



# *The roots of Brexit in popular culture*

## Danny Dyer, *Good Evening Britain* ([ITV1](#), 29 June 2018)



“This Brexit thing, it’s comedy. It’s like this mad riddle that no-one knows what it is. Whatever happened to that twat David Cameron? He’s the one who called it on, yeah? Where is he now? Is he in Nice, with his trotters up? He should be held to account for it... Twat!”



# UK pop culture (1996 - 2016): methodology

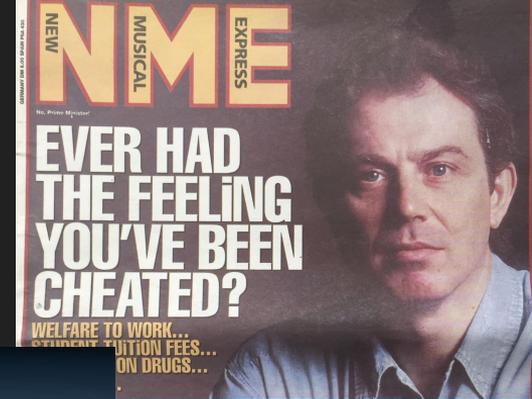
- Post-Cool Britannia and New Labour landslide
- Time of EU expansion to the east (2004)
- Human Rights Act (1998)

⇒ myths about the EU, Euroscepticism

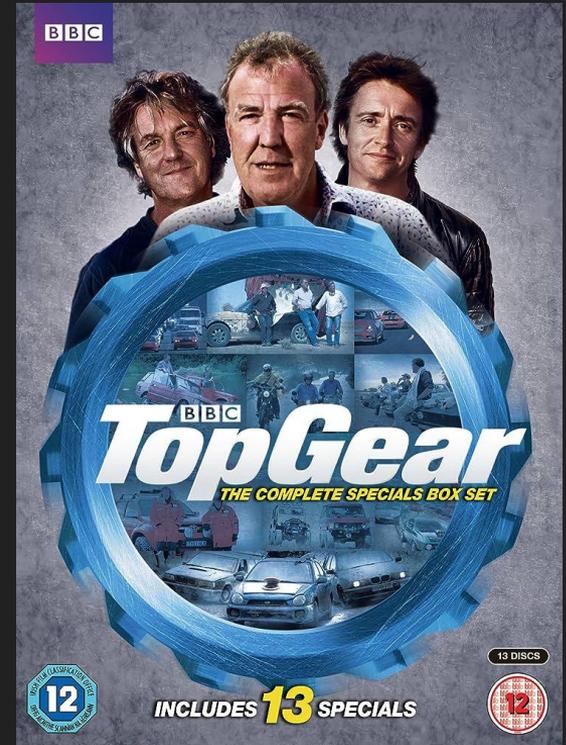
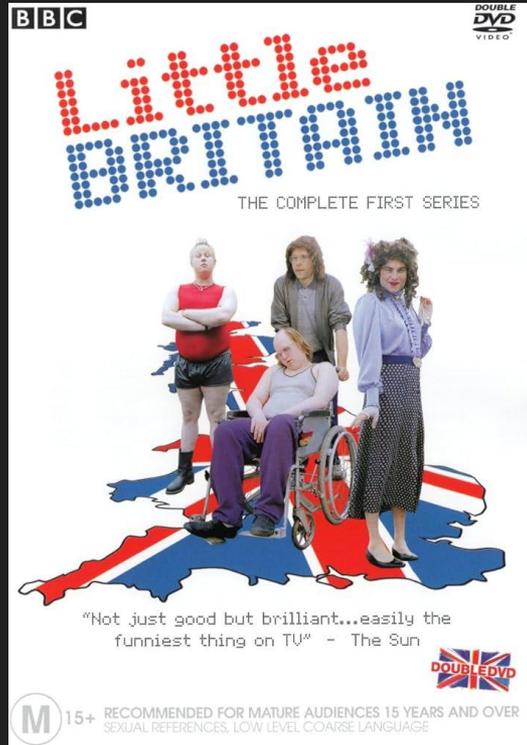
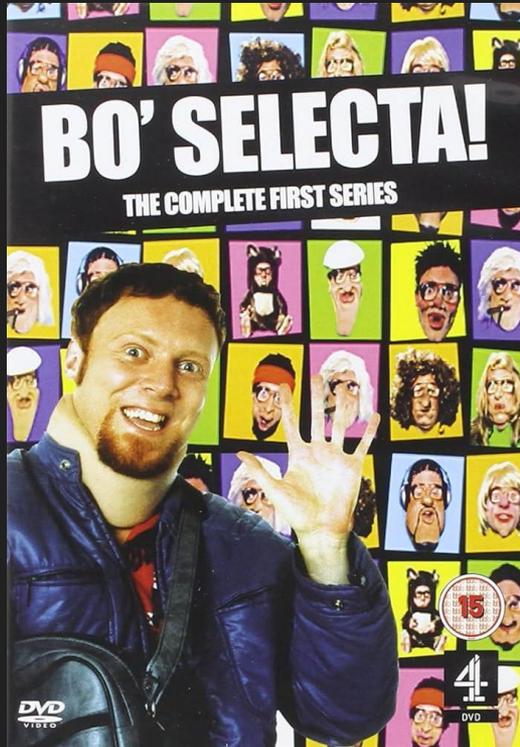
- 2012 London olympics
- Music: post-Britpop success, 'Britpack'
- TV and film: a golden age after 2000

