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In the Brexit Mood: Film Critics and British World War II Cinema After 2016

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Abstract

A wave of British World War II films was released in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum: *Dunkirk*, *Darkest Hour*, *Their Finest*, *Churchill* and *Hurricane*. The paper offers a preliminary reading of these films' reviews in the British and, for comparative purposes, German press. The reviews are read as an immediate response of critics who anticipated the films' likely impacts on audiences in Brexit-haunted times.

Brexit Moods, Brexit Films, Brexit Reviews

Pro-Brexit discourse frequently invoked a past when Britain was 'great' and could be proud of itself, in comparison to the second decade of the 21st century. Ali Smith captures this retrospective mood in one of the first novels responding to the Leave referendum. A passage of *Autumn* (first published in 2016) evokes a country literally and symbolically besieged with old things: 'All across the country all the things from the past stacked on the shelves in the shops and the barns and the warehouses, piled into display units and on top of display units' (Smith 2017: 219). In the same vein, nostalgia for the British Empire is diagnosed in countless Brexit-related books and articles. Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson (2019: 3), for instance, suggest in *Rule Britannia* that 'in the near future the EU referendum will become widely recognised and understood as part of the last vestiges of empire working their way out of the British psyche'. Afua Hirsch (2018: 271), in her provocative memoir *Brit(ish)*, registers the 'role of nostalgia in our current political discourse' and pays special attention to its distressing consequences for the British BAME community. David Hare (2019: 26) speaks of 'fantasies of empire' in a *New Statesman* symposium on the 'state of emergency', published one week before Brexit was supposed to have happened.

One could add many further analyses of this kind, some of which were made specifically in relation to a wave of period films released in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. Several of these films revisit the days of (waning) imperial greatness, such as *A United Kingdom* (2016), *Victoria and Abdul* (2017) and *Viceroy's House* (2017). Even more prominent in the Brexit context are recent British films about the Second Word War and its preeminent leader figure, Winston Churchill, where the war serves, in Robert Eaglestone's words, as a 'signifier for a rooted Britishness or even Englishness' (2018: 97). The Second World War was a defining event for Europe and its post-war relationship with the UK; Churchill, who campaigned for a united Europe after the war, was claimed by both the campaigners for Leave and the supporters of Remain during the Brexit debate. [1] The best known, and commercially most successful, of the recent World War II films are Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (released in 2017) and Joe Wright's biopic about Churchill, *Darkest Hour* (2018), which portrays Churchill as antagonised by his peace-seeking cabinet during the Dunkirk crisis. These films were preceded by *Their Finest* and *Churchill* (both released in 2017) and followed by *Hurricane* (released in 2018). My focus in this paper will be on such films' reviews in the British and, for comparative purposes, German press, rather than on the films themselves. I assume that the review genre is particularly sensitive to the power of cinema as a seismograph of the contemporary zeitgeist, and that critics tend to ascribe such sensitivity also to the makers and audiences of films. It is likely that the recent wave of World War II films was inspired by the 60th anniversary of the war's end, which

overlapped with the centenary commemorations of World War I. As will be seen, however, many critics are less interested in how the films present the past and are instead more interested in how they speak to the present. I will therefore read the film reviews as an immediate response of critics who anticipated the films' likely impacts on audiences in Brexit-haunted times.

It is obvious that World War II films released after June 2016 should be associated with Brexit and Brexit-related moods. The Second World War 'continues to exercise a powerful hold over the British imagination' (Havardi 2014: 11), specifically as a time of national effort and collective heroism. The cultural memory of the War has been continually revisited and revised to suit the interpretive needs of respective presents. Much of this cultural memory is focused on 1940, the year of many iconic events in the nation's history: the Dunkirk evacuations, the Blitz and the Battle of Britain—historical events which, in mythified and heroised shapes, evoke the idea of Britain standing alone against the enemy and its people standing together, enduring the war both at the front and at home. In 21st-century Britain, 1940 has been mobilised not only to serve the government's austerity measures after the financial crisis, but also 'in support of opposition to British membership of the European Union', as Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson observe (2014: 3).[2]

