**Soft power and national cinema: James Bond, ‘GREAT’ Britain and Brexit**

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**Introduction**

The increasingly right-wing UK governments of the 2010s, backed by the right-wing media, sought to present Britain unequivocally as a global power. This process only intensified with the politicking around Brexit and the UK’s (impending) departure from the European Union. The official GREAT campaign, launched in 2011, promoted GREAT Britain throughout the decade as a brand that might attract and generate trade and investment. At the same time, the concept of Global Britain, ‘the organising slogan of UK foreign policy in the age of Brexit’ (Barber 2018; Global Britain 2018), became central to narratives about how the UK should perform on the international stage: this too was a nation-branding exercise.

There is no denying the prominence of the UK story globally. Thus the Anholt Nation Brands Index ranked the UK’s overall ‘National Brand’ third in the world in 2018, based on responses from 20,000 consumers in 20 countries (VisitBritain 2018), while the 2018 edition of Portland Communication’s *Soft Power 30* publication (McClory 2018) had the UK in the top spot in their annual league table – despite the ongoing negotiations about Brexit. The success of the GREAT campaign was cited as a key factor, while the pervasiveness of the Global Britain slogan was noted (McClory 2018: 46). But perhaps more important than both was the fact that ‘Independent from the government, British art, film, music, fashion, and sport continue to flourish in highly competitive global markets’ (McClory 2018: 44). The significance of the UK’s cultural heritage and contemporary creative industries are repeatedly singled out for attention in commentary about the UK’s soft power, their outputs identified as crucial soft power assets.

For Joseph Nye, the international relations expert who coined the term soft power, and for his followers, soft power is about the creation and circulation of compelling national stories, ‘effectively communicating a winning global narrative’ (McClory 2018: 12). This chapter reflects on the role cinema has been called on to play in communicating a compelling story about the UK in the 2010s, and on the role of one agent in particular: 007, James Bond. Those seeking to brand the UK as a global power also found it useful to invoke the iconic figure of James Bond, and the apparent ease with which Bond both asserts a British identity and moves around the world. Political discourse in and about the UK has positioned cinema, and the creative industries more generally, at the centre of the nation-branding process, and this chapter also charts the development of this discourse. At the end of the chapter, I consider the new configuration of national cinema that emerges from this discourse in this era of intense globalisation.

In identifying the UK as one of the world’s leading soft power nations, two influential soft power reports, in *Monocle* magazine in 2014 and by Portland in 2015 (*Monocle* 2014; McClory 2015), cited the Bond films as prime contributors to that status. Around the same time, the Bond films were co-opted into the GREAT campaign, under the slogan ‘Bond is GREAT Britain’. This was quite blatantly an exercise in nation-branding for a global world, fully supported by the British government, and a deliberate attempt to project a particular national narrative. The nation-branding at stake here also coincided with the visions of pro-Brexit campaigners in the run-up to the 2016 Referendum about whether the UK should leave the EU: for them too, Bond was a national hero.

**James Bond’s soft power**

How then was James Bond, the leading character of one of the toughest and most violent action adventure film franchises in history, re-framed as a cultural diplomat, an instrument of soft power? What part did the character play in formulating the Brexit narrative of GREAT Britain and how did he become a key component of a particular national brand? The focus here is on the first four Bond films featuring Daniel Craig in the lead role: *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008), *Skyfall* (2012) and *Spectre* (2015) (a fifth Craig/Bond film is set for release in Spring 2020).

These are at one level British films, made by Eon Productions, but they depended on substantial inward investment from Hollywood, in this instance in the guise of MGM (Jones and Higson 2020). For most UK audiences, James Bond is a British agent, an identifiably British character – and in the case of the five films in which Bond is played by Daniel Craig, he is for UK audiences a recognisably *English* character, given his southern, white, middle-class English accent. The films are also replete with British imagery, iconography, institutions, flags and characters. Bond’s British identity was further underlined when Daniel Craig appeared as Bond alongside the Queen in the short film made for the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012.

The Bond films are then celebrated in the UK as very much national products, as Great British films about a Great British icon. At the same time, the films are also Great British exports – in both economic and cultural terms. Bond himself is also of course very much a global traveller, who inhabits a highly seductive narrative world filled with prestige consumer goods and a luxury lifestyle. This is a national narrative, but it is also a narrative of cosmopolitan globe-trotting adventure.

This serves to indicate that, if the Bond films are in some senses British, they are also very much global productions for global audiences. Indeed, Eon/MGM’s Bond film franchise is by any definition a global phenomenon, and the films are very carefully packaged for global markets. The films are also very much transnational productions, in terms of the involvement of co-production partners, locations, creative personnel, crew, cast and actors from various different countries.

