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Foreword Margaret Thatcher in Popular Culture

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On 8 April 2013, the day Margaret Thatcher died, former Spice Girl Gerry Halliwell decided to remove the following tweet, as she had come in for sharp criticism: "Thinking of our First Lady of girl power. Margaret Thatcher, a green grocer's daughter who taught me anything is possible."¹ Also, American actress Meryl Streep, who played the Prime Minister recently, stated on 9 April 2013: "To me, she was a figure of awe for her personal strength and grit".² Two years after her death, on 22 April 2015, Madonna was forced to almost instantly delete a thank you note addressed to Margaret Thatcher, as her large gay fanbase sent her a barrage of criticism her way. The post said: "If you set out to be liked, you would be prepared to compromise on anything at any time, and you would achieve nothing".³ Such outbursts of admiration for the former Prime Minister of the kind haven't been commonplace, not even when the news of her death was broken. In fact, as hatred reignited, hundreds greeted her decease throughout Britain with street parties punctuated by "Maggie Maggie Maggie, Dead dead dead" chants. More surprisingly maybe, both on account of the moment when the words were pronounced – that is, when no tribute to the former Conservative Prime Minister was expected – and of the author of the quote – Oasis lead guitarist and co-lead vocalist Noel Gallagher, who's been used to holding contentious views on various issues – on 11 February 2012 the Daily Mail published an interview that offered the following unexpected comments: "It was all better under Thatcher [...] There was a work ethic – if you were unemployed, the obsession was to find work [...] Under Thatcher, who ruled us with

an iron rod, great art was made.”⁴ These quotations sound almost shocking to British ears, as artists, generally left-wing and working class, just like Halliwell and Gallagher, have famously been opposed to Baroness Thatcher because of her persona and her policies in general.

On 4 May 1979, on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, the newly-elected Prime Minister quoted St Francis of Assisi: “Where there is discord, may we bring harmony. Where there is error, may we bring truth. Where there is doubt, may we bring faith. And where there is despair, may we bring hope”.⁵ The Winter of Discontent, which refers to a notorious period of public sector trade unions strike action which damaged the economy and society as a whole in 1978-79, definitely turned the public against Labour and the Unions. During the run-up to the 1979 general election, the Conservatives emphasized Labour’s unemployment record as well as their inability to contain the strikes, famously claiming that Labour wasn’t working,⁶ and eventually making it to power. Thatcher was committed to bringing about radical change as the quote hinted at. Yet, her determined and strong personality, her ironclad certainties and uncompromising politics, together with her deep belief in highly traditional family values, self-sufficiency and self-improvement, otherwise known as Thatcherite values, did not appeal to everybody. Many are those who believe that the Iron Lady succeeded in transforming the country indeed, but only for the worse. In fact, it is widely accepted that during her unprecedented three-term leadership from 1979 to 1990, her administration ultimately vandalized Britain, as Thatcherism permeated all facets of contemporary life, and Britain became the land of poverty, racism and economic enterprise, postwar consensus politics being replaced with politics of direct capitalism; top-down crisis management turned out as a harsh response to the economic crisis. The Conservatives pursued economic, social and cultural policies which accentuated polar separation, impoverished and alienated the working class through soaring unemployment and the emasculating of Trade Unions, as illustrated more particularly by the 1981 and 1985 urban / racial riots which broke out in the main cities of the country. The shift was part of the enterprise culture ideology, pioneered by the Thatcherites: the efficiency of markets,

the liberty of individuals and the non-interventionism of the state were the three principles of liberal economics. Thatcherism came down to a broad set of beliefs and practices such as the deregulation of certain areas of the economy, privatizations, and curbs on the welfare state, as the enterprise culture was to take over from the culture of dependency on the Nanny State. Entrepreneurial skill plus business acumen were trump cards in this context: the individual (who was to manage his/her own life) was to prevail over the collective state, as the now famous “There’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first”, that Thatcher gave *Woman’s Own* on 23 September 1987, illustrates.⁷ Devastating effects of the individualistic approach included the dog-eat-dog mentality, the culture of greed, yuppiedom. This was a contradiction in terms with sanctified family values, as amoral and destructive actions could be justified as long as they yielded profit. Therefore, the power of entrepreneurship and ruthless free economy resulted in negative energies—so much so that Margaret Thatcher eventually found Britain’s breaking point with the introduction of the Poll Tax: the British people swarmed into the streets to voice their discontent, and her own MPs ended up sacking her as Prime Minister.

