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DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

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Editorial

The UK Parliament prorogued, a UK Supreme Court judgement declaring that Parliament is not prorogued, a political (far) right-wing shift sweeping across Europe, the Amazon rainforest on fire, heatwaves across the world and predictions that climate change is reaching the point of no return, the United States on the brink of a trade war with China, speculations about a recession in Europe, ongoing protests in Hong Kong: the events of 2019 so far seem to suggest that the social fabrics of societies are rupturing and what we have seen in 2019 might merely be a taste of what is to come in 2020.

Fig. 1: The Conservatives, BREXIT Countdown Clock, tweeted 31 July 2019, https://twitter.com/

At the time of writing this editorial, for the author, the immediate day of reckoning seems to be 31 October 2019 when the United Kingdom will leave the European Union (or not) with a deal (or without one). And a day of reckoning 31 October became when Boris Johnson had Brexit countdown clocks installed in 10 Downing Street and the Tory Headquarters (fig. 1).[1] Waiting for this day of reckoning feels, at least for me as an EU citizen living and working in the United Kingdom, a bit like being stuck in limbo, where eternal salvation, prosperity and imperial glory (if Johnson's fantasies become true) and eternal doom and a plunge into insignificance are competing narratives on the horizon of contemporary UK political and popular culture.

1 Cf. Clark 2019a; Clark 2019b.

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Fig. 2: The Conservatives, Out of the EU Facebook Event, tweeted 23 August 2019, https://twitter.com/Conservatives/status/1164825101608607744 [accessed 30 August 2019].

The narrative horizon of imperial glory and doom has also driven parliamentary debate ever since the Brexit referendum. So strong was that narrative horizon, that as an observer, I have been puzzled by the unwillingness of (some) politicians to go beyond their ideological frame just so they can continue to reassure themselves of their individual power and importance while holding the entire country hostage and taking it on a path of destruction. And I am referring not to any economic impacts of whatever Brexit scenario might become reality, but to the destabilization of the social fabric. More so as since the Brexit referendum, UK politicians seem to have developed a certain fetish for destruction. That Theresa May had to resign and Boris Johnson ascended to power appears to have been the ultimate indulgence for a number of Brexiteers, who celebrated May's failure to get her deal approved by Parliament with champagne parties (fig. 2).[2]

That parts of the electorate continue to put their trust into politicians who use stories from fantasyland as their narrative frame is on the one hand part of an attempt to redefine political practice and political norms, as Jonathan White

2 Cf. Syal 2019.

Fig. 3: National Picture Theatre, Beverley Road, Hull, 2019. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

argues,[3] and on the other hand connects the current socio-political climate in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world to themes addressed in this issue: the apocalyptic and social anxieties it connects to.

To express apocalyptic (and indeed utopian) ideas, the visual can sometimes excel where words might fail: in the forms of images, figures of speech, verbal depictions, symbolic action. After all, social actors often draw on strong and powerful visual language and imagery to convey emotions, stir up angst, instill hope, garner support, or cause division. Such images and emotions can be powerful contributors to swaying public opinion, something that the political right has craftfully mastered. Yet, Steven Joyce argues that "The power of apocalyptic rhetoric cannot be reduced to the socio-economic status of marginalised groups. Something about the rhetorical structure itself creates an appeal that works across classes, ideologies, ethnicities, and age groups. […] If we are to understand why it is so widespread, we must understand the narrative's intrinsic merits."[4]

Immersing ourselves in the visuals of apocalyptic and utopian ideas, then, might help us better understand the appeal apocalyptic narratives might hold. Brexit offers us such an opportunity in particular when we pay closer attention to cities in the United Kingdom with a pro-Brexit majority, their look and feel,

3 Cf. White 2019.

4 Joyce 2018, 45.

Fig. 4: British Extracting Company Silo, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

and their aesthetics. Kingston-upon-Hull, the city I live in, has a total population of roughly 260,000 people and had a BREXIT referendum turnout of 62.9% (113,355 valid votes) and voted 67.6% leave.[5]

With unemployment rates of 7.54% (age cohort 16–64),[6] a below-the-national-average average salary, and geographically located at the end of the trainline, the city has seen brighter days. As a North Sea port city, Hull was one of the most bombed cities during Second World War, leaving 95% of houses damaged. Traces of the bombings can still be seen to this date, as for example with the remaining façade of the National Picture Theatre on Beverley Road (fig. 3).[7]

Economically, too, the city is struggling as it relied for a long time on its fisheries industry. Yet, following the Cod Wars that stretched from the late 1950s into the mid 1970s, the fisheries industry slowly declined and eventually collapsed. Moving from the continent to Hull as an outsider, I believe it is this experience of almost absolute destruction and economic decline that – in a way – shapes the character of the city to this date (though those who grew up in Hull might disagree with me!).