Despite the evident investment by Hollywood in the films and the transnationalism of their production, the Craig/Bond films were repeatedly mobilised as national totems in political debates about global Britain, co-opted into a soft power play that was designed to promote a persuasive and attractive image of the UK as a leading global player. In 2012, the year of the London Olympics as well as the hugely successful release of *Skyfall*, the magazine *Monocle* produced a soft power survey that put Britain at the top of the world table, ‘thanks to the exploits of Bradley Wiggins, Andy Murray, James Bond, Adele and the Queen’ (McClory 2012). The right-wing populist British newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, was delighted: ‘The sun may have set on the British Empire, but this country is once again the globe’s most powerful nation by at least one yardstick’ (Kelly 2012).

The 2015 *Soft Power 30* report claimed that Britain’s combined hard military and political might, its economic strength and its soft diplomatic and cultural influence again made it the world’s leading global power (McClory 2015). This too was picked up on the *Daily Mail*’s globally popular website, which proclaimed ‘Britain as the world’s ONLY global power - and we have the Royal Family, James Bond, Harry Potter and Sherlock Holmes to thank … not to mention companies like Land Rover, Burberry and Topshop’ (Drury 2015). James Rogers of the European GeoStrategy think tank was quoted approvingly: ‘Brand UK has never been stronger’ – and the Bond franchise, he argued, was key to that national brand (Drury 2015). With *Spectre* released that year, the British Deputy High Commissioner in India was moved to proclaim that ‘Bond is back to show the world what makes Britain GREAT’ (McAllister 2015).

The same theme was picked up in a report from a Select Committee on Soft Power in the UK’s non-elected chamber of parliament, the House of Lords: ‘UK cultural assets have a wide appeal that adds to the country’s international recognition and reputation’. The global success of the Bond film franchise was cited by way of example(House of Lords 2014: 117). This passage was subsequently picked up in another report, commissioned by the British Film Institute, which concluded that ‘British Film is a major generator of soft power for the UK’, in which context the Bond franchise is ‘particularly influential… This is further underlined through the significant tourism and diplomatic value British film generates worldwide – by building interest and trust in the UK, they perform a role of great importance’ (Olsberg-SPI 2015: 1).

This line of argument was also adopted in 2016 in the run-up to the Brexit Referendum in a leaflet produced by the Brexit Leave Campaign, which articulated a vision of Britain going it alone as a global power freed from the shackles of the European Union:

The United Kingdom continues to punch above its weight in terms of “hard power”: the ability to control others through forces – usually economic or military – to do what you wish. … Yet it is in soft power that our influence is most remarkable (Brexit Leave Campaign 2016).

How is that influence felt?

From the Commonwealth to the G8, from the Hong Kong Sevens to Formula One, from gentlemen’s clubs to the James Bond film franchise, the history of the British Empire and its expats is everywhere. Furthermore, there remains intense global media interest in Queen Elizabeth II and the wider Royal Family. … Come with us as we make a new future in this globalised world (Brexit Leave Campaign 2016).

In a key speech by Michael Gove, then Justice Minister in the UK government and one of the leading Brexit campaigners, he argued that, ‘Britain is a great country, it’s the world’s fifth largest economy with the world’s best Armed Forces, best health service and best broadcaster. We’re first in the world for soft power, thanks to our language, culture and creativity’ (Whale 2016).

The Brexit mythology of Britain as a great nation that is capable of standing alone plays heavily on popular memory of 1940 and Churchill’s rhetoric of ‘defend[ing] our Island … fight[ing] on the beaches … [and] never surrender[ing]’ (Churchill 1940). This mythology of *Great* Britain was also played out in the UK government’s GREAT tourist and trade promotional campaign. As Jeremy Hunt, then government Minister for Culture, put it, this was about ‘putting great back into Britain’ (quoted in Satherley 2011). This careful exercise in nation-branding was a key early example of the UK government taking the soft power agenda seriously, and by 2016 it was being used in a highly coordinated fashion ‘by 17 government departments and … actively branding the British diplomatic and trade presence in over 150 countries’ (Pamment 2016a).

Launched by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, in 2011, the campaign co-opted a series of already very high-profile national brands, including the football Premier League, Jaguar, Aston Martin and James Bond. In his launch speech, Cameron explained, ‘This campaign is simple. There are so many great things about Britain and we want to send out the message loud and proud that this is a great place to do business, to invest, to study and to visit’ (BBC 2011).

The involvement of the Bond franchise in the campaign was explained in an official government document:

VisitBritain, The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the GREAT campaign partners saw an opportunity to use the globally recognised James Bond franchise to promote both tourism and the excellence of the UK’s film-making expertise (Hague 2014: 8).