⇒ discourse on Britishness, patriotism, nationalism?

⇒ question of *reception* of TV, film, and the press



# 3 popular TV/comedy shows of the past 20 years



# Plan

- 1) Explicit Euroscepticism
- 2) Britain, England or 'Deep England'?
- 3) 'Ambivalent Englishness'
- 4) Masculinity, lad culture, and Brexit

# 1) Explicit Euroscepticism

The Sun, 23 June 2016



# BE LEAVE in Britain

**WE are about to make the biggest political decision of our lives. The Sun today urges everyone to vote LEAVE.**

**We must set ourselves free from dictatorial Brussels.**

Throughout our 43-year membership of the European Union, it has proved increasingly greedy, wasteful, bullying and breathtakingly incompetent in a crisis.

Next Thursday, at the ballot box, we can correct this huge and historic mistake.

*It is our last chance. Because, be in no doubt, our future looks far bleaker if we stay in.*

Outside the EU we can become richer, safer and free at long last to forge our own destiny – as America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other great democracies already do. And as we were the first to do centuries ago.

If we stay, Britain will be engulfed in a few short years by this relentlessly expanding German-dominated federal state. For all David Cameron's witless assurances, our powers and values **WILL** be further eroded. Staying in will be

**THE Sun SAYS**

worse for immigration, worse for jobs, worse for wages and worse for our way of life.

Greece is bankrupt. Italy is in danger of going the same way, with even more disastrous consequences. In Spain, 45 per cent of those under 25 are out of work. And numerous even poorer and worse-governed countries are now joining the EU.

**'Remain' is bigger risk in every way**

To remain means being powerless to cut mass immigration which keeps wages low and puts catastrophic pressure on our schools, hospitals, roads and housing stock.

In every way, it is a bigger risk. The Remain campaign, made up of the corporate establishment, arrogant europhiles and foreign banks, have set out to terrify us all about life outside the EU. Their

'Project Fear' strategy predicts mass unemployment, soaring interest rates and inflation, plummeting house prices, even world war.

The Treasury, Bank of England, the IMF and world leaders have all been wheeled out by Downing Street to add their grim warnings.

Nonsense! Years ago the same politicians and economists issued apocalyptic predictions about our fate if we didn't join the euro. *Thank God we stopped that. The single currency stranglehold has since ruined the EU's poorer nations and cost millions on the dole.*

We are told we cannot be in the single market without accepting all the rules, free movement of people included. If so, let's leave it and, using our enormous clout as the world's fifth biggest economy, strike great trade deals with the other 85 per cent of the world. And pick and

choose the best migrants from the whole world. If we stay in the EU, as Cameron wants, we will finally give up any chance of controlling our population. Cameron admits it.

Note: Leave, and we will reassert our sovereignty – embracing a future as a self-governing, powerful nation envied by all.

We will re-establish the basic principle that we are governed by politicians we elect or eject every five years, not foreign bureaucrats.

