

Trainspotting

(1996, Boyle, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film and Film-Making (AL)
Component 2: European Film

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Narrative
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study & narrative

- *Trainspotting* remains an era defining film and one of the most successful UK films of the 1990s. Aside from its ability to talk to a generation and capture the zeitgeist it remains (despite the huge critical and financial success of 2009's *Slumdog Millionaire*) Danny Boyle's defining movie. Its vibrant soundtrack, its aspirational new stars (Ewan McGregor most famously), its wit, its controversial representation of Scotland and its energetically edited, beautifully shot material lead to some criticism for its perceived glamorisation of a drug fuelled lifestyle. True or not, the marketing for the film certainly communicated to its audience a sense of cool – featuring iconic portrait mid-longshots of the main characters (see above) as well as trumpeting the arrival of a new wave of UK cinema.

STARTING POINTS - Beginnings and Endings

- 00:21 – Beginning - Iggy Pop's anthemic song '*Lust for Life*' erupts on screen and we see Renton (Ewan McGregor) and Spud, running from security guards in well-heeled Edinburgh. Renton's narration of Welsh's iconic and nihilistic 'Choose Life' monologue sets the

tone for the film's iconoclasm. The scene is actually from the middle of the film prior to Spud and Renton's arrest for shop lifting.

- 01:25:48 – End - Renton leaves Begbie, Spud and Sick Boy behind and runs off with the money they got from a drug deal. The feeling is optimistic. He's quitting drugs and is going straight. He's leaving his violent, nihilistic, wastrel friends behind and moving on - literally crossing a bridge (London Bridge) to a new life that he's chosen! '*I'm going straight and choosing life...*'

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Low level camera movement and framing communicates a sense of a life of limited perspectives and ambition.
- The first of a number of Renton's overdose POV's – having surreally sunk into the fleshy carpet and lost touch with reality: (44:53). A doctor revives Renton with adrenalin. The irony of Lou Reed's song 'Perfect Day' underscores his visual nightmare (47:08).
- (01:14:33) London, a long shot and homage to the Beatle's Abbey Road photo.

Mise-en-Scène

- 00:48 - The shabby brown tones of a dilapidated junky drug den perfectly communicated through set design, costume and colour palate. However this is not social realism but rather hyperrealism – a heightened realism.
- 07:45 - Colour-coordinated cubes of working class life. These cells hide their contents from us and their conformist normality reflects something Renton is escaping from.

Editing

- Title sequence freeze frames - Focus on character's identity and character traits: (1)

Renton (00:40 – a gremlin); (2) Sick Boy (00:57 – cool and argumentative); Begbie (01:02 – violent and sadistic); Spud (01:07 – foolish); Tommy (01:20 – embattled).

- 14:02 - Jump cutting during Spud's awkward hyperactive interview working with the sparse mise-en-scène and claustrophobic set to create a comic effect.
- The *cross cutting* between Tommy and his girlfriend making love and Renton and his one night stand is hilarious. As Renton orgasms he notes: *'I haven't felt that good since Archie Gemmill scored against Holland in 1978'*. We then see the goal – the same one which Tommy is also bemusedly watching. However this comic scene has a tragic outcome as Tommy's girlfriend subsequently dumps him and he becomes an addict and then dies of complications with AIDS. The tragedy that befalls Tommy is all due to Renton's selfish and childish act.

Sound

- Music - Chronological in its appearance in the film and often having some narrative importance in terms of commenting on scenes rather than merely accompanying them. Thus *'Lust for Life'* introduces Iggy Pop (an idol of Tommy's referred to in the film a number of times) as well as augmenting Renton's 'Choose Life' monologue. The drug induced haze of Lou Reed's *'Perfect Day'* acts as a counterpoint to Renton's OD.
- Renton's voiceover - Throughout the film Renton narrates (his VO bookends the film) and his acerbic, cynical, foul mouthed and resigned delivery perfectly captures the 'exhaustion' of Generation X.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

Gender, age and ethnicity

- The film is largely filmed from a *Scottish white male's* perspective and most screen time is devoted to 20 something Renton. There are few older representations of note other than Renton's parents (see below) who are depicted sympathetically as a caring loving couple, deeply concerned for their son.
- Age is represented through the nihilism of the Generation X experience – most vividly evidenced through death of Allison's and Sick Boy's baby – they are unable, it

seems, to successfully give life to a new generation. A contrasting generational representation occurs through the school girl, Dianne (Kelly McDonald). Here is someone who is more in control of her own destiny and sexuality (unlike Renton).

- Gender representation is largely male focussed but both Tommy and Spud's girlfriends get screen time as does Sick Boy's girlfriend, Allison (another heroin addict) and Renton's on/off schoolgirl lover, Dianne. However these characters are largely love interests to the main protagonists and although by no means being supine and inactive the film has little interest in them. Renton's monologue in the London club towards the end of the film (see Sexuality below) suggests that gender equality will become the norm: *'One thousand years from now there will be no guys and no girls'*. The fact that Begbie discovers this to his horror with a transgender lover is a fitting commentary on his sexual redundancy.

Addiction and drugs

- (47:56) Renton is infantilised by his addiction. Returned to his parental home and the room he had as a kid. Perhaps from this old nest he will be reborn.
- However controversially graphic detail of heroin use suggests that it is also a very pleasurable 'high' – in the opening sequence we see Spud high and happy (02:39).

