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Running Wild: Fictions of Gender and Childhood in Thatcher's Britain

It is eleven years since Margaret Thatcher resigned her premiership in November 1990. Since then she has figured prominently in political culture as emblem of a particular 1980s *zeitgeist*. Both critics and supporters share deeply gendered ways of summoning up images of her fantasised return and of the disciplinarian Conservative conviction politics and fervour that she still embodies in the cultural imagination. This paper illustrates the centrality of gender to cultural critique of Thatcher by focusing on J. G. Ballard's novella *Running Wild*[1] written as Thatcher entered her third term as Prime Minister. Ballard's dystopian fiction of Thatcher's middle England is a

Cultural Context

Gender was an integral part of Thatcher's political persona; as Britain's first female leader of the Conservative Party and then first female Prime Minister she provoked critical debate about the role of women in public and political life and their engagement in the political field. Her confrontational stance, and her presentation of politics as battle, posed in dramatic form questions about the gendered performance of parliamentary politics. Critical debate often focused on Thatcher's femininity and its contribution to the adversarial persona that she adopted throughout her eleven and a half years as Prime Minister. Popular cultural responses to Thatcher were often shaped through two "paradoxical and common judgements:" that she was not a real woman, or that she was "the best man in the cabinet."[2] These statements indicated how she often occupied a place of gender ambiguity. As a conventionally groomed and married woman, she drew on her status as wife and mother to construct the benign image of the "housewife managing the nation's budget." This promotion of domestic femininity wedded to political management enabled her to suggest her special female knowledge as she reworked a long-held axiom of British Conservatism that women were the moral guardians of "home and hearth." The distinctiveness of Thatcher's image came from the amalgamation of this highly conventional femininity with the inflated versions of militaristic and individualistic masculinity she celebrated and incorporated into her "Iron Lady" role.

Gender was also central to Thatcherite discourse, most particularly in the ideologically loaded image of the "privatised" family, a construct that involved the mobilisation of Thatcher's "feminine" knowledge of domestic life. For Thatcher, the stable, self-reliant, moral, nuclear family was the core element and measure of the nation's strength and vitality. While she endorsed economic liberalism and the

freedom of the market, the private sphere of the family embodied the space of limited freedom: the space to be free from state intervention as long as a moral and disciplined order was preserved. In her political discourse, the child was a symbol for the expression of broader anxieties about the relationship of the family to the state. These anxieties were aired in political and media discussion about parental and teacher responsibility, law and order, education and knowledge, and the place of the child in a commercial and media-informed society. Furthermore, Thatcher tapped into the electorate's contradictory identifications with the British Welfare State. In post-war political imagery, welfarism had been couched in the language of protection, care, development and regeneration. Yet the reverse of this image was an association of the Welfare State with bureaucratic control: a world of systems, institutions and information gathering.[3] As an alternative to what Thatcher defined as infantile welfare dependency, she offered a vision of the self-sufficient and independent consumer. One central political backdrop to this paper, then, is Thatcher's contestation of the Welfare State and her proposed substitution of the consumer society in its place. Critically, this consumer society was invested with moral weight and responsibility through the image of the child. The idealised child within the space of the consumer-laden family home was a motif of stability, harmony and discipline that would infuse the nation under a Conservative government.

The "family" and the politicising of domestic space had also been central to second-wave feminism. On the back of two decades of feminism, Thatcher had been elected as Britain's first female Prime Minister. On a simple level, these two political facts can be placed on either side of an ethical and political gulf. Without the feminist questioning of masculinist political culture and the vociferous claims for equal representation in public and political life, she may not have achieved ministerial, let alone, prime-ministerial status. However, her outspoken distancing from feminism,

the New Right which fed into Thatcher's discourses of individual and familial responsibility. Furthermore, the violence that erupts in the "Little England" of *Running Wild* is not only a British but also a transatlantic story, in which Ballard nods to the violent shattering of American society and particularly of the secure upper-middle class suburb and the idealised family. The child and certain formations of childhood that Ballard clearly identifies as emblematic of this political moment are central to his novella. Importantly, his critique of Thatcherism is refracted through a critique of certain forms of child-rearing within a consumerist society. Before a closer analysis of Ballard's text, then, it is valuable to situate it within the context of Thatcher's idealised consumer society.

