Conclusion: Peacescripts?

RUNNING WILD

In J. G. Ballard's novella Running Wild (1988), a group of children brutally massacre their parents. The children, the progeny of highly paid, caring, and conscientious professionals, are brought up with kindness and consideration and given all the right toys to play with and all the right activities to pursue. They experience the perfect balance of parental supervision and respect for their autonomy. Their parents not only lavish expensive gifts on them but, fortified with the latest in psychological research, set out to provide their kids with a conflict-free, nurturing environment. No dark secrets in Pangbourne Village, no hidden child abuse, no kiddie porn, no trauma festering under the surface of loving family life. Nevertheless, the children of paradise are a group of ruthless killers, psychotic in their detachment from human reality, exterminating their parents without a flicker of horror or remorse and embarking on a crusade of accelerating violence.

The explanation, according to the narrator of this postmodern morality play, is that without tragedy or fear in their lives, the children grow up severely handicapped. Deprived of the knowledge of pain and mortality, they crave violence as the reprieve from the intolerable blandness of their existence. But even parricide fails to provide the stimulus they need: lacking the story of Oedipus—or any tragic story, for that matter—they cannot situate their actions in a meaningful context. Their parents' benevolent tolerance and boundless understanding turned out to be worse than excessive strictness. They did not warp their children's emergent selves; they just did not provide them with any. Incapable of feeling and unburdened by conscience, the children are hooked on violence in the vain hope of experiencing the guilt that
might fill the aching void inside. But instead, murder and terror only serve to empty out their already shriveled psyches, producing glassy-eyed assassins.

Ballard’s strange and disturbing tale goes against the grain of the contemporary wisdom that locates the source of violence in childhood abuse and trauma. It suggests that people kill because they want to kill, because killing offers an experience so potent that it is worth the risk of the reciprocal violence of the law. This experience is seen as an escape from the meaningless routine of suburban existence. But the escape is deceptive; running wild, the murderer only outruns his or her humanity.

RUNNING SCARED

Desire, as Lacan perceptively noted, is like a railway track stretching toward the unreachable horizon. But the murderer’s desire is looped into a circle, speeding away from the victim’s corpse, only to end up at another crime scene. The narratives of violence we have encountered range far and wide: from Dostoevskii to dystopia, from Dickens to Clive Barker, from graphic horror to fairy tale. Its subjects are as motley a crew as the reader is likely to encounter anywhere. And yet Frankenstein’s monster, Professor Moriarty, and Dr. Mengele do have one thing in common: the murderer’s desire. Whether expressed in all its naked rapacity, as the serial killer’s body count, or disguised as the search for profit or purity, this desire propel all the narratives I have discussed in this book. And the proof that it is the same desire, despite its chameleonic transformations, lies in the one structural feature all blood-scripts share. This feature is the lacuna, the ellipsis, the stumble, and the incoherence that figure and disfigure the story of a murderer. Like the scar of a freshly dug grave, this lacuna betrays the presence of a hidden body. But adorned with a tombstone, a grave becomes a holy place. The pit of violence is at the same time a site of transcendence, of spiritual self-aggrandizement—the site of the sublime.

Biologists, psychologists, and criminologists argue about the origins of the desire to kill; but while different, many of their models acknowledge the irreducible ambiguity built into human violence. In Robert O’Connell’s discussion of the origin of war, for example, he recognizes the existence of “a strong and innate human inhibition against killing members of our own species” and suggests that various forms of “cultural mediation” were developed in the Neolithic age to disarm this inhibition by convincing the aggressor that “the victim was not actually human and was, therefore, subject to predation.” This mediation is so powerful that it “is capable of overwhelming . . . the reporting of our senses as to the true nature of the victims” (110–11). Goldhagen’s “ordi-
nary Germans" did, perhaps, see aliens in place of women and children. But such self-delusion cannot be seamless and complete without escalating into psychosis. And so the perpetrator of violence is locked in a peculiar double state of knowing and not knowing, accepting the victim's humanity and denying it. This vacillation, this inevitable splitting of the perpetrator's selfhood in the act of violence, is what accounts for the shattering impact of killing on the coherence of the self. But precisely because the self exists only in, and through, discourse, this shattering is mistaken for the liberation from the "prison-house of language." Violence appears as communion with the Real, beyond the shifting illusions of the Symbolic. But in fact this communion is the greatest illusion of all.

