Review: Neil Archer, *Cinema and Brexit: The Politics of Popular English Cinema*

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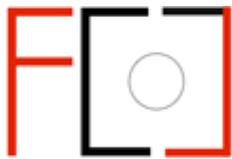
Cinema and Brexit: The Politics of Popular English Cinema

By Neil Archer

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British politics in the 2010s proved particularly tumultuous, with the latter half of the decade witnessing some of the most vitriolic discourse in recent memory. Namely, I am referring to Brexit. A myriad of theories seeking to explain the Brexit referendum result have since been purported; ranging from notions of sovereignty to (national) identity crises to nostalgic heritage. In *Cinema and Brexit: The Politics of Popular English Cinema*, British film scholar Neil Archer investigates the extent to which English films may have passively contributed to notions of cultural identity and national narratives, fuelling broader discussions around England's position within the European Union, and on the world stage.

Archer's central analysis pivots around two axes; on the one hand, around thematic representations of Englishness presenting domestic and global perceptions of said Englishness, and the production of English films and how the British Government has influenced film policy. Whilst primarily examining films produced in the latter half of the 2010s – or, in the lead up to, and in the aftermath of the EU Referendum - Archer's assortment of English films further incorporates priorly-produced titles, when deemed appropriate, to inform the reader on the specificities of long-standing genre-specific themes. His investigation into popular national English cinema begins by challenging notions of what precisely constitutes 'popular national cinema' – both conceptually, and in relation to the English nation.

Archer admits the "mangled contradiction[s]" in extracting singular and precise definitions of

'popular national cinema' (14). The differentiation between Britain and England – if pertinent – concerning 'national interests', (mis)representations of monocultural and multicultural England, and the tacit centricity of Englishness (thematic and ideological). In addition, the enigmas of what constitutes 'popular' cinema (e.g., artistic style, genre, or commercial success) and 'national' cinema (e.g., the extent of a given film's domestic/native production context, the source of funding and any perceptible cultural resistance against foreign competitors, and the conceptual contention between prescriptivism and descriptivism). Archer's adopted framework evolves accordingly.

Following the introduction, wherein the methodological and conceptual frameworks are presented, Archer's first chapter continues his investigation into both the nature of 'national cinema' and the circumstances behind the development of British film policy. Highlighting the role in which national film policy and film industries rely upon conceived notions of the nation towards, and consequently promotion of, propagandising said nation, Archer pinpoints the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games, due to New Labour's active involvement in its development, as an illustrative example of the promotion of what he ambiguously terms 'brand Britain', and cinematic soft power. Within the ceremony, the latter is emphasised explicitly (through the use of Daniel Craig's James Bond character intermittent with shots from the then-upcoming release of *Skyfall* (2012), and repeated emphasis of London) and implicitly (co-ordination of the ceremony itself by notable English directors such as Danny Boyle and Stephen Daldry). More broadly, Archer pays close attention to the production of films which achieve broad appeal whilst capitalising on deliberate 'Britishness' (in spite of significant Hollywood investment), usually through a nostalgic nod to the past and subtextual metropolitanism (vis-à-vis London). Chapter one concludes by reflecting on whether the British film industry will be able to continue generating its soft power in the wake of Brexit,

and perhaps whether British/English films will continue to be as nostalgic and/or metropolitan.

Archer subsequently emphasises the comedic relief present in English holiday films and the interplay between self-perceived Englishness (versus 'Europeanness'), and how it may aid the growth of populist and nativist attitudes at the expense of accurate representations of European nations. Whilst holiday films are not unique to English cinema, as Archer admits, English holiday films envelope a form of banal nationalism and indulge quasi-nativist habits (as exemplified by *The Inbetweeners Movie* (2011) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (2016)) whilst often deriding those of the host nation(s) (60). Whilst set abroad, English holiday films tend not to stray away from cultural Englishness – even if it is portrayed ironically – which is demonstrated in many of the films projecting the European continent as an extension of England itself (or an extension of metropolitan London), reinforcing a subtextual isolationist framework. Even more Europe-friendly English holiday films, such as *Mr. Bean's Holiday* (2007), demonstrate a willingness to undermine cultural authority (as shown by Mr Bean's "naïve and aggressive" intrusion into Cannes) (82-86).

The foci of the third and fourth chapters primarily concern the role of the portrayal of resilience (in regard to an individual and the nation) in both mythical and mythologised epics and biopics. For example, *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017), *Early Man* (2018), *Darkest Hour* (2017), *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), but especially *Skyfall* (2012), exemplify the English 'epic' which, according to Archer, sentimentalise a wholly English idealistic triumph of will (such as the Churchillian myth) and reinforce national myths (98-99). He notes the regular lip service paid to Europe and the wider world, whether visual (using non-English cities for select scenes in *Skyfall*) or in the form of racial tokenism

(*Darkest Hour* (2017)), exemplifying the insular narratives exemplary of English epics. Similarly, Archer notes that mythic narratives are not exclusive to English epics, as they are also present within 'English scientist films' such as *The Imitation Game* (2014) and *The Theory of Everything* (2014) which fortify notions of national resilience and triumph in the face of great adversity (138, 168). However, unlike some of the aforementioned epics, they tend to play into 'brand Britain' more vigorously due to their aesthetic trappings and do so while self-exceptionalising themselves through the use of highly regarded scientific figures. Archer closes the chapter by stating that, in the wake of Brexit, English cinema should be more critical of isolationist myths and should accustom itself more with international collaboration.

Chapters five and six concentrate less on the thematic Englishness presented in films, though still present, but rather on the conceptual precarity of 'national cinema' and the development of 'European English cinema', primarily through family films. For Archer, the precarity is evident due to the changing socio-cultural and political narratives within England and Britain as a whole, as reflected in both Hollywood's domination over British film production (which Archer neglects to note is not unique to Britain), and the subtextual thematic self-revision of British romcoms (e.g., the disposal of notable London landmarks in *About Time* (2013) in comparison to *Love Actually* (2003)). Additionally, the author notes a shift, as demonstrated by *The World's End* (2013) and *Sightseers* (2012), away from a romanticised idealisation of the past and the suburbs, and instead towards a satirised rejection of 'heritage' (190-202). Concerning the development of 'European English cinema', Archer highlights the irony of European co-operation, which Brexit inherently rejects, in propagating popular English family-friendly films, such as *Paddington* (2014) and *Paddington 2* (2017), as a lack of co-operation places future distribution (and profits) in jeopardy.

Archer's (largely) reflectionist socio-cultural and film politics analysis provokes the reader to question how English films leading up to the EU Referendum may have been perceived by their respective audiences in the context of growing Euroscepticism – especially in spite of the need for international distributive and financial co-operation. In his conclusion he further questions whether future English productions will continue to embrace narrative myths and mythologisations, and the idealisation of English history and heritage. Six years on from the EU Referendum that is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, *Cinema and Brexit's* detailed analysis of the films leading up the referendum and immediate years succeeding provides a keen insight into the thematic and industrial paradoxes now being unravelled.