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In the Name of the British People: Words and Democracy in Three Post-Brexit Films
Au nom du peuple britannique : les mots et la démocratie dans trois films post-Brexit
Nicole Cloarec

It is yet too early to assess the impact of Brexit on the British film industry. In January 2017 the British Film Institute published a report on the “Impacts of leaving the EU on the U.K.’s screen sector.”¹ It concludes on two possible scenarii that correspond to the broader options of a “soft” or a “hard” Brexit depending on whether the UK remains in the European Economic Area (EEA). For some, leaving the EU means new opportunities, in particular to attract more inward investment, bolstering a trend that has been gathering momentum since the end of last century with the implementation of generous tax incentives.² However, concern over the aftermath of Brexit prevails in the screen sector as the UK’s film industry has relied not only on coproduction treaties (for example through Creative Europe programmes) but also on a significant makeup of European film employees who will no longer benefit from freedom of movement (in the field of visual effects for example, European film personnel from outside the UK represent up to 25%).³ It is also likely that independent British film production will have an even harder time to find funding and distribution outlets since European distributors and broadcasters have to meet quotas of films recognised as European by Creative Europe. All this may not exactly be conducive to the championing of “a distinctive British voice”, to quote Lord David Puttnam’s optimistic outlook in a 2018 speech he delivered as president of the UK’s Film Distributors’ Association (FDA), in which he contends that Brexit “could help to deliver a form of national re-branding.”⁴

Ironically Brexit has repeatedly been discussed in cinematographic terms. The long and tortuous journey of negotiations was compared in the media to an endless television series, with “ever more improbable and desperate” plot twists.⁵ Even politicians are reported to use the same popular references, as when Michael Gove, still Environment Secretary in Theresa May’s government quoted *Games of Thrones*’s famous line “winter is coming” in an attempt to rally support in Parliament⁶ or when former European Council president Donald Tusk declared that “It was Hitchcock, who directed Brexit,” referring to the remark attributed to probably the most famous British film-maker of all times that a good movie “should start with

1 ‘Impacts of leaving the EU on the UK’s screen sector,’ <<https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-reports/reports/impacts-leaving-eu-uk-s-screen-sector>>, accessed on 20 March 2021.

2 It is reported that in 2019, inward investment hit an all-time record of £3.07bn out of a total of £3.61bn while UK film production fell 45%. <<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/announcements/bfi-statistics-2019>>, accessed on 20 March 2021.

3 Sheena Scott, ‘Brexit: An Uncertain Future For The British Film Industry,’ Nov 20, 2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/sheenascott/2018/11/20/brexit-an-uncertain-future-for-the-british-film-industry/#157c53a06944>>, accessed on 21 May 2020.

4 Quoted in Geoffrey Macnab, ‘UK film execs make predictions for Brexit impact,’ 9 May 2018, <<https://www.screendaily.com/features/uk-film-execs-make-predictions-for-brexit-impact/5128929.article>>, accessed on 20 March 2021. David Puttnam is probably better-known for his career as film producer, in particular for producing the celebrated *Chariots of Fire* (1981) that made the British so proud when it won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1982.

5 Jenni Davidson, “Brexit is like a TV series that goes on and on with increasingly improbable plotlines,” 5 April 2019, <<https://www.holyrood.com/articles/inside-politics/brexit-tv-series-goes-and-increasingly-improbable-plotlines>>, accessed on 20 March 2021.

6 Kimberley Bond, “These Game of Thrones Brexit references are getting ridiculous,” 15th January 2019, <<https://www.radiotimes.com/news/tv/2019-01-15/brexit-game-of-thrones-comparisons/>>, accessed on 20 March 2021.

an earthquake and be followed by rising tension”.⁷ Conversely, many have been eager to identify films or sitcoms that “anticipated” the referendum outcome, most often citing *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975-1979) as the perfect illustration of the same jingoistic attitudes that led to the Brexit vote. Artistic productions following the 2016 vote were soon labeled “Brexit films” or “Brexit television”.⁸ Although these labels are never clearly defined, they have been used to describe productions that have been perceived as taking part of the ‘zeitgeist’, focusing on the image of the nation that the films convey. Neil Archer, for example, examines in *Cinema and Brexit. The Politics of Popular English Film*⁹ how some specific genres in contemporary popular British cinema (the holiday film, the scientific biopic and the epic) have been reflecting the same values of national pride and national myths that have underpinned the Brexit agenda.

In this article I want to focus on three films whose reception has been skewed by the context of Brexit, and more particularly by the issues related to the referendum and the concomitant political instrumentalisation of the notion of ‘the people’s voice’. I will first examine how the three films, although very different in content and style, have been caught in similar debates about the representation of ‘the people’s voice’ which was so often called upon during the campaign leading to the referendum. I will then contend that in return the films offer some cinematographic reflections about the notion of representation itself, which should be understood both from a political and artistic perspective. At a time when the political scene and media environment are saturated with references to “the people”, when the term itself is overused and much abused, the three films interrogate the very notion of representation, namely what representing a nation and its “people” means. Instead of claiming they convey the ‘true’ voice of the people, each film dramatises the staging of a battle of words, which is thus construed as the essence of the democratic debate. Even more specifically, each film offers a reflection the political power of words through a specific use of its cinematographic tools. In each case, albeit with obvious stylistic differences, both *mise en scène* and montage are what gives a proper dialectical dimension to the film discourse insofar as the narratives are built on a series of ruptures or contrasts that are orchestrated into an organic whole.

