

The Commodification of History: Debunking Processes of Authenticity and Simulacra in Julian Barnes' *England, England* 1999.

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ABSTRACT: *Englishness has become a focal point of research and exploration, placing itself at the heart of debates within contemporary literary criticism. In this article, I will be taking Julian Barnes' England, England 1999 as a case study to highlight the workings of the aspects of authenticity and simulacra by attempting to break down the mechanisms that contribute to the rebranding of national identity as well as presenting an account of postmodern reflections of the novel. I also try to highlight the obvious influence of the author by French elements in terms of form and technique.*

My research touches upon the unreliability of memory, historical commodification and narrative techniques of perspectivation and characterisation amongst others, in order to showcase how Barnes manages through the amalgamation of particular techniques to denounce the artificiality of authenticity as a whole, and in focus, that of Englishness.

KEYWORDS: Englishness, Authenticity, Simulacra, Commodification, Barnes.

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Introduction

Englishness has become a focal point of research and exploration, placing itself at the heart of debates within contemporary literary criticism. In this article, I will be taking Julian Barnes' *England, England* (1999) as a case study to highlight the workings of the aspects of authenticity and simulacra by attempting to break down the mechanisms that contribute to the rebranding of national identity as well as presenting an account of postmodern reflections of the novel. I also try to highlight the obvious influence of the author by French elements in terms of form and technique. My research touches upon the unreliability of memory, historical commodification and narrative techniques of perspectivation and characterisation amongst others, in order to showcase how Barnes manages through the amalgamation of particular techniques to denounce the artificiality of authenticity as a whole, and in focus, that of Englishness.

Postmodernism and Englishness

The novel seems to be postmodern in terms of Barnes' play with form and the open-ended offerings it presents the reader with. It is self-reflexive, depends heavily on artifice, and offers very conflicting opinions and views constantly reminding us of the construct nature of history. The idea that history, politics and society are totalizing concepts becomes invalid through Barnes' attempt to highlight totalizing concepts as the constructs of processes of our conceptualization. Barnes, through *England, England*, is in fact trying to debunk the totalisation of these metanarratives.

Although drawing on satire, Barnes rejects the idea that he wrote *England, England* with the aim of producing satirical work, he prefers to refer to his novel as "*farcical*" (Guignery, 2006, bk. 105) through which he sends a message to Britain. The novel opens up immediately questioning the reliability of memory, highlighting one of the key concepts to be discussed including the evasiveness of truth and the construct nature of history. In this novel, he speaks of the lack of authenticity of the past, evoking how both national and individual memory are built upon layers of reinvention and rearrangement, and the fact that concrete reality could swiftly transition to simply being different interpretations.

Postmodern reflections on the discussion of identity classify it as a construct produced through invention which can be further reconfigured and revised. Julian Barnes' work and contribution to this field highlight all of the aforementioned aspects concerning the construct nature of identity and the incessant updated versions of Englishness; his deconstruction of a certain vision of Englishness is complicated by postmodern reflections on identity (Delnieppe, 2015). In this novel, he acknowledges that identity is not a defined concept but a progressive notion that prefers the replica to the original, also questioning whether it would be possible to ever attain historical truth, and therefore a true and authentic national identity.

According to Anna Bohme (2012), the dominance of postmodernism on the level of both content and form, is apparent, especially due to obvious French elements and influence in the novel as Barnes, not only through *England, England*, but the majority of his fiction and non-fiction work, proves to be fascinated by French philosophy and narrative techniques where we see associations with Derrida, Deleuze, Baudrillard and Lyotard.

In *England, England*, the notion of Englishness as a national identity has been designated as a theme park project to which managers have been assigned. This theme park is constructed in order to invent and reinvent cultural traditions and only follow what folk tales and myths have made of history. It addresses contemporary nostalgic versions of Englishness but also highlights the state of England as it has been showcased within the novel and that the manipulation of facts, i.e. history is necessary in order to ensure capitalist revenue.

It is important to note how the novel self-consciously negotiates notions of Englishness and reflects on the process of invented traditions. Barnes presents us with the idea of competing versions of Englishness, and fragments of national memory, the unreliability of individual memory through characters who doubt themselves and their own beliefs, and who do not oppose the readjustment of history for capitalist gain. This is perfectly exemplified through Robin Hood and his merry men who are referred to as 'fairies', which alludes to homosexuality. The adaptation of the myth within Sir Jack's latest innovation, *England, England* is conforming to the politically correct third millennium and the social freedoms it was advocating and giving birth to, amongst which we count sexual freedom. We also have the myth of Gwynn, the protestant whore that has been altered as well in order to suit the expectations of visitors. Her poor background and bastard children were out of the picture, and she was portrayed instead as an attractive and sexually open woman.