Like any sociobiological speculation, this one is a just-so story of origin. But whatever the ultimate source of what I called the "violent sublime," it exists. It sends raw recruits into fits of weeping after their first combat, but it also transforms Vietnam veterans into adrenaline junkies. It inspires Ted Bundy-like nonentities to taste the divine in rape and torture, and it seduces would-be scientists into identifying with Nature red in tooth and claw. It makes the concentration camp builders shed tears when confronted with the spectacle of their handiwork, but it also makes them build the camps in the first place. Killing somebody, even if it happens only once, even if it is unintentional or justified, in self-defense or in defense of others, marks the killer forever. It is as irrevocable as the loss of virginity: "the act of killing changes the person who has performed it, from then on he is a different person living in a different world" (Kott 72). Having killed, an ordinary subject becomes a subject of violence.

But subjectivity is not located only in a subject's individual body; it is created in, and through, discourse. No society is free of violence, but no violence is free of society either. The self-narratives of violent subjects unfold within the generic matrix of socially circulating stories, and it is this matrix that the book analyzes.

Hunger for the violent sublime is expressed differently in each category of murderers that I discussed. Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, the Invisible Man, and Barker's Cabal are embodiments of this hunger at its most extreme, emptying those it possesses of all semblance of humanity. Horror's creatures are cautionary metaphors of what I called the subject of torture, the speechless monster from beyond the social pale. Their serial killer counterparts retain the human form that the generic conventions of horror allow the monster to discard. But like fictional monsters, serial killers lose the coherence, the social intelligibility that defines a human subject. The story of a monster automatically situates the perpetrator in opposition to society, as the deviant, the outcast, the Other. No matter how deeply the subject of torture plunges into
the ecstasy of violence, he will eventually float up as social carrion. Even in Foucault's premodern spectacle of the scaffold, the executioner was an untouchable. Power needed him, used him, and threw him away. Stripped of its narrative husks, presented as a gory spectacle, the act of violence mangles the body of the victim and the story of the perpetrator.

Precisely because of this radical disenfranchisement, the subject of torture is sometimes regarded with certain awe and even admiration. Film audiences cheer for Freddie Krueger, and the intellectuals absolve serial killers of responsibility with Auden's worn-out line about those to whom evil has been done. Surely, a person who pays such a horrifying price for murder must somehow be compelled to commit it! And the same logic is applied to murderous martyrs and suicide terrorists.

What I tried to emphasize in the first and second chapters is the free desire that impels the subject of torture to engage in rape, mutilation, and horrifying slaughter. Fictions of horror reveal this desire: would Mr. Hyde roam the dark streets of London if Dr. Jekyll did not labor to bring him forth, or would Basil Hallward be dead if Dorian Gray's longing to be a painted thing were less overwhelming? Criminological treatises and true-crime books, however, often persist in denying it. Supposedly "emptied" of their subjectivity by the onslaught of the media or traumatized beyond repair by humdrum childhoods, serial killers are presented as impotent slaves of social and psychological scripts not of their choosing because it is simply too unsettling to view them as actively and knowingly writing their own scripts in the blood of their victims. But the very same texts inadvertently reveal the serial killers' agency through the blatant inadequacy of all explanations. A recent book on the career of Dr. Harold Shipman, perhaps the most prolific serial killer in British history, is a perfect example of the aporia of determinism, for try as they might, the authors can find absolutely nothing in Shipman's average childhood, sexuality, or lifestyle that would account for the staggering trail of dead bodies he left in the wake of his house calls. Eventually, they resort to a standard horror's ploy by labeling him "unremittingly evil" (Whittle and Ritchie 362)—in other words, a monster. But this ploy may be more illuminating than all the experts' opinions they quote, for it indicates that Shipman freely chose a self-narrative which cast him in the role of an evil alien. This is a position of power, which Shipman undoubtedly cherished; but perhaps more importantly, it is a position of transcendence. Shipman, like any other serial killer, has escaped social and cultural determinations into the wordless realm of the sublime, where the narrative definitions that shackle each of us to a chain of identities fall apart. He is a man, a husband, and a father, a doctor, but more than that, something unspeakable, unimaginable, a thing, a creature, an angel, inhabiting a world of the Real. A killer with no qualities, he epitomizes
all motiveless murderers' transformation into ciphers. Unintelligible to others, he is equally unintelligible to himself; and in this self-unreadability lies the murderer's nemesis. The drill of the superego is more easily disregarded than Freud imagined. But even if some people may do without conscience, dispensing with consciousness is a different matter. If the script of the self is obliterated by random and uncontrolled bloodshed, the self will eventually vanish.

