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Neil Archer: Cinema and Brexit: The Politics of Popular English Film

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Neil Archer: Cinema and Brexit: The Politics of Popular English Film

London/New York: Bloomsbury 2021 (Cinema and Society Series, Bd.41), 287 S., ISBN 9781501351334, GBP 76,50

The cover of Neil Archer's excellent study on cinema and Brexit features a screenshot from Sam Mendes' *Skyfall* (2012), the movie that brought us James Bond's origin story as well as his renewal as a distinctively English hero of resilience and strength. Looking out from a rooftop over a London skyline covered in Union Jack flags, we see Daniel Craig's Bond from behind, framed by a rising sun, and inviting us to share his physical and ideological perspective. While this opening suggests national roots, the Bond franchise is also a global commodity, featuring global locations

and transnational investment and distribution.

This interplay of the local and the global in recent English popular film is at the heart of Archer's study. His hypothesis is that recent English-centred film productions represent specific ideas of 'England' by constructing narratives of nation and national identity, both at home and abroad, while appealing to both domestic and global audiences. In this construction and representation of national myths, these films are relevant for understanding Brexit, Archer claims, while Brexit is a framework for making sense of the films in return. In

his study, Archer is less interested in how (or even whether) English popular cinema ‚mirrors‘ Brexit, understood as a broader period of hostility towards the EU, and he is wary of constructing all too literal causalities between films and social contexts. Rather, he looks at what popular cinema „often refracts, misrepresents or simply doesn’t show“ (p.6). The national narratives of these films are therefore „at once consistent with and problematically disjointed from its actual contexts“ (p.7), and Archer explores these paradoxes in six chapters that sometimes only imply Brexit as a context for analysis.

Archer talks about English, rather than British cinema, as English votes determined Britain’s exit from the EU, but he equally considers how difficult it is to say what ‚English‘ cinema really is in a differentiated discussion in the introduction. His corpus primarily consists of films produced and released before 2016, the year of the referendum, with the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony as its starting point, and it ends three years after the referendum.

After a concise introduction and a first chapter on film politics and the ‚soft power‘ of English cinema, the second chapter focusses on humour within the comedy genre of the holiday film, e.g. *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie* (2016) or *Mr. Bean’s Holiday* (2007). Archer discusses the construction of differences between the English and ‚Europeans‘ and the role of populist and nativist attitudes. Chapter three deals with the epic and its mobilization of mythic archetypes concerned with nation building and stories of resilience,

exceptionality, and return. It discusses recent films about the King Arthur myth, such as *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), films about the Second World War like *Darkest Hour* (2017), as well as the Bond franchise in an innovative analysis of *Skyfall*. Chapter four continues this assessment of stories of national resilience by means of two biopics about English scientists, *The Theory of Everything* (2014) and *The Imitation Game* (2014). The following two chapters concentrate on the transnational and European context of genre parody and family films, using examples like Aardman’s *Early Man* (2018) or the *Paddington* movies (2014 and 2017). Archer consistently shows that production and reception contexts outline a new sense of „European English films“ that demonstrate the „self-defeating nature of isolationist national approaches“ (p.35).

Archer uses a theoretical framework rooted in film and cultural studies, rather than asking why Britain voted to leave the EU or how individual viewers might have received the films as pro- or anti-leave. His qualitative close readings of the films are convincing, detailed, and embedded within research on trans/national cinema, popular culture, and global movie production, and they tackle a number of recent movies that have not yet received a lot of academic attention. This innovative, well-written, and carefully prepared book may thus be seen as an early intervention in the emerging field of Brexit studies.

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