Sir Jack wanted to recreate the thing itself, but adjusted it to better serve his capitalist endeavours, thus making the theme park more focused on financial prosperity. It is a place for which "*glories as well as 'burdens of the past' were dug up to make sure that every trace of Englishness is reinvented, be it genetic, mythical, historical or literary*" (Bulger, 2009, p. 03). Through this novel, Barnes attempts, and succeeds, in giving us a taste of how history is constructed, represented and transmitted to us. One of the characters that embody this process is the theme park's Official Historian Dr. Max, whose profile and clothing description support the projects' aim in selling English history as international leisure. His job description in the project is to find out what people knew about English history, and how much they knew about it, in order to best sell the product. He also supports the claim that the replica is much more preferred than the original. He attests that it is more desired and demanded because it can be altered and/ or disposed of if and when needed.

Commodification of History

Barnes seeks to prove that even those educated citizens' knowledge of history does not count for much since history was written and taught subjectively, making it impossible to retrieve precise and pure English traits, if they actually exist. His writing is full of satire, wit, paradox and parody, which are devices that he uses in a manner that permits him to transmit his ideas more convincingly, giving proof of great mastery. *England, England*, revises conventional notions of Englishness and questions them alongside historical authenticity, for example, Dr. Max is recounting the story of the woman and the basket of eggs in order to use it as a concept for the theme park. Dr. Max recounts this story as a recorded historical incident and mentions that he even has a source. Sir Jack loves the story although he openly states that he does not believe a word of it, but he appreciates it and agrees to utilize this narrative as a part of history in order to validate the authenticity of the theme park. It is very important to note that Barnes is trying to raise questions about the nature and origins of national identity, and whose notion or version of Englishness was authorized and accepted. Evidently, this novel is not a 'state of England' novel, but an 'idea of England' novel seeing that it is more preoccupied with tendencies, prejudice and stereotypes than it is with documentary content (cf Guignery, 2006, p. 105).

England's strength seems to be its old age and great history which is the best commodity to be commercialised and capitalised on, the concept of consumerism is palatable in the novel as the smaller replica of England that is built on the Isle of Wight, which comprehends elements and symbols that are associated with Englishness. *England, England* represents an almost utopian space where there is no unemployment, no prisons and no police, and where the needs of its visitors were accommodated consistently. It is, however, important to note that any and all elements that did not suit the image required to achieve monetary profit were disposed of. Everything was designed to mimic the originals, but in a cheaper and more era appropriate manner. Here we can note that the logic of the simulacrum, the copy without an original, is tied to the free market, intensifying late capitalism.

Frederic Jameson (1991) perceives nostalgia as an indicator of the effects of consumerism under the light of late capitalism; however, Nick Bentley (2015) believes it can also be identified as what Jameson refers to as an “aesthetic colonization of the past”.

“The discourse on product placement and marketability and reference to coinage and copyright relate to the financial endeavors to the actual rebranding policies of the late 1990s. Nick Bentley describes the commodification process in England, England as ‘a paradigm of a pure capitalist environment’ and points out that ‘the novel parodies the postmodern effect of a total victory of the market economy’ (Bohme, 2012, p. 199)

It is important to note that the aim of the theme park is to commercialize Englishness as a cultural commodity, not preserve it. In addition to quality leisure and tourist visits where all of the important, but selected, emblems of England are within a single place, *England, England* offers the possibility of reconfiguring England; in fact it thrives on it.

The validity of historical knowledge is questioned, as any interpretation of historical occurrences would be subjective or ideologically influenced. This is where the process of the invention of traditions takes place. Eric Hobsbawm (1983) states that sometimes the reason for the invention of traditions is the fact that old ones are deliberately not followed anymore, which creates a social void in societies. This seems to happen when societies transform and develop too quickly and where the currently established cultural traditions and norms are incapable of adaptation and need to be discarded, such as the concept of the milkmaid and her swain; Sir Jack wanted to implement this concept in his theme park, but the actual achievement of the idea proved itself to be particularly difficult since “*industrialization and the free market had long disposed of them. Eating was not simple, and historic recreations of the milkmaid's diet involved the greatest difficulty*” (Barnes, 1999, p. 42). The function of inventing traditions that never existed before is to ensure a suitable continuity from the past and into the future. However, Hobsbawm (1983) argues that many of the political institutions and ideological movements are so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented.