**Our country has glorious history**

The Sun has campaigned relentlessly against the ever-expanding superstate. But the EU cannot reform. Remain has conducted a deceitful campaign. It has been nasty, cynical, personally abusive and beneath the dignity of Britain.

Our country has a glorious history. This is our chance to make Britain even greater, to recapture our democracy, to preserve the values and culture we are rightly proud of. **A VOTE FOR LEAVE IS A VOTE FOR A BETTER BRITAIN.**

**VOTE TO QUIT EU ON JUNE 23**



**Daily Mail**

**LITTLE JOHN: If they could kill Brexit, these so-called Tories would be happy to live in Corbyn's Britain**

**ANOTHER HUMAN RIGHTS FIASCO!**

Iraqi 'caught red-handed with bomb' wins £33,000 - because our soldiers kept him in custody for too long

**Recognise who's playing Demelza's new Poldark pal?**



**THE Sun**

EUROPEAN COURT PUTS TERRORISTS & MURDERERS FIRST. WHY IS CAMERON DITHERING OVER ENDING THIS FARCE?

**THEIR RIGHTS ...OR YOURS?**

**Sun SAYS**



**Daily Mail**

I sympathise, but this father was **WRONG** to end his life

Ruth Dudley Edwards

**FOLLY OF HUMAN RIGHTS LUVVIES**

As actors fight plans to axe Human Rights Act, how thousands of foreign convicts use it to stay in Britain

**'Greed' of the first banker in the dock**



**Daily Mail**

**STARTING TOMORROW**

How to anti-age your memory

OUR BRILLIANT NEW SERIES

**Rise of the no-cleavage CLEAVAGE**

In a triumphant week for British values, Tories unveil plans to give Parliament and judges power to ignore the European Court and its crazy decision making

**END OF HUMAN RIGHTS FARCE**



**THE TIMES**

**Cameron to sink claws into Human Rights Act**

UK's new prime minister has kicked Britain into the 21st century

It's a new day for the UK's new prime minister

UK's new prime minister has kicked Britain into the 21st century



**Daily Mail**

Is there any greater joy on earth than baking a cake?

**TRUTH ABOUT TORY CATFIGHT**

Judge DID rule migrant's pet was a reason he shouldn't be deported

Show some building spirit, PM tells Britain



**Daily Mail**

Why you should NEVER ignore a month's worth of GOOD HEALTH

How wearing socks in bed can cure a low libido

The reason you can't resist that extra biscuit

Drinking dossier reveals to parents' bill for European court payouts to murderers, terrorists and traitors

**HUMAN RIGHT TO MAKE A KILLING**

Rising stars, the women who quit TV for politics



**Daily Mail**

**FREE Weight Watchers 'Slimming Made Easy' recipe magazine**

UK loses three out of four human rights cases, damning report reveals

**EUROPE'S WAR ON BRITISH JUSTICE**

Why SamCam's stepfather turned on the PM



Some tabloid headlines, 2010s.

## Best-selling newspapers in the UK (circulation, 2020)

- *The Sun*: 1.3 million
- *Daily Mail*: 1.1 million
- *Daily Mirror*: 500,000
- *The Times*: 400,000
- *The Telegraph*: 330,000
- *The Guardian*: 136,000

## Some Eurosceptic headlines from the tabloid press

- “Criminals received £4.4m of taxpayers’ money in human rights compensation”
- “Italian killer allowed to stay in the UK because of right to family life”
- “Serial killer received hardcore porn in jail because of Human Rights Act”
- “Police gave fried chicken to a burglar because of human rights”
- ...

2) Britain,  
England  
or  
'Deep England'?

*The Sun*, 13 June 2014

FIFA World Cup opener



# Englishness and the Brexit vote

“How the UK voted on Brexit”, Lord Ashcroft polls, 2019

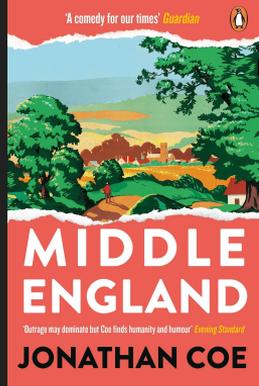
<b>National identity</b>	<b>Remain %</b>	<b>Leave %</b>
English but not British	21	79
More English than British	34	66
Equally English and British	49	51
More British than English	63	37
British but not English	60	40

## Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (Penguin, 2018)

p.259:

“The 2012 Olympic opening ceremony had had a profound and specific effect upon Sohan. It had diverted the course of his research, which after that event became centered upon literary, filmic, and musical representations of Englishness [...] he became fascinated by the concept of ‘Deep England’, a phrase which he began to encounter more and more often in newspaper articles and academic journals. What was it, exactly?”

