

Review - Brexit: The Uncivil War

Written by Russell Foster

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RUSSELL FOSTER, FEB 5 2019

Brexit: The Uncivil War
Directed by Toby Haynes
House Productions, 2019

Brexit in Fiction

Brexit and fiction have a long and rich history. As one of the defining events of recent British history (if not *the* event of recent British history), Brexit has been portrayed in the creative arts in a variety of ways, from plays and musicals to parody literature (Hazeley and Morris 2018; Sewage, Harris, and Blakewill 2017; Vincent 2016) and even Brexit-themed pornography. While much of this is farcical, high culture has also seen the emergence of “Brexlit” (FT 2017) – a burgeoning genre of serious novels which use Brexit as a framing device for various dystopian portrayals of post-Brexit Britain and utopian imaginations of the ‘good old days’ before the question of EU membership split the country into a thousand shrieking factions.

This aligns with a broader imagination of Europe in British fiction, from the 1970s to the present. Very little research has been conducted on the relationship between the EU and fiction, but my own ongoing research into fiction and the EU indicates that, for the British at least, the EU/EEC has performed a complete 180-degree turn since the Brexit referendum. From 1973 to 2016, representations of the EU in British fiction fell into one of three categories. In the first category, the EU was portrayed as annoyingly bureaucratic, functionally pointless, and the subject of slapstick comedy. In the second, the EU was portrayed as the “Fourth Reich” puppet of sinister neo-Nazis seeking to conquer the continent, in Yanis Varoufakis’ infamous phrase of 2016, ‘with banks not tanks’. Or, in the third category, the EU was imagined as a well-meaning but naïve entity, whose idealism resulted in the invasion and conquest of Europe by neighbouring civilisations whose religions and cultures were deemed antithetical to Western secular liberalism. All three of these themes imagined the EU as a **dystopia**, something to be ignored, laughed at, or actively resisted. But since the 2016 referendum, representations of the EU are overwhelmingly **utopian**, with Brexlit authors, playwrights, and screenwriters portraying the Union (or at least, the UK’s membership of the Union) with lament, regret, and nostalgia for an imagined arcadian past in which the EU was a land of milk and honey. This stands in stark contrast to professional novelists’ bleak portrayals of a post-Brexit Britain characterised by empty shelves, toxic politicking, social self-segregation between Remainers and Leavers, and a level of free-market *laissez-faire* practices that would make the staunchest advocate of *Atlas Shrugged’s* John Galt (Butler 2018) or *Bioshock’s* Andrew Ryan (Cuddy and Irwin 2015) shirk. In fiction, the EU is never far removed from dystopia.

A Plague On Both Your Houses

The drama, *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, which aired to mixed reviews on Channel 4 in the UK on the 7th January 2019, merges these portrayals. Leave versus Remain, paradise versus nightmare, apocalypse versus rebirth. In spite of several reviews which criticise the film for heroizing Vote Leave’s mysterious *eminence grise*, Dominic Cummings, or whining demands that a Brexit film should not be even vaguely sympathetic towards Leave, the film tries to strike a balance – and largely succeeds. Director Toby Haynes avoids taking an obvious side, and throughout the film participants in the official Leave *and* Remain campaigns are skewered for their hypocrisy, backroom politicking, and sneering contempt for the tens of millions living outside of the political bubble of middle-class London. The film is well-

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researched (there are repeated nods to sections of Tim Shipman's gargantuan 2016 book *All Out War*) and tells its story effectively, with good pacing and scene structure. Of particular note is the film's effortless combination of real footage with very believable fictional portrayals of the process by which formerly civil, stuffy British politics rapidly broke down into shouting matches and screams of abuse. All levels of British society are shown, and the high politics of Westminster, millionaires' mansions, and whispered scheming in the corridors of power are offset by scenes that are crucial to the plot but which the audience can relate to – abandoned council estates, cooking the kids' tea, bumping into a frenemy and going for an awkward pint, arriving home so exhausted that you collapse on the bed face-down and fully dressed. In a film which plots Brexit's divides between aspirational cosmopolitans and abandoned left-behinds these *quotidian* scenes are not only nice touches; they remind us how the Brexit debate has seeped into every banal, mundane aspect of our lives. Brexit has utterly colonised British consciousness, and this film portrays that well.