society.’”[8] The contemporary child was hindered by this iniquitous system and Thatcher implied that she would return the child to its rightful owners, ordinary parents, and would redress the imbalance of power wrought by the state through her promotion of individual economic rights. In December 1976 she informed the Social Services Conference that the child and the parents’ desire for their child were instrumental to the establishment of a stable and moral society. She stated, “We believe the family is the foundation of society and the desire of parents to give their children a better start in life is honoured as one of the most powerful influences for good.”[9] By 1979, the year in which she commenced as Prime Minister, the family had

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society. In this process desire for material goods, consumer services and prestige

completely conceal the instability and unfulfilled lack that also enthuses family life: the petty squabbles, private rivalries and the conflict borne of intimacy that are also present in the lived reality of any "family" home. In Thatcher's speeches, subversion and discontent fissured the external political world; the imagery of social instability and volatile public battles deflected from and partly consolidated the unreal harmony of the private sphere. Conflict and dispute on the part of unions, nuclear protestors, and social movements, were continuous throughout the Thatcher years and she presented such challenges as irrational, disharmonious and often dangerous infractions of an otherwise prosperous and secure nation and private life. While the hardworking and parentally monitored child closed down adult fears of the transgressive or dangerously immature aspects of childhood, the well-armoured family home secured child and adult from the dangerous public world that populated Thatcher's speeches. Her secure and exclusionary family home then was "ground" won through the Government's "many battles," from the Falklands to the recent Miners' Strike and the current union protest at Wapping.[18] She warned Conservative women that, alongside her, their "first duty" was "to defend and hold that ground against all-comers:"[19]

> You are the best guardians of our liberties. Continue with the Conservative Party to build on the great open site of human freedom: the homes, the families, the values, the enterprises—in a word, the good society. For it's that which can bring…a little bit of Heaven on Earth.[20]

mainstream politics. Secondly, Thatcher could mobilise her own gender and her status as wife and mother to claim an especial knowledge of the moral responsibility of the hard-working family and its right to material comfort. Here she maintained a strict gender divide between the active masculine public world of aggressive-defensive politics and the small, still potentially vulnerable, feminine world of private family life. As a woman at the summit of high political office who advocated an adversarial style of politics and who thrived on images of conflict and political unrest, the "Iron Lady" was presented as an exceptional woman who could successfully cross that divide.

Against the political and cultural backdrop outlined so far, the remainder of this analysis will explore Ballard's *Running Wild* as fictionalised social commentary on the Thatcherite "privatised" family and child. Ballard's novella was, as I have indicated, written against the background of Thatcher's third successive electoral victory, a point when it seemed for advocates and critics alike that Thatcherism was insurmountable. Ballard's reputation as science fiction writer lends to this narrative—set in the present with a postscript in the near future of 1993—the function of the science fiction genre: a shocking and cautionary new perspective on the dangerous complacency of the present. In the creation of a dissenting text, he slips into the misogyny that some feminist critics have noted as the danger of any critical representation of Thatcher that focuses on her gender.[21] But I will illustrate how

strong, dangerous emotion.[22] Thatcher, feminism, the New Left, and the 1980s *zeitgeist*, then, are worked into a complex and troubling metaphor. They represent the source of a symptomatic violent insurrection by children brought up in a model, consumerist family community of 1980s Britain.

The story that unfolds is that of the "Pangbourne massacre" of ten professional and business families, with domestic staff and security employees, in an English village estate of executive housing built in the 1980s on deregulated farmland, thirty miles west of London. The narrative opens with details of the brutal and swift, organised murders of thirty-two adults in barely twenty minutes on the exclusive estate one summer morning. The victims are found in various states of early morning preparation for those of comfortable circumstance: "Husbands and wives were shot down across their still-warm beds, stabbed in their shower stalls, electrocuted in their baths or crushed against the garage doors by their own cars."[23] Mysteriously, the thirteen children of the massacred families have disappeared, assumed by the police to have been kidnapped.

