1917, Brexit and imperial nostalgia

A longing for the future¹

Christoffer Kølvråa

If, as Fredric Jameson famously claimed, the cultural products of a society express the anxieties and desires of its political unconscious (Jameson [1981] 2002), then the financial and critical success of the BAFTA-winning movie *1917*, directed by Sam Mendes, might well rest on its very timely catering to a certain set of nostalgic desires and anxieties that emerged with renewed force in Britain in the shadow of Brexit, but which can be said to exist to varying degrees across Europe and the United States. In this chapter, I aim to show how *1917's* narrative of military valour can be interpreted as addressing, placating or indulging the anger, fears and hopes of British majority culture in ways that chime with both its distinct political situation and the wider socio-historical context. More precisely, I seek to show how various forms of nostalgia embedded in this movie and in the Brexit debate—which is clearly its implicit field of reference—ultimately express the impasses and insecurities of British national identity in ways that also implicate the country's colonial heritage and imperial history.

My approach is inspired by Jameson's work on the political unconscious and his thoughts on allegory and ideology, both of which rest on the assumption that cultural objects are always reflective of wider political struggles and should therefore be interpreted in light of—or indeed, contrariwise, should be interpreted as throwing light on—contemporary societal issues and anxieties (Jameson [1981] 2002, 1998, 2019). But while certain ideas and concepts in the following pages reveal this inspiration, my primary conceptual ambition here is not to implement Jameson's interpretative frameworks in any detailed or dogmatic sense. Rather, they serve as a framework against which the idea of nostalgia, as both an academic concept and a political accusation, can be critically discussed and qualified. This is necessary because while accusations of both 'national' and 'imperial' nostalgia have been pervasive in the Brexit debate, they have most often rested on a merely rhetorical use of the term. However, if fully unpacked, nostalgia can be used as an interpretative lens allowing for a better understanding of the seductive enjoyability of both *1917* and of certain elements of 'Brexiteer discourse'—the latter serving the former as something like what Jameson (2019) would call an allegorical code, a secondary narrative structure implicitly shaping and ordering the content of the story told.

Brexit, Britishness and nostalgia

The fact that, at a superficial level, *1917* presents a nostalgic ideal of British national community in the shadow of Brexit has escaped few critics and commentators. The film, as one critic would have it, ‘is intriguing only because of Britain’s current moment. Certainly, the country’s acrimonious withdrawal from the European Union makes a notable contrast with the onscreen camaraderie’ (Dargis 2019). The film *1917* is in this sense part of what Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dassù call ‘Anglo-Nostalgia’—something also clearly present in other recent British TV and film productions, such as *Victoria* (2016–19), *Dunkirk* (2017), *Darkest Hour* (2017) and the immensely popular *Downton Abbey* (2010–2015/2019) (Campanella and Dassù 2019a, 2019b). But as Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson have argued, such nostalgia pervades British politics and society also beyond popular culture, especially finding an outlet in the rhetorical strategies employed by ‘Brexiters’ before and after the Brexit referendum (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019; Tomlinson and Dorling 2016). The accusation of nostalgia has, in this most straightforward sense, been used in the context of Brexit by a wide sway of academics, journalists or politicians to signify little more than a form of rhetoric in which the past covertly becomes a resource for articulating political ideals or remedies for contemporary society.

Such a straightforward nostalgic subtext is not hard to detect in *1917* or to connect to the wider anxieties of a Britain deeply divided in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, not just between voters for Remain and Leave but also along newly aggravated racial and class lines (see Jackson et al. 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Indeed, a kind of joint ambition to soothe the nation might explain the fact that A-list British actors crowd into minor or marginal roles throughout the film. But it is also significant that these well-known faces mostly play the roles of officers, because one of the significant choices that sets *1917* apart as a First World War movie is the way it portrays the officer class. The plot is set in motion by General Erinmore (Colin Firth) who—in what is framed as a gesture of paternal concern—sends the two protagonists, Blake and Schofield, on a mission to stop a doomed attack in which Blake’s brother is to take part. On their journey across the trenches, our heroes encounter officers of almost all ranks, concluding with Schofield finally making contact with the commanding officer of the doomed attack (Benedict Cumberbatch) and relatively easily convincing him to call it off. What is significant here is that not a single one of these officers is portrayed as anything other than competent, caring and approachable from the perspective of the common soldier. As such, the movie fundamentally challenges the conventional ‘lions led by donkeys’ narrative that has typically narrated the war as a meaningless slaughter orchestrated by cynical or inept upper-class officers residing safely in French chateaux far behind the lines (Clark 2011). What is of interest here is not which depiction best corresponds to historical reality, but rather that the narrative consequences of shifting from one to the other