The involvement of two of the most powerful government departments, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and UK Trade and Industry, ensured that:

over 20 Embassies and High Commissions held Bond-themed receptions and screenings to promote Britain as a world-class tourism destination to influential local audiences and highlight the strengths of the British film-making industry and Bond-related British products such as the new Jaguar (Hague 2014: 8-9).

The ‘Bond is GREAT Britain’ campaign was renewed in 2015 with the release of *Spectre*, and a new tagline, ‘Live the Bond Lifestyle in Britain’ (VisitBritain 2015). The objective was once again to ‘utilis[e] 007’s iconic international profile to show the world what makes Britain GREAT’ (Bond Lifestyle 2015).

The politics of Bond’s on-screen adventures equally present Britain as a sovereign global power. In the first four Craig/Bond films, British national security is threatened by a series of villainous global players, but protected almost single-handedly by Bond, with the support of the British secret service. There is little sense of international collaboration or cooperation as a positive force, even with the USA. Indeed, the organisation SPECTRE in the eponymously-named 2015 film is a multi-national corporation, a metaphorical version of the G7, which seeks to privatise global cyber-security for its own sinister ends.

**The ironies of Bond’s GREAT Britain**

No wonder that the Brexit Leave Campaign invoked the Bond films: this is the perfect narrative for the post-Brexit vision of the UK as a sovereign global power. However, a closer inspection of the stories told in the first four Craig/Bond films, and of the circumstances of the production, distribution and reception of those films, throws up some challenging questions about nationhood in this period of intense globalisation. Indeed, there is much irony about the way the Bond films were wielded as instruments of soft power and nation-branding, not least since Bond repeatedly exercises power through violent coercion rather than cultural diplomacy. And of course that power and the national narrative in which the Bond films participate depend on foreign investment in UK’s cultural economy, with the films heavily funded by Hollywood studios. This is the nature of national cinema in a neo-liberal, globalised world, and indicative of how developed nations are mobilising commercial nationalism and soft power and adjusting their presence in the global media landscape.

It is of course possible to read the Craig/Bond films in different ways to those in which the Brexiteers read the films. Indeed, there is an explicit critique of the *Daily Mail* version of England at the heart of *Skyfall*, provided by Raul Silva, the film’s master villain:‘Oh, Mr. Bond. All that physical stuff is so dull. So dull. Chasing spies. So old-fashioned. … England, the Empire, MI6. You’re living in a ruin, as well. You just don’t know it yet.’ In the end, of course, Bond’s traditional ‘physical stuff’, combined with the modernity of Q’s computing mastery, proves successful. Change is there too in the re-introduction of Moneypenny in *Skyfall* asa black British character, and a woman with far greater agency than the previous incarnations of the character.

The same can be observed of the opening ceremony to the London Olympics, which was seen by commentators on both the left and the right as projecting an idea of Britain as a liberal, multicultural society. The involvement of Bond in this narrative suggests that Bond too has his place in this modernised vision of Britain, which yet allows for the enduring nature of both the monarchy and an imperialist version of British masculinity.

Finally, in this list of ironies troubling the Brexit vision of Bond’s soft power, there is the thorny issue of whether international audiences actually perceive Bond as British. Many such audiences are far less certain than British audiences about this matter: after all, in order to appeal to contemporary global audiences, the film franchise must and does look beyond a parochial sense of Britishness. Indeed, as Bond scholar James Chapman notes, Bond’s Britishness has long been ‘carefully packaged for the international market’, by combining British signifiers with elements of internationalism and cosmopolitanism (Chapman 2003: 97).

The production and distribution of the Craig/Bond films is typical of how global capitalism operates – and in this case, how the same cultural products are exploited on a global scale. Glocalisation – investing global products with some sort of local flavour – is an important part of this work. Thus, each of the films was both set and shot in numerous locations around the world, while in many countries, Bond fluently speaks the local language thanks to the practice of dubbing. These global products are thus able to depict local places and speak to local audiences. This is neatly captured in a scene in *Spectre* when a meeting of the global organisation headed up by Blofeld is conducted by people from a variety of national, racial and ethnic groups speaking several different languages. Even in the English-language version of *Spectre*, the meeting of Blofeld’s organisation requires subtitles to capture the meanings of the several different languages spoken.

For some viewers, the Craig/Bond films may be full of signifiers of Britishness, but their emphasis on action, big budget special effects and international locations means they are seen by many non-British audiences as ‘Hollywood’ films rather than ‘British’ films. This perspective is reinforced by the fact that the Craig/Bond narratives are prefaced by the MGM and Columbia studio logos. Taking such issues into account begs all sorts of questions about how audiences make sense of cultural products, spectacular or otherwise, questions that are rarely addressed by diplomats or politicians (Jones and Higson 2020; Clarke 2016; Albro 2015).