Instead of plunging headlong into the wound that violence opens in language, other killers try to suture it. Discipline and ideology promise sublimity and coherence, transcendence and intelligibility, transgression and the Law. They promise it in different ways, however. Discipline aligns with the existing Law by allotting to the subject of violence a place in the rational, orderly, and comprehensible universe of discourse; a bad place, to be sure, a jail, but a jail of one's own. Ideology has grander goals: the jail will be transformed into paradise, and rather than inhabiting the necessary but uncomfortable margins of society, the killer will be enthroned at its center.

Discipline requires physical violence as its opposite, the dark double of the rational world of calculable risks and affordable rewards. But in its omnivorous desire to reach everywhere, discipline turns every citizen into a potential murderer. Rather than being concentrated in the emblematic figure of the monster, ritually displayed and sacrificially expelled, violence becomes an invisible poison seeping into reason and contaminating it from within. Instead of a pariah, the violent subject of discipline becomes Everyman.

C. Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Father Brown offer a safe route into the kingdom of bloodscripts: enjoy murder and call it fine art; touch the sublime and pretend you are only solving a puzzle. But they, and their adversaries, so often indistinguishable from the detectives themselves, bear witness to the irrepressibility of the violent sublime by the very labor expended in building defenses against it. The perfect form of the classic detective story is a temple of reason raised over the sewer of horror.

In the wake of Foucault, discipline has gotten a bad name. But the confrontation between the classic detective story and the dystopia reveals that the rational murderer is not the worst thing to bump into in the dark alleys of history. Beyond the subject of discipline looms the shadow of the subject of ideology who has already turned twentieth-century textbooks into bloodscripts and has plans for the new century as well. And the confrontation between the two restores an ethical scale to the problematic of violence, which tends to be blurred by understandable indignation at any act of murder. But if all murderers are evil, some are more evil than others. When the aging Hercule Poirot battles idealistic killers; when the private eye stumbles into a state-sponsored torture chamber; when Xavier March treats the Holocaust as a
crime to be investigated and penalized, we are reminded that jail is preferable to genocide.

What is a private transcendence for the subject of torture becomes a collective transformation for the subject of ideology. The violent sublime will be unleashed, turning ordinary, limited and mortal human beings into New Men. Any ideology that promises the millenarian metamorphosis of the self-divided human consciousness into what Zizek calls “the sublime subject” requires violence. Regardless of its overt political platform, regardless of the historical conditions, regardless of the ostensible goals and the real or imaginary grievances, the search for a radical millennium generates radical tribulations. And just as the millennium in the Book of Revelation is continuously postponed, while the count of the tribulations mounts, the sublime subject never quite emerges from the womb of history, which meanwhile continues to bleed. The Holocaust, the Gulag, the genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, and elsewhere are all necessary outcomes of their respective ideologies to forge a new, racial, social, or ethnic sublime subject.

