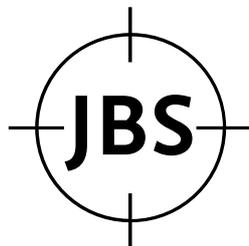


# This SPECTREd Isle

## James Bond, Alan Partridge, and Englishness

GILLIAN GROSZEWski

Like the Aston Martin car he drives and the Savile Row tailors he frequents, James Bond is an English cultural icon. Indeed, in 2012, Daniel Craig, as Bond, was the natural choice to “act” as the security escort for Her Majesty, the Queen, as she made her way to the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London, itself a celebration of all things English. Although approximating the iconic, Steve Coogan’s fictional character, Alan Partridge, does not possess the same cultural cachet as Fleming’s international man of mystery. A self-professed Bond super-fan, Partridge attempts, on a regular basis, to achieve the impossible: to become an icon. Where Bond and brand become inseparable due to their sophisticated interdependence, Partridge desperately seeks corporate partnership in an attempt to increase his personal wealth and social profile. However, while Partridge may appear, at first sight, a pale imitation of Fleming’s iconic sleuth, both characters possess a similarly acute awareness of what it means to be English. Christine Berberich has written of Bond that “behind the suave secret agent lurks a character both at ease and at odds with his time” (2012, 14). Looking behind the preoccupation of Alan Partridge with all things Bond highlights the changing concept of what it means to be English in contemporary Britain. Like Bond, Partridge frequently finds himself to be at odds with those that surround him – not least due to his encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bond franchise – but



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**Gillian Groszewski** teaches English at Chigwell School. She wrote her Ph.D. on the poetry of Ted Hughes, and she is currently the recipient of a Beacon Teacher Fellowship from Liverpool University and the Runnymede Trust.

also because he seeks relief from the multicultural heterogeneity he associates with London through explorations of provincial settings (Norfolk, in particular) in his attempts to rediscover and reassert what it means to be English. According to Berberich, this nostalgia for the “very national characteristics that had once made Britain great” is partly what attracts us to the world, and character, of James Bond (13). It comes as no surprise, then, that the misty-eyed Englishman, Alan Partridge, is a Bond super-fan.

#### “STOP GETTING BOND WRONG!”

Partridge’s love of Bond was revealed in the very first episode of *Knowing Me, Knowing You* in which Partridge excitedly promises his audience an appearance by “James Bond, 007, Roger Moore” that never comes to pass. Following the death of Moore in 2017, Caroline Westbrook wrote that “Sir Roger Moore had no shortage of fans – but we suspect few were quite as devoted to the late acting legend as Alan Partridge” (2017, n.p.). That Partridge prefers the suave sophistication of the quintessential Englishman depicted by Moore over the sharper-edged Sean Connery is, in itself, a patriotic act. It would appear that Connery’s Scottishness somehow diminishes his Britishness for Partridge. When one of the other guests on *Knowing Me, Knowing You* (who happens to be Scottish) claims that “Sean Connery was a better Bond anyway”, Partridge immediately responds by stating that it is “interesting you take that position – the Scottish position”. Partridge quickly turns a predilection for a certain Bond actor into a question of patriotism and defends Moore vociferously. By the episode’s end, however, Partridge is left embarrassed and disappointed by Moore’s no-show and must explain to viewers that Moore has gone straight to his hotel from the airport rather than to the television studio. In *My Word is My Bond: The Autobiography*, Roger Moore recounted his father’s disappointment at his non-appearance on Partridge’s show:

I think it was around summer 1994 when Dad called me in France.

‘That was very bad last night, son.’

‘What was, Dad?’

‘There was a talk show on television and they said that you were on the way, but you never got there. That’s not good, son. Not good at all.’

‘What show, Dad?’ I asked.

‘It was on the BBC,’ he replied.

[...] It turned out to be Alan Partridge *Knowing Me, Knowing You* chat show with Steve Coogan, a spoof show and the joke in that episode was that I didn’t get to the studio in time for the recording. Doris [Moore’s assistant] sent me a tape. It was a hysterically funny send-up. I called Dad to explain.

‘Yes, but it’s still bad, son, still bad,’ he said. (2008, 321)

Following his failure to appear on *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, Moore’s father berated him for a lack of manners which was unacceptable in a gentleman so admired by Partridge who obviously revered him as a model of English propriety.