The involvement of the Bond franchise in the GREAT campaign certainly didn’t entertain such ambiguities. As an official exercise in nation-branding, this is hardly surprising. As Melissa Aronczyk (2014) points out, such official processes generally iron out diversity, plurality, internal national differences and competing ideas of the nation and national identity. On the basis of twelve case studies of nation-branding around the world, she argues that only those ‘aspects of a culture that are deemed economically viable are promoted as part of the branded national identity’.

Such branding exercises often produce and re-circulate the most familiar and therefore most stereotypical images of a nation. As such, they play a key role in maintaining and promoting commercial, consumable national brands, providing reductive, non-complex images and narratives of the nation for consumption. As Janine Widler (2007: 148) notes, ‘instead of fighting stereotypes [nation-branding] reproduces and enhances them’. For many, this is clearly highly appropriate. As former diplomat, Tom Fletcher (2016: 139), puts it, ‘Successful country branding uses stereotypes and national symbols rather than fights them’ because ‘people want some familiarity.’

The Bond films themselves, in seeking to address diverse global audiences, are clearly more ambivalent in their use of traditional, nationally-specific stereotypes and iconographies, suggesting alternative images of a more diverse nation, but also allowing audiences to read them non-nationally. The question of how actual audiences and consumers make sense of the sorts of national narratives and images circulated by campaigns such as GREAT is important. As Melissa Nisbet (2015) notes, ‘those on the receiving end of soft power do not always respond in the way that politicians might expect them to’.

**The discourses of soft power**

No doubt some will argue that I am using the terms soft power and nation-branding too loosely, too interchangeably. Gary Rawnsley (2018), for instance, argues that, ‘soft power has become one of the most familiar, yet perhaps over-used and misunderstood concepts in international relations.’ This may be a problem in terms of the rigours of academic scholarship and the protection of disciplinary boundaries. But in terms of how such concepts are used more widely, and how professional practices have developed around them, it is precisely this usage that is significant. What interests me in particular is the way the concept has been used in debates about the creative industries, and especially film, in the UK.

Joseph Nye (2003) defines soft power as ‘the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will’. Jonathan McClory (2010: 1), creator of the Soft Power 30 Index, explains that this is about ‘relying … on the attractiveness of a nation’s institutions, culture, politics and foreign policy, to shape the preferences of others’. Rawnsley (2018) provides a more succinct definition: ‘Persuading publics in other countries to want what you want, or to want what you want them to want’.

This understanding of soft power is now a central pillar of many government foreign policies and diplomatic missions around the world, as they seek to project ‘the attractiveness of their “national culture” … as a means to achieve competitive advantage over other nations’ (Ang et al. 2015). James Pamment (2016b) has examined in detail how the UK government’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office embraced the discourse of soft power in the 2010s, transforming how they, the civil and diplomatic services and two key arms-length organisations, the British Council and the BBC World Service, promoted the British national brand abroad. This was, Pamment notes, ‘the re-imagining of British diplomacy in the light of the digital communication revolution’ (2016b: 2), and numerous public pronouncements along these lines can be found in the work of Parliament and in speeches by government ministers.

Thus Lord Howell (2011), Foreign Office Minister, noted that ‘The Government have been and are looking closely at how to improve the co-ordination across Whitehall of soft power resources.’ In 2013-14, a House of Lords Select Committee examined the UK’s soft power challenges and opportunities in some depth, producing a highly detailed and oft-cited report (Select 2014). But it wasn’t until 2018 that the government sought to establish a formal, cross-government soft power strategy, as part of its National Security Capability Review (2018: 32): ‘How the UK is perceived matters.’ Crucial to this work was the effort to both secure the future but also maintain ‘the independence of the BBC World Service, British Council and the many British institutions and brands that contribute to our soft power.’

By the later 2010s, it also became necessary for the government to articulate ‘what we mean by “Global Britain” as we navigate our way to leave the European Union’ (Ellis 2018). In an official government statement, it was explained that ‘Global Britain is about reinvesting in our relationships, championing the rules-based international order and demonstrating that the UK is open, outward-looking and confident on the world stage’ (Global Britain 2018). Or as Jeremy Hunt (2019), by now Foreign Secretary, put it, it is ‘the story of a small nation playing a decisive and enlightened role in world affairs’.

Although the British Council and the BBC World Service were seen as crucial to the telling of this story, they were at various time under threat during the 2010s. One way in which the British Council sought to maintain its position was to intervene at some length in the soft power debate and demonstrate the significance of its cultural diplomacy work, notably in their *Influence and Attraction* report (Holden 2013). Following a major review of the Council in 2014, its purpose was re-defined as ‘soft power projection’ (Osborne 2015). In so doing, there was an implicit alignment of soft power with cultural production, circulation and reach. Rawnsley is critical of what he sees as this reductionist alignment of soft power to the cultural attractiveness of a nation, arguing that this obscures the ‘power’ element in the equation. This is however probably the most widespread use of the term in UK public and political discourse, and as such it maps neatly on to the idea of nation-branding.