Built by Camelot Holdings Ltd., the site of the murder, Pangbourne Village, represents the numerous, self-contained, new executive housing estates built in semi-rural areas during the decade. As an emblem, it captures the blend of new purpose-built accommodation and nostalgic simulacra of "character" housing through which such mock villages were constructed and marketed. Furthermore, in Ballard's text, Pangbourne epitomises the fantasy of the self-sufficient family residing in a purpose-built pastiche of England's communal past that populated much Thatcherite discourse. This is an "imagined community," sealed off from the outside world by a *cordon sanitaire* of steel-mesh fencing, electrical alarms, surveillance cameras, guard dogs and radio-equipped handlers: "entrance was by appointment only."[24] There is a sense that the topos of Thatcher's imaginary Britain—forever England, forever secure—has

become self-sustaining, and that the fantasies of Thatcherite secure individualism have mutated into dehumanised isolation: “Indifferent to the lives and deaths, negotiated within its walls, Pangbourne Village would endure. Once the mystery of the mass-murder and the kidnapping had been solved…a new cast of tenants would soon be recruited to fill those calm drawing rooms.”[25] The Village just prior to the crime was captured on security camera, and the “minimalist style of the camera-work” as it offers up to the police viewers the fetishised imminent crime scene emphasises and mirrors the “strangely blanched,” unemotional tone of this carefully constructed environment. With its gatehouse controlling access to the well planned ten mansions, a recreation club, gymnasium, private cinema rooms, optional stables and swimming pools

In *Running Wild*

The aetiology of the fictional Pangbourne massacre is located in a complex network of seemingly antagonistic political movements. Dr. Greville postulates that the extreme state of alienation that compelled these children to kill in such a methodical and bloody way was brought about by the liberal, devoted and supportive regime of child-rearing enacted in the village. The moral and cultural influences that shaped the newly prosperous, once New Left and feminist parents—the psychiatrists, concert pianists, TV executives, health-food executives—are crudely signified in bookshelves that contain "an A-Z of once modish names from Althusser to Husserl and Perls."[31] These inhabitants are sketched in easy companionship, living in the village community at one with the capitalists and social conformists that they once politically opposed: the investment broker, merchant banker, Lloyd's underwriter and business bureaucrat. Ballard draws the two groups as indistinguishable and now both comfortable inhabitants of Thatcher's consumerist utopia. They share the same parenting methods, deck their homes with the same hi-tech consumer goods, employ and exploit the same under-class of domestic servants, border their mansion homes with the same carefully clipped grass verges, ornamental shrubs and dry-stone walls.[32] Their traffic to and from the semi-rural retreat is along the same arterial lifeline, the M4 highway "to the offices and consulting rooms, restaurants and private clinics of central London."[33]

The children of the village are presented as the prisoners of a too-tolerant but implicitly stifling regime. In Pangbourne's effusive liberal environment, the parents tacitly tolerate the teenage boy's collection of soft-core erotica and indulge his collection of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines hidden under the mattress. Yet they reveal their own strict cultural contours of taste and acceptability in the creation of a home environment where the child's writing of a fictional "bodice ripper" or reading of pulp horror magazines is construed by parents, and therefore offspring, as a

subversive teenage act. In seventeen-year-old Jeremy's bedroom, soft-core magazines conceal the "real porn," gun and rifle magazines with the mail-order coupons missing.[34] The contradiction highlighted here is between the attempted parental separation of libidinous sexual drives and violent drives, the former endured within a broader pedagogic attempt at containment, the latter associated with a demonised "low" culture. The narrator Dr. Greville constructs the tableau of a child imprisoned by close-circuit TV, computer-assisted learning and a crowded recreation schedule in which the adults fully participate with an almost compulsive sense of enlightened parental obligation. Like Thatcher's consumerist family haven, this is an environment in which the dangers of unconstrained consumerist desire are held in check by a disciplined regime: "This was a warm, friendly Alcatraz. Swimming at eight, breakfast eight-thirty, archery classes, origami, do this, do that, watch the *Horizon* repeat on the video together, well done, Jeremy…"[35]

Here the share-owning, home-owning democracy of Thatcherite consumerist utopia melds with the tolerant, egalitarian and cultured registers of the New Left and feminism to, in the words of Dr. Greville, "censor" and "overcivilize" the "senses" of children. The surveillance of the hra313(ltu)-1dotuwl3eh on