That the scale of such ideological violence exceeds anything achieved either by freelance criminals or by the disciplinary state is due to ideology’s management of the violent sublime, far more efficient than either release or repression. In an ideological state, such as Nazi Germany, the “cultural mediation” of violence becomes so powerful that it blinds the perpetrators to the bloody spectacle of the body in pain and thus allows this spectacle to be repeated endlessly, hidden away from the ordinary citizens in some anus mundi, and yet titillating those same citizens with its half-acknowledged presence. The familiar argument that the visibility of violence in the media provokes more violence avoids the historical experience of genocidal regimes, where the invisibility of violence acted as a spur to its escalation. There was no pornography of violence—or any other pornography—in the kingdoms of the New Men, the Third Reich or Stalin’s Russia. Their censorship acted with admirable efficiency against any kind of decadent entertainment, such as horror movies. The use of SS paraphernalia in sadomasochism is a triumph of the imagination over history, for hardly anything could be more puritanical than this organization, in which marriage and eugenically perfect children were a prerequisite for membership. But precisely because the narrative universe of the Nazi killers presented them with the utopia of happiness and health, their exultation at having the power to kill, maim, and torture was unchecked by the shuddering recoil that destroys the subject of torture. A serial killer eventually gets out of control, descending into what in the jargon of profiling is called “the disorganized stage,” sometimes actually begging to be caught. A disciplined assassin will either be caught or retire, perhaps occasionally bothered by a nightmare or two. But a junkie of the sublime will need more and
more of his drug. He will only stop if his society as a whole shifts into a different narrative modality, returning to discipline and repressing the age of ideology. And then the ruins of the utopia will crawl with hitherto unknown serial killers, such as the notorious post-Soviet mass murderer Chikatilo, who perhaps long for the time when violence was not a forbidden pleasure but a social duty. Empires come and go, but the impulse to write a utopian narrative in blood remains an integral part of Western—and nowadays global—culture, with the new breed of terrorists proving that a state apparatus is not a prerequisite for mass violence but an ideology is.

It is here that the lessons of the bloodscripts that I have investigated diverge sharply from much of postmodern theory. From Adorno on, the mainstream of theory has blamed the Enlightenment and its product, the bureaucratic nation-state, for the Holocaust and all the other mass killings of the last century. "Instrumental rationality" is widely held to foster violence; in Copjec's summary, Enlightenment concepts are "responsible for bringing about the very disasters they pretend to ward off" (ix). This would be true if the Holocaust were perpetrated by conscientious bureaucrats or if, indeed, the Twin Towers were brought down by a committee. I have argued above against Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" as being in any way adequate for representing the Nazi subject. From Hoess's autobiography to Mein Kampf, from Borges's Linde to the Hitler clones, from Moreau to Mengele, representations and self-representations of the subject of ideology insist on his full awareness that murder, torture, extermination are not banal but sublime. And Moreau and Mengele's misuse of science demonstrates that for Nazism rationality and discipline become means rather than ends, reason enslaved to power the machinery of murderous ecstasy.

Such popular fictions are more radical than Habermas's philosophical defense of the Enlightenment, for they do not claim that reason is innocent but only that it is necessary. He argues that the Enlightenment has been perverted to serve the ends of violence; they show that a kind of violence is indeed inseparable from reason, but that there are worse kinds. Discipline breeds its own killers; bureaucratic democracies wage wars and execute criminals. But utopian and apocalyptic ideologies generate mass-scale violence not as a by-product of their functioning but as their raison d'être. To refuse to discriminate between the two, to condemn, for example, both sides in the Second World War because both committed war crimes (which is perfectly true) is to abandon ethics altogether. Moral absolutism may in practice be more dangerous than nihilism. Philip Gourevitch, in his book on the genocide in Rwanda, shows how Western refusal to make a moral distinction between ideological slaughter and partisan war led to complicity with the perpetrators of genocide. Such complicity, or course, was supported by cynical geopolitical interests, but
without a tendency in the media to airbrush the genocide into a “tribal war,” it would not have worked.

The glorification of trauma, the subject of my last chapter, reveals the serious political danger of treating violence as absolute, divorced from its historical, cultural, and ultimately narrative setting. If violence is everything and everywhere, it is also nothing and nowhere. Acknowledging, along with Kant, the universal human potential for radical evil is not the same thing as claiming the universality of guilt, for the latter ends, as with Shoshana Felman’s defense of Paul de Man, in blanket absolution for everybody. If the bloodscripts, with their finely tuned generic distinctions, teach us anything, it is the necessity of discrimination, which is also the necessity of judgment.