Dramatising the “People’s Voice”

Toby Haynes’s *Brexit: the Uncivil War*, which was first broadcast in January 2019 on Channel 4, is reported to be the first major feature film to be made about Britain’s 2016 referendum and offers a behind-the-scene view of how the Leave campaign was orchestrated, since, as its main protagonist explains, “Everyone knows who won. But not everyone knows how.” To do so, it focuses on Leave campaign’s mastermind, the political lobbyist Dominic Cummings, who famously coined the slogan “Take back control”. Some critics have questioned the timing and legitimacy of a drama about such a politically sensitive issue before the outcome of the long, arduous withdrawal process is known or, “to use TV parlance, still

7 Quoted in Caroline Mortimer. ‘EU council president Donald Tusk says UK general election call “a plot twist worth of Hitchcock”.’ *The Independent*, Tuesday 18 April 2017, <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-president-donald-tusk-uk-general-election-plot-twist-theresa-may-alfred-hitchcock-a7689491.html>>, accessed on May 20, 2019.

8 Among other headlines: Jennifer Gannon, “The Apprentice’ is the most Brexit of TV shows, living in a landscape of denial,” Oct 4, 2017, <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/tv-radio-web/the-apprentice-is-the-most-brexit-of-tv-shows-living-in-a-landscape-of-denial-1.3244234>>; Adam Bloodworth, “Don’t Forget The Driver is the Brexit show we need right now,” 9.4.19, <<https://www.thejackalmagazine.com/dont-forget-the-driver-tim-crouch>>, accessed on 20 March 2021.

9 London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

several months from its season finale”.¹⁰ One of the *Guardian’s* critics even called the film “superficial, irresponsible TV” that “only added to the chaos”.¹¹ Others have wondered how one could make a decent movie out of what the *Atlantic’s* journalist describes as “a polarizing, infuriating, exhausting mess”.¹² Since the motivations of playwright and screenwriter James Graham – who is no stranger to commenting on recent British politics¹³ – was to write a “first draft of history”¹⁴ as it were, by “tapping into political and social anxieties and trying to make sense of it through narrative and character”,¹⁵ it is no wonder the film has been interpreted almost exclusively through the prism of the ongoing political debate that Brexit has sparked.

What is more surprising, though, is that even films that do not deal with contemporary Britain and were actually conceived years before the fateful day have been appraised through the troubling prism of the Brexit debate. Two films in particular, Joe Wright’s *Darkest Hour* (2017) and Mike Leigh’s *Peterloo* (2018), have been used to draw correlations with the present. Now it is a truism that all films reflect their production time or may acquire unexpected additional meanings through their resonances with actual events. Screenwriter Anthony McCarten and director Joe Wright have explained that, although they conceived their film some years before the referendum, they were repeatedly asked about their resonances with the present, of which they readily conceded, the first speaking of “a portrait in leadership [that] has suddenly become a very relevant thing”¹⁶, the other conceding that “as we made the film events came over us like a great wave, and suddenly the film became strangely topical.”¹⁷ Likewise, Mike Leigh explained they started working on the project after *Mr Turner* in 2014 but found themselves thinking on a daily basis it was becoming more and more relevant to the present day: “What we couldn’t have anticipated is that in the half decade that’s happened since then, things have lurched in an astonishingly dangerous direction and the question of democracy is everywhere, [...] certainly in that afflicted place called the United Kingdom, the dis-united Kingdom actually.”¹⁸

10 Alice Jones, “Brexit Is Dividing Britain. So Is a Brexit Movie,” Jan. 10, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/arts/television/brexit-the-uncivil-war-benedict-cumberbatch.html>>, accessed on 30 March 2021.

11 Lucy Mangan, “Brexit: The Uncivil War review – superficial, irresponsible TV,” Mon 7 Jan 2019, last modified on Fri 11 Jan 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jan/07/brexit-the-uncivil-war-review-superficial-irresponsible-tv-cumberbatch>>, accessed on 30 April 2021.

12 Sophie Gilbert, “Brexit Is Chaos. The Movie About It Is Anything But,” Jan 17, 2019, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/01/how-james-graham-made-sense-of-brexit/580567/>>, accessed on 30 March 2021.

13 James Graham, born in 1982, has been hailed as one of the most prominent British political dramatists of the age. His breakthrough play in 2012 entitled *This House* was about the scheming and shenanigans in British Parliament in the second half of the 1970s. Other plays also focused on recent British politics. *The Vote’s* final night on stage was also broadcast live at the exact time as the play is set, since it narrates the closing of the polling for the 2015 general election 7 May 2015. As its title indicates, the 2015 television film *Coalition* was about the coalition government following the 2010 general election. *Labour of Love*, which opened in 2017, scrutinised the evolution of the Labour Party through the life of a Labour MP over 25 years in office.