The narrator presents the catalyst to the children's act of massacre as, firstly, the reports of the planned new construction of a super-Pangbourne in the immediate future, which would combine several executive estates within an even more secure complex. The hypothetical second trigger to the crime is the forthcoming televising of Pangbourne for a proposed documentary with the provisional title "The New Samoa:" "a reference to Margaret Mead's influential but partly discredited work in which she described the idyllic world of these unrepressed islanders."[36] Dr. Greville muses that "the prospect of this glib sociologist" analysing the village for three months may have pushed the children over the edge and galvanised them into murderous outrage. The third and related source of the children's pathology is signalled in the surname of the leading terrorist: Miller. This can be read as an oblique reference to the work of Alice Miller, the Swiss psychoanalyst whose controversial theories on the roots of adult violence in child rearing were published in the mid-1980s. Marion Miller arguably represents the strict correlation between caring but instrumentalised parental discipline and the child's violent response to powerlessness that Alice Miller lays out in her work.[37] Miller argued adult needs are projected onto the child who becomes the object of desires both to protect the child and to control and punish the child. Through the child, adults re-enact their own repressed experiences of childhood humiliation and disempowerment. Consequently, in *Running Wild*,I139 Tw [aJ /nnetI139 Tw [(wo)-13(r)-1p5(i)- hlhu

known as “the Mother of her Nation” or “Mother England.” It is reported that a stern-faced teenager with blonde hair and the compulsive mannerisms of Marion Miller, progeny of Pangbourne, led a terrorist attack in an armoured truck that burst through Mother England’s security gates.

Although the narrator states ominously that “all authority and parental figures” are now the terrorists’ “special target,” the revenge of Marion against “Mother England” is more than this barely disguised parental attack.[44] Reminiscent of *film noir*, the male narrator on the outskirts of the law leads the reader through to the enigma to locate the cause of the crime clothed in female form. Margaret Thatcher becomes a metaphor representing a curious amalgam of Conservative protective individualism and a hyper-rational civilising consumerism melded with a politically-skewed Left politics of “kindness and care” and overwhelming disciplinary nurture. It is notable that the authorial voice is that of a renegade psychiatrist, an outlawed male on the cusp of institutionalised law and order and that his account of the massacre is suppressed by the government. Notable too is the fact that the surfacing of a rogue terrorism that bites the hand that fed it is aligned with an almost mythic transgressive violent masculinity—Nazi guards, Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald—yet the emblem of this terrorism is a fey blonde girl.

The text is complex, perhaps a

which the young female writers feature as prostitutes servicing both genders on the estate, and a home video of Pangbourne in which footage of domestic life is intercut with media footage of "car crashes, electric chairs and concentration-camp mass graves."[46] Here Ballard partly aligns himself with the children and refers the knowing reader to his fictional treatments of atrocity in texts such as *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition.* More broadly, I would suggest that the text evokes a nostalgia for a political moment devoid of the ethical consciousness of the New Left, feminism and its constructed corollary, the skewed libertarianism of the New Right. In this sense the child becomes Ballard's symbol of an innocent, unrestricted, and transgressive free politics. In an oblique way, *Running Wild* is also written into the political battle for a public memory of the 1960s in the 1980s, which fuelled much Thatcherite attack upon the social democratic gains of primarily the Labour governments of the post-war years.[47] Consequently, through the indictment of "Mother England" and her spawn, Ballard inadvertently replicates the Thatcherite theme that the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s gave birth to the criminality and delinquency of the 1980s. In the narrator's words, the regime of care launched in southern England and prompting imitations in western Europe and the United States gave "birth to its children of revenge, sending them out to challenge the world that loved them."[48]

There was a generational aspect to the rhetoric invoked by Thatcher and her acolytes of the alien and profligate "permissive sixties;" the denial of the recent radical political past was a denial of the politics of the first beneficiaries of the Welfare State. This Welfare State, in populist Thatcherite terms, resulted in an enfeebled generation of socialist radicals and subversives derelict of political and familial responsibility. As I have indicated, Ballard's tale is perhaps also inspired by a generational angst, exhibiting a nostalgia for the fantasy of a subversive and insurgent politics which exorcises those undesirable aspects of the Left as well as the Right. In

Running Wild, Thatcher becomes an icon for the feminisation of politics: of the Left into the "soft" New Left and also of Conservatism into a pastiche of mansion facades, neo-liberalism and the soft world of consumer goods. Like the closing image of Mrs Thatcher handing out tea to the police, Ballard's image of Pangbourne is both maternal and profoundly domestic yet "antiseptic," devoid of "every strain of dirt and untidiness."[49] The only form of opposition created is a band of violent, transgressive paramilitaries who, with shades of the Patty Hearst story, recruit a female to front it.

