

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe  
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann  
Podcast Contribution, Authors: Dario Barone & Melanie Frey  
TV series: *Victoria* (2016 ff.) & *Taboo* (2017)

## **Imperial Nostalgia: The Message of the TV-Series *Victoria* & *Taboo***

### **Cut-Up:**

*“Britannic golden age lost ” - “We have been best as a nation when we have been bold.” - “[A] world beyond Europe that offers opportunities for Britain to be a global player once more.”*

### **Speaker 1 [male]:**

Such phrases evoking Great Britain’s past as an imperial power often appeared in pro-Brexit newspapers during the referendum campaign. The narrative of Britain’s glorious history remains popular, and it is sometimes argued that for many in search of a British identity, the loss of the Empire still hurts like a phantom limb. Moreover, ever since Shakespeare’s historical drama of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, English, and later British culture has been obsessed with the country’s history. In order to find out who they are, the British routinely turn their faces to the past.

### **Speaker 2 [female]:**

Unsurprisingly, then, the British are masters of period drama, be it TV series or feature films. The main purpose of this, one could argue, is of course entertainment. Who does not like to immerse him- or herself in an epic historical film? But all these films and series, churned out by the BBC and ITV and nowadays disseminated widely by such companies as Netflix, also beg the question of their educational and their political value. According to historian Robert Dillon, period dramas gain importance in our modern culture where filmic artefacts have become the main source of historical knowledge for many people. Therefore, critical assessments of the films often turn on the question of historical accuracy, but this is not really the issue in the context of Brexit. It is much more interesting how these films tap into cultural memory, and how their narratives of the past proceed to shape contemporary culture and national identity.

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**Speaker 1 [male]:**

Period drama is far from monolithic – on one end of the spectrum we find soapy series in the heritage tradition such as *Downton Abbey*, or the slightly less soapy series *Victoria* produced by ITV and aired first in August 2016.

**Speaker 2 [female]:**

Revisiting Queen Victoria's reign just as Elizabeth II had overtaken her as the longest reigning monarch, celebrating both 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and Sapphire Jubilee, the series *Victoria* proves that Royalty sells – the show was so popular that it was renewed for a third season. Focussed strongly on the Queen herself, her personal life and her initial struggles with handling her new role as monarch of the Empire, the series offers opulent costume drama, revelling in candles, chandeliers, expensive curtains and furniture, stunning dresses and sparkling jewellery, creating a perfect, idyllic bubble that reduces politics to a backdrop.

**Speaker 1 [male]:**

The BBC series *Taboo*, aired in 2017, is located on the other side of the spectrum: Set in 1814, just before Britain's global hegemony was cemented for the next hundred years, the series focusses on the battle between the adventurer and colonial entrepreneur James Delaney and the powerful East India Company. The series stands in the Gothic tradition of dark, dirty, violent and bizarre depictions of the past. The East Indian Company is presented as an immensely ruthless group of old men, planning their evil conspiracies in vast conference rooms and offices surrounded by Chinese vases, huge paintings and big globes, while the Prince Regent is portrayed as an impotent and ridiculous figure: nothing could be more unlike the graceful, young Victoria.

**Speaker 2 [female]:**

Despite their obvious differences, however, both *Victoria* and *Taboo* take their viewers back to the days of the Empire. They drive home the message how powerful, grand, rich and impressive the British Empire was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how influential certain players were, be it the royals or the East India Company.

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**Speaker 1 [male]:**

Crucially, therefore, such series reproduce a discourse established in countless earlier films or television series: the discourse of a great and powerful British empire. Transmitted through exciting narratives and luxurious or harrowing images, the message impacts on the emotions, side-stepping the political and rational critique of imperialism.

**Speaker 2 [female]:**

Therefore, while they are not propaganda films, *Taboo* and *Victoria* exert an important influence on viewers' constructions of national history and identity. In this way, they can also be read as responses to current predicaments. Are they designed, one might ask, to make Brexit more palatable?