14 Quoted in Alice Jones “Brexit Is Dividing Britain. So Is a Brexit Movie,” Jan. 10, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/10/arts/television/brexit-the-uncivil-war-benedict-cumberbatch.html>>, accessed on 30 April 2021.

15 “Interview with writer James Graham for *Brexit: The Uncivil War*.” 28 December 2018, <<https://www.channel4.com/press/news/interview-writer-james-graham-brexit-uncivil-war>>, accessed on 30 April 2021.

16 Quoted in Joe Deckelmeier, “Darkest Hour Writer Tried To Find ‘The Human Inside the Myth’,” Dec 08, 2017 <<https://screenrant.com/darkest-hour-interview-anthony-mccarten/>>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

17 Quoted in Andrew Pulver, “Winston Churchill of Darkest Hour a rebuke to Trump, says film’s director,” 28 Sep 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/28/darkest-hour-trailer-trump-churchill-gary-oldman--joe-wright>>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

18 The comment appears in the DVD commentary and in different interviews, for instance for the US channel salon.com, dated 12 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImCeki6_KQ4>, accessed on 6 April

Indeed, both *Darkest Hour* and *Peterloo* deal with a critical moment in a troubled period of British history. *Darkest Hour* relates the first weeks when Winston Churchill took over as Prime Minister and stood alone against Nazi Germany and the Axis. As its title indicates, Leigh's film focuses on what has become known as the Peterloo Massacre, when, on the 16th August 1819, a crowd of about 60,000 people gathered peacefully in Manchester as part of their campaign for Parliamentary reform, and were brutally attacked by armed local militia and the cavalry, resulting in at least 15 deaths and up to 600 wounded. Even more importantly, beyond the significant differences in content and style, both films, like *Brexit: the Uncivil War*, deal with a pivotal moment in British history when the notion of democracy is at stake. Each articulates to some extent a reflection about the representation of the "people's voice", which explains why the films have struck a chord with the ongoing debate about the referendum. Marking the commemoration of the bicentenary, *Peterloo* relates what is considered one defining event in the long struggle of the British people to obtain a meaningful political voice, at a time when less than 3% of the population had access to the vote, while exposing the corruption, social inequalities, class hatred and prejudice that plagued Regency Britain. *Brexit* offers an up-to-date depiction of the gulf that has occurred between the political and metropolitan elite that doesn't know, or care about, people living in other, economically depressed, parts of the country. When Cummings organises a tour in a run-down housing estate, the MP is as astonished to learn the place is in his constituency as the couple whom they visit are surprised to see him.

In *Darkest Hour* one scene in particular has drawn much attention. The scene, which is entirely fictional, shows Churchill taking a ride on the Underground, following the King's advice to "Go to the people". There the Prime Minister meets a convenient cross-section of British citizens, including an Empire subject who quotes Macaulay's heroic poem *Horatius* (1842). As he later describes them, they are the "Brave, good, true citizens of this kingdom" whom he decides to consult on what course of action he should take:

Let me ask you something that's been, uh, weighing on my mind. Perhaps you can provide me with an answer. You, uh, the British people, what is your mood? [...] Now let me ask you this. If the worst came to pass and-and the enemy were to appear on those... those streets above, what would you do? [...] And what if I put it to you all that we might... if we, uh... if we ask nicely... get very favorable terms from Mr. Hitler if we enter into a peace deal with him right now? What would you say to that?

Unsurprisingly, the scene, which has been aptly described as a "St. Crispin's Day speech from District line",¹⁹ has crystallised some very harsh criticism. The *Irish Times*' reviewer called it "abysmal",²⁰ the *Guardian* "patronising" and "contrived".²¹ A.O. Scott in the *New York Times* taxed the filmmakers with "sham populism", arguing that the film "falls back on an idealized notion of the English character that feels, in present circumstances, less nostalgic than downright reactionary, [...]. Rather than invite the audience to think about the difficulties of democratic governance at a time of peril, the filmmakers promote passivity and hero-worship, offering not so much a Great Man Theory as a great man fetish."²² The film was even

2021.

19 John Broich, "What's Fact and What's Fiction in *Darkest Hour*" Dec 08, 2017, <<https://slate.com/culture/2017/12/whats-fact-and-whats-fiction-in-darkest-hour.html>>, accessed on 3 April 2021. Interestingly, the reference to the famous quote that has been used to encapsulate British fortitude and raise spirit in the face of adversity appears in *Brexit* just after the results of the referendum have been proclaimed: "From this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered."