For the purposes of this editorial, I walked and cycled through Hull to find traces not only of past glories but also of sites that manifest, materialize, and

5 Electoral Commission 2019.
6 Hull Data Observatory 2019.
7 BBC 2007.

Fig. 5: Skips, Wincolmlee, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

visualize apocalyptic and utopian elements and connect the city to what holds the country hostage at the moment: the narratives around Brexit. Throughout the city, one can encounter a number of abandoned or desolate buildings that remind me – as someone who is and still feels foreign in the city and indeed the country – of the harsh experiences and realities Hull and its people had to endure: from a lively port city (and the city's Streetlife Museum still bears witness to Hull's vibrant life a century or so ago) to the Hull Blitz to the money the fisheries industry brought in to its collapse.[8] There certainly seems to be an apocalyptic dimension to it: not only the confrontation with destruction, decline, and uncertainty, but – in a sense deeply apocalyptic – the hope that at some point things will turn for the better.

On my journey through the city, I came across the listed building of the former British Extracting Company silo (fig. 4).[9] I found the appearance of the building with its large letters "BRITISH EXTRACTING CO" striking because aesthetically and on the level of language, it visualizes Brexit debates: the building can be taken to stand for the former British Empire that tries to extract itself from its social and political environment. Like the oil extracting process that happened at the site long ago, Brexit, so the promise goes, will extract the cherries and

8 Fishing News 2015.
9 Historic England 2019a; Historic England 2019b.

Fig. 6: Excavators, Headland Plant, Wincolmlee, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

leave other responsibilities behind, to help restore the Empire to its former glory. The fading colors on the building have a romantic touch, bearing witness to a former glory that just waits rediscovery and resurrection.

The cover image shows a storage site for skips (fig. 5). The yellowish colour of the skips, the number of skips stored there, the debris they stand for, and the impending storms the clouds herald, made me wonder about the city – or civilization – the skip storage site could possibly bear witness to. The emptiness of the skips could be traces of a society that has given up or ceased to exist. They can also stand for a society that is ready to leave behind the storms of difficult times. In a way the skips sit in a liminal state, much like the entire country: in between remainers and brexiteers in a tug of war, neither here nor there, no movement on either side, with all outcomes equally possible. Uncertainty.

The image of the excavators set in front of an industrial building I came across has a more hopeful feel to it (see fig. 6) – but again is linked to Brexit fantasies. Britain, once at the forefront of industrialization, hopes to revive its historic glory and – by leaving the shackles of the European Union behind – enter a new age of economic prosperity. At least, these are the narratives and the mental imagery created and disseminated by Brexiteers.

At the point of writing this editorial, it is unclear whether Brexit will happen at all or what variant of it will be pursued. Immersing oneself in towns, their aesthetics, their history, and linking them with the narratives of Brexit, however,

can help us understand how everyday images of destruction or decline might contribute to a sense of disempowerment, disillusion, and a hope that change – whatever that change actually is – will bring about change.

In a certain sense, all these images communicate the – often shattered – hopes for a better life. They communicate a desire for change, a shared agreement that things must change, and the shared disappointment in past promises of change. I mean here not necessarily unfulfilled promises by the EU, but the disappointment of pro-Brexit voters in the political system and political elites. "What they wanted", Nick Westcott argues in an LSE blog post, "was to be noticed."[10]

APOCALYPTIC IMAGININGS – WHAT THIS ISSUE IS ABOUT

The articles in the thematic section of this issue of the JRFM address a number of issues that can help us better understand not only the films, TV series, or texts the authors are looking at, but also broader socio-political and psychological issues linked to an apocalyptic mood we can trace throughout a number of societies today. John Lynch's article on Mr Robot (TV series, US 2015–2019) discusses questions of authority, reality, and belief. Stephanie Bender in her article on Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003, 2009, 2013) is interested in how apocalyptic imagery can help social actors think about and imagine brighter futures.

We can use Jennifer Woodward's discussion of J. J. Connington's 1923 apocalyptic novel, *Nordenholt's Million* as a starting point to explore and better understand socio-political narratives of salvation. Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo looks at the idea of critical dystopia in music and the importance of art. It will be fascinating to see how critical dystopia in art, or more specifically music in the case of Campos Calvo-Sotelos' article, will continue to react to and transform with current forms of activism, such as the FridaysForFuture or the protests in Hong Kong at the time of writing of this editorial. Bina Nir concludes the thematic section with a reflection on the perception of time and Western ideas of wether and to what extent the future can be influenced. Again, this is quite a timely reflection in the context of Brexit where the promise of Brexiteers is "to take back control".

OPEN SECTION

The Open Section starts with Teemu Taira's analysis of James Bond films with a religious studies perspective. He argues that religion is often used to label and single out the other, non-Western, or exotic. David Dalton provides us with an

10 Westcott 2019.

important contribution to better understand the director Jared Hess's body of work. Dalton argues that in order to more fully appreciate Hess's œuvre, in particular the film NAPOLEON DYNAMITE (US 2004), we need to pay more attention to the film's and Hess' own rootedness in Mormon culture. Russell C. Powell concludes this issue with a discussion of the political vision in Terrence Malick's THE TREE OF LIFE (US 2011). He attributes the lack of attention the film's political dimension has received thus far to a broader ignorance of the social and political nature of theology.

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