

National buffoon

By Patrick Barkham

The Guardian

Mr Bean is one of the most successful British cultural exports ever: since the first Bean TV show was broadcast in 1990, its 14 half-hour programmes have been sold to more than 200 TV territories worldwide and shown on more than 50 airlines. And if you ask a non-Brit to describe Mr Bean, these are the words they deliver back: hapless, awkward, self-conscious, childlike, disaster-prone and ... 16: resplendent in geeky tweed, the Mini-driving Mr Bean increasingly seems to be a symbol of the nation around the globe.

17, Atkinson says his quintessentially British creation was in part inspired by a French comic character, Monsieur Hulot, invented by French actor, director, writer and producer Jacques Tati. Mainly, however, Bean was the result of decades of the comic studying himself. Atkinson has said he based Bean on his nine-year-old self. "The essence of Mr Bean is that he's entirely selfish and self-centred and doesn't actually acknowledge the outside world," he said. "He's a child in a man's body. Which is what most visual comedians are about."

Dr Willibald Ruch, an Austrian professor of psychology at the University of Zurich, has tested how laughter increases your tolerance of physical pain by showing volunteers clips of Mr Bean to 18 the required amusement. "There was a high rate of punch lines per minute and we wanted to make our subjects laugh as much as possible. It suited our research well," he says. Mr Bean works universally, he says, not simply because the slapstick humour is almost completely non-verbal. "Mr Bean plays like a child, so you're reminded of your own childhood and this is quite universal. The way he reacts in a range of circumstances, from funerals to train journeys, is like a bored child so I think that's what people like about it."

But with his disaster-prone behaviour, is Mr Bean now seen as emblematic of Britain? Ruch sounds surprised. "Is being disaster-prone part of Britishness? That's interesting to hear." But he 19 that for all his prancing, Mr Bean is recognised by global audiences as peculiarly British. "If you did an experiment with a one-minute clip from Mr Bean and you showed it to people, omitting where it was from, or context such as car number plates that give a clue to its nationality, there would be an above-average chance that people would guess he is British – it's the way he looks and also his demeanour, the way he behaves."



A classic example of Mr Bean's Britishness, for European audiences, at least, is when he literally ties himself in knots trying to get changed to have a swim on a beach. "This is typically English," says Dr Ruch. "Everyone else in Europe would simply get undressed and be naked for a moment."

British characters may always have been viewed as repressed on foreign shores, but in the days when the nation still clung to a sense of its global importance, its cultural exports were more heroic. Where Bean is an asexual wimp with no taste in anything, James Bond is a strong, sophisticated connoisseur who takes risks and has a lot of sex. Does the increasing popularity of Mr Bean abroad 20 Britain's diminished standing in the world? Christoph Lindner, a US academic and author of 'The James Bond Phenomenon', points out that Ian Fleming's Bond was a response to Britain's own sense of decreasing importance: here was an impeccably mannered British superman who tackled the Soviets single-handedly – and upon whom the Americans depended.

Tim Bevan, co-chair of Working Title Films, says the universal appeal of Bean is based on Atkinson's talent for physical comedy. Atkinson is recognised as "Bean" wherever he goes. When Bean's producers tried booking the comic a room in a particularly posh French hotel, reception said they had none until they heard the magic word "Bean". 21, Atkinson has been pounced on by Chinese diplomats at dull functions, who break out into laughter when they see him. Bevan agrees that Bean's "Britishness" is very much part of his appeal. "What people perceive as being British is part of that success," he says.

Atkinson is revered for his role in the comedy series Blackadder, but Bevan accepts that British audiences have never really taken Bean to their hearts. "It's really weird how Bean 22 British people. The sarcastic remarks I've heard about this character! What is that about? He's only a bloke who walks into a lamppost. Is it that we pretend that we can laugh at ourselves, but really we can't? I suspect Atkinson has created a character he will never be able to shake off," says Bevan. Cast as international bumblers, will the rest of Britain ever live down the legacy of Bean? Bevan laughs. "Unfortunately – or fortunately – not."

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Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.

1p 16

- A annoying
- B British
- C funny
- D international

1p 17

- A Ironically
- B Naturally
- C To make matters worse
- D Unwisely

1p 18

- A analyse
- B limit
- C recognise
- D trigger

1p 19

- A agrees
- B denies
- C forgets
- D hopes
- E jokes

1p 20

- A cause
- B improve
- C overshadow
- D reflect

1p 21

- A But then
- B Instead
- C Similarly
- D Therefore

1p 22

- A aims to insult
- B amuses
- C annoys
- D flatters
- E tries to avoid

Bronvermelding

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