While Partridge’s enthusiasm for Bond was declared in *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, it was almost a decade later, in the series two episode of *I’m Alan Partridge* entitled “Never Say Alan Again” (itself a play on the title of the 1983 Sean Connery Bond film), that Partridge revealed that he was a true Bond super-fan. His exclamation that his friends “stop getting Bond wrong” comes shortly after a rapid exchange in which Partridge corrects a succession of mistaken memories and misidentifications of Bond actors and scenarios including his girlfriend’s belief that *The Spy Who Loved Me* begins in a forest in Germany to which Partridge replies: “It’s Austria. AUSTRIA!” Partridge announces that he has become “Norfolk’s maddest man” after he settles down to watch “the best film ever made”, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, only to discover that his friends have accidentally recorded an episode of “America’s Strongest Man” over Moore’s third Bond film. Partridge’s outrage at the accident, however, seems secondary to the affront that his company prefer the American programme to the excitement of another 007 instalment. Partridge hushes his friends with the shouted instruction that they “stop talking about American things!” In upbraiding his company, Partridge reasserts the importance of Englishness, not only in terms of their entertainment interests, but to their cultural lives as a whole. Partridge subsequently goes on to demonstrate his detailed knowledge of *The Spy Who Loved Me* by re-enacting the entire title sequence because it would seem that, according to Partridge, not to know Bond is not to be English. Indeed, Englishness and Bond are regularly deemed to be synonymous (in spite of Bond’s Scottish-Swiss heritage). Christine Berberich has argued that the “groundbreaking” social and economic changes

which took place in Britain in the “Swinging Sixties” prompted a reassertion of Englishness and the association of James Bond with “traditional” Englishness contributed to the initial popularity of the franchise (14). Discussing the social upheaval that took place in the decade that spawned Bond, Berberich notes that

[w]hile many applauded these changes, for others they had come too quickly and at too high a price, the loss of traditions, manners and morals effectively culminating in a selling out of those very national characteristics that had once made Britain great. (ibid.)

Partridge’s disgust at his friends’ preference for “American things” over Bond suggests a character who mourns for a lost British identity embodied by the man who skis off the side of a cliff confident that the Union Jack will literally save him as it is emblazoned on his parachute.

#### **ALAN PARTRIDGE: ALPHA PAPA**

Despite his disappointment at Roger Moore’s no-show, Partridge’s admiration of Moore’s Bond did not wane. In the episode of *Knowing Me, Knowing You* on which Moore is expected as a guest, Partridge claimed that: “In the whole Roger versus Sean debate that’s been raging for the past twenty years, I have to say I’m *firmly* in the Roger camp. I believe that nobody could wear a safari suit with the same degree of casualness as Roger”. Despite his belief that nobody does it better, however, Partridge gave it a go. At the premiere for his 2013 feature film *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa*, Coogan “took to the red carpet in character and a powder-blue safari suit that could have been looted from Roger Moore’s wardrobe circa 1974” (Jones 2013, n.p.). Indeed, the plot and resolution of *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* owes much to the Bond franchise. In high Bond style, Partridge single-handedly takes on a media superpower and an Irish terrorist in order to protect local, British interests. Linda Racioppi and Colleen Tremonte have identified that: “Bond films and their pre-title sequences frequently engage in narrativising the defence of the state and the global capitalist world from serious threats that are increasingly transnational in scope” (2014, 16). In the pre-title sequence of *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa*, this is precisely the narrative that is presented. The film’s first shot is of a Norfolk pier with aged typeface identifying the location and suggesting an old England under threat. The use of Philip Glass’ score for *Koyaanisqatsi* over this scene further accentuates the idea of an indigenous world under siege by capitalist interests through the link made with Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 movie about the dangers of technological progress. When we first see Par-

tridge, he is presenting an episode of *Mid-morning Matters* in which he poses a hypothetical scenario based in “the near-future, an unprovoked chemical attack from France, or possibly China” setting a Bond-esque global scene of devastation that is never realised. The smaller-scale, capitalist nature of the actual threat to North Norfolk Digital radio is subsequently revealed when Pat Farrell, a fellow disc-jockey at the radio station played by Colm Meaney, tells Partridge: “It’s started. They’re here”. The takeover of the local radio station by a bland, multinational corporate entity which intends to rebrand the station as “Shape”, with the tagline “the way you want it to be”, spells the relegation of the maverick characters of Partridge and Farrell and a greater threat to the British values embodied by North Norfolk Digital.