Much of this is due to the star. Benedict Cumberbatch (sporting an erratic but surprisingly acceptable County Durham accent) plays Dominic Cummings, the relatively unknown mastermind of the Leave campaign. He is supported by a cast of characters from the real drama of the Brexit campaign – although David Cameron and Jeremy Corbyn are absent, Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, John Mills and Douglas Carswell occupy significant screen time, while minor characters from Remain, AggregateIQ, and Cambridge Analytica fill out the intricate character interaction. Some of the acting is brilliant – Boris Johnson and Michael Gove are palpable, and the blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo of Theresa May towards the end is almost eerie. However, some of the acting (or to be fair to the actors, the writers' portrayal of certain characters) is woefully poor. Former UKIP leader Nigel Farage is lampooned as a buffoonish, bumbling sidekick while industrial giant John Mills is reduced to a lumbering dinosaur. These are wholly unfair portrayals of men who, regardless of the viewers' positions on their politics, daily navigate (and flourish in) the cutthroat worlds of politics and business – something that neither clowns nor dinosaurs are known to do. The film's other weakness is that it ascribes too much power to Dominic Cummings, suggesting that without his maniacal genius Leave would have been a total flop – despite the film's fair portrayal of how Leave was driven by thirty years of dissatisfaction with a system which pays no attention to millions of anxious Britons who feel that their country has forgotten them.

This spills over into portrayals of the Leave and Remain campaigns, both of which oscillate between sympathetic and condescending. The awkward bromance between Arron Banks and Nigel Farage segues into a portrayal of UKIP as a weird hybrid, a stereotyped Frankenstein's monster of sneering snobs and football jobs who somehow tolerate each other. Which perhaps does injustice to UKIP. But in fairness, the film is equally critical of Remain. Where Cummings' campaign is shown as a devious but hardworking project and Farage's campaign is reduced to a circus act, Remain is portrayed as smugly overconfident, arrogantly aloof, barely able to see outside the M25, and obsessed with technocratic bean-counting methodologies which alienates the campaign from the grievances of real people and leads Remain to a pathetic defeat. Remain's obsession with *facts*, compared to Leave's obsession with *feelings*, is their downfall (Foster 2016). Nothing portrays the hubris of Remain better than the well-played character of Ryan Coetzee – the severely overworked Director of Strategy for Remain who realises, too late, that he is fighting a losing battle precisely because his old-school approach to politics cannot compete with the slick, Facebook-friendly style of Dominic Cummings.

Naturally, the film's most gripping moments all belong to the main character. A maverick, a radical, an *outsider*, Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Dominic Cummings is not without its flaws, but it is still superb. In contrast to what is portrayed as tried-and-tested, smug, and frankly boring campaigning by Remain, Cummings throws the politics playbook out of the window. Quoting Thucydides, Bismarck, and Sun Tzu, he campaigns in a radically different way. Testing the waters with the regulars down at his local pub he shows a greater ability to talk with ordinary voters, and to empathise with the genuine anxieties and legitimate grievances of council-estate left-behinds, than any of Remain's high-flying, holier-than-thou number-crunchers. Combined with his stubborn refusal to compromise with fellow Leavers who push for a 1970s posters-and-politicians campaign, Cummings becomes the hero of the story with his ability to consume vast amounts of ancient literature while embracing the cutting edge of 2010s technology. In one of the film's eureka moments, when Cummings coins the winning slogan "Take Back Control" from reading a baby book for his upcoming fatherhood, Cummings summarises the reason that Leave won: "*We can make this about more than Europe. Europe just becomes a symbol, a cipher for everything that is*

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happening, has happened.”

