



TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS IN PERI-BREXIT CINEMA: SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN *ABOUT TIME* AND *THE NEST*

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ABSTRACT. Filmic representations of the transnational coupling US woman/English man, rife in Anglo-American cinema, tend to rely on commodified iterations of British and US-American identities, which are recognisable by audiences and adaptable to the transnational cultural market. This article explores representations of these “special relationships” in the attempt to detect identity construction processes and negotiations that were relevant in the context surrounding Brexit, understood not only as a political event but as a larger cultural phenomenon. This transnational coupling, the article argues, allows for a contraposition of identities that results in a rendering of commodified, exportable versions of Englishness that resonate with the discourses of what this article calls peri-Brexit cinema: films that were released *around* the times of Brexit, chronologically speaking, but also discursively. Following this framework, this article analyses the depoliticised idea of Englishness at stake in Richard Curtis’ *About Time* (2013) and explores how Sean Durkin’s *The Nest* (2020) offers examples of identity work that are in tune with the disenchanted post-referendum affective landscape.

Keywords: Special relationship, Brexit, Richard Curtis, Sean Durkin, transnational.

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ENCUENTROS TRANSNACIONALES EN EL CINE PERI-BREXIT: RELACIONES ESPECIALES EN *ABOUT TIME* Y *THE NEST*

RESUMEN. Las representaciones fílmicas de la dupla transnacional mujer estadounidense/hombre inglés, abundantes en el cine anglonorteamericano, suelen descansar en nociones reificadas de la identidad británica y estadounidense, que a su vez son reconocibles por el público y adaptables al mercado cultural transnacional. Este artículo explora representaciones de estas “relaciones especiales” tratando de detectar los procesos de construcción y negociación identitaria que fueron relevantes en el contexto del Brexit, entendido no solo como evento político sino como un fenómeno cultural más amplio. Se argumenta cómo la aparición de este emparejamiento transnacional permite escenificar una contraposición de identidades que resulta en una representación comodificada y exportable de “lo inglés” que resuena con los discursos de lo que se denomina aquí cine “peri-Brexit”, esto es, películas que se produjeron *alrededor* del Brexit, cronológicamente hablando, pero también discursivamente. Siguiendo esta aproximación, este artículo analiza la idea despolitizada de identidad inglesa que ofrece *About Time* (2013), de Richard Curtis, y explora la construcción identitaria en juego en *The Nest* (2020), de Sean Durkin, cuyo tono se acerca al panorama afectivo desencantado propio del momento post-referéndum.

Palabras clave: Relación especial, Brexit, Richard Curtis, Sean Durkin, transnacional.

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1. SPECIAL RELATIONS IN TIMES OF TURMOIL

In *Love Actually* (2003), written and directed by Richard Curtis, there is a scene in which English citizen Colin Frissell (Kris Marshall) arrives in the US Midwest and enters a bar, where he hangs out with several women whom he finds extremely attractive. They engage in superficial conversation and the butt of the joke in the scene is his English pronunciation of words like “straw” or “bottle,” which the US women find hilarious. Although nobody in the audience will be surprised by either the English or US-American pronunciation of these familiar words, the formula that sustains the scene manages to create humour and to present the English as *quirky* in the eyes of the US-American girls. The film, entirely based on a transatlantic net of romance, presents the audience with a wealth of stereotypical national attributes that sustain the comedy of the film, despite their obviousness. These national differences are representative of the transnational encounters that this article explores. These pairings are so popular as to have become a cliché—think, for instance, of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), where Charles (Hugh Grant) falls in love with the glamorous Carrie (Andie McDowell), an American guest at the weddings, or *Notting Hill* (1999), where Julia Roberts famously plays Anna Scott, the US celebrity who falls for the dorky English guy (again, Hugh Grant). In these films, US-American women play the romantic foil to Hugh Grant’s characters, who incarnates the archetype of clumsy but charming Englishness. The coupling US

woman/English man is rife in cinema and fiction, most likely because it works well in terms of narrative formula. This cultural script tends to rely on commodified renderings of British and US-American identities, respectively, which are recognisable by audiences and adaptable to the cultural market. Indeed, Andrew Higson argues that “[g]iven the success of these films, this is evidently an eminently bankable version of Englishness” (2011, p. 27) in which “Englishness is in part defined by what it is not, Americanness” (2011, p. 78). The space of the US/English heteronormative couple thus becomes a discursive battleground where (a very specific version of) English identity is foregrounded. The films—that following the undeniable success of productions like the ones mentioned above—have incorporated this pairing, have done so by working with, or against, the same formula they partake in.¹

Following the likes of Andrew Higson (2011) or Diane Negra (2001), who have studied the implications of these transnational couplings, this article examines two representations of English/US-American identity couplings in the attempt to detect identity construction processes that were relevant in the context surrounding Brexit, understood not only as a political event but as a larger cultural phenomenon. In order to do so, two films are analysed which depict a “special relationship” between an Englishman and a US-American woman.² This coupling, the article argues, allows for a contraposition of identities that results in a rendering of commodified, exportable versions of Englishness that resonate with the discourses about and around Brexit. In particular, this article is interested in examining filmic production in the context of what it calls peri-Brexit: films that were released *around* the times of Brexit, chronologically speaking, but also discursively, conjuring cultural manifestations that are not necessarily *about* Brexit, but which can, and do say something about it, as Archer (2022) has suggested. Brexit is then not to be understood narrowly as an actual timestamped event, but more loosely as a set of

¹ An eloquent filmic antecedent can be found in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which the negotiation between US-American and English identity constitutes a significant portion of the plot. The film was released in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and it exemplifies the ways in which the depiction of the special relationship between the United States and Great Britain varies according to the political backdrop of the time. In this case, the confrontation between the identities of the English man and the US-American woman invokes the political context and the intentions of the British Ministry of Information, which meant to smooth over differences and buttress the “special relationship” of these two nations, an alliance which “developed during the Second World War [as] a strategic partnership” and which “played an essential part in bringing stability to the evolving post-1945 international order” (McKercher, 2017, p. 3). See James Chapman (2005) for an insightful analysis of *A Matter of Life and Death* in the context of the transnational film industry.