According to Steven W. Thomas, “[Bond films] confirm the ideology of maverick exceptionalism that has always driven the Anglo-American style of global capitalism and has always been Bond’s signature ethos” (2009, 34). Similar to Bond, it is Partridge’s maverick status that makes him unique. Partridge’s outside status prevents him from becoming a hostage at the beginning of the film but also provides the point of identification between him and the hostage taker, Pat Farrell, which leads to the film’s resolution. However, it is Partridge’s uneasy relationship with the consumerist world which provides his “hamartia” as he is initially responsible for the redundancy of Farrell when he seeks to preserve his own radio show and interests over the greater good. Berberich writes of Bond that “he is a snob: if he has it, he flaunts it, and he is scathing of people who do not come up to his standards” (17). This description could equally be applied to Partridge in the title sequence of *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* which sees Partridge driving a corporate car with the branding “Alan Partridge drives this car” written across the side as he sings along to Roachford. However, the title credits themselves, which are coloured red, white and blue, speak to the tension between the capitalist forces that Partridge courts and the British values he espouses. In the film’s resolution, Partridge chooses to protect the provincial interests of Norfolk over his own selfish aims and joins Farrell in protest against the capitalist threat to their radio shows. The pair undertake a bus tour and re-establish links with the provincial people they represent who greet them with placards in support of the stand they are taking and who phone in with messages of displeasure at the corporate takeover. Farrell describes these people as “my listeners: ordinary, working-class people” and the soundtrack to the reassertion of Englishness enacted by Partridge and Farrell is provided by John Farnham’s “You’re the Voice”, which, in this context, constitutes a musical equivalent of the Brexiteer invocation that the

British people “take back control”. In the final analysis, however much he would like to see himself as a snobbish Bond figure, synonymous with suave Englishness, Partridge becomes the protector of regional Englishness by rejecting the capitalist threat to North Norfolk Digital established in the pre-title and title sequence in the style of the Bond franchise. As a final gesture to its debt to Bond, it is worth noting that two Bond themes make their way onto the official soundtrack to *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* without appearing in the feature film: Shirley Bassey’s “Goldfinger” and, of course, Carly Simon’s “Nobody does it Better”, from the film *The Spy Who Loved Me*. Although professing that he is “firmly in the Roger camp”, it is evident that in *Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa* Partridge sees himself as a version of his hero, Moore.

#### **ALAN PARTRIDGE: SCISSORED ISLE**

The Partridge of *Alan Partridge: Scissored Isle* is a hybrid character who channels Michael Portillo, Jeremy Clarkson and Roger Moore, the latter in his preference for polo-neck jumpers and fawn-coloured jackets that evoke the distinctive 1970s kitsch style with which Moore is associated. The title of the programme is adapted from a line from John of Gaunt’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and announces the intention of the programme to interrogate what it means to be English:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,

This other Eden, demi-paradise,

This fortress built by Nature for herself

Against infection and the hand of war,

This happy breed of men, this little world,

This precious stone set in the silver sea,

Which serves it in the office of a wall,

Or as a moat defensive to a house,

Against the envy of less happier lands,

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England[.] (II, 1: 40-50)