is that class antagonism moves to the background in favour of national identity. A framing of the war that emphasizes the distance between ordinary soldiers and their officers is, in the final instance, a potentially pacifist and internationalist one, because it can articulate the shared destiny of ordinary soldiers on both sides of the lines and thereby undermine national animosity as the leitmotif of the conflict. But *1917*, surprisingly for a contemporary war movie and even more so for a First World War narrative, moves decisively in the opposite direction. The communion of the ordinary British soldier and his superiors is also reinforced by the unrelenting antagonizing of the German enemy. There is no trace of that equally conventional plot element in First World War narratives where a comradely encounter between ordinary soldiers from opposite sides serves to question the very legitimacy of the suffering enforced on both in equal measure. The film does not for a moment allow the German counterparts of our protagonists to become humanized or even identifiable; they remain mostly menacing dark shadows sniping at, pursuing or killing our heroes.

This nostalgic construction of national communion not only concerns the interplay between class and national identity: the film also somewhat heavily-handedly seeks to extend it to racial/colonial differences. Indeed, the movie has received praise for affording colonial troops a consistent presence in its depiction of the war. Mendes has himself insisted that it was important for him to emphasize that it ‘wasn’t just a war fought by white men’ (Gandhi 2020), and while colonial subjects are mostly fixtures in the background or encountered only in passing, there is one key scene that reveals the deeper logic of their inclusion. It entails a group of British white soldiers entertaining themselves by competing for the best parody of their captain’s upper-class accent and heavy lisp. From the fringe of the group, a Sikh soldier dismisses their efforts as ‘bloody awful’ and is in turn told, ‘You don’t know, you barely even speak the bloody language’ (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2018, 65). The Sikh soldier then goes on to deliver a perfect impression, which is consequently cheered by the rest of the men. This scene clearly imagines a working-class solidarity ultimately not confined by fractures of race or coloniality. But while this swift integration of the colonial subject into the class of ‘ordinary soldiers’ happens in the context of a mild challenge to (officer/upper-class) authority, it never fundamentally disturbs the image of national communion forged by the plot’s succession of lovable officers. Thus, neither class nor coloniality are ultimately allowed to become defining differences. Instead, coloniality is folded into class, only for class to be folded into nation, leaving in the end the national community as the unrivalled focal point of identification.

It does not take much imagination to see why this is attractive nostalgic imagery in a contemporary context. The Brexit and post-Brexit political discussion in Britain has not only been divisive and fractious, but it has been so in multiple, often mutually incompatible, ways linked to the different intersectionalities of nation, class and race for different groups in society. This

confusion resides even at the heart of our understanding of the political phenomenon often cited when seeking to explain the current state of affairs, namely the rise of ‘populism’. Populism has—not least by many populists—been understood as a working-class revolt against a political ‘elite’ with which they no longer share values, income brackets or mutual regard (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). However, the political agenda of populist parties and actors has also been dominated by nationalist anti-immigrant and, at times, overtly racist discourse (Wodak 2015). What is important here is to notice, as Gurinder Bhambra has done, that if nationalist populism is understood in terms of class, then a ‘methodological whiteness’ eliminates the non-white working-class from consideration (Bhambra 2017b) and furthermore misrepresents the demographic fact that the voters behind US President Donald Trump and Brexit were much better off financially than the new working class of short-term precarious labour composed to a high degree of people of colour (Bhambra 2017a). What nationalist populism in this sense expresses is not so much a desperate blowback from the margins of post-industrial society, but rather a white identity politics proactively manoeuvring to defend structural racial privileges. Nationalist populism as a phenomenon, therefore, only confirms that there are still ‘wages of whiteness’—to borrow David Roediger’s classic term—a racial privilege of being working-class ‘white’, which undermines any interracial class solidarity (Roediger 1999).

All these initial observations serve to underpin the argument that the swift suspension of both class and race, under the umbrella of the nation, becomes immensely attractive because it offers a nostalgic alternative to a Brexit context full of confusing and shifting intersectionalities and antagonisms. But to move beyond such surface observations, and the equally superficial critique that they are not ‘historically accurate’, it is necessary to engage in more detail with the concept of nostalgia and its relationship to historical accuracy and error.