As big-budget productions, *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* have attracted the bulk of film-critical attention. Many reviewers, and not only British ones, comment on the films' Britishness, and this is not over-interpreted because Britishness was also on the filmmakers' minds. For example, Christopher Nolan affirmed in an interview that the Britishness of the Dunkirk story was important to him, and he expressed satisfaction that he was able to convince Warner Bros. that the story would, despite its Britishness, have enough 'universal appeal' to deserve their money (James 2017: 24-25). Neither *Dunkirk* nor *Darkest Hour* were intended to be interventions in the Brexit debate, but when they were released in the United Kingdom, it seemed almost inevitable that they were received as 'metaphorical readings' (James 2017: 27) of the contemporary situation. As one commentator noted in the *Guardian*, while their origins 'had nothing to do with Europhobia or the nationalism that was gathering in provincial England', the two films came to be perceived 'as a reflection and endorsement of the Brexit mood' and appealed to 'an England congratulating itself on its past' (Jack 2018). The other films I will consider in this paper were less expensive and less successful at the box office, and reviewers vary in the extent to which they relate the films to Brexit—even though the films' themes, plots and characters allow such association: *Churchill* is another biopic about the great man; *Hurricane* tells the story of Polish pilots in the Battle of Britain; *Their Finest* stages the making of a film about Dunkirk. With the exception of *Churchill*, which is set on the eve of D-Day in 1944, the films are set in 1940, a year that gave occasion to some of Churchill's most stirring speeches: the post-Dunkirk 'We will fight on the beaches', delivered in Parliament on the 4th of June; 'Their finest hour', given in the House of Commons on the 18th of June; and 'Never was so much owed by so many to so few' on the 20th of August, which honours the heroic endeavour of the air force in the Battle of Britain.

These emotive speeches are part of the affect memory (cf. Eaglestone 2018: 96) of the Second World War in Britain, and when they are evoked (directly or indirectly) in the films, they converge with the affect-charged climate surrounding Brexit. One may well diagnose Brexit Britain as an example of what William Davies (2018), a political economist and sociologist, calls 'nervous states': the phenomenon that people are increasingly relying on feeling and shared moods rather than fact in political decision-making and in the articulation of political belief. Given the current political climate in Britain (and other countries), it is understandable why Raymond Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling' has gained new critical currency (e.g. the volume edited by Sharma and Tygstrup 2015; also cf. Eaglestone 2018: 93). The *Oxford Dictionary of the Social Sciences* gives a concise definition of 'structures of feeling' as referring to 'the general organization of emotion and experience in a given period' and to 'the ways in which common values or shared generational experiences shape

subjective experience' (Calhoun 2002). The *Dictionary of Critical Theory* explicates further that 'Williams uses the term feeling rather than thought to signal that what is at stake may not yet be articulated in a fully worked-out form, but has rather to be inferred by reading between the lines' (Buchanan 2010: 455). According to Williams, literature and the arts give access to structures of feelings, and my following analysis claims that critics of the World War II films under discussion read between the lines of the cinematic texts, probing them for the motives and moods from which Brexit arose, for the versions of Britishness they project, and for the way they configure Britain's relationship with Europe. Of course, such probing reflects the critics' political sympathies and those of the metropolitan elites to which they belong. The reviews thus capture a specific angle on Brexit, but even so they are pieces of cultural analysis as much as of film criticism. My discussion begins with reviews of *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* as the two most visible films, and those which were most emphatically located in the Brexit context. It will then proceed to *Hurricane* and *Churchill* and the way in which these films complicate the established heroic narrative of Britain and Churchill during the war. Finally, I will look at *Their Finest*, a Dunkirk film with a meta-cinematic dimension that seems to have interfered with a metaphorical reading of the film as Brexit cinema.

Dunkirk and *Darkest Hour*: The Films and the Reviews

Dunkirk and *Darkest Hour* have often been discussed as suggesting parallels between present-day Britain and Britain in 1940 (see, e.g. Bradshaw 2017b; Jack 2018). Not only were they reviewed by regular film critics, they also elicited more general comment in the culture and opinion sections of newspapers and magazines. In a cover story for the *New Statesman*, for instance, the writer Nicholas Shakespeare asked why contemporary British audiences 'remain entranced' by Churchill and 'Britain's heroic resistance to Nazism', and what the 'lessons for Brexit Britain' are (2018: 25).