² The special relationship trope goes back to the liaisons between US-American women of the Gilded Age and British men. The transatlantic coupling of decaying British aristocracy and the emerging American *nouveau riche* women, contemptuously dubbed “dollar princesses”, is the subject of Edith Wharton’s unfinished novel *The Buccaneers*, recently turned in to a TV show. See Maureen Montgomery (1987) for an overview of this issue and, more recently, Makayla Elise Talley (2025).

overlapping discourses that are actively produced nationally and internationally. The term peri-Brexit, intentionally open-ended and featuring blurry contours rather than a rigid demarcation, aims to add to this idea, suggesting that “Brexit” was, as Archer suggests, “a whole period” (2022, p. 5) whose echoes can be inevitably heard in multifarious cultural expressions, both prior and subsequent to the event itself. The films explored in this study do not, therefore, directly confront Brexit, but they can be useful in understanding the identity work that Brexit compounded, harnessed, and ultimately profited from.

In a book about the history and culture surrounding the Orient Express train, Mauricio Wiesenthal writes that “Brexit had two historic antecedents—or warnings, if you will: the Anglican Church and the Pullman Company” (2020, p. 27).³ Wiesenthal’s passing remark about Brexit in his book about trains is, while an oversimplification, in fact apposite as it throws light on the long-rooted history of the values that would materialise, eventually, in Brexit, but which hark back long before. Regardless of the implications of choosing these two particular antecedents, the quotation throws light on the need to consider Brexit as part of a historical continuum rather than as an isolated event. Scholarly discussions likewise hold that the events of 2016 “stirred powerful emotions of fear, loss and betrayal, with deep roots in British history. Its signature issues—immigration, ‘sovereignty’, citizenship and trade—spoke to diffuse and sometimes inchoate ideas about identity, nationhood and Britain’s place in the world” (Saunders, 2020, p. 1141). In the turmoil that accompanied the identity turbulence of Brexit, it is often the confrontation between different nationalities that unmasks the attributes of Britishness that are being reinforced, contested, or questioned. Although it is the contrast between subaltern or minoritised identities and hegemonic ones that offers the most evident identity wars, sometimes these also happen, perhaps more subtly, in identity pairings between what would seem natural allies. In the context of classic romantic comedies, revolving around the union of a man and a woman and the glorification of heteronormativity and/or marriage as the “natural” or “normal” outcome for a couple, the inclusion of the US-American element, which would be, in principle, a natural ally to England, is read here as a device through which English national identity can be asserted or called into question, even if the contraposition between US-American and British identities is not as mediated by inequality and power imbalance as others might be. Because the “special relationship” presumes analogy and closeness rather than radical difference,⁴ the US-American nationality of the partner serves not so much as a strong indicator of alterity but rather as a prop to bolster, or critique, certain traits of Englishness incarnated by the British partner. US nationality, in other words, does not antagonise English identity enough for this pairing to become a central issue; rather, the two nationalities interact smoothly allowing for Englishness to emerge in a seemingly effortless manner. The

³ Translation mine.

⁴ See Sara Ahmed’s chapter “In the Name of Love” in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014, pp. 122-143) for a discussion on the demands imposed on the multicultural Other, virtually absent from the pairing US-American / English this article is concerned with.

foregrounding of certain traits of “Englishness”⁵ in cultural products that surround Brexit, whether discursively or chronologically, speaks of a more or less deliberate re-examination of national identity happening at multifarious sociocultural levels that must be grappled with. This is especially true if we agree with Kristian Shaw’s contention that “Brexit arguably concerned England’s own identity crisis rather than an adjudication of its relationship with the EU or the wider world” (2021, p. 29).

This article is devoted to the analysis of *About Time* (2013), written and directed by Richard Curtis, and Sean Durkin’s *The Nest* (2020), two contemporary films that differ in genre and tone, and which, in different ways, mobilise hegemonic representations of Englishness to multifarious results. The fact that the films do not align in their tone is deliberate, and compounds the idea that identity work cuts through different categories, genres, and cultural manifestations. While *About Time* was released in a time of generalised optimism regarding dominant Englishness, *The Nest* belongs to the post-Brexit affective landscape, typically defined by despair and scepticism. What the two films do share is an interest in conveying signifiers of Englishness through space, engaging in different iterations of what Stephen Ingle calls the “Southern metaphor”: a subset of values, aesthetics, and else that are politically motivated and mobilised in cultural production (2011, p. 22-23).⁶ The landscape of the affluent South of England is endowed with certain emblematic qualities that befit the hegemonic conception of Englishness that the movies work with, evincing how “normative geographies are defined by those with the power to do so” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 10). This is no surprise if we consider that:

[t]he idealization of the national landscape, and the sense of belonging it has been said to embody, have afforded a symbolically rich and resonant language within which to express a sense of social alienation and political disenchantment, both of which have become powerful motifs in contemporary public discourse. (Kenny, 2016, p. 12)

Let it be noted that we do not attempt to establish any sort of causality, nor suggest that the cultural artifacts that are analysed here have a direct correlation with Brexit as such. Neil Archer has made the caveat that “[t]he capacity of these films to

⁵ Any study discussing the concept of “Englishness” must at least to some extent address the conundrum of British *vs* English identity. In this article, the stance taken is that which interprets that Englishness co-opts Britishness, excluding the rest of nationalities encompassed by “Great Britain” and establishing a hegemonic and exclusionary version of Britishness that is ultimately reduced to a very specific—privileged—representation of Englishness. The discussion of what constitutes a British or an English film—another complicated debate on its own—is beyond the scope of this paper, and has been done elsewhere (see, for instance, Higson 1997). For pragmatic reasons, this article focuses on films that centre Englishness as a prominent signifier in the narrative, and not necessarily on films produced *in* England, or *by* English directors. This debate, however, is necessary. Who (which nation/s) is putting money into making films that produce these ideas of “Englishness”?