An oddity often encountered in public and academic discussions of nostalgia is that while the term most often signifies overtly romantic, idealizing or hyperbolically positive depictions of the past, the primary critique of nostalgia simply takes the form of correcting its historical errors or biases. In assuming nostalgic discourse to be vulnerable to factual critique, its detractors inadvertently end up assuming that the pursuit of historical accuracy is somehow still at the heart of nostalgia. Yet at the same time, most scholars engaging with the term soon find that nostalgia not only has little to do with a pursuit of historical truth but that the nostalgic mood is one in which the subjects are often very well aware of this. One can of course square this circle by instituting a certain double standard and assume that when we ourselves indulge in nostalgia, we at least remain aware of what we are doing, whereas our opponents are imagined to have been both tempted by nostalgia and unaware of having succumbed to it. Svetlana Boym famously manages to have it both ways by differentiating between a self-aware ‘reflexive nostalgia’

and a 'restorative nostalgia' (Boym 2001). The latter is assumed to involve believing not only in the reality of its idealizations but also in the possibility of actually bringing back the past. Such distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' nostalgia have been variously conceptualized as progressive/reactionary, utopian/melancholic or future-oriented/backward-looking (see Pickering and Keightley 2006; Smith and Campbell 2017). They are often ultimately mapped onto the politics of Right and Left, with nationalism serving as the ultimate home ground for a 'bad' right-wing, melancholic, reactionary and self-delusional type.

However, instead of such double standards, which ultimately lead only to the ineffectual critique of pointing out factual errors in a style of speech never intended to be factual in the first place, we might follow the lead of scholars who have focused directly on the apparent affinity between nostalgia and fictionality. Pam Cook's analysis of 'nostalgia films', for example, argues that nostalgia always entails a conscious suspension of disbelief, a willingness to engage in a moment of 'let's pretend' (Cook 2004). This has some affinity with Alison Landsberg's idea of 'prosthetic memory': the past is remembered not because (or as) it was experienced, but via how it has been (fictionally) mediated—without that mediation ever actually being mistaken for historical reality (Landsberg 1995). The point here is that if we accept that all nostalgia is in a sense reflexive because it is aware of its own idealizations, then the critical analysis of nostalgic constructions cannot stop at revealing them as normative fictions. Rather, it must uncover the wider ideological functions they serve and the communal anxieties they gloss over. In short, nostalgia must in the widest sense be approached symptomatically in relation to the society that produces it and as a product of a certain contemporary political unconsciousness finding allegorical expression, above all, in the realm of (popular) culture.

Pastoral nostalgia and Little England

So far, I have concentrated on nostalgia as a certain kind of representational technique, one that produces normative fictions from historical material. But while nostalgia is highly flexible and can incorporate a wide field of historical objects, the (modern) historical context of its first formulation still means that a specific type of imagery and imagined space has most often lent itself to nostalgic intonation, namely the rural, bucolic realm rendered as manifestly anti-urban and anti-industrial, and thus from early on made to aesthetically represent a nostalgic escape from modernity into a kind of idealized pastoral bliss. Such idealized imagery of bucolic, pastoral bliss is very much an element in the nostalgia of *1917*.

As Peter Fritzsche has argued, nostalgia was from the beginning an eminently modern and 'bitter-sweet' exploration of loss in that it 'not only cherishes the past for the distinctive qualities that are no longer present but also acknowledges the permanence of their absence' (Fritzsche 2001, 1592). It is,

in other words, a form of longing dependent on modernity's strictly linear and progressive temporal imagination and, in a gesture mirroring modernity's ambiguity in relation to itself, at once mourns and celebrates what has been left behind. Nostalgia can be historicized as a phenomenon born from and configured in relation to a certain modern experience (Shaw and Chase 1989), which 'was not only saturated with narratives of transformation and movement but keenly aware of the estrangement that those motions called forth' (Fritzsche 2001, 1618). More precisely, nostalgia, as Linda Hutcheon points out, is 'a by-product of cultural modernity with its alienation, its much lamented loss of tradition and community' (Hutcheon and Valdés 1998, 23).

Nostalgia, therefore, might be thought of as a general form of cultural performativity, but it is one invented in specific historical circumstances and therefore originally filled by a concrete cultural imagery. If nostalgia was born as the psychological companion piece to urban modernity and to an experience of rushing forward into an unknowable and ever-expanding future, then it makes sense that it initially mobilized an archaic pastoral stability as its preferred imagery of a bygone bliss. Nostalgia, an eminently modern critique of modernity, nonetheless borrowed the imagery of a 'pre-modern' pastoral.

Nationalism, moreover, if not the primary then certainly one of the most enduring modern ideological innovations, to a large extent internalized and weaponized this ambiguity. It was an utterly modern ideology retooling the state for a new age and grounded in an industrial bourgeoisie, yet nevertheless holding not the bustling metropolis but the countryside as the sacred heart of the nation (Forchtner and Kølvraa 2015). Such romanticism has its own colonial dimension, in that the move from 'cosmopolis' to 'pastoral' is also one from a space of irrepressible heterogeneity to one of idealized—and among other things racialized—homogeneity.