Christopher Nolan, when asked in an interview if Brexit had been on his mind during the making of *Dunkirk*, replied that 'Brexit happened when we were halfway through shooting the film' and that the film is relevant for the present because it treats 'issues that have not diminished in terms of their importance to the modern world' (James 2017: 27). Critics, however, related *Dunkirk*, just like *Darkest Hour*, very immediately to Brexit, and so did some of the British viewers. As one commentator recalled in the *Guardian*, Gary Oldman's impassioned performance of 'We will fight on the beaches' at the end of *Darkest Hour* 'brought cinema audiences to their feet' (Jack 2018). In *Dunkirk*, where the most famous lines of same speech are cited from a newspaper by an evacuated soldier, several scenes were likewise met with applause. This kind of affective response is certainly invited by the emotions inscribed in the films themselves. First of all, they engage with icons of patriotic feeling: identity-defining history, a charismatic leader, famous pieces of oratory, and not least the symbolically charged topography of the English Channel, a geographical border that seems to 'naturally' separate Britain and the Continent. In a study of the literary and cultural representation of the Channel, Dominic Rainsford claims that for many people in Britain the Channel is still 'what divides them from a "Europe" that does not [include them]' (2002: 8). This idea, according to Rainsford, gained momentum after the Second World War, whose outcome 'changed perceptions of what it was to be British, and English, radically'. In this context, the Channel came to be seen as 'the vital phenomenon that had allowed Britain to escape the occupations of the Continent, and that perhaps symbolized a separateness of spirit that had saved the British from succumbing ideologically' (129).

This is exactly what *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* offer their audiences. They transport viewers back to a time when Britain, instead of being a part of Europe, was Europe's saviour, and they depict the English Channel emphatically as a natural line of defence against the Continent. As Churchill pronounces in *Darkest Hour*: 'We are a seagoing nation. ... The Channel is ours, it's our moat, our battlement'; and he then

affirms that the Germans 'have first to reach that island' before they can be victorious. They do not, of course, and instead we see, in a short but poignant shot, the famed 'little ships' of Operation Dynamo (made legendary in a BBC broadcast by J. B. Priestley on 4 June 1940) crossing the Channel from the English side towards Dunkirk—a powerful symbol of the whole nation resisting the would-be invader and saving their army. As a matter of course, the Channel is given much more screen presence in Nolan's *Dunkirk*; it is spectacularly staged here as both a physical and an ideological border. *Dunkirk*'s images of the Channel have an almost sublime quality, especially when a solitary RAF plane glides along the French coastline after the successful evacuation, thus marking the Channel once more as the last bulwark from German invaders. We get many glimpses of the little ships that will bring the soldiers home, and 'home' is a key concept of the film, once evoked through the white cliffs (here of Dorset, not Dover) that signal the safe side of the Channel. For most of its duration, Nolan's film shows the little boats urging towards the Continent, but there is never any doubt that the desired direction is backwards: when the yacht *Moonstone* (whose name perhaps signifies the empire via Wilkie Collins's eponymous novel) saves a shipwrecked soldier on its way to Dunkirk, the man runs berserk when he learns that he will have to go back to France before he can be returned to England.

Dunkirk and *Darkest Hour* have a high level of affective intensity: *Dunkirk* works with epic pictures and a soundtrack that cites Elgar at emotional peaks. Both the music and the images have been noted for their visceral and immersive quality (e.g. Kemp 2017; Kermode 2017). *Darkest Hour* depicts Churchill in shifting emotional states, from despair and self-doubt to determination and triumph. The film's writers did not hesitate to invent a scene—bashed for its bluntness in many reviews (e.g. Ide 2018; Maher 2018; Norman 2018)—that shows Churchill exploring the 'mood' of 'the British people', represented by a group of ordinary civilians in a Tube carriage. The composition of this group reflects present-day standards of equality and diversity, including women and a member of Britain's emerging BAME community. Encouraged by their emphatic, united will to 'fight the fascists' and to 'never' enter peace negotiations with Germany, Churchill decides to discontinue the negotiations that some members of his Cabinet have started and, citing the 'sentiments' of the people, turns Parliament in his favour. The affectivity inscribed in the films, often quite literally in their dialogue, inspired the tone of some reviews. An opinion piece on *Dunkirk* in the *Guardian*, for example, speaks of 'national shame' that 'still burns', and of 'undeniable political and emotional urgency' (Behr 2017).