The GREAT campaign was a key product of this attempt to develop a coordinated approach to diplomacy, soft power and national security during the 2010s, with the focus on cultural projection, tourism and trade – with both cultural projection and tourism understood almost solely in terms of trade. If economic growth and new inward investment were the core goals of the GREAT campaign, the vehicle was cultural, in the form of striking stories and images. The GREAT campaign is thus not about securing a political agenda, or establishing the framework within which debate takes place, but about what Robert Albro (2015) calls ‘a cultural policy of display – of showing or representing the nation through cultural spectacle’, with ‘governments promot[ing] spectacles of nationhood as forms of national aggrandizement’.

It is the impact of this spectacular storytelling that the various soft power and nation-branding league tables seek to measure. Such tables are taken seriously, by diplomats, politicians and the media, and widely regarded as ‘authoritative, influential assessment[s] of the strengths and weaknesses of national brands and the changing cultural landscape’ (Kramb 2017). Or as former diplomat Tom Fletcher (2016: 138) puts it, ‘this is a competition that should matter, and not just to diplomats’.

There is then a close relationship between the discourses and practices of soft power and those of nation-branding. A soft power strategy in the digital age, Fletcher argues, ‘comes down to three ideas: having a strong national story; knowing how to tell it; and knowing how and when to mix the tools at your disposal’ (2016: 138). ‘A nation needs to tell a good story’, he argues, one that is aspirational, inclusive and persuasive in terms of the values it expresses (138). It does not ‘need to be sophisticated or detailed,’ he suggests, ‘but it does have to be something that people can buy in to, and that other countries can take as an authentic and attractive vision’ (139).

**Nation-branding**

Aronczyk (2013) has examined in some depth the ways in which nation-branding has been legitimised as a business, following the work of Simon Anholt (1998), with governments turning to branding consultants, PR advisers and strategic communications professionals to create and hone their national brand. In so doing, she charts ‘the political, cultural and economic rationales by which the nation has been made to matter in a twenty-first-century context of global integration’, a context in which national borders often seem irrelevant to economic transactions (2013: 1). Nadia Kaneva (2011: 118, 120) argues something very similar, that nation-branding is a means of ‘reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms’, in order to ‘enhance[e] a nation’s competitive advantage in a global marketplace’. This is the benign re-assertion of national distinctiveness, producing a nation brand as a marker of difference, in a period dominated by global businesses, global trade flows and neo-liberal economic policies. It is thus about creating and promoting a specific, appealingly packaged and officially sanctioned idea of the nation that can be bought into and consumed in the global marketplace, an attractive destination for tourists, skilled workers, investors and businesses. Globalisation in its various forms supersedes the idea of the nation, unpicks its borders and adopts practices that are designed to sidestep national governance. Nation-branding seeks to reassert an image of the nation that has some sort of purchase in this landscape.

This is what Zala Volcic and Mark Andrejevic (2016a) call commercial nationalism – producing a competitive brand for the nation, commodifying and selling it, but at the same time nationalising the sell, using that recognisable national brand to encourage inward investment and sell products. ‘In the global economic context,’ they argue, ‘the ability to channel and capture attention is a crucial one’ (2016a: 1). As can be seen in the UK government’s GREAT campaign, this involves creating a ‘relationship between state appropriation of marketing and branding strategies on the one hand, and, on the other, the commercial mobilization of nationalist discourses’ (Volcic and Andrejevic 2016b: iv).

The nation is thus re-forged as a commercial brand in the context of globally dominant neo-liberal thinking. All of the analysts cited above situate nation-branding in the context of ‘competiveness policies, the commercialisation of culture, and the widening application of corporate strategy to non-market institutions’ (Aronczyk 2014). Typically of neo-liberal approaches, ‘national wellbeing is defined primarily in terms of securing an economic competitive advantage, and nation-branding is expected to contribute to this by attracting investments, tourists, human capital, or trade’ (Kaneva 2011: 122). The role of national governments in this context is to support enterprise and competition by creating a competitive national context in a global free market, and by creating an attractive image of the nation as a place to do business. That is the instrumentalist function of the so-called creative industries and the cultural products they produce. Indeed, the emergence of soft power doctrines and nation-branding coincided with the establishment of neo-liberal creative industries policies in the UK and elsewhere.

**The UK film business, nation-branding and soft power**

While these different policies and practices emerged around the same time, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it was only in the 2010s that the creative industries came to be understood in the UK as the producers of so-called soft power assets. This was in part thanks to the influence of the House of Lords Select Committee Report on Soft Power (Select 2014), the British Council’s *Influence and Attraction* report (Holden 2013) and the annual *Soft Power 30* Report (McClory 2015 etc.). Thus the latter stated that ‘Brand Britain[‘s] … dynamic creative industries, from art, film, and music, to architecture, design, and fashion, are all critical to its soft power stores’ (McClory 2017: 44), which are ‘instrumental in spreading British influence and cultivating soft power’ (McClory 2018: 44).