20 Donald Clarke, "Darkest Hour review: Oldman is chunky, the script is clunky" Jan 10, 2018, <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/darkest-hour-review-oldman-is-chunky-the-script-is-clunky-1.3349659>>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

21 Wendy Ide, "Darkest Hour review – the woman behind a very great man," 14 Jan 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/14/darkest-hour-review-gary-oldman-kristin-scott-thomas-churchill>>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

22 A.O. Scott, "Review: 'Darkest Hour,' or the Great Man Theory of History (and Acting),"

qualified by former *Daily Telegraph* editor Charles Moore, as “superb Brexit propaganda” though “possibly by accident”.²³ What these critics have failed to see, however, is that Churchill may be depicted as the leader who understands and personifies the nation, the film also presents his vision of the people through emphatically unrealistic tableaux. In two echoing scenes (at 13:00 and 1:33:00), some various members of the population are filmed in the street “doing business as usual”. Filmed in two long tracking shots from Churchill’s car in slow motion, and set to a melancholy piano music, the two scenes may convey the nostalgic vision of a world under threat but the choice of conspicuous filmic devices that highlights the subjectivisation of the point of view ultimately underscores the fantasy view of such a nation.

In his article for the collective work called *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple ?*, Georges Didi-Huberman recalls that the representation of the people meets a double aporia, which comes from the impossibility of subsuming either term, *representation* and *people*, under a single univocal concept.²⁴ My contention is that in the three films the question of democracy is not conveyed through the presumptuous claim to provide a “true” representation of the people but through the staging and dramatisation of a battle of words which is construed as the essence of the democratic debate. Interestingly, the films have been criticised for being “about talk: talk, talk, and more talk”,²⁵ at best “unapologetically wordy”²⁶ or downright verbose, tending towards “a flowery wordiness”²⁷ at worst. Indeed what is striking is that the three films are structured around a series of discourses, public harangues or monologues, most of them taken from historical records, which all revolve around the question of conveying the “voice” of the people.

A battle of Words for Democracy

Screenwriter Anthony McCarten explained that he conceived *Darkest Hour* around three of Churchill’s famous speeches²⁸ which he considers “three of the greatest speeches ever written” and which he likens to “three tentpoles that would hold up the whole tent”. He then defines the film as “a portrait of leadership conducted mainly through words and the spoken word in a series of meetings that happened over a very short period of days.”²⁹ In this respect *Darkest Hour* appears to fit the traditional genre of the biopic and more specifically the

Nov. 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/movies/darkest-hour-review-gary-oldman.html?referrer=google_kp>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

23 Charles Moore, “Darkest Hour is superb Brexit propaganda.” *The Spectator*, 3 February 2018, <<https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/02/darkest-hour-is-superb-brexite-propaganda/>>, accessed on 3 July 2019.

24 Georges Didi-Huberman, “Rendre sensible”, in A. Badiou, P. Bourdieu, J. Butler, G. Didi-Huberman, S. Khiari, J. Rancière, *Qu’est-ce qu’un peuple ?*, Paris : La Fabrique éditions, 2013, 77-114, 77.

25 Peter Bradshaw, “Peterloo review – grit and brilliance in Mike Leigh’s very British massacre,”

1 Sep 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/sep/01/peterloo-review-grit-and-brilliance-in-mike-leighs-very-british-massacre>>, accessed on 6 July 2019.

26 Wendy Ide, “Darkest Hour review – the woman behind a very great man,” 14 Jan 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/14/darkest-hour-review-gary-oldman-kristin-scott-thomas-churchill>>, accessed on 3 July 2019.

27 John Bleasdale, “Peterloo first look: Mike Leigh’s cudgel for a massacre,” 5 October 2018, <<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/peterloo-mike-leigh-cudgel-massacre>>, accessed on 6 July 2019.

28 Extracts from Churchill’s first speech as Prime Minister to the House of Commons “Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat” May 13, 1940, from his first BBC broadcast as Prime Minister to the British People “Be Ye Men of Valour” May 19, 1940, and the end of his famous speech in the House of Commons, June 4, 1940 “We Shall Fight on the Beaches”. See <<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat-2/> <<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/be-ye-men-of-valour/> and <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/>.

subgenre of the portrait of the Great Man. Churchill may be depicted with doubts and flaws, he is depicted as the leader who understands and personifies the nation, as the aforementioned scene on the Underground underlines. In this regard, the film upholds the popular icon he has become, rooted mainly in 1940 and the myth of the “People’s War”. His first apparition is thus appropriately delayed. Churchill doesn’t appear before more than 6 minutes into the film but his presence is already signalled through the iconic signposts that have become synonymous with the man: first the top hat, isolated in a close shot on his seat in Parliament (significantly ending the first sequence), the close ups of whisky and wine being poured for breakfast and then the flashing light of the famous cigar that only briefly illuminates his face. Although the icon is meant to be humanised through, for example, the use of the secretary’s point-of-view with whom the audience can identify, the film perpetuates the myth, as the highly dramatic lighting underlines, isolating the man through either sharply-defined directional shafts of light or contrastive backlighting. Likewise, as Mark Connelly recalls in his study of the myths and collective memory of the second World War in Britain, the popular image of Churchill as the inspirational leader seeing the British people “through both their finest hours and darkest days” is “very much connected with his skills as an orator”.³⁰ However, the originality of the portrayal resides in the focus on language as the organic principle that relates the man to history. His speeches are not only emphatically dramatised through sharp chiaroscuro effects and the remarkable acting of Gary Oldman,³¹ they are shown in their organic, carefully wrought-out elaboration, from dictation to rereading to last-minute corrections or to the secretary’s lip-synching; letters are detached in extreme close ups as they are being typed (for example as the word “sweat” is pronounced”), words rapped out as the typewriter’s keys are being struck, eloquent pauses underscored by carriage returns and the removal of paper in slow motion.