In one scene, Partridge visits a stately home in a vintage car. Desperate to appear comfortable in the upper-class setting, Partridge fails miserably finally admitting, in relation to his three-piece tweed suit: “I hired this”. In his attempt to understand what has divided this “once-United Kingdom”, Partridge also completes a stint as a checkout operator in a large supermarket and spends some time with a street gang. Throughout, Partridge is visibly uncomfortable engaging with both the upper classes and the working classes following his departure from his own upwardly-mobile home with the upwardly-mobile name of “Denton Abbey”. Partridge’s modest success means that he cannot sit comfortably with the working classes from whence he came – nor does he want to. Berberich writes of “Fleming’s [...] implicit and rather problematic call for a new sense of national identity that shows an awareness of waning British influence in the world while also trying to maintain the myth of British – and, here, particularly English – superiority” (14). In *Alan Partridge: Scissored Isle*, Partridge similarly attempts to maintain the myth of a united Britain in his exploration of the “schism” and “chasm” which he believes divides the “haves” and the “have-nots” of the “once-United Kingdom” and which he renames using the portmanteau “schasm”. Partridge’s proclaimed endeavour in creating the documentary – to become “a better citizen, a better man, and a more sought-after broadcaster” – demonstrates his conflicted loyalty to country and self. Berberich describes Fleming’s Bond as having a “character both at ease and at odds with his time’ which lurks ‘behind the façade of the suave secret agent” (14). Similarly, Partridge’s not-so-suave characterisation presents a man at odds with his time because of his nostalgia for a “once-United Kingdom” that no longer exists and a desire to escape from his modest working-class background in his aspiration to become the stereotypical English gentleman embodied by Bond. Partridge’s outsider status and re-assertion of Englishness prompted David Quantick to suggest that “there is nobody more representative of our times than Partridge, a man whose views chime with those of 52% of the British population who voted Leave in the 2016 referendum” (2019, n.p.). It is in the Brexit era that “the British bulldog” (ibid.), Alan Partridge, has begun to approximate the heroic, Bond-esque status he has always aspired to.

### **THIS TIME WITH ALAN PARTRIDGE**

The 2019 BBC series *This Time with Alan Partridge* marked a timely return for the fictional broadcaster. One newspaper headline lauded Partridge as “Britain’s new Winston Churchill, rising from the ashes to define our Brexit age” (Quantick, n.p.). The reappearance of Partridge amidst the government’s request for an extension to Article 50 saw print and social media exploit the links between Partridge and Englishness that Coogan had been cultivating since *I’m Alan Partridge* by drawing parallels between Partridge and the former United Kingdom Independence Party leader, Nigel Farage. Indeed, Coogan himself claimed in an interview that Partridge and Farage would “get on like a house on fire” (Anonymous 2018, n.p.). The low turnout reported for Farage’s “Brexit Betrayal” march was accompanied by pictures of “up to 100” marchers walking along the side of a motorway and was immediately linked on social media to Partridge’s solitary walk to a petrol station completed as he sang the theme to *Goldfinger* to himself in the second series of *I’m Alan Partridge* (Esler 2019, n.p.). In their single-minded focus on a version of Englishness espoused by Bond, social media users have identified that Partridge and Farage are similarly isolated. According to David Quantick, “like Farage, Alan knows that a blazer and a jumble of Anglocentric phrases are all you need to make it in this country” (n.p.). However, this description could equally be applied to the world of Fleming’s sleuth, and Berberich identifies this when she writes that “in Fleming’s ‘nationalist fantasy’, England always takes the leading role” (26). When Mark Francois, the Brexiteer leader of the European Research Group, quoted from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” at a meeting of the anti-European Bruges group at Westminster, he was immediately ridiculed on social media for quoting the same lines that Judi Dench’s M does in *Skyfall* just after she describes the terrorist threat to Englishness (Withers 2019, n.p.). In *Skyfall*, M claims: “I’m frightened because our enemies are no longer known to us. They do not exist on a map. They’re not nations. They’re individuals” and goes on to cite Tennyson:

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (67-71)

Francois' choice of this extract led to his immediate mockery on social media and to one critic dubbing him "Mark 'Alan Partridge' Francois" due to him drawing on his knowledge of a Bond film to assert his Englishness. However, the threat that M describes and that Francois so fears is the same: it is a threat to Englishness itself. Christine Berberich has argued that Ian Fleming's novels "comment not only on the state of Britain overall but help create a new notion of Britishness that continues to advocate for British dominance over the rest of the world" (24). However, Berberich notes that "the fact that it is a particular Englishness that the novels seem to celebrate is even more problematic [...] as it also highlights not only a misguided belief in British supremacy but also one of English superiority over the United Kingdom as a whole" (ibid.). It should come as no surprise then that the Bond-obsessed Alan Partridge who prizes the "traditional" Englishness embodied by Fleming's sleuth should emerge as the comedic parallel to the pro-Brexit campaigners equally enamoured by this version of Englishness.

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