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## FILM REVIEW

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### *Brexit* by Toby Haynes: Moral and Ethical Irrelevance and Naïve Expectations

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Zooropa better by design

Zooropa fly the friendly skies

Through appliance of science

We've got that ring of confidence

And I have no compass

And I have no map

And I have no reasons

No reasons to get back

—Adam Clayton/Dave Evans/Larry Mullen/Paul Hewson

A brief HBO introduction of the movie *Brexit* describes it as a riveting drama exploring the tactics employed by the United Kingdom's 2016 Vote Leave campaign to leave the European Union (EU) (<https://www.hbo.com/movies/brexit>). The film is based on real events that led to the referendum in 2016 and the decision by the majority of the United Kingdom population to leave the European Union (EU). Including UK, the EU consists of 28 member states in a political and economic arrangement to promote peace and stability and economic prosperity. The script was written by James Graham and the movie directed by Toby Haynes. Benedict Cumberbatch stars in the film as the main character Dominic Cummings, a brain and an architect of Vote Leave, Brexit group campaign during the Referendum in 2016 to exit the European Union (EU). The timing of the release of the movie was impeccable as Prime Minister Theresa May was attempting to muster the fledgling support for the Brexit

plan for departure from the EU. Further exacerbating the pain of the naivety of Brexit expectations, UK is now bracing for the full brunt of a non-deal Brexit. There is still no clear indication the UK politicians will adopt a deal on Brexit. Haynes's HBO movie *Brexit* provides a minor window into the propaganda machine behind the Leave campaign in UK, which spearheaded efforts to convince the British population to leave the EU.

For outsiders, Brexit was a democratic will of the majority of British citizens, including those from Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. However, the nuances of manipulation of data and information led to the ultimate defeat of the European values previously championed in UK. In the introduction, the movie provides a small window into the history of why UK joined the EU, mostly for economic but also for safety and security reasons, including the pursuit of a long-lasting peace on the European Continent after two devastating World Wars. Historically, all the political parties in England played a delicate balancing act of ensuring the independence and integrity of political institutions in the UK and the prevailing notion of open borders, labor movement, and free markets promoted by the EU. UK never fully adjusted to the complex web of EU bureaucracy and never endeared to the full ideals of the EU, including the decision not to join the single currency. Ultimately, the self-imposed distance kept UK from fully embracing the EU and would prove to be a fatal flaw in the otherwise well-envisioned scheme attempting to bridge the difference between European countries. Fast-forwarding several decades, the original EU member countries, including UK, saw an expansion of the EU to more members and an increased role of the EU bureaucrats, creating resentment in member countries. Furthermore, immigrant crises coupled with anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments set up the foundations for Brexit. The Brexiters tapped into the sentiments of the majority in the country who saw Brussels and its multiplying bureaucrats as a nuisance with no value.

In the early scenes of the film, in his many of the closet thinking to block out the noise, the main character, Cummings, points out that everyone knows who won, but not everyone knows how. If the movie intended to answer this dilemma, it certainly provided some but not full insight into the machinery behind Brexit. The film does very little to shine a light on foreign interference and motives behind the support for the Leave campaign and the effects on Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland as a result of the Leave vote. The majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. However, the movie opens a window into a fraction of what occurred during the campaign in one of the camps.

The key surmising points of the film are the use of personal data and the power of social media by Leave campaigners and misleading voters to alter the political process and outcomes. Altering realities and manipulation of information to gain the desired results in a representative democracy create grave and long-lasting consequences to democratic elections. The integrity of elections and referendums are at stake and deception of the general public and mass manipulation of data and messaging by the Brexiters are key conclusions that one should be able to discern from the movie.