Significantly, his second speech is given a literal echo, as if to prefigure its resonance in the collective memory of the nation.³² It also includes one of the most spectacular editing in the film, which is undoubtedly one of the best examples of the recurrent dramatic shifts of scale that characterise the film (and are one of the trademarks of the director Joe Wright). As Churchill is filmed reading his speech in a BBC studio flooded with the red light of the recording lamp, the camera frames his spectacled eyes in an extreme close shot before cutting to an aerial shot of a battle field strewn with multiple blazing points of impact of bombings that spread to the right until it reaches a curtain of dark smoke. This turns out to be the earthy dust that partly covers the cheek of a dead soldier filmed in close shot with one eye wide open reflecting the red glow of the bombings which in turn leads back to the red light of the BBC studio. Words are here literally part of the battle field. Rather than simply being illustrated,³³ they are shown to transcend places and time.

As the very last words of the film, pronounced by his political opponent Viscount Halifax, sums up, Churchill’s leadership is equated with his wordcraft: “He mobilised the English language and sent it into battle.” However, Churchill may use language as a weapon and wield it to inspire, he is also depicted as the man who turns Parliament from a battlefield into a stage. Just after the short sequence of archive footage recalling the dire situation the

29 Quoted in Jazz Tangcay, “Great Winston Churchill in Darkest Hour,” October 24, 2017, <<https://www.awardsdaily.com/2017/10/24/interview-anthony-mccarten-takes-great-winston-churchill-darkest-hour/>>, accessed on 3 April 2021.

30 Mark Connelly, *We can take it! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2004, 120-124.

31 Gary Oldman was widely acclaimed for his performance as Winston Churchill, which earned him the Academy Award for Best Actor.

32 Mark Connelly recalls how people thought they actually heard the 1940 speeches although only one was broadcast on the radio while the others were delivered in the Commons (live broadcasting from Parliament began in the 1970s) and recorded only later. (Connelly 122-3).

33 They also illustrate the specific words uttered at that moment: “...whatever the cost ...and the agony maybe”.

Western world was in at the beginning of May 1940, the House of Commons is significantly introduced as a battlefield, filmed in the same vertical high angle shot as the previous aerial map that charted the rapid progression of the German invasion. When Churchill is first seen entering Parliament (22:10), he is filmed walking through doors opening like the rise of the curtain onto a stage and his first speech as Prime Minister is significantly preceded by three chimes of Big Ben, like the three blows heralding the rising of the curtain. Ultimately the scene is echoed at the very end after the third speech: this time Churchill is filmed walking briskly towards the camera while it tracks back until the doors close, the stage curtain coming down as it were. The Parliament is literally reasserted as a place of representation.

The Clashing Voices of History

Peterloo is a far cry from the Great Man Theory of History, but the film also proceeds largely through the agency of lengthy speeches about political representation and democracy. Historian Robert Poole observed that thanks to letters, the accounts written in many protagonists' memoirs, the extensive transcripts of legal hearings and eye-witnesses' testimonies and the wide press coverage at the time, the Peterloo massacre is "one of the best-documented events in British history."³⁴ Working with historian Jacqueline Riding,³⁵ Leigh used many of the historical discourses verbatim.³⁶ The meeting at St Peter's field actually does not occur before about one hour and forty minutes of expository scenes that are devised to introduce the necessary historical background information, the main protagonists and the issues at stake. One scene, set in the office of the *Manchester Observer*, may well appear to act as a metaleptic comment on Leigh's concern to give a thoroughly informed account of the events. As the reformers and journalists John Knight and John Saxton discuss how to report about the suspension of the Habeas Corpus that was decreed in February 1817, Knight declares: "We have a duty to our readers to explain what a barbaric act this is. It may be that not every reader will understand what Habeas Corpus means." (59:00). This has led many critics and reviewers to deplore the didactic aspect of the narrative, one critic even speaking of a film inspiring "lecture fatigue".³⁷ John Harris's comment in the *Guardian* is quite typical in this regard: "It's a little too heavy on clunky dialogue that makes even minor asides sound like political speeches."³⁸

In particular, one recurrent reproach was that the characters were reduced to be mouthpieces illustrating the different types of arguments and discourses which were used both by the

34 Robert Poole, "'By the Law or the Sword': Peterloo Revisited," 29 March 2006, <<https://doi.org.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr/10.1111/j.1468-229X.2006.00366.x>>, accessed on 6 April 2021.

