

Trainspotting and the depiction of addiction

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Trainspotting, the “best British film of the decade”, arrived on 23 February 1996. Such were the expectations of the film (1996) that the face of its narrator-hero Renton (Ewan McGregor) appeared that month on the front cover of two influential London-based film magazines, *Premiere* and *Sight and Sound*. One year after its release, the film stands as both a critical and commercial success. The total Box Office receipts for Ireland, at IR £800 000 in the first 3 months, were comparable to a major Hollywood blockbuster. The film was still being screened 10 months later in Dublin’s north inner city, the heartland of Dublin’s heroin epidemic. Given its subject-matter, it is important to examine both the film itself, and its points of contact with the realities of drug addiction. In this respect, three questions suggest themselves: is the film showing anything new (representation), is it doing anything new (technique), and what is the film saying (ideology)?

Representation

Films about drugs are as old as Cinema itself, beginning with William Kennedy Dickson’s *Chinese Opium Den* (1897). However, the subject of illicit drug use was banned from British cinema screens in 1914, by the British Board of Film Censors, then two years old (British Film Institute, 1995). Nonetheless, a word search for ‘drugs’ in the Corel All-Movie Guide (©1995) database of 90 000 films yields 1036 films, 170 of which feature primarily the abuse of illegal drugs. *Trainspotting* shows ‘cold turkey’ coldly and harshly, reminiscent of *French Connection II* (1975), and well within the film tradition of delirium tremens, from *The Lost Weekend* (1945) to more recently *Leaving Las Vegas* (1996). Degradation has also been a key feature of filmic representation of addiction and *Trainspotting* is no different: none of the film’s addicts can trust any of the others, all continue their moral decline, with one ending up quite literally in the gutter. This ‘rise and fall’ formula has become the hallmark of the drug film: from *This is Elvis* (1981) and *Sid and Nancy* (1986) to *Wired* (1989).

The drug sub-culture has also been shown before in films such as *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and *Rush* (1991). Some British films have presented the sub-culture’s hedonism directly: *Performance* (1970), *Withnail and I* (1986) and *London Kills Me* (1991). Recently, drug-takers (like policemen) appear to be getting younger, as in *Kids* (1995). While all of these films portray the decline of their addicts, they locate that decline in the addiction itself, rather than in the individual. Their comeuppance is presented as grimly inevitable. Plots and devices such as these run the risk of losing credibility.

Where *Trainspotting* breaks new ground is in the directness of its narrator’s claims about heroin: he has made the *difficult choice* (sic) of heroin over the safety of a family, electrical tinsmiths, fixed-rate mortgages etc. to experience the pleasure, which he describes as 1000 times better than the best orgasm. In this regard the film has remained faithful to the book (Welsh, 1993) and echoes director Danny Boyle’s comments about existing films about drug abuse:

“That isn’t what drugs are about. When you take drugs you have a fucking great time – unless you’re very unlucky. We wanted the film to capture that. There’s half of the film which is obviously considerably darker. If you prolong the experience with drugs, your life will darken. The film doesn’t try to hide that. But it also doesn’t try to hobble along with the moral consensus”.

(Quoted by McNabb, 1996)

One such ‘unlucky’ person is Tommy (Kevin McKidd), whose life is darkened by Renton. It is Renton who causes the break-up of the film’s only conventional relationship (‘Tommy and Lizzie’), and who later sells Tommy his first fix. Tommy does not appear on the bill-board advertisement for the film which shows the principals as five numbers, #1 through #5. He is also absent from Renton’s thoughts.

Far from grim decline, the two dealers, Swanney (dubbed ‘Mother Superior’ from the length of his habit) and Mikey (played by author Welsh), gain from addiction. Nor does Sick Boy (Jonny Lee Miller) suffer, as he boasts the ease with which he can give up heroin. So too Renton,

despite his apparent recklessness, survives to escape the seedy sub-culture.

Technique

Many of the technical elements of this film have been seen before. The use of colour, special effects, flashback and flash-forward, varying film speed, and fast editing allow films the opportunity to recreate the hallucinogenic experience. The 'filmic trip' has become a common component of many films quoted here, and it has found its way into mainstream cinema in films such as *The Doors* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1995). Some films, such as *Naked Lunch* (1991), have clouded the separate realities of the trip with the realities of the individual. But where *Naked Lunch* showed Borough's accidental killing of his wife in the context of a 'trip', *Trainspotting* hits home even harder: at the film's darkest moment, Renton's response to Allison's tragedy is to 'cook up'.