RUNNING FOR COVER

“Must we burn Sade?” famously asked Simone de Beauvoir. Must we burn the bloodscripts? In the world beset by war, terror, crime, genocide, ethnic cleansing, the morality of a project such as mine is inevitably open to question. It is bad enough that people read such books; should we afford them the dignity of a scholarly investigation as well? Investigation, not castigation, for the latter is regularly found in both the academic and the general discourse on representation of violence. The most powerful component of this discourse, reiterated with various degrees of moral fervor and intellectual sophistication, is the call to ban all bloodscripts, or at least as many of them as happen to fall within the author’s purview. In particular, this call is heard when the focus is, as it is in this book, on the genres of violence. Hardly anybody would demand censoring Oliver Twist (if for no other reason than because it is old and remote enough to have acquired the status of a “classic”), but the horror movie industry is a different matter. And even if horror becomes the subject of scholarly analysis, it is with an eye to its “subversive” potential. Violence is only acceptable if read as rebellion and preferably within the safe confines of a movie theater. But when a real-life serial killer sets out to imitate Barker’s monsters, cultural scholars join the politicians in blaming pictures and books for disseminating the taste for murder. With certain apocalyptic smugness, recalling Dickens’s “it was the best of all times, it was the worst of all times,” theoreticians of postmodernity claim the scope and nature of violence today exceeds anything known to Rome, the Golden Horde, or the crusaders, and point the finger at the proliferation of bloodscripts, aided and abetted by the electronic media. In such a climate, my book is bound to provoke dissent, not just because of its subject matter, but because the generic approach I espouse seemingly makes ethical discrimination among narratives of violence impossible. By placing Dickens and Barker or Wells and Mein Kampf in the same generic
categories, I extend the aesthetic protection of the former to the latter. And indeed, if “protection” means refusal of censorship, I do.

Regardless of the complex theoretical framework erected around the critical defense of “silence” that I critiqued in the last chapter, there is a simple human impulse behind it. If we do not talk about horror, it will disappear. If we do not see it, it will go away. If we do not show it, our children will grow up innocent and peaceful. “Aggression is contagious,” says Rosalind Miles, “watching it, taking part in it, reading about it, and expressing it will never reduce it” (298). Violence is a disease that we catch through the eyes mesmerized by the high-tech spectacle of extermination; through the ears that listen to the staged moans of the victim; and most of all, through the mind that is so perversely seduced by stories of murder and mayhem. The still ongoing feminist debate about pornography centers on the contagion of violence against women that hard-core pornography supposedly disseminates by its very existence, by the simple fact of its availability, even though its actual consumers may be a tiny minority. All the sophisticated feminist arguments that have been rallied against this contention and the legal actions it inspired founder on the rock of common sense. Men who see violence done or read about it will become violent themselves. Isn’t it self-evident?

It is self-evident that we should beware of self-evident truths. It was common sense, bolstered by the unquestionable authority of science, that made Mengele believe that the Jews were a dangerously defective, nonhuman race. It is common sense that prompts criminologists to search for a hidden deviation in ordinary men who commit unspeakable atrocities. It is common sense that tells us that if people are fed, they will not go to war.

We are still caught in the double myth of the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Man. If children are corrupted by horror comics and violent television shows, does it mean that left to their own devices, they will grow up nurturing and cooperative? This Rousseau-like view, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, is increasingly giving way to the sociobiological argument that aggression is inherent in the human genetic make-up. But those are two sides of the same coin. In both cases violence is seen as a single definable entity, either a germ that infects primal innocence or a hereditary disease that civilization can cure. In both cases, representation of violence serves as a vector of transmission, either dropping the venom of corruption into the pristine mind or awakening the dormant pathogen. Just ratchet up the movie rating system, ban violent pornography, tone down literary mayhem, and society will be cured.

Metaphors are dangerous tools of thought. As we have seen above, radical attempts to cure the body politic of violence led to bloodshed, and the search for absolute health ended in the sickness of persecution and genocide. Violence is not a “contagion.” It is neither a disease of language nor the genetic
inheritance of our beastly ancestors. It is a human possibility, a form of behavior that humans can engage in, just as they can engage in love, politics, art, stamp collecting, or transcendental meditation. It exists not because we are burdened with animal instincts but because we are not. Humans are “flawed,” incomplete animals, making up with extraordinary learning capacity for the weak or absent biological programming. There are presumably some forms of behavior that are outside the realm of human nature, but we will never know what they are, because anything somebody can imagine, somebody else will do.