⁶ The opposite would be the Northern Metaphor, which “embodies Nonconformity, industry and resilience” (Ingle, 2011, p. 122).

say anything about Brexit is questionable, for the simple reason that they went into pre-production years before the referendum took place” (2022, p. 18). We must be cautious, therefore, in the relevance that we want to ascribe to films in “predicting” what was about to come. However, as Archer, again, explains,

we need to consider not just films that seem to be ‘about’ Brexit, but also the films, and the film policies and strategies informing them, that don’t seem to be about Brexit at all; films that, in fact, seem to promote the idea that *there is no problem*. These films may be, if not necessarily part of an actual problem, cultural manifestations of a broader and incipient issue (2022, p. 24)

Consequently, the aim of this article is to explore the multifarious tensions that, indeed, were materialised in an event like Brexit, a moment of radical national self-reflection and self-definition which inherited the cultural dynamics and tense identity work that hark back long before. The analysis, then, proposed in this article is more *affective* than it is historical, for it has to do with the unstated forms of nationhood that circulate transnationally in successful cultural products, and which respond to ways of imagining the nation that come to light under events like Brexit. It understands the nation, following Lauren Berlant, as a fantasy that is “not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and *the affect that makes these forms meaningful* [emphasis added]” (1991, p. 4). Hopefully, the category of peri-Brexit cinema will be helpful in understanding how identity representations fluctuate in consonance with sociocultural events of wide-ranging implications such as Brexit, even when they have no apparent relation to them.

2. THE PROBLEMS OF FANTASY IN *ABOUT TIME*

Two thousand thirteen was the year following two important events for any discussion on contemporary conceptions of Englishness. Two thousand twelve held both the London Olympic Games and the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee—celebrations that served to stir up ostensibly benign patriotic sentiment and to measure the affective climate of the moment, which at the time could be considered rather optimistic. In 2013, *About Time* was released—a romantic comedy written and directed by Richard Curtis. The film is narrated from the point of view of Tim (Domhnall Gleeson), a young man who introduces us to his family, which he presents as “fairly odd” (Curtis, 2013, 00:56), with a typical touch of charming quirkiness, but essentially, a *normal* happy family. Normalcy, however, is soon broken, as despite its surface of realism, the film revolves around the fantastic element of time travel. The men of the family, we find out, are able to travel to the past, to a moment of their choice—not without consequences. The movie then follows the birth of the romantic relationship between Tim and Mary (Rachel

McAdams),⁷ a US citizen who lives in London. During the film, Tim travels to the past several times to ensure that his relationship with Mary, whom he adores, turns out well.

The movie begins with Tim's voiceover description of his family. We listen to him while we watch a succession of shots that introduce his family members one by one. He begins with a self-deprecating description of himself as being "too tall, too skinny, too orange—unfortunate hair" (Curtis, 2013, 00:59), followed by a reference to his mum (Lindsay Duncan), whose fashion icon is the Queen, and who has a stereotypically English "rectangular" and "unsentimental" character (2013, 01:09). He then goes on to introduce his dad (Bill Nighy), shown onscreen reading a book in their garden, who, Tim claims, "was more *normal* [emphasis added]" (Curtis, 2013, 01:16) and who "after giving up teaching university students on his 50th birthday, was always available for a leisurely cup of tea" (2013, 01:19). After introducing his uncle and his sister, the introduction finishes with Tim claiming, "[a]ll in all, it was a pretty good childhood, full of repeated rhythms and patterns (...) and by the time I was 21, we were still having tea on the beach every single day, no matter what the weather" (2013, 02:05). Everything is presented under the guise of *normality*, and the family's identities are represented as *typically* English, with Tim himself arguably incarnating another iteration of the archetype previously emblematised by Hugh Grant's roles. The context may have changed, and the narrative the film mobilises is not entirely similar to early 2000s romcom scripts, but his role as a domestic Englishman remains operative. Tea, self-deprecation, the queen, emotional restraint, quirkiness, and rain are thrown in in the first minutes of the film as signifiers of Englishness that help establish Tim's family as representatives of English normalcy, exemplifying the notion of "bankable" English identity mentioned in the introduction. This is a representation of Englishness that audiences are able to immediately recognise and categorise as such.

The idea of normalcy, however, is vexed and conjures up ideas of Englishness that under closer examination emerge as heavily restrictive, as Higson has explained:

The problem here is that this dominant stereotype of middle-class, male, Southern Englishness squeezes out other versions of Englishness and makes it very difficult to embrace the diverse communities of modern England. Imagining a national community on the basis of this dominant version of Englishness makes it very difficult for other classes and other ethnicities to feel that they belong in this image of collectivity (2011, p. 80)

Arguably, Tim and his dad embody this exclusionary understanding of Englishness. His dad is said to have retired at 50 and now enjoys a leisurely life with his family. He is a cultivated man, often shown surrounded by books, and has dedicated his career to intellectual endeavour as a university professor. The family is leisurely

⁷ The transnational element of the movie is also present in terms of filmic production, as the nationalities of the actors who play these characters do not correspond their fictional counterparts. Domhnall Gleeson is Irish, while Rachel McAdams is a Canadian citizen.

enough that they can spend vast amounts of time together, watching films every Friday night and heading down to the beach for tea.

The family home in *About Time* contributes to the articulation of formulaic Englishness, which in the film at large is notably conveyed in spatial terms. The juxtaposition between Tim's voiceover in the "meet my family" scenes, emphasising the normalcy of his family life, with the shots depicting their Cornwall family home can be jarring. The house is as enormous as it is cosy, lived-in, and in line with the quirkiness of the family members. Its façade is big enough that they can arrange a cinema-like movie night projecting films on the wall, and their generous garden has direct access to the beach. The Cornwall family home is somewhat symbolic of English pastoralism, as it is set in a rural environment that anchors the affluent identity of the family. Although the film does not gravitate towards a nostalgic, idealised pastoralism by any means—it just offers Cornwall and the big family home as the anchor for Tim's identity, even if his identity also unfolds in the metropolis—it does reinforce Tim's stereotypically English identity. The countryside lifestyle is, in English culture, aspirational and harks back to "older, even aristocratic, notions of the rural aesthetic and the value of rural nature" (Murdoch et al., 2005, p. 2). It acts as the (permanent) retreat for the family's wholesome lifestyle, away from the bustling streets of the metropolis, with the movie mobilising the countryside's "particular place in the popular imaginary (...) frequently discursively produced as a form of internal other—an idyllic leisure space operating in a timeless romanticism that is usually more akin to practices of a few decades previously" (Willett, 2019, p. 867).