Many reviewers have referred to the scene where Renton searches for two opium suppositories down a filthy toilet: Kemp (1996) describes this as the only time the film strikes "a wrong note". But in the context of this film where the film shares the actors' moods, be it exhilaration or degradation, the creation of Renton's own parallel universe is entirely appropriate. After all, the scene serves as a clear manifestation of Renton's exhilaration in degradation. His own sense of unreality is also evident in the pleasure-helplessness of his accidental overdose, magnificently set to Lou Reed's song, *Perfect Day*.

The debate within Cinema about the representation of reality (verisimilitude) is ongoing. The makers of this film decided against a fly-on-the-wall piece. Had they done so, the result would have been difficult to view, if not unwatchable. Given the real risks of intravenous drug use, the film creates its own sense of unreality. This sits uncomfortably with the realities with which its audience are familiar. This discomfort hits home when the film deals with HIV infection. For the film's characters, it is a surreal lottery, and even the death of their friend does not change this. Here again the film has captured the tone of the novel:

"... said here that Scotland's goat eight per cent o the UK population but sixteen per cent o the UK HIV cases ... *What's the scores, Miss Ford?* ... Embra's goat eight per cent o the Scottish population but over sixty per cent o the Scottish HIV infection, by far the highest rate in Britain ... *Daphne and John have scored eleven points, but Lucy and Chris have fifteen!*".

(Welsh, 1993)

Ideology

Trainspotting uses complex representations and a multitude of techniques in a novel way to tap into what is euphemistically called a public health problem. It takes one swipe at psychiatry's response – the rehabilitation programme to which Renton is assigned by the court is wholly irrelevant. Far more inadequate is society's response, with its endorsement of alcohol abuse: the hard-drinking Begby will not "poison his body with drugs", but is clearly the most dangerous of the film's addicts. For all of this, *Trainspotting* remains a moral film: Renton's indifference to Tommy's death or to Spud's prison sentence (in both respects, he got off), or to Diane's feelings and Allison's tragedy, runs like a thread throughout the film.

Just as a black humour hides the darkening of lives, Renton's affability hides a more profound lack of loyalty, engagement, or even empathy. Far from endorsing drug-taking, *Trainspotting* locates the character of Renton in what William Burroughs has described as the worse form of capitalist society, the drug sub-culture. The film's discourse is Renton's and the film ends with the dissonance between what he does (the image) and what he says (the opening narrative as credo). Unlike documentary, it is this image which endures, and exposes much of the narration as false. Renton, as the film's worst psychopath, is no role model; from antihero to estate agent, exhilaration to betrayal.

Trainspotting, despite its affection for its subject, is a moral tale. The film makes no radical call for legalisation of heroin: in fact it appears almost sheepish alongside the concluding remarks of one recently published report of service provision to Edinburgh's drug population:

"Society's attempts to tackle the escalating drug problems by punishment and reduction in supplies of drugs have clearly failed, prompting high-ranking members of the police and press to think the unthinkable about legalisation".

Greenwood (1996)

Conclusion

This is an important and original film, which because of its popularity will provide some enduring stereotypes of drug addicts, both for themselves and the general population. Psychiatrists who ignore this film would do well to remember that the dominant image in society of electroconvulsive therapy, comes not from the public information literature of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, but from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). The film has begun a debate about today's drug users ('generation

why not') who are: "not crazed radicals, not junkies on a slow decline into the gutter, but discerning consumers who decide exactly how much they want to take, when, where and how often" (Cook, 1996). Psychiatry should contribute to this discussion.

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Prevention of Anxiety and Depression in Vulnerable Groups

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The scope of this review, commissioned by the Department of Health, is the common mental disorders of anxiety and depression occurring in adults in the community. It considers the possibilities for prevention in primary care. This combination of basic conceptual and research information provides a practical framework of preventive strategies for the primary care team. Social factors in aetiology are examined in detail, and epidemiological data is used to consider vulnerability factors and to identify high risk groups. There is also a thorough review of risk for common mental disorders. £7.50, 112pp., 1995, ISBN 0 902241 87 7



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