Civilization, as T. H. Huxley so presciently recognized while all around him scientists, writers, and intellectuals hurried to prop up their pet utopias with the symbolic authority of Nature, is profoundly unnatural. Freedom of choice sounds somewhat old-fashioned, squeezed between the post-Foucauldian primacy of discourse and the post-Human Genome Project primacy of the hard-wired brain, but it is nevertheless indispensable if we are ever to understand violence. Serial killers kill because they want to kill, says John Douglas, with some chagrin at being unable to discover any deeper secret after a lifetime of profiling violent criminals. And bookstores do a brisk trade in Douglas’s titillating autopsies of the victims’ bodies and the killers’ minds, because people want to read them.

The desire for violence is part of human freedom and thus it can never be eliminated, only confronted. Reading Kant through Lacan, Joan Copjec claims: “Human freedom makes radical evil a structural inescapability” (xxvi). And if violence is embedded in the structure of the subject, it is equally embedded in the structure of the narrative through which the subject constructs himself. Whatever form the bloodscripts take, they are present in any conceivable cultural configuration in which human beings apprehend the fact that they are capable of making other human beings bleed. To ban narratives of violence, we would have to ban narrative altogether.

In Demonic Males Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, drawing on the evidence of our genetic closeness to the chimpanzees, suggest the explanation for human violence is the “coalitionary bonds among males” (167). Predation is widespread in the animal world but intraspecies violence as a choice is rare. Male chimps, however, formed into party gangs, kill other chimps for no obvious reason (incidentally, female chimps can be violent too, engaging in infanticide and mutual fighting). Is this the biological bedrock of aggression? But one might just as well claim that the behavior of street gangs in the Bronx explains the killings among rival chimp bands. In other words, genetic closeness cuts both ways: we cannot deny freedom of choice or even glimmerings of self-consciousness to our nearest simian relatives. Perhaps what set us on the road to freedom is precisely the weakening of the inhibition against
killing members of one's own species, along with the loosening of the other
inherent regulators of behavior. Perhaps the chimps are following in our foot-
steps rather than our helplessly repeating the simian patterns of the evolu-
tionary past.

But to the best of our knowledge, chimps do not tell each other stories, and
thus animal violence cannot become embedded in a cultural matrix. We live
in, and through, language, whether it is conceived as a prison house or as an
infinite playground. Once violence becomes a possibility of action, it also
becomes a possibility of language, and therefore, of narrative. A loop is
formed, in which a subject's choice of violence is reinforced by the violent nar-
ratives of his culture, while these narratives are fed by such choices. It seems
seductively simple, then, to end a journey through bloodscripts with a pious
hope that somewhere in the brighter future this loop will be cut, ushering in
the millennium of peace. And if I refuse to do so, it is not only because I
believe this hope is unrealistic—all hopes are—but because I think it is dan-
gerous.

Setting the elimination of all violence as its goal, society might encourage
the apocalyptic quest for purity that would end up washing away the stain of
human imperfection with blood. For the seduction of the sublime subject is
precisely this: the end to inner division, ambiguity, contingency, to the
makeshift nature of the human self, provisionally constructed in language
and narrative. And it is seduction all the more powerful since it is never—nor
can it be ever—consummated.

The source of the violent sublime is the human body, vulnerable, aching,
and mortal. To inflict agony and death on another human being produces in
the perpetrator a sense of transcendence, which is also the sense of escape
from the limitations of his own embodied self. But this escape is temporary;
eventually, the murderer has to return from the realm of the sublime into the
realm of language. Nobody is born a killer (though in some cultures every
male is predestined to become one). But having once experienced the loss of
self in violence, a killer has to fit it into a self-narrative, to rewrite his life-
story. Culture offers him a number of templates: a tough guy, a smooth oper-
ator, a soldier of the Motherland, a holy warrior, a New Man. But no story can
quite soak up the sight of the torn and bleeding flesh, the impact of the body,
one as alive as the body of the killer and now as irrevocably dead as his body
will one day be. We are all brothers and sisters under the skin. And the killer
himself lives with the knowledge of narrative's duplicity, both accepting his
new identity and often proud of it and yet at the same time recognizing its
deception. The only way to escape this aporia is to plunge, over and over
again, into the wordless ecstasy of violence, in which momentarily all ambi-
guities of language are obliterated.
Educators might hope to teach children the danger of addiction to the violent sublime; feminists might fight the fictions of masculinity that equate courage with mindless aggression; dreamers might imagine a world in which economic spurs to violence are minimized. But any attempt to provide a final solution to the problem of violence will bring about the usual catastrophic results of a final solution because it will attempt to do the impossible: to eliminate free choice from human behavior and free play of meaning from human language.