The symbolic currency of Cornwall in the film, however, is complexified further if we also consider the economic position of the Cornish county with respect to England and the UK at large. Cornwall can be read differently depending on the intended audiences of the film. Although the enormous house by the beach evidently speaks of a very comfortable economic position, in reality Cornwall belongs to the "poor western periphery" (Murdoch et al., 2005, p. 97) and is "one of the poorest parts of the UK" (Willett et al., 2019, p. 6). This means that Tim's family's Cornwall home is, in other words, far from *normal*. Whereas for an international audience their family home may represent Englishness, if we take a closer look, we can understand how it actually debunks the idea of normalcy because of its "exceptional" quality in the context of Cornish socioeconomics. Interestingly enough, Cornwall predominantly supported Brexit in the 2016 referendum ("EU Referendum Results", n.d.), which, as Joanie Willett explains, should not come as a surprise as their Leave vote was completely in line with the social and economic uncertainty that many Brexit supporters suffered elsewhere in the country (Willett et al., 2019, p. 6).

This "erasure" of Cornish specificity in the movie and its intended transnational audience speaks of a touristic approach to the region, which obscures the fact that:

Cornwall isn't just an isolated rural peninsular with a stunning and dramatic coastline, but it is a rural peninsular which, through its visitor economy (which is an enormous part of the fabric of Cornwall) has a role in the wider popular imagination of the United Kingdom. (Willett, 2021, p. 117)

This role in the wider imagination of the UK is an element that is perhaps more easily lendable to transnational audiences, who may read the landscape as merely quintessentially English, an ancient environment that anchors national identity, without questioning its actual distinctiveness. We could then argue that, as part of the film audience, we are subject to a pseudo-touristic attitude to Cornwall in the film—its name is even barely mentioned once—in that we, like the tourists, who visit the county, “take away and remember only (or predominantly) symbolic markers associated with leisure and pleasure” (Willett, 2021, p. 121). It is a vision of the region in line with the film’s identity work—reductive and insensitive to complexity, with their Cornwall home adding to the discrepancies between the claims to normalcy and the privileged situation of the family. Additionally, transnational audiences will perhaps miss the situation of Cornish regionalism, which posits that Cornish identity is distinct to English identity.⁸ This nuance exemplifies how identity vectors are entirely malleable, their meanings fluctuating depending on who is *reading* those signifiers, giving valence to Higson’s enquiry into “what happens to filmic images of England and English people when they are produced for consumption beyond the national borders” (2011, p. 70).

The appeal of the Cornwall family home is accentuated by the depiction of London in *About Time*. Space in the film appears as highly polarised, with Cornwall offering the stability that its semirural environment represents, and London as the urban milieu where fantastic things can happen. It is in London that Tim meets Mary, and where he has the chance to find her after manipulating chronology. In the context of cultural wars, London acquires a symbolic power that critics have detected. The protagonist, Tim, leaves his tranquil life at home and goes to London “in search of a future and a girlfriend” (Curtis, 2013, 17:29). As Rahoul Masrani says, in 1990s and 2000s films, London is presented as a “glamorous and fast-paced imagined space” where “a well-educated, middle class population that conforms to heteronormative stereotypes” lives (2018, p. 160). Indeed, this is an *imagined* London that has not yet been called into question by the Brexit events; it is a London apt for fantasy. This is the London Tim goes to in order to find his job and girl. There, he will move in with an old family friend, a playwright. This is another indication of the privilege that Tim, thanks to his family, embodies. If moving to one of the most expensive cities in the world is probably daunting for many young people, for Tim it is a smooth experience thanks to his family connections, which grant him a home in the metropolis.

The notion of an *imagined space* is extremely apt to talk about what several critics (Leggott, 2012; Adams, 2009) have termed “Curtisland,” a word that refers to, indeed, the imagined space that the movies penned and/or directed by Richard Curtis create—an imagined geography where fantasies like the one that drives the plot of *About Time* are possible. Discussing *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Tim Adams defines Curtisland as “an apolitical place, full of can-do possibility, obsessed

⁸ In fact, Cornish identity was declared a minority in the UK (“Cornish Granted”, n.d.). For an account on different, sometimes contradictory claims to “Cornishness”, see Willett (2021).

with the educated middle class, perfectly relaxed about the filthy rich, much more in love with sentiment than ideas, and insatiable in its optimism” which grants a “fairytale quality” to movies like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Adams, 2009). In line with Higson’s caveats, Adams claims that “[t]his charmed life may have been full of the idea of England, but it did not contain much of England itself” (2009). While previous Curtis films like *Notting Hill* fetishised London and “the pleasures of a geographically defined home, [investing] Notting Hill (a suburb of West London) with an enormous amount of narrative power as a source of stability” (Negra, 2001, p. 93), it is true that *About Time* does include a London where the realities of work are not erased or glamorised—something which leads Archer to term the film “Curtis’s most socially and economically honest film” (2022, p. 188). Even if Archer is right in his analysis, the film complies with the definition of Curtisland verbatim, continuing the fairytale quality of the imagined space of the film, even if this time it has been “tainted” by the reality of work and long Tube rides that most people living in London are used to.⁹ Yes, Tim has to work to make ends meet, but he comes from a white, affluent family who own a single-family home in Cornwall, moves to London to a family friend’s home, and falls in love with a US-American editor whom he will marry and create a family with.