Regarding the British-European relationship, it is understandable that both films present Hitler's Germany as an overpowering threat. The title sequence of *Darkest Hour* uses newsreel pictures that leave no doubt about German military force. But the film is not much more sympathetic in its portrayal of other European nations: Mussolini's Italy is a selfish go-between, and the French, who have resigned to their fate and their political leaders and with whom Churchill converses in very poor French, are not even named. In *Dunkirk*, tommies waiting on the beaches show open hostility to French soldiers who try to get evacuated along with them: 'English only', one of them says. However, the film also shows more friendly relationships between individual soldiers, and a navy commander remains on the mole at the end of the operation, waiting gallantly 'for the French', who may now be saved too. In the words of one critic, the film suggests that, had Churchill not had his will, 'the embryonic self-image of our indomitable little island standing alone in freedom's cause—which has shaped us all the way to Brexit—would have died in the womb' (Norman 2018).[3]

Indeed, there is hardly a British review that does not relate the two films to Brexit, and in some instances, reviews were coloured by their authors' resentment of Brexit. Steve Rose (2017), for example, suggests that *Dunkirk*, depicting 'a literal effort to get out of Europe', might well have been used as a propaganda film by the Leave campaign. This, according to Rose, 'is the Brexiter version of British identity in a nutshell: proudly isolated, independent, not European, and "strong in the world"'.[4] But his review also suggests that more subversive readings of the film are possible; for

instance, when one associates the masses of soldiers waiting on the beaches with the masses of migrants and refugees 'striving desperately to reach Europe' in 2017. The journalist and war-correspondent Max Hastings found the impact of *Dunkirk* upon the British public 'calamitous' because the film feeds the myth that 'there is splendor in being alone'—the very myth which also brought the nation to the 'cliff edge' of Brexit. Hastings' review culminates in the remark that the British public should have been prevented from seeing the film at a moment when their country was 'threatened with embarkation upon one of the most self-indulgent, wilfully foolish acts of self-harm in the nation's history' (Hastings 2017: 16).[5] In a similar vein, Geoffrey Wheatcroft's (2018: 23) review of the Churchill biopics regrets that 'Churchill—real or imagined—now controls the past, the present, and, alas, the future, maybe with bleaker consequences than we can yet know'.[6] Ben McIntyre (2018) saw *Darkest Hour* more positively: he interpreted the film as offering a lesson in good political leadership, but he also noted that the film reprised the myth of Britain 'preparing to go it alone, while Europe collapses'.

Overall, British reviews of the two films read them as indicative of the state of the nation and the structures of feeling that gave rise to Brexit. They do not demonstrate much awareness of how the films might be received outside the United Kingdom, or how they might be read as statements on Europe. We see more of this in the German reviews, which otherwise indicate the German discomfort with war films that are not anti-war, and a bemusement with the importance of the past and its myths for British self-identification. Of course, German critics also made the connection to Brexit. Hanns-Georg Rodek (2017b), writing in *Die Welt*, finds the story of Dunkirk hardly relatable for Germans, since it is not a part of their collective memory. Rodek describes Nolan's film as a nostalgic, isolationist piece that serves the need of a country retreating to its island, believing all will be well again once connections with the continent have been cut. Oliver Kaever (2017) wrote a more sympathetic review for the weekly *Die Zeit*, calling *Dunkirk* a timely film that offers reassurance to a nation in a crisis of its strength and unity (similarly Müller 2018). To Christian Schröder (2018), who reviewed *Darkest Hour* for *Die Tageszeitung* (*taz*), Churchill has once more become the hero of the hour, but now for a country divided and disturbed by Brexit.[7] In the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Tobias Kniebe (2018) asked whether one should be afraid of a country reassuring itself with sentimental, nationalist films, and he suggests that *Darkest Hour* is more about present uncertainties than it is about history. Apart from such connections to the British situation, however, reviews in the German press identified the films' relevance to Europe. Discussing *Darkest Hour* in *Die Welt*, the British-German journalist Alan Posener (2018) claimed that Churchill's fight with the appeasers in his cabinet was a fight about Europe—and about the question whether Great Britain could exist without Europe. To Posener, Churchill understood that an England which did not fight for the freedom of Europe would be at the mercy of Hitler, and that Churchill, in order to prevent this, was willing to risk the Empire. This interpretation is shared by Andreas Borcholte (2018), writing for SpiegelOnline, for whom *Darkest Hour* tells an encouraging, invigorating story of resilience against anti-enlightenment and evil—a story about decisions that paved the way for today's united, democratic Europe.