**RUNNING FREE**

And yet the ethically minded would rebel at the thought that there is nothing to be done and that violence, like the poor, will always be with us. If not elimination, what about resistance? On what ground can the resistance to violence fight its battle? Censorship breeds underground pornography, education—guns in the classroom, and persuasion—ridicule. It almost seems preferable to declare, with a fashionable kind of apocalyptic gloom, that all discourse is violent by definition and that there is no difference between violent speech and violent action. This position, however, is vulnerable to the same kind of refutation as the one employed by Dr. Johnson against Bishop Berkeley: namely, a kick.

When Foucault in his last works gropes toward defining a position of resistance to power and knowledge, he attempts to situate it in the human body itself. The body’s vulnerability is the source of the violent sublime and yet, paradoxically, it might also offer the last-ditch defense against its seduction. Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* sets the materiality of the body against what he sees as the murderously “metaphysical” nature of the Holocaust by claiming that “the course of history forces materialism upon metaphysics” (365). Andrew Hewitt, in his discussion of Adorno, points out that it is not only the body’s mortality but also its capacity for pleasure, the “flows and functions” of its survival, that constitute a bulwark against ideology (77). But both attend to the body of the victim; I would shift the focus to the body of the perpetrator. Whatever pain or pleasure the victim experiences in his body, it is incommunicable and thus cannot offer resistance to the murderous power. It is only when the perpetrator’s and the bystander’s bodies thrill or cringe in empathic identification that corporeality enters the social circulation of meaning and becomes capable of infecting and weakening the metaphysical edifice of ideology. This identification, as I have argued, creates desire for violence in the first place, for without it, there would be no sublime subjects. If violence were only instrumental, Auschwitz would not have been built. But it is also a site—perhaps the site—of resistance, for through the shiver, the recoil, the
nausea, the perpetrator recognizes his own “functions and flows” in the terminal convulsions of the victim.

And insofar as the bystander, the witness, the reader of the bloodscripts, shares in the perpetrator’s pleasure, he also shares in his abasement. This abasement, conveyed through the convulsion of narrative, concedes the ultimate victory of the body. Glimpsed through “those ejaculations of language that no terror could eradicate” (101), the shared corporeality of the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander offers not a hope of totally eradicating violence—such a hope can only lead to more terror—but a limit to its power.

In Ballard’s fable that I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the children of utopia kill because they have never learnt to recognize their own mortality in the mortality of others through the medium of bloodscripts. They have not shared in the bloody exploits of It or the Wolfman, only to recoil from the monster at the end. They have not followed Sherlock Holmes on the trail of Victorian evildoers, only to recognize that while the murderer is neutralized, murder is not. They have never seen Nazi demigods, strutting around in their Star Wars uniforms, only to watch their downfall into abjection. Violence for them becomes both meaningless and inescapable. Running away from the antiseptic narrative of happily-ever-after forced upon them by their parents, the children kill and kill again, futilely trying to find themselves in a story of their own.

The bloodscripts, whether high art or pop culture, provide a frame to express, define, and delimit violence. Conscious or not, they reveal the truth underlying the false promise of omnipotence inherent in the act of murder. This truth is the dead body itself, immune to the regulating power of discourse, taunting the killer with its unsubdued materiality. In discussing the writings of Sade, de Beauvoir rhetorically asks: “But what would the tyrant do with this inert object, a corpse?” (31). The answer is nothing except recognize his own potential inertness in this chunk of the flesh, and this is the recognition no tyrant is willing to face. Promising manhood to the impotent, strength to the weak, divinity to the downtrodden, violence delivers nothing but what is available to every human being anyway: mortality.