One of the focal points of the novel is to stress how through distorted history and invented traditions, England had lost its memory of itself in the process. Barnes clearly denounces the fact that many versions of Englishness have been built around constructs and favourable self-images which are mostly reminiscent of a past and glorious England and how all it takes is “*placing the product correctly*” (Barnes, 1999, p. 41). Some characters are highly doubtful of the truth of their recollections and the historical facts they have been taught such as Martha whom we witness to be having constant internal debates about the authenticity of her memories: “*This was a true memory, but Martha was still suspicious, it was true, but not unprocessed*” (Barnes, 1999, p. 06), unlike characters such as Sir Jack who chose to modify memories and facts according to their needs and conveniences. We manage then to see through fragments of these characters’ recollections and their reflections upon the latter, the emblem of the unreliability of memory. Barnes consciously uses nostalgia in an ambivalent manner in the text; he seems to be simultaneously highlighting its corrupting effects and the incessant need for it.

Throughout the novel, we can detect what Svetlana Boym (2001) identifies as restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. On the one hand, restorative nostalgia stresses upon the concept of a lost home and which serves to fill the gaps of supposed absolute truths that are contained within the nation’s collective memory, and which presents a medium for self-identification and belonging, hence, sheltering a feeling of superiority against an inadequate present. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia ponders upon history humorously and ironically. Hence, as readers, we are aware of the processes of transformation that are in the works within the novel, but

we remain reluctant to accept the images presented to us as proof or representation of “authenticity”. And so, we come to see that even though time is irreversible, attempts to reproduce it are made, but they fail miserably.

Real or Fictional Spaces

Space is an important dimension to consider within the novel since it acts as a memory site, a geographical embodiment of a nostalgic emblem of what England, real, true, authentic England should be and it being a topoi of Englishness. We can notice that after the establishment of *England, England*, the rest of the country has regressed as opposed to the progress and thriving of the theme park. England had taken over the name of Anglia and tried to go back in time to nostalgic images of a past and glorious England. However, Anglia came into decay with no contact with the outside world and a life based on farming. This regression into a purely rural landscape proves that Englishness has forever been tied to romantic pastoral images. Anglia represents the reinvention of England by going back to the old ways and the old denomination, a place that was supposed to turn into an idyllic utopia of traditional English conventions, but rather, came off as a dystopia.

As theories of authenticity apply to cultural and identitarian aspects, they also apply to geographical spaces and their connotative attributions. *England, England* is what Bhabha would refer to as a third space (1994), and Foucault as *hétérotopie* (1966); a space that is situated somewhere between the real and the imagined, and which is supposed to represent perfection; a dimension where everything comes together to form a utopia, a perfect place, a place of compensation for everything that has been lacking or was ill-formed. However, Barnes, in this novel, shows us how heterotopia turns into dystopia, thus denouncing the use of pastoral landscapes in aims of manipulating Englishness.

“The world began to forget that ‘England’ had ever meant anything except England, England, a false memory which the Island worked to reinforce, while those who remained in Anglia began to forget about the world Beyond (...) If poverty did not entail malnutrition or ill health, then it was not so much poverty as voluntary austerity” (Barnes, 1999, p. 41)

The fact that the theme park had come to replace England itself is proof of people’s preference for the replica over the original; a new enhanced, advanced, more accommodating replica. Cheap actors and understudies were hired to play historical figures and commoner characters, and were handed a script to recite what was produced by the project’s writers. Even the historical figures that were selected for re-enactment were chosen through criteria and standards as not to present a liability when entertaining the tourists. The past had become sheer images and stereotypical photographs drawn without a context of analysis, and since many explorations of the concept of ‘true’ Englishness locate it in the past (cf Nunning, 2001, p. 24), the idea of the theme park was obsessed with offering a bundle of what true Englishness was all about.

However, this national identity, in addition to presenting an obviously imagined construct, is also capable of presenting material manifestations. England’s pastoral topoi that counter the polluting industrial and multicultural image that was spreading through the nation are drawn from imagined heterotopias, and so the question is: to what extent are concepts such as individual identity, self-images, nation and nationalism, as well as constitutive dimensions like collective memory, topoi or memory sites, national narratives and canonicity, imagined or constructed?

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (2016) argues that nation is invented but still holds powerful material and ideological effects that impose on and manipulate the collective psyche of citizens of said nation; images influence individual and collective identity construction through their dissemination by narratives in order to influence people's consciousness.