Around the same time, the UK Screen Sectors’ Task Force (2017: 6) drew attention to ‘the value [of] forging new economic relationships through the prism of cultural soft power, one of the UK’s greatest assets.’ To that end, one of the five cross-cutting priorities they identified for the government’s emergent Industrial Strategy was the importance of ‘Linking international trade with cultural “soft power” – harnessing the power of the stories which are told across all platforms through film and the moving image to influence hearts and minds’ (3).

These sentiments were also picked up in the government-commissioned Bazalgette (2017: 4) *Review of the Creative Industries*: ‘The cultural and creative sectors are the engine of the UK’s international image and soft power.’ By 2018, they had found their way into ministerial speeches, with Jeremy Wright (2018), the Culture Minister, arguing that the creative industries are ‘pivotal to our economy and our standing as a nation’, and ‘at the heart of our soft power’. Even Theresa May (2018), the Prime Minister, contributed to the fanfare: ‘every day our creative industries fly the flag for Britain on the global stage. … Our creative industries really are at the heart of what makes Britain great.’

A great deal of work had been done by the UK Film Council in the 2000s to establish a robust sense of the economic scope and impact of the film business and its value to the wider economy, in the hope of leveraging government support for the business. Inward investment was a key aspect of this work (Oxford Economics 2005-2012). Another independent report by Olsberg-SPI (2012: 18) argued that two of the eight economic drivers for investment in the film production business were increased tourism and national brand building, which they argued were closely interrelated:

Films contribute to a wider “branding” of a country’s inhabitants, society and culture. This can have a very strong influence on creating a desire to engage in business transactions as well as tourism visits. The same effects that are experienced by potential tourists about a destination are to be found also in the international business and trade community. This can assist in building export markets and inward investment. There are also geo-political benefits to increasing the understanding of a nation worldwide as a result of a film’s impact.

While the GREAT campaign plays out its soft power credentials through top-down, state-sponsored ideological work, few of the products of the UK’s creative industries are developed in this way. Feature films, for instance, may receive state support in the form of tax credits or National Lottery funding, but are produced by private, non-state players whose activities are only loosely coordinated by the British Film Institute (BFI). Once produced, the films may be co-opted by state agencies, as the Bond films were by VisitBritain for the GREAT Campaign. But as the discussion of the Bond films above demonstrates, films themselves are rarely straightforward in their ideological work. Texts, characters and narratives are often multi-voiced, open-ended and ambivalent, and audiences read them in a variety of ways depending on their own circumstances.

On the one hand, this is a problem for the soft power agenda. On the other, the independence of the media, and the arms-length relationship the government has with organisations such as the BBC, the BFI and the British Council, is an important part of the national story about the UK as an open, democratic society. Harnessing films for official soft power initiatives in the UK has to date been undertaken in a very abstract and generic manner. Hence the ministerial statements quoted above about the pivotal role the creative industries play for the economy and by flying the flag for the nation on the global stage. With the exception of the campaigning in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, politicians have been wary of claiming that individual films project a preferred national image or story.

This relative independence created space for the BFI and the British Council to adopt an approach to the value of film, and to wider cultural activity and the creative industries, that was different to the government’s. While both institutions have engaged with the soft power agenda, they have sought to change the agenda in certain ways. For them, cultural value cannot be reduced to economic value, but neither can it be reduced to a monocultural national brand. Both organisations have promoted the concept of cultural exchange rather than cultural projection.

The British Council’s *Influence and Attraction* report (Holden 2013) argued for a new approach to international cultural relations, organised around interactive and inclusive networks, and designed to encourage an openness to other cultures. The soft power debate tends to imply a simple one-way projection of one’s own culture, displaying it as if it were in some way singular, superior and beyond reproach. The Council instead argued for cultural exchange as a dialogue with others, that would enable comprehension of each other through mutual cultural understanding.

They also argued that culture and cultural exchange should not be seen in a purely instrumental sense but should be understood as valuable in their own right. Cultural exchange should then be seen as a means of stimulating creative responses to encounters with other cultures, enabling innovation and cultural dynamism:

Culture itself develops through exchange. Culture is a ‘good’ in its own right, regardless of its political or economic effects, and develops through dialogue, either with past or contemporary practice. … Culture itself mutates through exchange, but cultural exchange also provokes new modes of thinking, doing, learning and sharing; in short, cultural exchange helps us to innovate. … Creativity happens where difference meets and contact between cultures is characterised by flux, stimulation, plurality and diversity (Holden 2013: 32).