35 Jacqueline Riding already worked as historical consultant for Mike Leigh's previous film *Mr. Turner* (2014) and wrote *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018) as a tie-in to the film.

36 Documents include letters from the magistrates (including Ethelston's poor joke when sentencing poor Margaret Micklethwaite who was found intoxicated in the cellar and convicted for the thefts of "two bottles of excellent claret", after she has explained she went to the cellar because she saw a ghost in the attic, "Indeed! So, afeared of the spirit in the attic, you partook of the spirit in the cellar"), letters and memoirs of the reformers John Saxton, John Knight, Henry Hunt, Samuel Bamford and John Bagguley, speeches reported verbatim by newspapers, like Susanna Saxton's address to the Manchester Female Reform Society printed in the *Manchester Observer*, 31 July 1819 (catalogue reference HO 42/190 f.11), large extracts of the Prince Regent's speech for the State Opening of Parliament on 28 January 1817, Home Office Disturbances Papers.

37 Nigel Andrews, "Mike Leigh's Peterloo is a bloated, right-on bellow," October 31, 2018, <<https://www.ft.com/content/12d6ff60-dd17-11e8-8f50-cbae5495d92b>>, accessed on 6 April 2021.

38 John Harris, "Peterloo shaped modern Britain, as much as any king or queen did,"

29 Oct 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/29/peterloo-britain-kings-queens-mike-leigh-massacre>>, accessed on 6 April 2021.

reformers and the authorities that were eager to suppress what they considered “a dangerous threat of rampant insurrection”.³⁹ In this respect the addition of the fictional working class family is quite meaningful. Although they provide a counterpoint to all the historical figures, they are significantly given no surname and never given a privileged perspective as would be the case in a Hollywood film, whereby historical events are experienced through the subjective prism of the individual. And when a subjective perspective is foregrounded, it is ironically underscored by the restricted viewpoint it provides, whether it is Joseph looking utterly bewildered at Waterloo or the family complaining they can “hear and see nowt” at St Peter’s field. Instead, they act as a sort of chorus, commenting on “big” historical events like the Corn laws in simple, “vulgarized” words which at times may sound contrived. Joseph’s character in particular is a perfect case in point, embodying the dismal ironical link that was soon established between the battle of Waterloo and the massacre, hence the name it was given.

What makes Leigh’s film differ from the illustration of a historical book, however, is the emphasis on texture. People’s language is by no means reduced to their speeches, but is conveyed through the tone of their voices, the regional accents⁴⁰ and dialect,⁴¹ the postures, the small gestures. Above all, what makes it differ from a series of tableaux is the original treatment of time and history.-Leigh’s film is first and foremost about a collective event which is filmed in what is close to real time (if we can trust the testimonies) but whose meaning is brought to light through a narrative that proceeds by accretion, through repetition (for example the three successive court scenes introducing three of the magistrates, the reformers’ meetings) and most specifically by contrast. Contrast is underscored from the start to illustrate “the return of the soldiers”, opposing the vote for Wellington’s sumptuous reward to the fate of ordinary, traumatised redcoats left to themselves. The same effect occurs with the juxtaposition of the pandemonic charge at the rally and the horse race, filmed in bright colours, which General Byng attends. Cross-editing is also consistently used to depict the preparations for the mass meeting and the actions of the different factions convening just before the violent onslaught. However, if the film foregrounds a plurality of voices at play, by no means does it signify that all discourses are given the same value. There is no doubt whose side Mike Leigh is on. What it illustrates is the organic development in the chain of events (as when the camera follows one character from one scene where he was a mere figure in the background to another where he is given a more prominent role), and a dialectic view of history that reveals its fractures.⁴²

Mike Leigh explained that making a historical film did not alter his original approach to filmmaking. The director is well-known for working without a script, instead developing his film through an improvisational approach or, to be more precise, through a process involving actors and collaborators in several months of in-depth research, discussions and rehearsal before the actual shooting. Leigh’s alternative approach to mainstream cinema seems ideally suited to offer a counter-history that would retrieve the Peterloo Massacre from its relegation as a footnote in history books.⁴³ One short scene in particular appears to be a self-reflexive comment on this approach. While Henry Hunt is sitting to have his portrait painted, the

39 The words used by Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth to General Byng.

40 As would be expected, most of the middle-class and working-class characters have a broad Lancastrian accent; Henry Hunt however has a distinct accent from the West Country (he was born in Wiltshire).

41 Leigh explains in the DVD commentary (28:00) that Samuel Bamford, who wrote an account of Peterloo in his memoirs, was also the author of a book about South Lancashire dialect, which they found very useful. Examples of such words and phrases used in the film are: “no striking” (no crying), “see thee”, “you daft barmpot!” (idiot); “You’re talking bullscutter” (bullshit), “don’t belder at me” (shout like a bull) “Stop mithering!” (stop fussing or moaning).