It is in Curtisland, then, that Tim meets Mary, whose US-American identity is not explicitly thematised, nor does she have strong stereotypically US-American traits—she does not have strong character traits anyhow, besides being charming, smiling and sweet—but she does emerge as a counterpoint for Tim’s English identity, which appears as stereotypically marked. Mary appears in Tim’s life randomly, while both are out in London at night. They meet and are soon attracted to each other. After going back in time several times to make sure that he will be able to see her again, Tim runs into Mary and, several jumps in time after, the two start dating. They start a relationship that will prosper and go through the expectable milestones: becoming property owners, forming a family, and the consecution of an absolute and overwhelming happiness derived from the infinite love they have for each other. While Mary does not conform to the superstar status of Anna (Julia Roberts) in *Notting Hill*—she is, to use the word at stake, more *normal*—she does certainly fulfil several of the traits assigned by Higson to the celebrity character in the 1999 movie: “extraordinary”, “successful”, “fantasy” (2011, p. 78). Mary appears as a more down-to-earth version of extraordinary glamour, but she is represented onscreen as angelical and virtually perfect. We, as viewers, do not obtain much information about her. Her identity as US-American, arguably *unmarked*, seems to operate as a device to merely exacerbate Tim’s Englishness,¹⁰ with his “normalcy” becoming “an

⁹ Note for instance the difference with *Notting Hill*, where “William experiences no disjuncture between life and work; this is symbolically communicated by the fact that he lives nearly across the street from his workplace” (Negra, 2001, p. 93).

¹⁰ Higson refers to the movie reception by transnational audiences as an explanation for this: “There is thus a perverse exaggeration of the national in order for it to signify easily in a range of international markets. In other words, the transnational or global context of distribution actually reinforces a particular if reductive vision of Englishness in such films” (2011, p. 80).

exotic signifier of difference” (Higson, 2011, p. 71) that contributes to *marking* his identity as decidedly “English”, that is, “ordinary,” “mundane,” “domestic” (Higson, 2011, p. 71). Additionally, Tim’s Englishness becomes tacitly coded as male, since Mary’s character is not developed further than her being representative of what Sara Ahmed terms “respectable femininity”, whose reproduction in social structures “is tied up with the reproduction of the national ideal through the work of love” (2014, p. 124). In this way, Mary’s character is functionally developed insofar as it advances the narrative of heteronormative love the movie revolves around.

Lauren Berlant’s claim that “[n]ations provoke fantasy” (1991, p. 1) is apposite to ultimately ponder the implications of the use of fantasy in *About Time* and its relation to the negotiation of national identities. Resorting to fantasy in the film (Tim’s time traveling) operates as the device that allows for the erasure of any hurdles to his life with Mary, and the final consecution of the fairytale. The abandonment of the realist premise does not only affect Tim’s traveling in time, but it also, ideologically, enables the creation of both fantasy and an exclusionary geography only inhabited by privileged individuals. In this way, we might identify *About Time* as an ideological heir to *Notting Hill* insofar as it reproduces what Diane Negra terms the “tourist romance”, where the US-American girl who has left the United States for Europe falls for a “mundane Englishman, becoming an exotic figure of desire” (Higson, 2011, p. 79) and representing the exceptional *normalcy* that is so deeply intertwined with dominant discourses about the category of Englishness. In this way, and although her identity is not completely marked as formulaically US-American, it does serve as a vessel for Tim’s identity to emerge as markedly English. The film thus contributes to the active, ongoing production of English identity as male, affluent, simple, quirky, more or less cultivated, heteronormative, family-prone, endearing, residing in London, and having a family retreat in the generic countryside. The fantastic element, ultimately, is not used to upend ideas of normalcy but rather to reinforce them, granting the “stereotypically English” characters of the movie the power to exert (fantastic) control over their lives in a way that will allow them to continue living as they are expected to: as a proper family. Time travel serves to erase trouble and ultimately to maintain all characters within the boundaries of whatever is expected from them and their desires and aspirations—it is, essentially, a device that grants Tim an omnipotence that diametrically opposes a fluid understanding of identity, one that allows for contradiction and ambiguity. His urge to control his relationship with Mary, which he exerts so that it can succeed in the terms he imposes through fantasy, is a sign of the rigidity behind notions of Englishness that reject any element that might trouble or question it. If many ideologically conservative films—those which would be closer to pro-Brexit narratives—tend to resort to an idealised past,¹¹ *About Time* goes one step further in getting rid of the past and, in so doing, becoming eloquently de-politicised. The unavailability of a satisfying reality calls for the recourse to fantasy, and the film’s time traveling premise validates Archer’s (2022) claim that *About Time* is ultimately

¹¹ See, for instance, Ortega Martín’s “Nationhood and the (De)Construction of Mythical England in Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List*” (2023).

a nostalgic film. As such, it stands closer to a peri-Brexit affective response that mourns happier, simpler times.

3. OLD BRITISH AND NEW AMERICAN IN *THE NEST*

This section analyses *The Nest*, a film that drastically changes *About Time*'s surface tone of optimism. Released in 2020, it was written and directed by Sean Durkin, a Canadian-American that grew up in England. The film opens to a long shot of a beautiful, stylish suburban house to the sound of disquieting music that suggests we are to witness a darker plot. The film revolves around the couple formed by Rory (Jude Law), an Englishman who works as a trader and his US-American wife Allison (Carrie Coon). They reside in the 1980s United States and have two children and a seemingly well-to-do, happy life. Early in the film, however, we see Rory asking Allison to move back to England, as he is worried his business is not running as it should in the US. Despite Allison's reluctance, the family finally ends up moving to England, where Rory takes up a job in a firm he used to work for in the past. The movie unfolds as we see Rory get trapped in his own fabrication of lies, living the life of a fake yuppie whose desires for socioeconomic climbing have led him to bankruptcy.

The special relationship of *The Nest* is not only the one formed by the protagonists, but also the one that defines the economic backdrop to the plot, emblematic of US-American/English relationships at large. The film is set in a decade when the respective leaderships of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher "helped define the 1980s in international politics" (McKercher, 2017, p. 107). The fact that the film is set in these times adds prominence to the representation of national identities and suggests that the dichotomy US-American/English is articulated in economic terms. One of the first scenes of the film addresses this context, as we see Rory preparing breakfast while he listens to the radio where the following information is provided: "Yesterday, President Reagan announced that effective May 19th, quotas would be set on imports of chocolate, apples, pear juice, and lower priced white wine, coming from members of the European community" (Durkin, 2020, 05:06). The reference to President Reagan's economic measures deliberately situates the audience in the decade of the 1980s, and a quick search informs us that these measures were taken in nineteen eighty six, more precisely (Auerbach, 1986).