The BFI drew on the same set of arguments in various official pronouncements. Their plan for 2013-207, for instance, spoke of ‘help[ing] the Foreign and Commonwealth Office … and Department for Culture, Media and Sport … engage more effectively on the world stage through UK film’s cultural value’, and ‘maximis[ing] the cultural, creative and diplomatic impact of our cultural programme’ through cultural exchange (2013: 3, 7). Their plan for 2017-2022 (BFI 2016a), does not even mention the concept of soft power, again preferring the terminology of cultural value. Their Annual Report for 2018-19 re-works soft power in terms of cultural exchange as dialogue, rather than the one-way trajectory of projecting a national brand: ‘there is nothing soft about so-called soft power. Cultural exchange initiates conversations, shows real intent to collaborate as partners, and opens the door for trade discussion in a way that is hard to beat’ (BFI 2019: 6).

**Cinema, creative industries policy and the neo-liberal political agenda**

The BFI’s policies and pronouncements in the 2010s thus sought to round off the hard edges of neo-liberal creative industries policies and carve out a space for valuing film as a cultural practice. But there can be no escaping the fact that the BFI has still had to operate in the context of a quarter-century of neo-liberal thinking in the UK about the so-called creative industries. In 1998, the Government’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport defined the creative industries as ‘those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property’ (Creative 2001: 5). Building on that definition over the last two decades, policy-makers have with some success sought to present the creative industries as vital contributors to the national economy.

Their goal was to establish the economic breadth and the dynamic growth potential of those industries and enterprises, a view that is now widely accepted within the UK and internationally. Thus the United Nations *Creative Economy Report* (UNDP/UNESCO 2013: 10) demonstrated that ‘world trade of creative goods and services … more than doubled from 2002 to 2011’. In establishing a new Industrial Strategy in 2017, the UK government identified the Creative Industries as one of five industries to drive economic growth in the UK (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017). Margot James (2017: 4), Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries, described the creative industries as ‘an engine of growth across the UK’. The Bazalgette Report (2017) too signalled the vital place that the creative industries have in the contemporary UK political economy.

While a number of more progressive and democratic currents have fed into this policy agenda, it is shaped above all by neo-liberal imperatives. At the heart of creative industries thinking is a market-led definition of cultural practice as industrial enterprise. The focus of this definition and of the broader policy agenda was and remains economic growth, competitive enterprise, job creation, the development of skills, talent and entrepreneurial leadership, the development of a production infrastructure, and an emphasis on investment rather than subsidy (Higson: forthcoming). From this perspective, cinema is to be valued above all for its economic rather than its cultural potential: ‘Bond is GREAT Britain’ because Bond films do excellent business around the world.

The perceived economic value of the creative industries, including the film business, means that national governments still invest in them. But the neo-liberal view is that creative decisions should be market-led, in terms of which action is most competitively advantageous in a global free market. It is in this context that the appeal of ideas of soft power and nation-branding should be understood, as a means of drawing attention to the enterprise and attractions of particular nations and achieving a competitive advantage over less well branded nations.

For the UK Government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2019), investing in the creative industries is justified in terms of boosting the image of the UK as a place to visit and to do business: ‘We help to give the UK a unique advantage on the global stage, striving for economic success’. Meanwhile a Treasury spokesperson justified tax breaks for the creative industries by noting that: ‘One of the ways the world sees Britain at its best is through world-class films and television made in Britain. They not only help us showcase the country, but are also an important part of a dynamic and diversified economy’ (quoted in Winnett 2012). The Bazalgette Report (2017: 12) brought in the concept of cultural enrichment, but the emphasis was again on economic contribution and reputational promotion:

Alongside the Creative Industries’ irrefutable economic contribution sit a number of intangible benefits: its outputs, particularly in our cultural sector, enrich the lives of UK citizens, and promote Britain around the world. There is evidence of a direct relationship between cultural assets and economic impact, with cultural investment creating an ecosystem of impacts.

Cultural enrichment is then simply a passing reference. The core theme is the economic impact gained by circulating cultural assets in the global market-place. The cultural value of film in this context is its capacity to display an attractive national brand and thereby assert soft power.