From their Continental perspective, the German critics express a greater awareness of the European significance that can be read into the two films, while their British counterparts seem preoccupied with the films' significance for their country's current crisis. Of course, all attempts to read the films primarily for their Brexit relevance are reductive. The cinematic texts of *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* are more subtle and complex than some of the cited reviews would make one believe. At the same time, the films do not explicitly resist such a reading because they engage with the same myths that dominated the Brexit debate. This is not the case in the films I will consider now: *Hurricane*, another war film, *Churchill*, another biopic, and *Their Finest*, a meta-film about making a war-propaganda film. These films interfere with established myths and expose their constructedness, thus making the myths

transparent and pointing out what is excluded. This, too, can be significantly related to Brexit, and one might therefore regret that these three films received less attention from critics—and audiences—than the two big productions of *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*.

Hurricane, *Churchill* and *Their Finest*: The Films and the Reviews

Hurricane tells the story of a Polish squadron within the RAF during the Battle of Britain. These pilots helped to defend Britain from the air, while also fighting the Nazis for what they were doing to Poland. The title refers to the type of fighter aircraft these pilots flew, and at the beginning it is inscribed over an image of the white cliffs of Dover, which very obviously serve as an index of Britishness. However, the film exposes a forgotten part of British war history that reveals the bigotry behind the myth of the island nation at war. At first, the Polish pilots are unwanted; they face prejudice, condescension and discrimination within the RAF and are admitted as fighter pilots only when the shortage of British and Commonwealth pilots has become dramatic. Increasingly, however, their contribution to the war effort and their heroic self-sacrifice are appreciated by the RAF ('we underestimated them') as well as the British public; as the hostess of a party thrown for the Polish pilots says, they have 'come to fight for us in the skies over England'. The 'us' implies, of course, that the Polish pilots, however bravely they may have fought, are not perceived as part of the national community. This is confirmed at the end of the film, which shows the Polish pilots excluded from the great victory parade in 1946 because Britain does not want to antagonise the Soviets, who now control Poland. The main hero of the film, Jan Zumbach—a historical character—tells his British lover that he will be repatriated and will have to leave Britain within the next few days. As the audience then learns from a final caption:

> The 145 Polish pilots who served in the Battle of Britain shot down over 205 aircraft and constituted 20% of the RAF's strength. After the war, an opinion poll showed that 56% of the British public thought the Poles should be repatriated.
> Many of those who did return were persecuted, imprisoned or sentenced to death.

That the history depicted in the film has topical relevance for the Brexit scenario is quite obvious. Not only does *Hurricane* undermine the narrative of Britain in 1940 opposing Hitler on its own, the film also connotes anti-EU-immigration arguments in the Brexit campaign and its Go Home rhetoric. As a minor production made on a low budget and with conservative aesthetics,[8] *Hurricane* did not receive major reviews and was largely ignored by German critics. However, a few critics in the British press noted the film's contemporary resonances. The review in the *Daily Express* registered a parallel with migrants from Eastern parts of Europe 'now leaving Britain in droves' (Lea 2018). A *Guardian* review remarked on the 'prejudiced English' (Felperin 2018), as did the very short review in the *Times* (Potton 2018). The *Empire* critic registered the film's difference to 'the triumphalist nostalgia' of other recent war cinema, and claimed that the xenophobia shown in the film invites comparison with contemporary resentment of the Polish people who are allegedly 'taking English jobs and copping off with British women' (Newman 2018).

Churchill, a film sometimes reviewed in conjunction with *Darkest Hour*, ends with a final caption referring to Churchill's reputation as the greatest Briton of all times. However, in marked contrast to *Darkest Hour*, *Churchill* concerns the crisis of Churchill's leadership during the final phase of the war. With a decidedly un-nostalgic gesture, the film presents Churchill as locked in the past and thus almost preventing