As Edward Said has shown in *Culture and Imperialism*, the literary construction of rural bliss in nineteenth-century Britain—for example, in Jane Austen—always had to labour to repress the colonial structures that made such elegant affluence possible (Said 1994). And the coloniality/modernity nexus described by decolonial scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo, Madina Tlostanova and Aníbal Quijano (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2007; Quijano 2007) is by no means threatened by a 'pastoral' nostalgic self-critique; to offer a sentimental and inward-looking nationalism as a rebuke of industrial modernity only further represses the latter's colonial underpinnings in the celebration of the former.

This dynamic was also part of the Brexit discussion, in which the conflict between Britain and the European Union could be painted as one between an incomprehensible and uncontrollable modern empire and the intimate space of a national British 'home' (MacMillan 2016, 2018; Manners 2018). Indeed, at times, Britain's own imperial past seemed to completely vanish in a rhetoric of borrowed colonial victimhood, such as when Boris Johnson warned that the country was 'truly headed for the status of colony' (Buchan 2018) in the face of what Jacob Rees-Mogg referred to as the EU's 'colonialist approach'

to the post-Brexit negotiations (Hughes 2017). But already on the eve of the referendum, UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage of course seemed to be playing the same amnesiac game of role-reversal, when he declared it to be Britain's 'Independence Day'—himself thereby apparently becoming the hero of a victorious 'decolonial struggle' (Ahmed 2016).

The Brexiteers could, as such, be accused not of celebrating the British Empire but of wanting to forget about it. If the Brexiteers were 'Little Englanders' then their ideal of 'a homogenous white, Anglo Britain' (Bhambra and Narayan 2017, 10) could only be achieved if the empire was sacrificed to a 'historical amnesia' in which 'Britain's colonial past and post-colonial history [was] seemingly erased' (Broomfield 2017; Tharoor 2017). And while scholars such as Ben Wellings (2012) have shown how British/English nationhood evolved in such close entanglement with the expanding empire that the two do not exist as separate historical entities, it remains the case that many Britons are unaware of the fact that they, as Sally Tomlinson and Danny Dorling have put it, 'benefitted from what was in effect the plunder of a quarter of the world by one country' (2016).

If this national–pastoral nostalgia is a moment in which modernity stages its own critique but does so in an 'anti-industrial' and often rural imagery, then one scene in *1917* seems almost overwhelmingly to pursue such an agenda. But the idyll of the countryside is actually continually present in the film as it both literally and figuratively frames the action. Literally, the film's first and last scenes have our hero resting amidst green fields, framing his 'modern' ordeal of navigating the horrors of war with moments of rural bliss and restitution. But also, more figuratively, pastoral or bucolic domestic spaces continually serve as the lost or absent opposite of the modern military machine; as a 'homely' space soldiers long for, are alienated from, find violated, or finally return to (if only in death). As mentioned, however, there is one scene that especially pursues this agenda. It comes where Blake and Schofield, the trenches behind them at last, find themselves approaching a picturesque little farmhouse and discover that the retreating Germans have inexplicitly cut down an entire orchard of cherry trees in an act of what the script calls 'wanton destruction' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2018, 44). This is not a very subtle metaphor. This vision of modernity's violation of the bucolic–pastoral is furthermore mapped onto the central (national) antagonism of the movie as Blake takes the opportunity to tell Schofield about his mother's cherry orchard with an enthusiastic innocence that associates him firmly with the uncomplicated values of a pastoral–national home.

Mendes, however, cannot resist using this location to further emphasize the danger that mechanical–industrial modernity represents to this pastoral domestic space and its subjects. As Schofield and Blake are searching the abandoned farm, a German bi-plane crashes into it, staging an even more violent clash between this space and the one piece of technology that, from futurists to fascists, became the very symbol of modern speed and excitement (Esposito 2015). As they pull the German pilot from the burning plane, he

inexplicably stabs Blake, securing a final reiteration of the apparent incommensurability between an agent of modern technology and a pastoral subject fresh out of his mother's cherry orchard. What follows is a death scene that can only be described as a heroic cliché: Blake dies in the arms of Schofield, with his last breath asking him to tell his mother that 'I wasn't scared' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2018, 57).

The only way Blake's death scene makes sense in a contemporary war movie is by insisting that it requires a nostalgic suspension of disbelief, a willingness to go along with its proposed normative ideal even while knowing that this representation of the past bears little resemblance to actual history. That so few First World War soldiers had the good fortune to expire in as dignified a way as is afforded to Blake is, then, a less interesting critique. The theatrical hyperbole of this scene clearly indicates that what we are being offered is a self-aware fictionality, a purely imaginary but beautifully choreographed performance of the values, dignity and aesthetics inscribed in the pastoral as a modern self-critique (and as such a nostalgic object par excellence). It demonstrates, so to speak, exactly that the function of nostalgia is not to be believable but to allow us to indulge for a moment in a fictional escape. That this fictionality is, as I have argued, self-aware rather than delusional does not make it innocent or inconsequential. This kind of nostalgia is, in the last instance, enjoyed at the expense of certain others, because when the national-pastoral fantasy articulates an imagined premodern homogeneity this entails not just the wish to return to an idealized past but also the wishing away of those British citizens who are never represented in the pastoral setting, namely those whose presence is a direct consequence of the modern matrix of modernity and coloniality.