If one focuses on a particular group in society, artists, then one finds the same discontent over the period—hence the surprise and shock referred to previously when praise for the Iron Lady came from a section of the population that particularly resented Thatcher’s general cultural policy. Although she played the piano and was knowledgeable about opera, the Conservative leader wasn’t a devotee of music, theatre or the movies. In fact, Mrs. Thatcher was a philistine and had little cultural understanding, which explains why she endeavoured to sell culture. As a matter of fact, during her 11 years in power, since arts can’t be separated from a political backdrop, she slashed funding for the Arts Council, which was set up after the war to bring culture to the masses. Hence, culture was privatized too, since privatization was the crucial ingredient to Thatcherism, not literally though, not as British Gas, British Telecom or Rolls Royce were. Still, the transition, consistent with the “rolling

back the frontiers of the state" approach (which aimed at revealing the genius of the citizens through individual initiative) undoubtedly altered the relationship between state and art. The state was not to be the sole provider of funds for the public sector, in arts as elsewhere, hence the creation of partnerships in the context of a mixed economy approach. The Arts were encouraged by government to get private, preferably corporate sponsorship, through the marketing arm of the corporations, the Arts Council. For instance, they were to introduce changes to tax law and "Challenge" schemes, to work with the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts, a nonprofit organization established in 1976 to encourage corporate philanthropy in the cultural sphere, whereby funds leveraged in the private sector would be matched in varying proportion by public sector funds.⁸ What is more, just as any other public service, arts organizations were compelled to produce and meet performance indicators that measured access, attendance etc., and they were to set targets against which future performance would be measured.⁹

Such a Thatcherization or Thatcherizing of the Arts Council was made manifest in the imposing of an ideological template, ideological culture thus being created by the Thatcher administration. On the one hand, "the shift from the arts to the management of the arts"¹⁰ would entail having the arts world "weane(d) away from the welfare-state mentality", as Richard Luce, the Conservative arts Minister declared in 1987.¹¹ From this perspective, unemployment benefits for example were viewed as some sort of arts subsidy. According to Mrs. Thatcher, artists happened to be broadly left-wing and anti-government, and just like the rest of the community, they should be judged simply on their own merits. On the other hand, culture was a form of dissent to the Conservative leader, which accounts for the fact that the musical became the dominant art form in Britain throughout her premiership. Musicals were commercial and conservative, they made money and were easy to export. As theatre critic Michael Billington argued, Andrew Lloyd Webber was the personification of what theatre should be to the late Prime Minister: he was entrepreneurial, able to make money, and famous.¹² Thatcher contended that market economics prevailed over intellectual curiosity, and that consumption surpassed

contemplation. *Les Misérables* (1984), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), among countless examples, were all attacks on culture to a certain extent, because there were not at all threatening in the sense that they offered no food for thought. Among occurrences of resistance, one can mention Kenneth Brannagh and David Parfitt's attack on ideological culture in 1987: both actors / producers founded the Renaissance Theatre, so as to take William Shakespeare to the masses. The idea behind this crucial contribution in the context of assault on fundamental principles was obviously that culture shouldn't be the prerogative of the privileged and wealthy. Another example is the 1988 Freeze exhibition organized by students from Goldsmiths College London, among whom Damian Hirst. Thanks to LDDC¹³ money they appropriated a non-professional space, a crummy Surrey Docks warehouse, since commercial galleries showed no interest in their projects. Not only did they succeed in appealing to Charles Saatchi, but also they ultimately contributed to founding the Young British Artists (a group of visual artists), revitalizing commercial galleries, and multiplying the number of art magazines. Last but not least, Channel 4, a public TV station which became the breeding ground for a whole new generation of directors whose incisive portrayals of British society were promoted to the cinema successfully, was created in 1982.

Thatcher blatantly didn't support creativity in the public sphere. Her attitude towards the arts can be encapsulated in the notorious Saatchi & Saatchi campaign for the V & A which carried the tag line "An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached". One needs to insist on the role the Saatchi Gallery played in the introduction of counter-culture in British art. However, her policies triggered a spirit of rebellion which transformed British art to such an extent that "Thatcherism is now a popular political lexicon but also a principle in popular culture".¹⁴ Margaret Thatcher accidentally revived British art, as hinted at by Gallagher or other prominent British cultural figures, among whom artist duo Gilbert and George, who told the Daily Telegraph on 05 July 2009: "We admire Margaret Thatcher greatly. She did a lot for art. Socialism wants everyone to be equal. We want to be different".¹⁵ Furthermore, alternative rock musician Billy Bragg declared on 11 April 2009:

“Truth is, before she came into my life, I was just your run-of-the-mill singer-songwriter [...] It was only when Thatcher started to menace the miners that I began to see things in ideological terms”.¹⁶ Another paradox lies in the fact that renaissance in the arts occurred through the embracing of atypical subject matters and the facing of traumatic political choices nationally rather than through (financial) support. The British politician has indeed been a muse for international artists (one can mention French singer Renaud’s “Miss Maggie” for instance), and her premiership has had a long-lasting, phenomenal impact on the cultural landscape. The artistic sort despised the Tories and hated their leader with a passion. She acted as a creative catalyst for a generation of creators as she turned into a unifying object of loathing. The then public enemy has been the subject of comic strips, theatre, film and TV productions, books and poems, paintings, plays and performances by the alternative comedy movement, murals etc. The social and political upheavals of the time were addressed in *Billy Elliot* (2000), set amidst a backdrop of the bitter 1984-85 miners’ strike, *Brassed Off* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997), which both illustrate the working class facing up to the consequences of Thatcherism, as well as Howard Brenton and Tony Howard’s play *A Short Sharp Shock* (1980), a brassy satire on Thatcherism, and so on and so forth. sometimes, Thatcher’s persona was represented metaphorically in a Thatcherite context: a cactus plant named Thatcher appears in Mike Leigh’s *High Hopes* (1988), and Thatcher is referred to as Mrs. Torture in Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*; filmmakers Stephen Frears and Ken Loach, Nobel Literature Prize laureate Harold Pinter, to name a limited number of figures appearing on an extensive anti-Thatcher list, joined the cultural onslaught on the government. However, the particular place where Thatcher led to an epiphany and unleashed an outpouring of creative anger from her opponents in the music industry, who got caught in an unrelenting successful pursuit. For postmodern political pop song, Thatcher became *the* go-to figure hated with a passion by an entire nation not long after her election. In 1977, The Sex Pistols’ *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols*, which bore testimony to that fact that the UK was a modern nation but whose social and political situation, characterized by pervasive unemployment and poverty, was highly dissatisfactory, was released. In the same vein, the Coventry-based Two-

Tone movement and anti-racist ska band The Specials were founded by Jerry Dammers to denounce bleak times. The people were against the Labour government and demanded change but things got worse when the Tories took over and anger intensified. One can argue that at the end of the day, Thatcher as a satirical target became highly fashionable a pursuit, engaged in by artists in order to appeal to the public; consequently the political essence to the pursuit vanished a little. Now, one can genuinely wonder how credible that was, since artists profited immensely from the golden age of the Thatcher flow. In fact both filmmakers and musicians turned entrepreneurs and ended up meeting with ironic success and acclaim, as their work was made possible thanks to some kind of public-private partnership. Still, musicians etc., the underground scene, did a better job than Labour to drive (young) people away from the Conservative Party. Communication tools can thus be used as alternative ways to voice discontent over policies and values, which points, in Tindell's words, to the "power of aesthetic and acoustic media".¹⁷ The Red Wedge Movement was formed for the 1987 election by Madness, Paul Weller, The Clash, The Communards, Billy Bragg, The Smiths and Elvis Costello: they urged people to vote Labour and raised money—for the miners for instance. In a way, the movement started a trend: the celebration of mass gatherings such as Knebworth as a reaction and the subsequent increased success experienced by festival culture, which can be associated with public enthusiasm for public figures, real or imagined, such as David Beckham or Harry Potter, debunked the "there's no such thing as society" ideology advocated by the Conservatives.

Through art and bitter protest anthems, the former Prime Minister's strong persona and controversial leadership will forever endure. As scholar David Khabaz put it, Thatcher "had a phenomenal impact on the cultural landscape of Britain by creating an ideological backlash" through her attack on art. In his view, Thatcherism became bigger than Thatcher.¹⁸ Gallagher and the likes confirmed the former Prime Minister has been an inspirational force for sure and engendered a golden age of art which has gone by, ironically "the good old (Thatcher) days" have gone by, which implies that a worst case scenario can always be reached. Cultural developments

proved Thatcher right indeed, the genius of British artists was indeed revealed thanks to her very own ideology. Still, one has to concede that Thatcher brought about some positive outcome as well, not only artwise: with the victory in the Falklands, Thatcher and the nation gained promotion on the international scene. In addition, by deregulating markets, the once shabby capital city became attractive again, and not only for the artists community. The following papers prove that in the main cultural fields, namely cinema, music and poetry, Thatcher indeed triggered a creative burst that has continued well beyond her departure in 1990.

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² <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-22063173> (accessed March 27, 2015).

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3048166/Madonna-posts-Instagram-tribute-Margaret-Thatcher-deletes-moments-later-receiving-barrage-abuse-gay-fanbase.html?ito=social-facebook> (accessed April 26, 2015).

⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-2094856/Noel-Gallagher-It-better-Margaret-Thatcher.html> (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/4/newsid_2503000/2503195.stm (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁶ In reference to Saatchi & Saatchi's "Labour isn't working" advertising campaign.

⁷ www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689 (accessed March 27, 2015).

⁸ Alexander, p. 4.

⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wu, p. 56.

¹² <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-long-shadow-theatre> (accessed March 27, 2015).

¹³ For London Docklands Development Corporation, a quango agency created in 1981 to regenerate the area.

¹⁴ Tinwell, p. 4.

¹⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/5743120/Gilbert-and-George-Margaret-Thatcher-did-a-lot-for-art.html> (accessed March 27, 2015).

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/apr/11/thatcher-and-the-arts> (accessed March 27, 2015).

¹⁷ Tinwell, p. 1.

¹⁸ Khabaz.