The film shows the ease of breaking down modern communications and the power of words, with an emphasis on the choice of words. Perhaps drawing from Orwell's *1984* in a less dark and dystopian approach to the plots and schemes, the relevance and importance of information, and the impotence of truth is amplified in the movie. Coming up with a slogan

that will catch attention is the part of the process emphasized in the film. The film juxtaposes two campaigns and their motto, Cummings's Take Back Control and the counterpart Remain, the campaign ran by Craig Oliver with its Jobs and Economy slogan. The fear and loss of control are amplified with possible membership for Turkey to the EU, which is used as a propaganda tool. Fake news of the massive influx of Muslims from Turkey's ascension to the EU would trigger fear and manipulation of images and discourse. The film portrays Cummings's ability to invoke ancient philosophies and strategies from various cultural backgrounds, including the Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* strategies to focus on Vote Leave's message rather than breaking down the opposition's messaging. The movie shines a light on selective microtargeting and algorithms deployed through the system to make predictions for the ultimate outcome of elections. Cummings's database-driven approach is portrayed as at odds with the established political understanding of the election process. However, ultimately Cummings's attitude prevails, as he promised to change the political landscape and how elections are won.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union lays out basic principles and foundational ideas espoused by the member states of the European Union through the European Parliament (2000):

The Union contributes to the preservation and to the development of these common values while respecting the diversity of the cultures and traditions of the peoples of Europe as well as the national identities of the Member States and the organisation of their public authorities at national, regional and local levels; it seeks to promote balanced and sustainable development and ensures free movement of persons, goods, services and capital, and the freedom of establishment. To this end, it is necessary to strengthen the protection of fundamental rights in the light of changes in society, social progress and scientific and technological developments by making those rights more visible in a Charter.

The rights and rules, ideals, and ideas are all presented in a list, clearly attempting to preserve the integrity and diversity of various member states institutions. However, in recent years, whether further exacerbated by the elements of the political far right, Islamophobic fear of refugees and immigrants, and refusal by most member countries to assist those refugees, ideals expressed through the Charter and other founding documents are slowly being chipped away and destroyed, not only in the UK but elsewhere in Europe as well. The subsequent untidiness and uncertainty created by the Brexit is evident by the UK government inability to come to terms for a reasonable exit settlement with the EU. The primary drivers of Brexit were fueled by the naivety of expectations that somehow leaving the EU would lead to better outcomes for UK.

The movie captures the zeal and fervor with which those despising EU promoted the ideals of British national identity. Prime Minister David Cameron fulfilled his pledge and opened the door to Britain leaving EU with catastrophic economic, political, and security consequences for Europe, non-EU and UK itself. Far removed from those impacted by Brexit, Brexiters had one goal in mind, a triumph over ideas and ideals exhibited in the EU. Moreover, the option for UK to be finally free of clutches of Brussels bureaucrats was one of the goals. The models of unified Europe merited to be crushed simply because they are met with zealots on the merit of warranted nationalism. The end goal justified means and some

more. Many European nationalists and politicians embraced the notion of UK leaving the EU. The then-candidate for President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, buoyed Brexit.

There is nothing ethical about collecting private information and targeting individuals with what only may be described as subliminal messages to form a mass opinion. The pattern of manipulation in the Brexit is similar to the designs of microtargeting and large-scale manipulation of the voters in the wake of the 2016 elections in the US. The use of social media has been instrumental in creating doubts; false equivalences; fake information; untested truth; and laying the ground for creating semiplausible scenarios and feeding them into the system to create a desired direction and outcome. Islamophobic websites proliferated in the wake of attempts by the Muslim community in New York to build a mosque in the area not too far from Ground Zero. The rise and proliferation of negative social media were parallel to that of nationalism and nationalistic sensationalism, and the likes of Infowars and Fox News.

Brexit uncovered the microcosm of European policy and political preferences on the world stage and the existential threat of European Union alliances. The schism of failed European policies from the Bosnian War and failure to respond to Serbian aggression against neighboring countries in the early Nineties to failed unification of immigration policies and nonresponse to authoritarianism tendencies particularly in parts of Europe. The unhappiness of UK with dictates from EU bureaucracies have been tempered over the years with preferential treatment of the UK over the rest of the European countries. The fact remains the UK never accepted and saw a fitting need to become a contributing partner in the EU but rather the antithesis of EU member. The whole process was eloquently explained in the BBC comedy *Yes Minister*, in which the main character at that time described the role of the UK in the European institutions as mainly to control and ensure the most positive outcomes for the UK.