...



## Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (Penguin, 2018)

... “Was it a psychogeographical phenomenon, to do with **village greens**, the **thatched roof** of the local **pub**, the **red telephone box** and the subtle thwack of **cricket** ball against willow? Or had it been most powerfully expressed, in fact, in allegorical form by J.R.R. **Tolkien** when he created the Shire and populated its pastoral idyll with doughty, insular **hobbits**, prone to somnolence and complacency when left to their own devices but fierce when roused?”



# A “green and pleasant land” – Britishness or Englishness?



# Deep England?

Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (1994):

- WW2-era British propaganda
- Mythical version of *British* identity
- stereotypes : southern *England* rural lifestyle

John Major, Conservative Group for Europe Speech (1993):

“the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer and old spinsters cycling to Holy Communion”



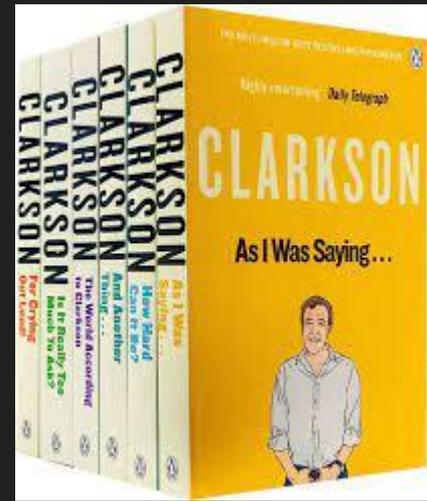
THE MYTH OF THE BLITZ

ANGUS CALDER



# *Top Gear*: an illustration of Deep England myths?

- BBC 2 motoring / comedy show hosted by Jeremy Clarkson (2002-2015)
- Viewership: between 5 and 8 million UK viewers per episode, up to 350m worldwide (comparable to *Strictly* and *Bake Off*).
- Jeremy Clarkson: columnist in *The Sun*, *The Times*
- Frequent jibes at EU regulations
- Controversial segments (racial slurs, provocation in Argentina about Falklands...)



## Top Gear, series 11 [episode](#) 6 (July 2008) - Spitfires



“ The hosts of a German motoring show invited us to take them on in a series of races and challenges.

I suggested we did this over the skies of southern England. In fact we settled on Belgium, which is a country invented so that Britain and Germany would have somewhere to sort out their differences.

The producers told us ‘you’re representing the BBC, you can’t just turn up and go on about the war’ ...”



# Top Gear, series 17 episode 1 (June 2011) - Jaguar E-type



“The E-type is not a plucky Brit who’s happy to come home second. It would not be humiliated by Barcelona. Every country has an icon: France has the big brown pylon in the middle of Paris; the Belgians have a urinating infant... Well the E-type is our Jerusalem, our Chariot of Fire, the Maypole around which the people of this funny little rock can gather to remind ourselves that once upon a time we really were as great as we think we are now.”



# UKIP poster (2015 general election)



**No border.**  
The EU has opened our borders

**No control.**  
to 4,000 people every week.

**TAKE BACK  
CONTROL OF  
OUR COUNTRY**



**VOTE UKIP  
22<sup>ND</sup> MAY**

[ukip.org](http://ukip.org)

# Top Gear, Deep England... and Brexit?

- Deep England myths
- Classic French/German-bashing
- Patriots or 'Little Englanders'?
  