42 In this respect Leigh’s depiction of Peterloo is much in keeping with E.M. Thompson’s analysis in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) who sees the massacre originating in “the panic of class hatred” (752).

camera tracks out from the famous orator to include in the frame the anonymous painter and a servant going about her chores. She is then asked to assist the political reformer by holding down a piece of paper so he can write on it. The girl, demure and awed, asks candidly: “shall I be in the picture?” (1:28:00). As the painter answers, she will definitely not be part of the official report of history, but of course she is in the picture, a reminder of all the unknowns that remain unaccounted for in the history books.

The Shambolic Cacophony of the Democratic Debate

Now another type of counter-history is at the heart of *Brexit: the Uncivil War*. The film may take on the Great Man Theory of History, whereby a single individual can change the course of history, its main protagonist had, at least until the film’s release, remained in the shadows, far from the limelight of the political scenes. Rather, the film follows the narrative arc of another subgenre of biopics in which the outsider, the oddball geeky figure and maverick thinker eventually beats the establishment. Based on interviews with the campaign strategists involved, on the published accounts of *Sunday Times*’ political editor Tim Shipman and Remain campaign director Craig Oliver who also acted as a consultant on the film,⁴⁴ and on Dominic Cummings’s blog and other public pronouncements,⁴⁵ *Brexit: the Uncivil War* purports to deconstruct the strategies used by the Leave campaign, set against the campaigning tactics used by Remain and Farage’s UKIP.⁴⁶ It aims at demonstrating how the democratic debate was “hacked”, to quote Dominic Cummings when he declares that what he wants is “to hack the political system” or, in the terms of the fictional public inquiry that opens and closes the film, “to investigate the use of our personal data in political campaigns, and the way in which it is rapidly altering democratic processes here.”

The film was thus criticised for somehow exonerating politicians from any responsibility, reducing them to puppets or cartoonish buffoons.⁴⁷ But the whole point is precisely to focus on Cummings’s perspective, a man who regards himself as a “disrupter of history”, claiming Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Bismarck, Mao and Sun Tzu as his aspirations, and conducting his political campaign like a war.⁴⁸ From the onset Cummings is depicted as a disruptive figure. Appropriately, the opening shot shows him breaking the fourth wall. If this transgression of the fictional world has now become a narrative convention, it still highlights the highly ambiguous nature of the address, ostensibly meant to establish connivance with the

43 Mike Leigh explained in an interview that: “What is remarkable for me is that people in Manchester and the northwest are proud of our socialist history,” he says. “And yet, Peterloo wasn’t really talked about.” “Mike Leigh interview: ‘Intelligent, working people voted for Brexit – but what role did the truth play?’” <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/mike-leigh-interview-peterloo-brexit-working-class-politics-trade-unions-protest-a8608296.html>>, accessed on 6 April 2021.

44 Tim Shipman’s book is entitled, *all Out War*, Craig Oliver’s *Unleashing Demons*.

45 See James Graham’s interview in Cadwalladr. The film’s foreword is not as specific and states “This drama is based on real events and interviews with key people who were there. Some aspects of dialogue, character and scenes have been devised for the purpose of dramatisation.”

46 Although contrastive devices prevail, a parallel is explicitly made through two consecutive scenes showing first Cummings who meets and hires Canadian Zack Massingham, co-founder of AggregateIQ, then Arron Banks who meets Robert Mercer to discuss their connection with the data firm Cambridge Analytica.

47 See for example Charlotte O’Brien, Professor of Law at the University of York, “*Brexit: The Uncivil War* – what it told us, and what it didn’t.” 9 January 2019, <<http://theconversation.com/brexit-the-uncivil-war-what-it-told-us-and-what-it-didnt-109532>>, accessed on 30 March 2021, or Andrew Rawnsley, *Observer* chief political commentator, “*Brexit: The Uncivil War* – four political insiders give their verdicts.” *The Guardian*, 6 Jan 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jan/06/brexit-uncivil-war-reviews-andrew-rawnsley-gina-miller-gloria-de-piero-shahmir-sanni>>, accessed on 30 March 2021.

48 Terms related to warfare abound in the dialogue and in particular in Cummings’ lines.

viewers and yet associated with Machiavellian characters.⁴⁹ Even more significantly, in a prologue sequence, he is filmed in a rapid succession of unconnected close and medium shots in different places and times, from a storage closet to the public inquiry committee to interviews with business consultants. Time in particular appears out of joint, as the sequence intermingles what retrospectively is construed as a near future (the public inquiry) with the scenes referring to the main flashback (Cummings mulling over in his closet). From the start, the narrative is propelled by discontinuity, countering any logical development or rather following the only logic of Cummings's abstruse high-flown rhetoric, in voice in as well as voice over, and cutting on action his abrupt head movements.