In most movies, the climax or the moment of reflections give a viewer a sense of purpose or justice served moments where a viewer and the movie director connect on some interdimensional field. This moment comes as a sense of accomplishments, achievement, and refection. The movie *Brexit* has its moments, and its ending offers a climactic conclusion to the Leave campaign's successful effort to lead the country out of the EU. However, that sense of satisfaction and victory is lost on a viewer. Perhaps purposely, the film does not convey the feeling of resolution, preferably one of negativity and dread, despite the evident success of the main protagonist of the movie and the main character's ability to achieve the unachievable and help sway the public toward the existing signs from the EU.

Toward the end of the film, the assassination of the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spennings, Jo Cox, is covered, who was a staunch supporter of the Remain campaign and was murdered by a supporter of the Leave campaign. In a fictional scene of meeting between Cummings and Oliver, both characters recognize the outcome is not what was expected and cannot be changed, but also cannot be controlled. The post-Brexit situation indicated the referendum expectations were not the same as the reality of leaving EU. Economic and political shocks and uncertainties for the UK but also for

the rest of the EU will be momentous. The film features the referendum polling day on June 23, 2016, with the announcement of the result. Cummings was in the end portrayed as disappointed how the political system reacted post the Vote Leave victory.

## SUPER-CONNECTED AND WELL-FUNDED UNDERDOG

In the movie, the main character is counterintuitively portrayed as an underdog. However, despite the appearance of an unsympathetic view from the public, Cummings had substantial funding and political machinery behind the Leave campaign. An opportunity to address powerful foreign factors and impacts on the Leave campaign is lost in the movie. It took decades for the UK to work with its counterparts in the EU to reach amicable and beneficial arrangements for the UK. Eventually, all these will be dismantled even if the UK Parliament is able to agree to the terms of the Brexit plan agreed with the EU. So far, the UK Parliament could not agree on the withdrawal deal, leading to UK Prime Minister Theresa May's resignation. The relevance and importance of information, but also the impotence of truth are amplified in the movie. Rose (2017) discussed regulating campaign honesty and sincerity as part of the election processes and concluded difficulty and the impossibility of managing such a task. However, stricter regulations, ethics, and integrity standards must be put in place to limit lies and deception of the public during the elections. With the increased risks of rigged polls; massive data manipulation; fake news influencing voters; and polling stations failure in democracies, the stakes are high and policymakers and the public need to ensure the integrity of elections.

A more profound concern perhaps and one the movie does attempt at a minor level to address is that during elections, under the guise of freedom of speech, anyone can say anything without consequences. The Leave campaigners were instrumental in drumming up propaganda and fear of immigrants and foreigners; namely, the fear of allowing Turkey to become an EU member. The movie, focused on the inner demons and alienization of everyone and everything around the main character, fails to fulfill a more profound mission, which was to shine a light on the massive outbreak of Islamophobia in UK, and one of the significant drivers of the Vote Leave campaigners.

While the film highlights Cummings's hiring of Canadian Zack Massingham, cofounder of AggregateIQ, whose company built a database by using social media tools of voters not on the UK electoral register, it does not provide any mindful explanation on the role of Cambridge Analytica in manipulating the UK public to vote for Leave. It emphasized, albeit briefly, social media as a tool in the electoral process. The film does feature Cummings's rejecting an approach by Nigel Farage and Arron Banks of Leave.EU to merge the campaigns. However, it does not demonstrate the role of Julian Assange and links between the WikiLeaks founder and Nigel Farage and foreign powers; namely, the Russian government may have played a role in supporting the Leave campaign. The film is entertaining, with its psychological deep dive into the mastermind behind the Leave vote; it captures this moment of importance for UK. The film captures the essence of the poisonous Vote Leave campaign and its ability to ferment mistrust in firmly established institutions, such as the EU. The film

fails to challenge and question the ethical and integrity violations of the referendum by the Vote Leave as unethical but within their means and rights to win. The film attempts to feature moral dispassion, amplified through the work of one man and many others around him—Cummings, a genius strategist but also a manipulative opportunist.

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