Rory, as an Englishman based in the United States, soon emerges as the advocate for the idea of economic freedom that was predominant at the time. He often acts as a spokesperson for the discourses glorifying the advantages of deregulation—a position that becomes ironic when we find out about his actual situation, hinting at the ambivalent position that Rory occupies throughout the movie. After their move to England, in a work lunch with some colleagues at his new job—a firm where he had worked previously before relocating to the United States—Rory complains about the following:

They want to vilify deregulation and privatization, but it's gonna show the ordinary person how to expect more, how to want more, how to be their own boss. In America, everyone believes they can be anything. Here, you're supposed to settle for the station you're born into. (Durkin, 2020, 19:14)

Rory establishes a dialectical opposition between “America” and “here”, England, praising the virtues of the “American Dream” that tempted him away, as his boss says in a different scene. To Rory, the United States represents infinite possibilities for creation, while England means class determinism. The economic postulates of the yuppie culture that Rory represents are aptly summarised by his own motto: “Risk, reward and money” (Durkin, 2020, 38:16). Rory fully embraces the myth of the self-made man, à la Gatsby, trying to cover up his humble origins and pretend that he belongs to the upper echelons of society, as Allison recriminates: “You’re a poor kid pretending to be rich” (2020, 1:09:51). His ostensibly humble background makes Rory resent what he understands as a specifically English impossibility to escape your economic origins and contemplate the United States as the space where anything can be possible. Rory is convinced that he has a *right* to escape his origins and live the affluent life he could not enjoy as a child: “I had a shitty childhood and I deserve this and a lot more!” (2020, 1:11:07). His character thus emerges as the natural cognate of the economic culture of the time, incarnating the self-made man type that works his way up to the top and, in turn, evoking Thatcherism’s belief in getting rid of the chains of the past.¹² When Ally is shown to be reluctant about his desire to move back to England, he recriminates: “You’re so fucking risk-averse” (2020, 10:02) and insists, both to his coworkers and to his wife, that they should “be [their] own boss”, parroting the emphasis on individualism that was so central to Reaganomics and Thatcherite postulates.

Rory’s position within the special relationship is ambivalent. Unlike Tim in *About Time*, who was, unequivocally, a paradigm of “Englishness”, Jude Law’s character is more complex as his identity hybridises elements of Americanness and Englishness in a way that symbolises the transnational economics that he reveres. He is, as his boss publicly declares Rory advertised himself as, “exactly the right blend of old British and new American” (2020, 30:20), his character exemplifying the kinship that the two nations displayed over the decade.¹³ Despite Rory’s narrative, the truth is

¹² The desire to emancipate both the individual and the nation from the past was a central concern in Thatcher’s Cabinet, owing at least partially to the great influence that Martin Wiener’s theses exerted. In his book *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (1982), the cultural historian claimed that the cultural mindset of English people had been halting economic growth in the country due to its indebtedness with pre-modern notions of the good life, based on rural idyll rather than industrial prowess.

¹³ James Wood explains that Thatcher’s “opposition to the European Union wasn’t just about Europhobia; it had to do with her visceral Americophilia. When she flew to Washington, D.C., in 1981 to proclaim her ardor for the newly inaugurated Ronald Reagan, she was not only announcing an ideological kinship but binding her country to the larger power. ‘America’s successes will be our successes,’ she declaimed. ‘Your problems will be our problems’” (2019, n.d.).

that he is not an honest symbol for Reaganomics or Thatcherism. His conduct and economic clumsiness debunk his discourse in ways that make him a parody of the successful type he pretends to incarnate. Going back to the radio news featured in the beginning of the movie, it is certainly interesting that, of all the measures taken by Reagan, the film should feature the one that openly contradicts his economic position. The fact that a major proponent of deregulation would apply retaliatory tariffs on products coming from an alleged ally—the European Union—points to the cracks and inconsistencies of the neoliberal discourse that Rory comes to incarnate as the movie develops. If hard work and “being your own boss” are the path to success, Rory does not comply with either. From the very beginning of the movie, we see Rory in a pensive, concerned look while he is at his studio. We do not actually see him *doing work*, we just see him looking worried or doing house chores like preparing breakfast for his children or wife. By contrast, we see Ally implicated in her horseback riding business. The first scenes show her running her barn, doing chores, or managing the payments of the horseback riding lessons she teaches—that is, taking care of the economy. The film offers an immediate contrast between Rory’s empty work time and Ally’s industriousness. Despite his efforts to narrativise himself differently, Rory can only be read as a dark parody of the self-reliant, industrious, virtuous archetype that, from Benjamin Franklin to Margaret Thatcher, has accompanied an unshakable faith in the virtues of the free market.

Notwithstanding his claims that the US is a self-making paradise, it is no surprise that a character like Rory, transnational and money-driven, should wish to move to London. As Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson explain, “in 1986 the Thatcher government changed the rules governing the London Stock Exchange. In their project, called Big Bang, the Conservatives deregulated London’s financial markets and London became a more dominant global centre for banking and trading in money” (2019, n.d.). Note that 1986 is precisely the year included in the radio news to help to establish the chronology of the movie. Rory is aware of this when he explains to Ally that “regulations have changed, culture has changed” (2020, 9:48) in his attempt to persuade her to follow him back to his homeland. Consequently, when they finally do move to London, the family move symbolically to the centre of transnational financial capitalism that the urban space of the City emblematises, as Masrani explains: “London’s symbolic power as a global city is the result of a variety of factors, including the city’s links to global markets and a large pool of transnational migrants” (2018, p. 157). If the London of *About Time* was a city full of promises and fantasy, *The Nest* portrays the metropolis in a much more dubious way as the symbolic environment that accommodates a volatile economic system. Whereas London is often represented as “a spacious and economically amenable place, with a trans-European and transatlantic citizenship” that “enhance[s] Britain’s global ‘soft power’” (Archer, 2022, p. 48), *The Nest* portrays it as the adequate setting for someone like Rory and casts doubt on the optimistic portrayals of the city—something which can be identified as typical of post-Brexit cultural artifacts, as Masrani maintains:

After the referendum, London's prominence as the European Union's most populous and dynamic suddenly came into question [*sic*]. Would nationals of other EU countries be free to visit and live in the city? Would Brexit threaten London's status as a global financial centre? (2018, p. 157)

Rory's seemingly successful London life is complemented by an equally aspirational home in the affluent county of Surrey. Ally and the children arrive to England to Rory welcoming them to the enormous estate that they will call home. The absurdly enormous farm that Rory *rents* in Surrey, in affluent South East England, is representative of the symbolic landscape that encapsulates the virtues of the semi-rural and pastoral English countryside. The mansion is a historic farm with Elizabethan furniture that Rory is excited to show his children, while Ally complains saying that it is too big. It is no coincidence that he should look to establish the home in Surrey, invoking a "rural vision of England [that] is firmly rooted in the old Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the South" (Strong, 2012, n.d.) and which is related to "older, even aristocratic, notions of the rural aesthetic and the value of rural nature" (Murdoch et al., 2005, p. 2). In this, Rory partakes in what Stephen Ingle, drawing on Donald Horne, calls the "Southern Metaphor". The farm thus becomes a signifier of Englishness that Rory uses to legitimise his social identity. In other words, Rory chooses to live on the Surrey farm not because it befits the family—everybody abhors it, and it is evidently oversized—or because he can afford it—he cannot—but because of what it represents. In this, Rory arguably embodies the strand of Englishness that Margaret Thatcher championed and which Ingle defines as "instrumental, concerned only with favourable outcomes" (2011, p. 127) and secondary to the primacy of the market.¹⁴

Rory interacts with a commodified geography that can lend him more value in the eyes of others. The film, in this way, offers a critical eye on what Doreen Massey terms a *static* notion of place that sees it "bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic in its identity (1994, p. 5). In addition to their Surrey farm, Rory talks to his coworkers about securing a pied-à-terre in the exclusive neighbourhoods of Mayfair or Knightsbridge, which Ally mocks when they return home:

RORY. It's just small talk.
ALLISON. Is it? (Durkin, 2020, 31:40)

¹⁴ Kumar further elaborates on this issue: "There were, it is true, other causes of the rise of interest in Englishness at this time. Margaret Thatcher had, in her administrations of the 1980s, put a great stress on national unity and British patriotism ('putting the Great back in Great Britain'). Like many others before and since—including her successor John Major—'Britain' was often a stand-in for 'England'. Nationalism was part of Thatcher's strategy in her victorious war with the trade unions, portrayed as putting class before nation. (...) Thatcher's espousal of nationalism, reminiscent of Churchill and unusual in any British leader since the Second World War, stirred up, as did most elements of Thatcherism, fierce divisions in British society; but it undoubtedly put questions of national identity on the public agenda" (2015, p. 4).

Added to this are his comments about their Portugal vacation, which leaves behind spaces that were formerly coveted like the Riviera, which Rory now considers crowded and therefore vulgar, as it is no longer exclusive. Rory even extends this way of thinking to his own wife, telling her: “I can’t wait to show you off” (2020, 23:37). The static, commodified vision of space that Rory has mirrors his own and his wife’s identity as equally reified and marketable. The Surrey farm, the metropolitan pads, and the Southern European holidays are endowed with an emblematic quality and support the notion of *virtual* wealth that Rory devotes his efforts to. The signifiers of Englishness that he deceptively acquires are fetishised and consumed as emblems, not as part of a heritage that he wishes to honour.

As we start to find out about Rory’s actual economic situation, so too does the house start to wear on the rest of the characters. The house, instead of appearing as the guarantor of family stability and the correct embodiment of English identity—a wholesome nest—, turns out to be a trap: it is sinister, dark, and full of secrets. It is too big for the family, and its disproportionate size does the opposite of welcoming them. Allison, not afraid to voice her discomfort, repeatedly complains, referring to their “shitty fucking dirty broken-down mansion” (2020, 1:10:08). It is precisely Allison, a US-American, who debunks Rory’s pseudo-pastoral narrative by doing actual work in the country. She starts building a barn in their Surrey plot, instilling the property with actual economic potential, and after finding out they have no money, she takes up work in an adjacent farm, doing away with the leisurely notions of the countryside that pastoral narratives privilege and giving away Rory’s actual situation to his colleagues when she confesses she “picked up some work” (2020, 1:18:31)—only for Rory to immediately change the subject. Opposite Rory’s immaterial capitalism, represented by the airy skyscrapers of the London City, emerges Allison’s work in the chores that her immediate environment demands. After learning that Rory is unable to be the provider of the family, she takes up the handwork in the neighbour’s farm, feeding the animals, and “shoveling shit out of pig pens” (2020, 1:18:20). Ally’s sense of economy is not dependent on virtual conceptions of money, but rather on the land and the animals she has to take care of. Unlike Rory’s, this sense is deeply rooted in materiality—something that was foreshadowed in the beginning of the film, when we see Allison asking her horseback riding students for the money they owe and cashing in several bills. Ally is in contact with material, tangible money that we see her touching with her hands. Rory, on the contrary, *talks about money* and lives in the context of the disembodied transnational capitalism that is supposed to make him rich. The penultimate scene in the movie represents this duality: we see Allison scraping the land to exhume her dead horse—a diametrical opposite of the virtual world symbolised by the seemingly weightless urban skyscrapers.

Allison can be further read, in the context of this article, as the foil not only to Rory but to Mary from *About Time*. Curtis’s film never leaves the British Isles, and Mary’s US-Americanness (and identity at large) are not really developed, as they serve as a pretext to foreground Tim’s Englishness. *The Nest*, conversely, shows the couple in both national contexts, showing Allison transition from her life in the

United States to her growing discomfort in England. If Mary's US nationality, combined with a gendered portrayal of arguably traditional femininity within the heterosexual couple, is stable and unproblematic, becoming almost diluted in her relationship with Tim, Allison's US-Americanness provides a counterpoint for Rory's mirage. Without embodying the archetypal attributes of US ideology like self-making and free, deregulated markets that Rory adheres to, Allison incarnates the pragmatism and sound work ethic that allow her to make a living for herself and for her family. Her nationality thus becomes oppositional and serves, in turn, to delegitimise the reified conceptions of nationhood, whether American or English, that Rory lives for. Allison's US-Americanness, finally, becomes associated with a grounded pragmatism, while Rory's Englishness becomes deflated, unable to provide a stable sense of self.