the decisive victorious operation of the Second World War in Europe. Not only does the film reject nostalgia, it is also less interested in the state of the nation than in the precarious state of its titular character, who struck one reviewer as a mixture of Colonel Blimp and King Lear (Macnab 2017), and another as a man fighting with himself rather than exhorting the nation to fight for victory (Muir 2017). While *Darkest Hour* ends with the spirited 'We will fight on the beaches' speech, *Churchill* engages with the beaches in France in a multi-layered manner. The film begins with a scene showing Churchill on the English side of the Channel, haunted by memories of the First World War—in particular the Gallipoli landings and their disastrous outcome, for which he was held accountable.[9] Churchill hears echoes of gunfire from the earlier war and has a vision of the Channel turning red with blood (which also disturbs the status of the Channel as an icon of glorious isolation). A black-and-white shot then shows him walking over a battlefield of the Western Front. 'So many young men', he says, 'So much waste. I mustn't let it happen again'. Accordingly, most of the film shows Churchill trying to prevent the Normandy landings of Operation Overlord and their potential of new disaster, and he finds it hard to accept that victory no longer depends on him or the King, but on the determination of military leaders like Montgomery and Eisenhower—the importance of America's military strength also already foreshadowing Britain's post-war decline. While Eisenhower is now 'the real war hero', a hurt Churchill describes himself to his wife as a 'clapped-out, moth-eaten old lion whose teeth have been pulled so as not to frighten the ladies'. The film depicts Churchill as a fragile, vulnerable old man who can hardly live up to his reputation with the British people, whose orders are countermanded by the military, and who needs to be prodded by his wife, a trusted friend from Boer War days and even the King, in order to make the right decisions. The writer of *Churchill*, the British historian Alex von Tunzelmann, saw herself exposed to criticism that her narrative was not true to facts (e.g. in the reviews by Muir 2017 and Norman 2017).[10] Compared to *Darkest Hour*, *Churchill* was less often reviewed in relation to Brexit, presumably because the film refrains from obvious displays of Britishness and patriotic gesture. But when it was related to present-day Britain, the film's de-heroising of Churchill gave rise to critical remarks about political leadership. The *Telegraph* critic, for example, was impressed by the film's message that real authority in politics 'stems from complexity and compromise' and suggested that this was 'a lesson Westminster's Class of '17 would do well to heed' (Collin 2017a).

As mentioned above, *Their Finest*, directed by the Danish filmmaker Lone Sherfig, was hardly ever reviewed with direct connections to Brexit or Brexit moods, even though it stages Britishness very explicitly in its cast of characters, its locations and its engagement with myth. Steve Rose mentions the film in his *Dunkirk* review as a tribute to British war-time cinema and its power 'to change hearts and minds' (Rose 2017). The film is an adaptation of Lissa Evans' *Their Finest Hour and a Half*, a novel about a female screenwriter during the war period and loosely based on the life of the screenwriter Diana Morgan. The film uses the conventions of romantic comedy, but, above all, it is a meta-film about making a film about Dunkirk or rather, the myth of Dunkirk. It shows how the evacuation is used when the film division of the Ministry of Information need to produce an 'authentic' and 'optimistic' film to boost morale among the Blitz-ridden population, and also to draw the Americans into the war. The true story this film is supposed to tell—twin sisters joining the fleet of little ships—turns out to need a lot of invention by the screenwriters because the sisters never made it to Dunkirk. One of the screenwriters is a young Welshwoman, Catrin, a double outsider in the myth-making machine because she is both female and not English. Although originally engaged only to provide 'slop', i.e. dialogue appealing to the female members of the audience, she writes women as heroic characters into the narrative of Dunkirk.

While exposing all the tricks of filmmaking and the strategies of war propaganda, *Their Finest* shows the capacity of cinema to hold the nation together in a situation of crisis, especially as a community of shared feelings. When Catrin watches

her finished film in the cinema, she is not only affected herself, she also witnesses the emotional response in the audience around her. *Their Finest* thus explores the structure of feeling in war-time Britain in quite explicit terms, and it would have been easy to relate this structure of feeling to that of Brexit Britain. However, while the film did attract attention from the critics (mostly very favourable reviews emphasising its self-reflexivity and its story of female empowerment),[11] there are few remarks on its pertinence to the time of Brexit. This is surprising because there are several prompts for such remarks. Patriotic oration is satirised in a cameo appearance by Jeremy Irons, the hero of so many heritage films, playing a minister who is moved to tears by his own hammed-up recital of the St Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*. And like *Hurricane*, *Their Finest* points to the significance of a European presence in war-time Britain: the producer and agent characters are migrants from Eastern Europe, and one of them is killed in the Blitz alongside native Britons. On a lighter note, the film's aging star actor observes with regret that the waiters at his favourite Italian restaurant—labour migrants—have been 'rounded-up as so-called enemies of the state'. Perhaps the missing Brexit associations in the reviews are explained by the fact that the film was perceived as providing the perspective of a Continental filmmaker, or because it has an explicit myth-bending element with its feminisation of the Dunkirk story, and the importance it bestows on non-English characters from the Celtic Fringe and the Continent. This subversive dimension was missed by the German critic who called *Their Finest* exactly the right film for Great Britain in 2017—because it offers a dose of encouraging nostalgia and transports the audience back to seemingly good old times (Rodek 2017a).