- Clarkson was a known Eurosceptic...
- ... yet he announced his support for 'Remain' in 2016 ⇒
  
- Helped mirror and popularise Deep England myths and Eurosceptic tropes in the 2010s

## Jeremy Clarkson tells David Cameron 'my gut says stay in the EU'

Ex-Top Gear host says he will vote against Brexit and that need to remain is one thing he agrees on with co-star James May

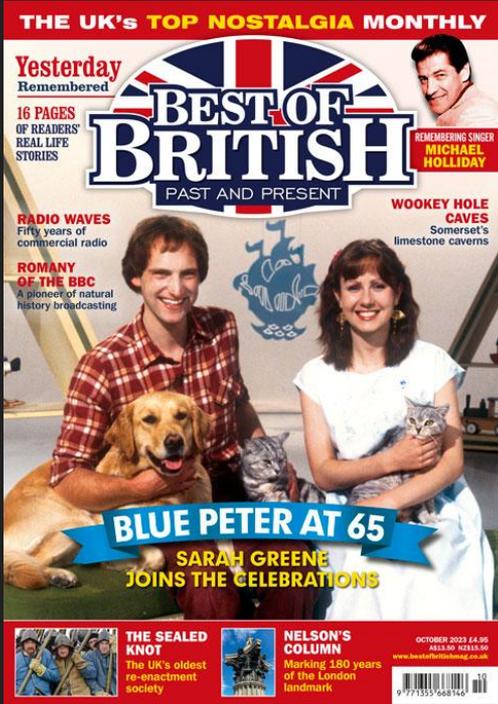
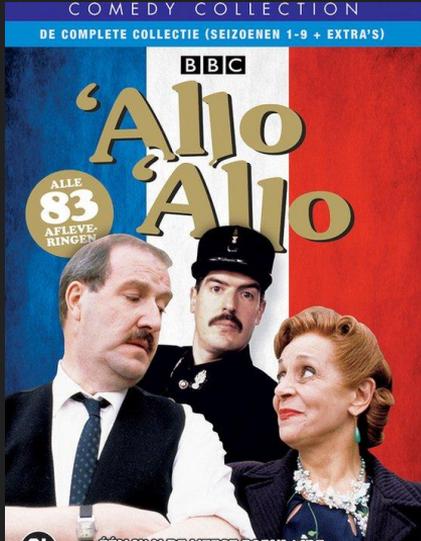


### 3) 'Ambivalent Englishness'



\* Martin Cloonan, 'Pop and the Nation-state', *Popular Music*, vol. 18 n°2, 1999

# Common places: cultivating and celebrating insularity?

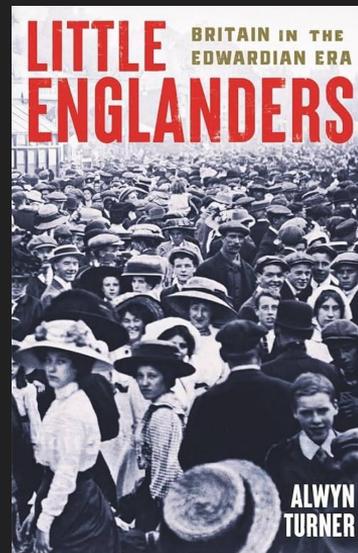


# Little England or Little Britain?

Celebrating insularity may lead to a return of 'Little England', applied to the EU rather than to the Empire in the late 19th c.

= Focusing on their island, themselves, to the exclusion of mainland Europe.

Little England may actually be embodied in the TV show Little... Britain!





# *Little Britain*, 'Lecturer Linda Flint', [Series](#) 2 (BBC, 2004)



“Hello Martin, it’s Linda.

I’m with Kenneth Lau who needs an extension on his essay...

You know Kenneth...

Yellowish skin, slight smell of soy sauce...?

That’s right, the ching-chong-chinaman”.

*Little Britain, 'Maggie Blackmoor', Series 3 episode 3 (BBC, 2005)*



# Intention vs reception

Classic British self-deprecation and hyperbole?

Mock-outsider point of view to highlight national idiosyncrasies?

Matt Lucas (2017): “I wouldn’t re-make that show now. It would upset people. What we did was a cruel kind of comedy. Society has moved on now and my own views have evolved”.

