

In Search of a National Identity – Performances of Englishness in Popular Culture

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Abstract:

Simon Featherstone's book investigates performances of national identity that have constructed a distinctively English identity in the 20th century. The strength of the publication lies in its selection of characteristic instances from popular culture that are presented in a concise, witty, and accessible way. Emphasising concepts and seemingly trivial instances that, in many other publications on the subject, are neglected or simply presupposed, Featherstone's book makes a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary field of study on Englishness.

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In the vast interdisciplinary field of research on Englishness, a myriad of different stories could be written. The title of Simon Featherstone's book, *Englishness. Twentieth-Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity* promises a thorough analysis of this rich topic. Although the task of investigating a nation's popular culture and identity over the course of a whole century might seem almost impossible, Featherstone's is a remarkably concise compendium. The performances presented and analysed in nine chapters offer a panoramic view of popular culture, covering aspects such as the Boy Scouts movement, the revival of folk-dance, travel writing, national festivals, comedians, regional accents, Paul Gascoigne's tears after a lost World Cup match in 1990, and Lady Di's royal romance. Featherstone's book, written in a readable style sprinkled with surprising, humorous anecdotes, is not only a seminal contribution to the study of Englishness for researchers, but also an enlightening read for anyone interested in the history of England's popular culture.

Setting out with an introduction to the nine thematically arranged chapters, Featherstone alludes to a crucial point in the discourse on Englishness: the tendency to conjure up a crisis of a seemingly lost national identity. He observes thereby that "the English who read about being English also like to be told how hard it is to say who they are" (p. 2). In his subsequent laying out of the aims of the book, the selected performances of Englishness might, at first glance, seem quite arbitrary, or in part opaquely British. However, these instances are not simply said to be representative of English identity; Featherstone also makes quite clear why each is a case in point. In addition to performance, place is introduced as a key concept for the construction of regional identities. In this context, it might have been possible to explicitly support the conceptual background by narrative as a basal concept, since it serves as such in the analyses.

The second chapter introduces five representative political theories about Englishness. Particularly convincing is Featherstone's reading of George Orwell's reflections on English identity, whereby he explains Orwell's enduring popularity as a reference, and demonstrates why the texts function so well to support even contrasting ideologies. The chapter ends with the provocative thought experiment that research in this field could one day result in a new academic

discipline – "Englishness Studies" – which, Featherstone admits, remains a "potentially embarrassing fantasy" (p. 27).

The following chapters then scrutinise characteristic representations and performances of Englishness in popular culture across various media. The linkages and comparisons generally work well, with but a few exceptions that constitute only minor flaws in the largely convincing argumentation. An example: although the Miners' Strike in the 1980s can indeed be evaluated as a counter-discourse to the Festival of Britain in 1951 and the Millennium Experience in 2000, comparing them under the chapter title "Festivals" seems questionable. In this case, national representations initiated and constructed by the government, on the one hand, and the impulsively developing strike actions of underpaid miners, on the other, do not quite function on the same level. Such inconsistent flaws notwithstanding, the overall argumentation of the book is convincing, and impresses with its accurate readings of narratives that are skilfully employed in fluid, well-constructed transitions.

Of the wide range of topics presented, Featherstone pays special attention to England's divides between North and (dominant) South, and urban and rural space. In several of the chapters, Featherstone emphasises the role of the North and the relationship between Englishness and Northernness – an issue that is often neglected in studies of English identity. In the author's own words, "a long indigenous history of metropolitan exclusivity and regional exclusion" (p. 27) exists in England.

In sum, each selected performance of Englishness makes a case in point in its own right. Each underlines, as well, the comprehensive character of popular culture and its intertwining relations to politics, literature, film, and other popular media. Featherstone thus demonstrates that Englishness is a phenomenon closely linked to various fields exceeding traditional disciplines, and thereby highlights the problem that popular culture is too often reduced to a mere precondition. The author skilfully shows that his thought experiment of 'Englishness Studies' requires just such an attentive, interdisciplinary approach. The book thus makes a valuable contribution to this hypothetical field of 'Englishness Studies', and is highly recommendable to everyone interested in English culture.