As Paul Gilroy has famously argued, one effect of 'postcolonial melancholia' (Gilroy 2004b) is a rejection of racial Others because they are 'unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past' (Gilroy 2004a, 110) the nation is trying to forget. In a similar vein, in her analysis of the emergence of a racialized 'we' in the discussions around Brexit, Bhambra points out that such imaginings about a white British Anglo-nation, constituted before and beside its modern imperial adventures, is a double violence towards those populations whose presence in Britain is a consequence of that colonial heritage:

No subject of empire asked for [imperial] subjugation. Having been *included through subjugation*, it seems perverse to now be excluded by those, careless in their history and wanton in their analysis, who articulate a conception of the body politic and the body social as white, and do not wish *inclusion on terms of equality*. We didn't wish inclusion through subjugation, but we will not be wished away.

(Bhambra 2016)

There are undoubtedly still groups in society for whom pastoral nostalgia forms an attractive escape from modern dislocations. Yet there is also

something strangely anachronistic about this ‘high modern’ longing for an image of premodern pastoral bliss, for it can certainly be questioned whether we are still living in the era of a forwards-rushing modernity. In a sense, then, it is not only the pastoral that is nostalgically recuperated from a bygone past but also the ‘high modern’ position that the viewer has to assume in order for pastoral nostalgia to make sense. In order to fully enjoy *1917*, what is required is a double engagement with nostalgic ‘make-believe’. One has to go along with not only the immediate and primary nostalgic fantasy of the premodern pastoral as an anti-modern ideal but also with the secondary nostalgic fantasy that we are still in a modern world where the fictional recuperation of the pastoral corresponds to the deepest anxieties of our political unconsciousness.

A nostalgia for the modern

What we can find in *1917* is therefore yet another nostalgic layer, one that articulates not simply the original nostalgic desire to return to premodern pastoral bliss, but a nostalgia for the high modern time and context in which such ‘pastoral longing’ made sense. The film *1917* in this sense articulates not just a modern nostalgia for the premodern, but also a postmodern nostalgia for a modern that is itself ‘becoming part of the past’ (Turner 1985, 177).

While most recent treatments of nostalgia, such as that by Svetlana Boym, have gone back to thinking of it as a (pastoral) escape from the modern, the discussions in the 1980s and 1990s focused instead on how nostalgia operated in a situation of ‘postmodernity’ where many of the dynamics that first brought it into being no longer seemed present (Jameson 1984, 1991). Indeed, postmodernity has often been characterized as a ‘stalled present’ in which subjects were no longer able or willing to imagine a future of radical change, momentous historical events or the exciting possibility of ever new experiences (see Foster 1996).

This diagnosis was made by several scholars from the late 1970s onwards. But it is perhaps Fredric Jameson’s work that is still the touchstone of such discussions as they continue today. The elements Jameson identified as key to ‘late capitalism’ have certainly not become less relevant or less globally prevalent. He points not just to the Lyotardian collapse of grand narratives (Lyotard 1984) but also to the fact that capitalism in its global extension no longer admits any alternatives and to the way in which political agency seems increasingly distracted and circumscribed in what Guy Debord theorized as the ‘Society of the Spectacle’ ([1983] 2010) and Jean Baudrillard as the rise of the simulacrum (1994). The accumulated effect, according to Jameson, is that it becomes increasingly hard to imagine substantial change to society. While surface ‘modular’ change is omnipresent—changes in fashion and new consumer goods circulating at a dizzying pace, for instance—it is, as Jameson famously quips, easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson 1998, 50–8).

This collapse of the future is, perhaps counterintuitively, why postmodern culture is so saturated with what Jameson terms ‘nostalgia’. However, Jameson uses the term to signify not so much a deep longing but rather the pervasive presence of ‘retro-objects’ (Fisher 2013). Without the means to imagine its future trajectory as anything more than an endless repetition of the present, it becomes impossible for contemporary society to attain its own distinct historical identity; it is instead forced to eclectically borrow cultural styles and expressions from past periods—thereby also undermining their distinct historicity in the process. As Mark Fisher has remarked, this ‘slow cancellation of the future’ means that ‘those who can’t remember the past are condemned to have it re-sold to them forever’ (Fisher 2014, 25).