A House Divided Against Itself

This speaks to the two main themes in this film, both of which transcend (and unite) Leave and Remain. First is the sharp divide between Old Politics and New Politics. Second is the far sharper divide between civility and hatred. Old v. New is a running theme, and not just in the sense of young versus old. Indeed in the film's only scene which addresses the generational divide, a young, big-city-dwelling black woman accuses an older, working-class white woman of stealing her future, as “you've already had your life”. The film turns this into a moment of profound despair as the white woman lashes out that she is so tired of the high-and-mighty thinking she *knows* nothing, and forgetting that she *has* nothing, before breaking down into uncontrollable sobbing. In this numbing scene the film perfectly captures the fear, the depression, the sheer desperation of the vast British nation that exists beyond the vapid realm of Instagram hashtags and pop-up coffee shops, and highlights the emotional and economic plight of tens of millions who feel forgotten, summed up in the Remain leader's moment of truth when he acknowledges “their campaign [Leave] began thirty years ago”.

The major theme of old v. young is shown in the style of politics used. Cummings' rivals – the bean-counters of Remain and the poster-hangers of his reluctant Leave allies – are rightly shown as lagging behind, trapped in an analogue world which has long since become stale. AggregatIQ and Cambridge Analytica offer a new style of politics, and in several unsettling scenes the breathtaking reach and terrifying power of social media advert campaigning reveals just how quickly politics is changing, and just how little control we have over our own opinions.

The second, related, theme – civility versus hatred – is slowly built. Initial spats are humdrum, little more than genteel rivalries, as Cummings pushes Banks and Farage to the margins and checkmates the Leave establishment who are (perhaps rightly) concerned about his maverick style. But as the plot develops and referendum day comes hurtling towards us, the polite, old-fashioned, tea-and-crumpets politics of Britain collapses in the face of a new, savage, screaming style of deliberately uncivil politics (Wodak 2019) as the pent-up fears, frustrations, and anxieties of the British population explode – in Cummings' analogy, like a North Sea oil-rigger releasing the devastating powers of a gas deposit which has lain dormant, under unimaginable pressure for unthinkable time, until someone tries to tap into it. This reaches its crescendo in a genuinely frightening montage of factual and fictional footage of the campaign, showing Remainers and Leavers across the country not quietly debating over the friendly rivalry of pints and snooker as in the early scenes, but shoving and swearing and screaming at each other in terror, desperation, fury, and raw *hatred*, against the backdrop of a discordant and sinister version of Elgar's “*Land of Hope and Glory*”. If this film has a message, it is not that Leave was the devil and Remain an angel; nor even that this was a struggle between light and dark. The film's message is that both sides are guilty or fomenting emotional politics, and in a country divided between the clapboard council estates of rusting towns and the marble mansions of unaffordable megacities, everyone is screaming in anger. But when everyone screams, nobody can hear.

The film's closing (and opening) scene takes place in the future in 2020, in which Dominic Cummings addresses some nameless international inquest into the Brexit vote. Interrogated by the chairwoman as to Leave's legality, Cummings launches a lengthy tirade on how he tried to reset a broken Western system, and the disasters of Brexit are not due to him, but due to politicians' attempts to reboot the same old broken system which he had tried to reset. He cuts off in the middle of a sentence and after an awkward pause, the chairwoman asks: “*Are you finished, Mr Cummings?*” “*We're all f***ing finished.*”

The Future of Brexit

Brexit: The Uncivil War is a microcosm of British fiction's portrayals of Europe from 1973 to 2019. During the campaign, Europe is portrayed by Cummings' faction the same way the novels and TV comedy sketches of the twentieth century portrayed it – bumbling, maybe harbouring sinister ambitions, but ultimately a farce. A dystopia. But in the fictional future of the film's ending, the EU – or rather, the status quo which the EU was part of – is viewed nostalgically, with regret and remorse. A fallen utopia. That utopia was not the EU, nor the UK. The utopia we mourn for is a world in which politics was polite. Civil. Even boring (Foster 2019). The comfortable world of posters and

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pollsters, a warm memory to soothe us in the poisonous, jagged politics of screaming abuse and festering hatred – on all sides. This will provide material for Brexit writers, artists, and filmmakers for decades to come. Perhaps the film's best moment is when Cummings and Coetzee, his Remain rival, accidentally meet on a train platform, and go for a pint. In a line which summarises the entirety of British politics from the Scottish referendum to the present, and far into the foreseeable future: “*Nobody listens. They just yell.*”

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