If in *About Time* London appears as the imagined space of fantasy, class is not thematised, and the idea of "normalcy" is tacitly associated to the white affluent classes, *The Nest* centres the obsession with social climbing by calling into question certain emblems of Englishness. In *The Nest*, the transnational encounter is not associated with fantasy but with lies, unveiling the deceit of "YUPPY CUNTS" (Durkin 2020, 1:35:23)¹⁵ who are invested in identity fantasies, like Rory, who, when asked by a cab driver about his job, ends up confessing: "I pretend I'm rich" (2020, 1:27:36). The 1980s and their "overwhelming feeling of despair" (Ortega Martín, 2025, p. 275) are strategically mobilised to provide a backdrop of mistrust that grounds the affective panorama of post-Brexit cultural production and which helps articulate feelings of scepticism about the unstable ground on which ideas of national identity rest in peri-Brexit times. *The Nest* turns the typical English penchant for revisiting the past on its head, by casting a critical light on the national past. The film thus looks back, not with nostalgia—one of the default modes of reified renderings of English identity¹⁶—but with a critical eye that foregrounds the cracks of national narratives that characterise the emotional landscape of the Brexit aftermath.

4. WHAT DOES ANY OF THIS HAVE TO DO WITH BREXIT?

This article, through the analysis of two films produced in the years preceding and following the 2016 Referendum, has tried to show how Brexit, understood as a cultural phenomenon, rests on national fantasy, taking the term to mean "the images, narratives, monuments, and sites that circulate through personal/collective consciousness [...] simultaneously 'literal' and 'metaphorical' meanings, stated and unstated" (Berlant, 1991, p. 5). If we agree with Higson that "cinema is one of the

¹⁵ This is the phrase that Allison finds written on their house wall towards the end of the film. See José Francisco Fernández Sánchez (2000) for an analysis of yuppie characters and their relationship to Thatcherism.

¹⁶ Many scholars have discussed the role of nostalgia in English national identity. See, for instance, Kenny (2016), Saunders (2020), or Archer (2022).

means by which national communities are maintained" (2011, p. 89), then we should pay attention to how those communities are being portrayed in culture at large, especially when trying to come to terms with events that shake the pillars of national identities to their core. Exploring the representation of those national communities in cultural artifacts allows us to ask ourselves what images of "Englishness" are being offered, and how they may operate ideologically. The two movies analysed here offer iterations of Englishness that revolve around a white, family-oriented, relatively affluent, and ultimately aspirational rendering of national identity. These identities are mobilised in the context of the "special relationship" that occurs in transnational encounters between US and British citizens, and which result in a foregrounding of certain attributes of Englishness that reinforce a dominant narrative about national identity. The US-American/English trope is thus revived to cast light on the identity work that undergirds peri-Brexit times. Notably, the two films show a divergence in their treatment of the female counterparts of the pairing: in *About Time*, Mary complies with the precepts of "respectable femininity" and, therefore, with the reproduction of the national ideal, whereas Allison in *The Nest* breaks both the family and the national pact by refusing to comply and by showing that Rory's acquiescence to his self-imposed mandates is bogus. While *About Time* rests on notions of identity that are arguably static, *The Nest* is much more vocal in highlighting the cracks of the homogenising emblems of Englishness that Rory insists on performing. The signifiers that sustained Englishness in *About Time* have been emptied out in *The Nest*; no longer offering a symbolic realm for stability, becoming hollowed out and transactional and, ultimately, dysfunctional. The films evince the malleability of identity work in accordance with the re-examination of identities that events such as Brexit impose.

The clear US-American penchant of both films may suggest that, in a peri-Brexit context, the identity work around English identity looks transatlantically westward rather than to the continent, negotiating identity categories with the US, not Europe, as the chosen interlocutor. This does not mean, however, that such a relationship is necessarily stable, and the contrast between the unproblematised pairing in *About Time* and the struggling marriage of *The Nest* suggests that national categories and relations, far from being taken for granted, are being revised under the anxieties imposed by Brexit and its context. Be that as it may, the two films show how a negotiation of identity is underway in peri-Brexit times, with national identities remaining unstable, open, and subject to critique, despite the reified representations offered to transnational audiences. They evince the dialogic quality of the production of English identity, underscoring the vectors of Englishness that are done and undone in ways that are symptomatic of the turmoil that characterises an event, or an era, such as Brexit. Reading these cultural texts under the light of Brexit reveals how its shadow looms over the cultural production that followed it, but also over that which precedes it, allowing us to revisit multifarious cultural manifestations as indexes of those tensions that ended up materialising in the event of Brexit, as Shaw suggests when he claims that "[w]e must therefore look to Britain's past to understand the present crisis and to consider life after Brexit" (2021, p. 5). This is not to imply that post-Brexit cultural manifestations will fall on the bleaker side,

with pre-referendum ones veering towards a giddier tone. That would be an oversimplification, and plainly wrong.¹⁷ What an analysis of cultural production can suggest is the idea that Brexit, discursively understood, dissolves the notions of fantasy and privileges readings of representations of Englishness that are tainted by doubt rather than enthusiasm. In other words, these films do not *explain* Brexit, but they do compound our understanding of the identity negotiations that fluctuate in society, especially in periods of unrest, and reveal how competing identity discourses are put to work in cultural artifacts that are successful among transnational audiences.

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¹⁷ Neil Archer, in his pathbreaking *Cinema and Brexit*, starts off his discussion with a reference to what he calls "the first British film of the post-referendum era: *Absolutely Fabulous*, and its paean to political indifference and champagne-soaked hedonism" (2022, p. 1).

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