2020: *Little Britain* is removed from iPlayer and Netflix over their use of blackface

2022: Show restored to iPlayer without some sketches (blackface and ‘Ting Tong from Tooting’...) - editing by Lucas and Walliams





# Tabloids (again): Euroscepticism and toxic masculinity?

**Daily Mail**  
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2018  
REVENUE OF THE YEAR 65p

**Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!**  
SARAH VINE'S light-hearted verdict on the big showdown  
SEE PAGES 6-7



**BLUEPRINT TO SAVE THE NHS**

**EXCLUSIVE**  
By Sophie Borland  
Health Editor

- Dramatic drive to cut costs unveiled**
- Doling out of painkillers to be scrapped**
- GPs ordered to crack down on health tourists**

NHS says patients will also be expected to pay for their own independent physiotherapy sessions and spa retreats. Annual revenue says that the latest commission will cover an extra 100,000 hospital beds. "We will see how we can improve the service," says...

**THE SCOTTISH Sun**  
THE PEOPLE'S PAPER FOR 66 YEARS 65p

MODEL SHOWS MOVES

Kendall's Jenneral fitness

BOZ BOOTED AGAIN...

**Floppy Johnson can't get an election**

MPs HALT POLL UNTIL 'NO DEAL' BLOCKED

Scalped victim's 'prayers'

Riot fear parades get OK



**20p DAILY STAR**  
HOME OF THE PAGE 3 GIRL  
THIS PAPER COSTS JUST 20p

ALL LAST NIGHT'S FOOTBALL ACTION

Aston Villa	1	Everton	3
Bournemouth	2	Sheff Wed	0
Leicester	2	West Brom	2
Norwich	1	Chelsea	2
Sunderland	2	Crystal Palace	2

MATCH REPORTS: STARSPORT

**DAILY STAR** BRITAIN'S FASTEST GROWING NEWSPAPER

**MIGRANTS TRY TO KILL BRIT TRUCKERS**

Calais Jungle is a blazing war zone

Katy Perry: I love Orlando



# 1990s - 2000s lad culture

- *The Sun*: Page 3 girl (1970-2015)
  - *FHM* (since 1985)
  - *Loaded* (1994- 2015)
  - *Nuts* (2004-2014)
  - *Zoo* (2004-2015)
- 
- Links with Britishness (lad culture and Britpop)
  - Links with politics? (David Cameron, 2005)
  - Turning point in 2015?



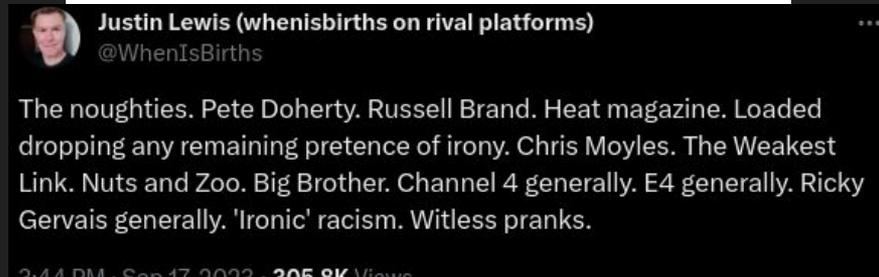
# *Bo' Selecta!*, Channel 4 (2002-2009)

- Comedian Leigh Francis
- TV sketch show with recurring characters
- Main character: (Romanian) celebrity [stalker](#) Avid Merrion
- Viewership: between 2 and 4 million
- Controversies: toilet humour, blackface, sexism, objectification of [women](#), trivialisation of harassment, negative portrayal of minorities...
- Removed from Channel 4 platform (2020)
- apologies from L.Francis.



# The 'Nasty Noughties': Toxic masculinity as populism?

- A form of conservatism applied to gender and social identities and relations?
- Jonathan Coe (*Middle England*): pro-Brexit character has lads' magazines and very few books...
- Russell Brand case (2022)
- Political extremism and toxic masculinity links are well documented and visible in tabloid culture.



## Conclusions (to be continued...)

- 1996-2016: A coherent, conservative discourse on Britishness
- ... also outdated, reductive and compatible with Euroscepticism
- ... and also sexist, classist, potentially transphobic and nationalistic
- Subliminally, unwittingly feeding into a toxic (Europhobic, sexist) discourse?
- Comedians' intentions vs reception by audiences in a heavily polarised context
- Pop culture is inevitably influenced by the historical context of its creation...
- ... but once in a while pop culture also influences politics!