Conclusion

This paper has offered a preliminary survey of the responses of film critics to a spate of World War II films released in the two years following the British EU referendum. These films were not specifically made as reactions to Brexit, but they can be read as indicative of a structure of feeling that gave rise to Brexit. This idea was pursued in many reviews, especially those for the two blockbuster films *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour*. British critics tended to relate these films to present-day patriotism (or nationalism) and nostalgia, as well as to the growing resentment of immigration and issues of political leadership. Likewise, German critics saw the significance of the films for Brexit Britain and its emotional climate, but they also pondered the European significance of the films—a level of meaning which few of their British counterparts addressed. Overall, *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* seem to lend themselves more easily to interpretation within the Brexit scenario, and they have given critics the most obvious occasion to vent their personal opinions and feelings regarding Brexit. While released at roughly the same time, the minor productions discussed above were less frequently and less explicitly reviewed in light of Brexit, presumably because they engage less bluntly with the war myths and icons that were so prominent in the Brexit campaign and that worried many film critics. Rather, *Churchill* complicates the reputation of a heroic leader; *Hurricane* and *Their Finest* point to the constructed nature of myths, and to what the established British myths of the war omit: including a significant presence of Europeans on the English side of the Channel in 1940 and what these Continentals contributed to the British war effort. One might claim that this is precisely why these films should deserve more, and more detailed, attention in the analysis of Brexit than the immediate responses of film critics could provide. However, as snapshots of the Brexit mood, these immediate responses deserve attention themselves.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Boris Johnson's heroising biography *The Churchill Factor*, first published in 2014. Johnson grants that Churchill did campaign for a united Europe but that 'he had an idea of Britain that transcended Europe, and which involved

Britain turned to face the rest of the world' (Johnson 2015: 307). By contrast, Felix Klos, in a book published to coincide with the EU referendum, presents Churchill as the leading post-war campaigner for European unity in the late 1940s, beginning with the speech he delivered at the University of Zurich in September 1946, venting his vision of a United States of Europe. Klos, a pro-European Dutch historian, argues that unity in Europe 'is to a great extent the evolved and still organically developing legacy of Winston Churchill' (2016: 6). See also Eaglestone (2018: 98-100).

[2] For the permanence of World War II as a theme in British fiction and film, see also the collection of essays edited by Petra Rau, who notes in her introduction that '[f]ew countries attribute as much importance to the Second World War and its memory as Britain; nowhere else has this conflict developed such longevity in cultural memory and retained such presence in contemporary culture' (2016: 3). On the tradition of the British war film and its patriotic and national(ist) functions see also Murphy (2000) and Paris (2007).

[3] Quoted with kind permission by Duncan Crawley, Licensing & Syndication Sales Executive at ESI Media.

[4] See also Toye (2017), who sees Nolan reinforcing the myth of Dunkirk rather than subverting it.

[5] Quoted with kind permission by Max Hastings.

[6] Quoted with kind permission by Patrick Hederman, *The New York Review of Books*, Rights Inquiries.

[7] See also Andreas Kilb's (2018) description of the film as offering a glimpse into the laboratory of myth.

[8] See, for example, its conventional handling of flashbacks for the pilots' thoughts of their relatives in Poland, in contrast to the complex, non-linear time structure of *Dunkirk*.

[9] In *Darkest Hour*, Churchill's role in the First World War is of marginal significance. Gallipoli is the first item in Churchill's 'litany of catastrophe' mentioned by the King at the beginning of the film, but Churchill gets an opportunity to defend himself when Halifax holds Gallipoli against him: 'How dare you. Opening a second front, outflanking the Turks, was a serious military idea and it could have damn well worked if the admirals and the First Sea Lord hadn't dithered away our element of surprise'.

[10] See also Alex von Tunzelmann's own article on her film (2017).

[11] See for example Bradshaw (2017a), Leigh (2017), Macnab (2017), Collin (2017), Reed 2017, Ide (2017), and, with a similar opinion, the German review by Schweizerhof (2017).

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