Barnes seems to have been inspired by Baudrillard's designation of Disney Land as a hyper-reality; a simulacrum for his novel. A copy without an original but which came to replace the original, and embodying Baudrillard's third order simulacra: Multinational Capitalism which he describes as the stage where increasingly complex industrial products manufacture and consumerism lead to losing touch with reality, even touching upon how national identity ceases to function as it used to, but rather blends or becomes tainted with hues of what is global, thus emphasizing consumerism's inherent relationship with the construction of the simulacrum (cf Baudrillard, 1981).

“We must demand the replica, since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can process, colonise, reorder, find jouissance in, and finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy” (Barnes, 1999, p. 55)

What used to be perceived as an imagined image, made its way into reality. Simultaneously, these reproduced copies and invented images cause oblivion of what was in order to make room for what is to become. Reality became the map that precedes the territory, its foundation dictated by simulacra. What I believe Barnes is trying to communicate and emphasize through *England, England* is his agreement with Baudrillard when the latter denounces the artificiality of postmodern culture, but also declares that we have simply come to a point where we are unable to distinguish between what's real and what is constructed.

Narrative Techniques in *England, England*

One of the most important aspects of deconstructing the constructed concept of a true and authentic national identity is list making which was used in the novel on several instances. Using certain elements of these lists and modifying some others is proof of the falsity of the authenticity and purity of national identity. The list of the 50 quintessences of Englishness has as a role to attract international visitors and sell this constructed image of Englishness to them. However, the manipulation of what should be included in the list is very straightforward which, yet again, brings to the front the self-reflexivity of narration and feature emplotment. Sir. Jack launched that poll specifically to find out what people around the globe believed to be the representations of Englishness in order to give them exactly what they wanted.

The results of the poll were not respected; the list was customized to include only positive aspects of Englishness, whereas negative answers were judged to be faulty polling results. This proves the rootedness of 'list-making' in an empiricist tradition by continuously attempting to form only positive national images. Listing, henceforth, is a technique that employs observation, selection and hierarchisation, and which is fundamentally associated with postmodernism. Lists create a direct link to icons and narratives that are easily recognized, thus reinforcing their perpetuation.

Bohme advances that “by self-consciously employing traditional genre conventions only to undermine them through what is narrated, *England, England* underscores the deficiencies of a political and ideological system, pointing to the existence of personal and collective self-alienation” (Bohme, 2012, bk. 179). She argues that the novel is self-reflexive but paradoxical in terms of history and personages’ representation. This has facilitated its reflection and re-exploration of the past through the form and content of narratives.

According to her, it appears that identity construction in this novel is also done through processes of characterization and perspectivation by employing homodiegetic, heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators (cf 2012, p. 51). Although the story centers on Martha Cochrane, she is not the only character giving an account of what happens. And so, narrative accounts in the novel and identity construction are made through narrating and experiencing.

Processes of configuration also apply in national identity construction in the novel. In addition to invented icons and symbols, many narratives go through steps in order to be reinvented and reconstructed. Paul Ricoeur (1984) calls this the process of prefiguration and refiguration which consist of three phases. The first phase is called mimesis¹ which stands for prefiguration as preceding experience, which is the step that is supposed to set a stepping stone for the construction or setting up of memory culture. An example of this is manifested in the novel when a specific version of history is taught in a systematic or robotic manner. The second phase, mimesis², stands for the actual configuration and fiction-making where specific images are constructed and transmitted in order to convey certain meanings and representations, which is very apparent through how *England, England* is set up to cater to international visitors’ expectations of what England and Englishness are, or what they should be. Finally, mimesis³, the level of refiguration, where certain pre-defined narratives are implemented and established as the new cultural norm or traditions, thus, heavily affecting national identity, for instance, the implementation of the myth of Robin Hood that was customized in order to appropriate liberal cultural and political streams for the sake of preserving the island’s capitalist interests.

Conclusion

Julian Barnes’ *England, England* highlights that identity, individual or collective, depends on narratives and that although it is never ending, the quest for the real is never attained. It showcases that it is impossible to construct a national identity without dealing with aspects of the unreliability of memory and the constructedness of history. *England, England*, a simulacrum, replaced England, which in turn became Olde England, and attracted the great majority of the inhabitants to relocate to. This replica, the constructed representation of what ‘real’ Englishness should be has come to replace England and became the copy without an original. The lines have been blurred and the past as it was known prior to the construction of the theme park has been rewritten. Olde England became a collapsed place that attempts to construct new roots of rurality and traditions, an image through which Barnes highlights the cyclical nature of the invention of traditions and the configuration of history by denouncing nostalgia and the displacement of *lieux de mémoire* that would never come to compensate for that which never was (cf Nora, 1984).

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