Mark Fisher is one of a number of scholars, including, for example, Jodi Dean (2010) and Franco Berardi (2017), who have reiterated the idea that the contemporary conjuncture is above all characterized by the collapse of the future. Fisher coined the term ‘Capitalist Realism’ to signify what he considers a pervasive inability to imagine alternatives to the global neoliberal order (Fisher 2009). Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s notion of Hauntology (1994), but actually understanding the hauntological more in line with Avery Gordon (1997) or Stephen Frosh (2013) as an affective substratum of contemporary culture, Fisher argues that what haunts certain parts of contemporary avant-garde (music) culture is ‘the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised’ (2014, 27). This haunting does not, for Fisher, concern the non-realization of a specific future but rather the broader, and much more difficult to signify, mourning for the disappearance of the future as a general ‘effective virtuality’ (2012, 16). In Berardi’s framing, it concerns the general experience of a loss of ‘potency’, an inability to force the transition from virtuality to actuality; to (re)open the future (2017).

But if such a loss is a part of our contemporary cultural experience and the political unconscious that it expresses then we can expect nostalgia—beyond its banal late capitalist commodification into a sea of retro-objects—to re-emerge with a new object, namely that unruly futuricity apparently so lacking in the ‘postmodern condition’ yet so easily idealized as being readily available in the grand moments of the modern era. The battles (*Dunkirk, 1917*), the leaders (*Churchill, Victoria*) and the sociocultural transformations (*Downtown Abbey*) that can be imagined as having ‘changed everything’ make sense as enticing nostalgic objects in ‘modular’ societies where—so to speak—nothing ever really changes anymore. What these cultural products offer (and *1917* is certainly no exception) is in this sense a nostalgia for a kind of experience felt to be no longer readily available, namely, one significant enough to be deemed ‘historical’—and ‘historical’ both in the proactive sense of opening up new futures and in the retroactive sense of being something worth remembering and recounting.

In *1917*, this notion of a ‘historical experience’ is constructed by a set of plot elements addressing the theme of narration, its contexts, its limits and its

time. We quickly learn that Schofield cannot talk about his experiences during the Battle of the Somme, he finds it a strain to go home on leave, and he has traded a medal he was awarded. This kind of traumatic alienation is a well-known theme in war movies, and it is often signalled exactly by the protagonist's rejection of conventional markers of military valour such as medals. One also finds this in *1917* with medals being described as 'just a bit of bloody tin' or 'a scrap of ribbon to cheer up a widow'—only Blake insists, '[i]f I got a medal, I'd take it back home' (Mendes and Wilson-Cairns 2018, 20, 44). What is constructed here is, in the first instance, yet another example of the distinction between the modern, as the site of experiences of a magnitude such that they resist both linguistic and symbolic representation, and the innocence of Blake's pastoral sensibilities in which an untroubled speech would apparently easily flow from such traditional markers of merit and honour. But under this thematic, Blake's innocence appears childish and banal. The modern is no longer simply that which is escaped from in favour of an idealized 'premodern' wrapped in bucolic or pastoral aesthetics. The modern now has its own distinctive content—the overwhelming experience—and its own aesthetics, never more forcefully rendered than in the film's visual climax when the spectacular background of a burning city is clearly meant to call to mind the striking images of modernist painting. But while the magnitude of modern experience is, on the one hand, established by it being immediately un-narratable, its value is nonetheless ultimately established only by its eventual narration at a different time and place. The medals are inconsequential because the true prize for the protagonists is the very right to narration, the possession of a story worth telling when it becomes possible to do so.

Mendes dedicates the movie to his grandfather 'Who Told Us the Stories'. What this postscript establishes is a second site of narration where the story could be told, one in which these experiences cannot only be represented but become a cultural object of great respect and appreciation. Indeed, this situation of narration seems almost ingrained in the very fabric of the movie. The 'one-shot' cinematography employed—there is only one cut in the entire movie—has been widely celebrated as a technical masterpiece (see Kermodé 2020). But some reviewers have conversely criticized it both for making the war seem 'beautiful and purposeful' (Berlatsky 2019) and for resulting in a disassociation of the viewer from the narrative, because one is at some level continuously conscious of the (often seemingly impossible) position of the camera relentlessly tracking our protagonists through trenches, crowds, explosions and underground cave-ins (Willmore 2019). But this tireless and forever attentive 'third party' in every scene can also be read as a brilliantly subtle cinematographic representation of the enraptured youthful listeners who have been told this story, that is, the grandchildren implicitly present as invisible spectators in the midst of the action narrated. The gaze constructed by this camerawork is one of unflinching attention and without critical distance, in other words, without any trace of 'postmodern cynicism' or distract-edness. It is a gaze that serves nothing other than to attest to the force of the

narration itself, the value of a story worth telling; and in doing so, it nostalgically marks the kind of grand experience that might sustain such stories. It could therefore be suggested that the deepest meaning of this postscript is a nostalgia geared to soothe the cultural anxiety proper to contemporary societies, the unconscious fear that if the future holds nothing but the endless repetition or modular variation of a stalled present then there will be no more stories like this to tell the grandchildren.