Thatcher removed the child from the welfarist paradigm that predominated as the model of collective responsibility in Britain from the late 1940s until the 1970s. Ballard's text reveals how the child within the Thatcherite privatised space

the extent to which individual violent insurrection is the desired fantasy at the heart of *Running Wild*, at the same time as that potential for aggression is deflected onto the figure of a female Prime Minister and a traumatised girl.

Conclusion

Ballard's novella was written in the late 1980s when Margaret Thatcher appeared immovable and her hold upon the British political imaginary was seemingly at its most secure. The response both in oppositional political discourse and in the cultural fictions of artistic dissent was not only to challenge Thatcher directly but also to attempt to imagine political voices that moved Britain on to "new times."[51]

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in Time and Troy Kennedy Martin's televised drama *The Edge of Darkness* were texts that individually achieved critical acclaim.[52] The former won the Whitbread Prize for Fiction in 1987; the latter received six BAFTA awards for 1985.[53] Both texts feature the lone, gradually enlightened, male outsider who is crucial to the concluding

In *The Edge of Darkness*, the central male protagonist, Ronald Craven, a detective in the West Yorkshire police force, also loses his political innocence through the loss of his daughter. Emma is murdered by a gunman as Craven returns with her from a political meeting she was chairing. His quest to find her killer reveals that she was a terrorist fighting the That

representation of aberrant or unhinged maternity. The resulting idealisation of masculinity and paternity arguably represents a retreat from the challenges of thinking through the complex implications of Thatcher's deeply gendered populist political appeal.

Notes

[1] J. G. Ballard, *Running Wild* (London: Arrow Books, 1988).
[2] Wendy Webster, *Not A Man To Match Her* (London: Women's Press, 1990), 1.
[3] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), 50-51 and 271-283.
[4] Maureen McNeil, "After Thatcher: Reflections on Eleven years of Gender Politics" in *Magazine of Cultural Studies* 3 (1991), 12.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Margaret Thatcher, " Let Our Children Grow Tall" in A. Cooke, ed., *The Revival of Britain: Speeches on Home and European Affairs, 1975-1981* (London: Aurum Press, 1975), 3, 16.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 12-13.
[9] Margaret Thatcher in S. J. Thomas, *Margaret Thatcher, Religion and Morality* (University of Sheffield, M.Phil. thesis, unpublished, April 1992), 64ff.
[10]Thatcher in M. McFadyean and M. Renn,

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ballard, 29.
[32] Ibid., 9.
[33] Ibid., 13.
[34] Ibid., 31.
[35] Ibid., 33.
[36] Ibid., 65.
[37] Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: The Roots of Violence in Child-Rearing* (London: Virago, 1987).
[38] The term comes from Alice Miller in her discussion of the correlation between strict discipline in child rearing and a general receptiveness to social and political violence. For a discussion of Miller see Diana Gittins, *The Child in Question* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998), 94.
[39] Glover and Kaplan, 221.
[40] Ballard, 64.
[41] Charles Manson, "Testimony," in B. Massumi ed., *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 68.
[42] Ibid., 66.
[43] Ballard, 51.
[44] Ibid., 80.
[45] Glover and Kaplan, 221.
[46] Ballard, 56.
[47] Glover and Kaplan, 221.
[48] Ballard, 80.
[49] Ibid., 9.
[50] For an account of Thatcher as "terrorist" and "executioner" see Jacqueline Rose, "Margaret Thatcher and Ruth Ellis," first published in 1998 and republished in Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).
[51] The "new times" debate started on the pages of the journal *Marxism Today* and was an attempt to engage with some of the powerful co-ordinates of Thatcherist authoritarian populism and to produce a new, invigorated, left-orientated politics.
[52] Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*, (London: Picador/Pan Books, 1987); Troy Kennedy Martin, *The Edge of Darkness*, broadcast on BBC2, November 1985.
[53]