What the opening sequence foregrounds is how skewed Cummings's vision is, setting the tone of a film dominated by a highly fractured montage bridged over by his manic flow of words. Throughout the film, the main protagonist is repeatedly filmed in close shots with a slight fish bowl effect that highlights the self-centered, hyperactive and monomaniac mind of the character. The comic freeze-frames of some key protagonists stamped with their political positions, the fast jaunty pace of the narrative that is punctuated by a countdown to create a pseudo suspense only highlight the ironical discrepancy between the gravity of the subject and the orchestration of the campaign as a personal challenge and revenge. The film thus underscores how ironical the course of history has become, whose distortion is encapsulated through turning a state-of-a-nation issue into the biopic of a man who claims to sum up the "general feeling" of the people but is portrayed as a scornful, amoral, asocial, egotistic sort of genius bent on destroying the system.⁵⁰ It is therefore quite surprising that some journalists praised *Brexit: the Uncivil War* for telling "a story of forgotten people finding their voice".⁵¹ Such interpretation seems to be a blatant misreading of the film whose actual narrative is superseded by a political agenda. On the contrary, the "people's voice" in the film is equated to abstract data to mine and the nation itself is depicted as a background noise of "groans"⁵² into which to tap. Most tellingly, when Cummings declares he has been conducting field studies, he is filmed in a montage of disjointed scenes in pubs and bars where he keeps fielding biased questions⁵³ – but no answers have been kept in the editing. Cummings has got the final cut as it were. He is also shown to have the final word, although he seems for once at a loss to find words.

Just before the epilogue, Cummings admits he can't hear the noise of the nation anymore. Meanwhile the political debate has been shown to be reduced to a shambolic cacophony that is illustrated by the jarring, slightly eerie rendition of *God Save the Queen* and Elgar's *Land of Hope and Glory*. In two other scenes that stand apart for their documentary-like quality, the Remain campaign team is shown in complete disarray before the commotion that their focus

49 The device was made popular by Underwood's asides in *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), and was already used in the British version of the series (BBC, 1990) and of course owes much to the stage, and in particular the Shakespearean characters of Richard III and Iago.

50 In the film Oliver Craig describes Cummings as "basically mental" and "an egotist with a wrecking ball".

51 Charles Moore, "Brexit, the uncivil war, rages on because our MPs continue to ignore the voters," *The Telegraph*, 11 January 2019.

52 "Britain makes a noise. An actual noise, did you know that? [...] It groans. It's been groaning for some time." These are actually the first words of the film, uttered by Cummings.

53 The barrage of questions is as follows: "So what is it you don't like about the European Union? Is it the size of it? What is it you don't like about the EU? What is it you don't like? What about it? The fact it's "over there"? [...] What about it? What about immigration? Is it immigration? Is it immigration? You can be honest, is it immigration? What about immigration? Is it race? Is it different races not mixing? Is it race? Not being integrated? [...] You think there should be a cap on immigration? Is it the numbers? Maybe it's the numbers? You think it's too many too? [...] Is it the type of people they're bringing over? Is it too many? What's too many for you? You don't believe the numbers? You think they're not being counted properly, you don't think you can trust the figures? [...] Which countries don't you like that have already joined? That have joined already? Why not? Why not? Why not? And who don't you want to join next? Who don't you want to join next? Why, why don't you want... Why? Why? Why not? Why? Why don't you?"

group meetings have become, realising how much their factual arguments and sensible rhetoric have become disconnected from the population in a media environment saturated by fake news and constant appeal to emotions. Democratic debates have been superseded by loud angry arguments, where “nobody listens to each other, they just yell.”⁵⁴ Articulate discourses have been engulfed in spurious slogans and soundbites which invade the screen in hectic montage sequences of news footage or of flashing screen inserts.

Jean-Luc Godard, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998) that explores the relationships between cinema and history, refers to Sieyès’ famous quote from his political pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?*⁵⁵ and rewrites its ternary questions to interrogate the nature and power of cinema: “What is cinema? Nothing. What does it desire to be? Everything. What can it do? Something...”⁵⁶ In the case of the three films examined here, this ‘something’ is to revisit troubled times in past or more recent British history when the issue of democracy was at stake. More specifically, at a time when the political scene and media environment are saturated with references to “the people”, when the term “people” is being overused and misused, they mobilise the film medium not only to question what to “represent” a nation means but how the issue of representation is related to discourses and the power of words.

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54 In a fictional scene where the directors of the two rival campaigns meet and have a drink, Craig accuses Cummings of “feeding a toxic culture, where nobody can trust or believe anything [...] where nobody listens to each other, they just yell.”

55 “*What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been hitherto in the political order? Nothing. What does it desire to be? To become something...*” *What Is the Third Estate? (Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?)* was written in January 1789, shortly before the outbreak of the French Revolution, by the French writer and clergyman Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836). The pamphlet was Sieyès’ response to finance Minister Jacques Necker’s invitation for writers to state how they thought the Estates-General should be organized. Sieyès stated that the people wanted genuine representatives in the Estates-General, equal representation to the other two orders taken together, and votes taken by heads and not by orders.

56 “*Qu’est-ce que le cinéma ? Rien. Que veut-il ? Tout. Que peut-il ? Quelque chose.*”

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