Such a nostalgic desire for ‘rebooted’ grand narratives can also be traced in the Brexit discussion. Indeed, the ‘Imperial Nostalgia’ (Lorcin 2018; Tinsley 2020) through which the Brexiteer camp managed to re-politicize memories of empire (Rasch 2019; Ward and Rasch 2019) in the context of Brexit, can be understood as implicitly expressing such a desire for the re-opening of the future. According to Ben Wellings, Brexiteer discourse did not actually rely on amnesia or a rejection of empire: how could it when a 2014 UK poll found that 59 per cent still thought that the British Empire was ‘something to be proud of’ (Dahlgreen 2014)? In his opinion, therefore, one should ‘reject outright the idea that “Leave” campaigners were “Little Englanders”’. Far from it: [they] were intent on returning the United Kingdom to what they saw as a pre-EU global field of action’ (Wellings 2017). This was most evident in the idea of a ‘global Britain’ (Daddow 2019) as the centre of a post-EU foreign and trading policy revamping former imperial ties and loyalties of the Commonwealth or the ‘Anglo-sphere’ (Namusoke 2016). It would be easy to dismantle the realism of such plans. As Wellings notes, ‘[r]eferring to the Commonwealth in familial and friendly metaphors provides a false front to a whole manner of sins’ (Wellings 2017), and many of Britain’s prospective partners soon rejected the idea. It also fundamentally overlooked the fact that the UK’s decision to join the European Community in 1973 was made in light of the realization that the Commonwealth was not a viable economic alternative to European integration and what was left of the UK’s global role after the end of empire could only be salvaged as a partner in a united Europe (Gifford 2008; Glencross 2016; Wellings 2012).

But if, as argued above, nostalgia is in the last instance not underpinned by or dependent upon a strict realism then what is important is not that a revamping of the Commonwealth or the Anglosphere is a fantasy, but rather why it proved such an attractive one. In this vein, Michael Kenny and Nick Pearce rightly point out that

the Anglosphere’s potency is ideological, not geo-political.... It registers nostalgia, but also energy: Britain would be liberated to march on the world stage again, freed from sclerotic, conformist Europe and reanimated by the animal spirits that once gave it an empire.

(2016, 306)

Clearly, this is as much a dream of the future as it is about the past, as Wellings has also argued: ‘Britain’s past greatness was a source of mobilising

inspiration for its future' (2017). There is as such undoubtedly a 'potent form of nostalgia' in evoking 'the ethos of a once great, sea-faring, imperial nation rousing itself from its slumbers' (Kenny 2017, 257).

This imperial nostalgia manages to mostly gloss over the historical realities of racial domination and colonial exploitation in favour of an image of empire as a site of adventure, possibility and ultimately boundless 'futurability'. Indeed, the very term 'Brexititeer', which was quickly adopted as a self-designation for pro-Brexit voices, intentionally incorporated an extra 'e' (becoming 'Brexititeer' rather than simply 'Brexitite') exactly so that it would recall the 'buccaneers' and 'privateers' of a British past of global high-seas adventure and domination (Barber 2018). This image of empire as adventure—as the exciting discovery and creation of new worlds—was by no means invented for the occasion. It has a literary trajectory running from Robinson Crusoe and the travel-narratives of 'civilising' non-European lands and peoples (Ifversen 1999) to the transformation of the colonial space of literary discovery into the extraterrestrial one of the science-fiction genre (Rieder 2012).

The reason such a nostalgic idealization of the imperial past proved tempting in contemporary British society might be that it offers a borrowed political futuricity; the prosthetic memory of what it felt like to believe in a future for the nation that could be shaped into something radically different from a perpetually stalled present. This was never clearer than when Boris Johnson announced that Brexit would be

an opportunity to rediscover some of the dynamism of these bearded Victorians ... not to build a new empire, heaven forfend, but to use every ounce of Britain's power, hard and soft, to go back out into the world in a way that we had perhaps forgotten over the past 45 years: to find friends, to open markets, to promote our culture and our values.