Operating in this context, with the government as its masters, the BFI has embraced some of the central tenets of neo-liberal policy. Their 2017-2022 plan opens with the statement that ‘The sustained Government commitment to the sector … ensures the UK’s competitiveness as a business destination. Together film, animation, television and games make a significant contribution to the economy’ (Berger and Nevill 2016: 2-3). Key goals identified in the plan include ‘working with Government to ensure the right conditions are in place for future growth’, ‘ensuring a globally competitive UK film industry’, and ‘ensuring inward investment remains a huge success story for the UK economy’ (BFI 2016a: 24, 24, 25). The plan also identifies the challenges involved in addressing all filmmaking through this neo-liberal lens:

There are genuine questions for us to consider about how independent British film can be supported to take advantage of its creative success to scale up and better compete in what should be an age of opportunity. Future economic value will come from more and better UK content being created, owned and then exported by UK businesses (Berger and Nevill 2016: 3)

The neo-liberal agenda is however tempered by the BFI’s cultural programme, ‘the foundation of all our work’ (Berger and Nevill 2016: 2), and their commitment to diversity, to encouraging new talent and to the cultural value of film:

Great filmmaking can change lives. Through stories from now, and from other times and other cultures, we learn to think differently and understand each other better. Great filmmaking is about revealing things we don’t yet know, seeing the world in new ways, enriching our lives and making a vital contribution to our wellbeing (BFI 2016a: 10).

This is a powerful statement about the soft, cultural and social benefits of film, but it is a rather different version of soft power to the one promoted by the government and the various league tables. Films are no longer reduced to mere economic or soft power assets. Simplistic nation-branding, one-way cultural projection and bombastic assertions of soft power are replaced by the values of cultural exchange, difference and understanding. This a much richer vision of storytelling than the one proposed by the Culture Minister who wanted to ‘put… great back into Britain’ (quoted in Satherley 2011), or the boastful, imperialistic comments of the *Daily Mail*. And it is a vision of the complexities of films as texts, even those produced for global markets, like the Bond films, that can move beyond the myopic, monocultural claims made for them by Brexiteering politicians.

**Re-asserting the national: a place for national cinema?**

Neo-liberal economic policies and the processes of globalisation have threatened the national in all sorts of ways. Two broad responses to this threat have developed. On the one hand, there is the re-emergence of populist nationalism, responding to a sense of insecurity in this global era; and on the other hand, the rise of soft power, nation-branding and commercial nationalism, accepting the neo-liberal logic of the market and seeking to create the most attractive image in that market. As Samanth Subramanian (2017) notes, ‘both seek, in different ways, to regain or construct a more distinctive version of a country’s self.’

The embracing by governments of ideas and practices of soft power is a means of reasserting the national – but still from a neo-liberal perspective. National governments are keen to attract inward investment from foreign businesses to boost the local economy, in a perverse but actually typical mixing of the global and the local. The practice of nation-branding also clearly reproduces the idea of nations and national identities in a globalised world. Once again, then, the national remains a meaningful entity in relation to audio-visual storytelling and the industrial structures and processes that support it, but what emerges is a reconfigured version of national cinema.

Looking back, we can see that, as Film Studies as an academic discipline slowly came to terms with the intense globalisation of cinema in the 1990s, we felt we needed to move beyond the discourse of national cinema, and we adopted a new set of terms, such as the transnational, the post-national and world cinemas. But the national has not withered away, and as John Hill (2016) notes, ‘discourses of the “national” … continue to structure and inform how films of various kinds are categorised, funded, promoted and made sense of by a range of social actors ranging from politicians and civil servants to filmmakers, critics and audiences.’ But in the UK at least, national cinema is not a concept that seems to have much purchase at the level of policy-making.

If national cinema is understood as the totality of films made in a particular nation, contemporary British film-making is too diverse to be promoted as a simplistic national brand. This did not prevent the GREAT campaign from using the slogan, ‘FILM IS **GREAT** BRITAIN’, in a series of posters launched in 2013 (MacLeod 2013). The BFI (2016b) also created a promotional video using the same imagery and wording. This video celebrates individual British talent in front of and behind the camera, and films made using British facilities. The video flashes up some readily recognisable national iconography at the start – a view of Britain from space, St Paul’s Cathedral, Tower Bridge, some green and pleasant heritage landscapes and a cityscape of post-modern London, with the Eye and Big Ben prominent. This is GREAT Britain. But there is otherwise no effort to brand the diverse achievements featured in the video as the products of a national cinema. In so far as one can discern national images, identities and values in outputs such as this, they are de-politicised, reduced to an attractive, competitive resource that can emphasize market differentiation in a so-called borderless, globalised world.

What is on offer is less a national cinema, more a national brand that can be consumed, hired or invested in. If there is a national cinema here, it is a loosely defined economic space carved out of the global market, and the talent, facilities and investment opportunities associated with that space. This is the plight of national cinema in the struggle to achieve ‘national visibility and legitimacy amidst the multiple global flows of late modernity’ (Aronczyk 2013: 3). The film business and the wider creative industries have to that extent been carefully co-opted into the neo-liberal framework of the creative industries, nation-branding and the assertion of soft power. James Bond may be GREAT Britain, but the very presence of the Bond films depends on inward investment, a global market and stories and images that are both diverse and spectacular enough to appeal to audiences around the world.

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