredom. What Crawford aims to do is to introduce a differential space, in Henri Lefebvre’s terms (50), into the structure of a homogenized and abstract space. The differential space functions as a resistance to the abstract space that leaves no ground for surprises, heterogeneities and uncertainties. For this reason, the constant competition of Crawford, who is also a tennis instructor, with the tennis machine in Estrella de Mar becomes suggestive of his war against an impersonal realm of rationality of the abstract space. Wang distinguishes Eros-modernity into two categories: while the first one “channels the energies of Eros into sublimation [...] and artistic activities” (36), the second one “is mainly about the direct, less sublimated, less cultivated, even crude and ‘dirty’ forms of gratification” (36). As he did in Estrella de Mar in the past, Crawford projects to install both forms of

Eros-modernity in Residencia Costasol and he has an eccentric philosophy about the relation between them. According to him when a crime is committed:

You're forced to rethink yourself on every level, like a primitive man confronting a hostile universe behind every tree and rock. [...] Then someone mugs the woman next door, so you team up with the outraged husband. Crime and vandalism are everywhere. You have to rise above these mindless thugs and the oafish world they inhabit. [So that] [...] we form watch committees, elect a local council, take pride in our neighbourhoods, join sports clubs, [...] rediscover everyday world we once took for granted. (244)

The civic pride understood by Crawford can only be achieved when "crime and creativity go together" (281). The extent to which the crimes are committed determines the degree that the members of the communities can bind to each other in guilt and thus form a sense of community.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Cocaine Nights* is a warning against the leisure communities of Western countries. This warning is an outcome of an understanding that regards material and financial abundance not as a grace but as the seeds that would later grow into a toxic plant that undermines civilized human relations. The novel extrapolates the liberating forces associated with the popular touristic resorts along the Mediterranean Sea and establishes the state of boredom-proneness as the reason for deviant behaviours. Ballard does not regard the lack of boredom and does not call for a return to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century working condition as a utopian alternative to what is demonstrated in the novel. What he wants to question is whether the Western societies are psychologically and sociologically equipped enough to cope with a leisure-dominated society that he regards as the inevitable state to which these societies march.

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