(Johnson 2018)

This kind of nostalgia does not present itself as nationally self-sufficient, backward-looking or engaged in a 'little Englander'-vision of the UK and therefore also could be attractive to voters who would not have been tempted by a more 'pastoral-national' imagery, nor by more overt articulations of racial exclusion or hierarchy. But while imperial nostalgia does not engage directly in a pastoral wishing away of colonial history and those subjects that still embody its heritage, it nevertheless allows itself the fantasy that something resembling the imperial adventure might be re-staged. Not, of course, as a one-to-one re-enactment of the racism and brutality of the original production—'no, heaven forfend'—but nonetheless in a version still ultimately true to the original plot, characters and cast. At the heart of the idea about 'global Britain' is still a fantasy about treating the 'global' as a re-imagined colonial space, as the object of a certain adventurous Western subject once again the focal point and agent of history.

The problem with this imperial nostalgia is not simply the irresponsible unrealism of imagining a future that is not going to happen. Rather, the problem is that even indulging in enjoyment of this nostalgic fantasy puts us further away from the kind of futures that need to happen. And while the incommensurability (Tuck and Yang 2012) of parts of different lived experiences should be taken into account, the shared experience of living in a stalled present haunted by a future that never happened might, as scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Franco Berardi and Alfred Lopez (Bangstad and Nilsen 2019; Berardi 2011; López 2007; Mbembe 2019) dare to hope, serve as a starting point for new ‘post-global’ forms of solidarity and alliance-building. But films such as *1917* will be of little help in this endeavour.

Concluding remarks

The charge of nostalgia has been ubiquitous in the debates around Brexit. This makes it all the more urgent to move beyond a simple understanding of nostalgia that points only to a use of the past that lacks any concern for historical accuracy. The film *1917* lends itself eminently to an exploration of how nostalgia inscribes itself at different layers and in different ways in cultural objects. This film contains both overt, clearly intended nostalgic elements, as well as deeper layers of nostalgia that can be understood as the more subtle expression of a political unconscious seeking to cope with the impact of Brexit on the intersections of race, class and nation.

At its most heavy-handed, the film employs a rhetorical nostalgia in which the past becomes the mere instrument of an ideological discourse about the present and entails historical characters painstakingly made to enact ideals proper to the contemporary context—such as the dissolution of race and class into the warm communion of an externally embattled national community. But even when confronted with such overt politicizing of the past it remains crucial that we do not reduce the critique of nostalgia to one focusing on its lack of historical accuracy. Doing so fundamentally misses both the form and the force of nostalgia as entailing a suspension of disbelief, a wilful and self-aware indulging in a certain form of enjoyable fictionality.

This becomes clear when appreciating the anti-modern pastoral nostalgia that pervades many scenes, characters, conflicts and objects. The significance of Blake’s heroic death, the crashing bi-plane or the felled cherry trees never hinges on whether they are ‘realistic’. They are clearly not. Rather, their value is solely dependent on the extent to which they can play their parts as metaphors of a wider conflict between the pastoral and its modern counterpart and the extent to which they succeed in evoking the longing for the former as an escape from the tribulations of the latter. It is an affective, not a factual, narrative economy they partake in. As such, this is a more abstract and subtly seductive form of nostalgia, one in its own way intimately tied to a racially white national imagery and mapped onto the wider modern anxieties of Brexit as illustrated in the fetishized wish to ‘take back control’.

But even this pastoral lament is in the last instance not the deepest level of nostalgia in 1917 or in Brexit. In engaging with the literature on nostalgia in the context of postmodernity, one can argue that what 1917—at this level almost certainly inadvertently—constitutes is not a modern nostalgia, but a nostalgia for the modern. Ultimately, its pastoral nostalgic imaginary requires viewers to put themselves in the position of the modern subject to revisit a world of such forward-rushing futuricity that longing for pastoral calm becomes enticing. But to scholars such as Berardi, Fisher, Dean and Jameson this is no longer the world we inhabit. The anxiety that might be expected to pervade the political unconscious today is instead that the grand modern experiences and narratives have been permanently replaced by a stalled present neither very exciting nor particularly worth recounting. It is such anxiety that is addressed by 1917's deepest level of nostalgia, one that subtly mourns not the loss of pastoral bliss but the elimination of a 'historical experience' grand enough to hold the attention of the grandchildren.

The imperial nostalgia of the Brexiteers drew its energy not just from its politicizing of history but also because it seemed to offer exactly a re-opening of the future, a promise of new political adventures. There can be little confidence, however, that a future modelled and inspired by the imperial past will offer much hope or inclusion to those who still suffer the heritage of its original enactment. But if political visions such as those imbricated in Brexiteer imperial nostalgia are to be countered, it will not be enough to critique their lack of historical accuracy: the alternatives to be offered also need to 'recover some sense of the future as well as of the possibilities of genuine change' (Jameson 1998, 90).

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