Sexuality

- Renton – *'The world is changing, music is changing, drugs are changing, even men and women are changing. One thousand years from now there will be no guys and no girls – just wankers. It sounds great to me ... We're heterosexual by default not by decision. It's just a question about who you fancy. It's all about aesthetics and it's fuck all to with morality'*. Aside from this very contemporary and liberal view on gender difference and sexuality the film contains some nudity – refreshingly male as well as female – and some positive representations of empowered and sexually active women. The sexually active schoolgirl, Dianne, who Renton meets at a club is perhaps the most shocking representation – followed soon after by Renton removing a condom from his penis. However the film is partly about the absence of sexuality – aside from Tommy none of the main characters have regular girlfriends (heroin is their lover) and

when he loses her he soon becomes an addict.

Scotland & England

- (30:54) Tommy attempts to lead the guys on a refreshing walk in the great outdoors – a stereotype of Scottish nature and its rugged outdoor appeal. Renton rebels: *'It's shite being Scottish!'* They all get back on the train and return to the city where in the next scene they are all back on the heroin – soon followed by Tommy.
- Later in the film Renton decides *'to find something new'*. Leaving heroin and Scotland behind he heads to London, introduced with an upbeat dance track and a highly ironic montage of the tourist stereotype that is our capital – Big Ben, red buses and cockneys (58:30).
- The mediated reality of Scotland and England is a far cry from the actual truth. In the scene following this cheesy montage we see Renton at work, selling grubby overpriced city apartments to yuppie wannabes.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Surrealism & hallucination - The hyper realism of the set design and cinematography is also enhanced by sequences that are clearly reflective of Renton's deranged mind. They are surreal in that they have a dream like quality but more accurately have the taint of nightmare – most obviously in the 'baby on the ceiling' hallucination of a junky in 'cold turkey'. Renton is forever disappearing – escaping. The nightmares only really become inescapable when he fights his addiction.
- Ironic humour - The film is permeated with an ironic tone – this is not a social realist film and that is of course why so many people took offence. The characterisations and dialogue are witty as well as the situations the characters find themselves in, such as: Renton giving up heroin at the start of the film and the surrealism of 'the worst toilet in Scotland'; Spud's inept 'speed-fuelled' interview; Renton and Sick Boy shooting a thug's dog in the park; Begbie's casual violence; the stealing and playing of Tommy's sex tape; the club scene – the battle of the sexes; Spud shitting himself, etc.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Social

- AIDS - Trainspotting is not a kitchen-sink drama and its disaffection with society is general rather than specific. Indeed the parents of Spud, Spud's girlfriend and Renton all seem decent people. The police and judiciary are rarely seen and there is no gang violence – only Begbie's indiscriminate and psychotic rage is something to be feared. Interestingly though, aside from Archie Gemmill's goal, the one time we see a TV show it's a fake game show hosted by Dale Winton about AIDS. The graffiti outside Tommy's flat ('Aids, Junky, Scum') also references the hostility faced by AIDS sufferers and the tale told to Renton of Tommy's death by a friend is far from empathetic. Renton tests negative for AIDS: *'It seems however I really am the luckiest guy in the world, several years of addiction right in the middle of an epidemic, surrounded by the living, but not me, I'm negative...'* AIDS was clearly a social problem given screen time and it still is a pressing problem for addicts who share needles.
- British Music in the 90s - Starting with Iggy Pop's *'Lust for Life'* song from 1977 and ending with *'Born Slippy'* by Underworld from 1996 the film takes us on an aural journey through contemporary musical UK culture moving from punk to anthemic rave. The 1990s saw an explosion of creativity, labelled by journalists 'Cool Britannia' and the dance scene, Brit-pop bands like Blur and Oasis and even pop creations like the Spice Girls gave Britain, for a time, a musical sense of positivity and energy. This is very much mirrored in the film's closing sequence with its high powered percussive beat. The euphoria of Tony Blair's New Labour led Britain is just around the corner in 1997 – ending 18 years of Conservative rule.
- Gen X - The generation that was sired by the baby boomers and went on to make punk and then slacker rock as typified by bands such as Nirvana. Generation X found some purpose in rave culture and lost some of its existential angst but in the mid-90s there was still plenty of disillusionment with contemporary culture and the diseased capitalist dream. In the USA this feeling of generational malaise was evidenced by the riots at Woodstock'99 and in films such as *Fight Club* (1999). This mood of alienation and disillusionment is also

evidenced in *Trainspotting* until its end.

- Irvine Welsh - The first of a number of Irvine Welsh adaptations, *Trainspotting* is based on his book of the same name which was published to acclaim in 1993. Other adaptations have been *Acid House* (UK, 1998); *Filth* (UK, 2013) *T2: Trainspotting* (UK, 2017).

Institutional

- Channel 4 Films (from 2006 to now Film4 Productions – Film4 is the TV channel) remain a pivotal producer of films in the UK. Their back catalogue stretching back to 1982 is also a catalogue of UK cultural attitudes and interests. Their film's subject matter is often controversial and left field although they have been behind mainstream successes too – not least *Trainspotting* which for a £1.5 million budget generated £48 million worldwide on its release.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Narrative and Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- Danny Boyle (B. England 1956) is one of Britain's highest profile filmmakers – a director of TV and film as well as a Producer. His film work includes the worldwide smash hit *Slumdog Millionaire* (UK, 2009) for which he won, as director, one of its 8 Oscars. In making his first feature film, *Shallow Grave* (UK, 1995) Boyle put together a team of actors and film makers some of whom would go on to make *Trainspotting*. The two films share: director, cinematographer, editor, writer, producer, production company, UK distributor and actors Ewan McGregor, Peter Mullan and Keith Allen. The latter appears in both films as the same drug dealer and *Trainspotting* acts as the prequel to his character's eventual death in *Shallow Grave*. Boyle's status as a national arts icon was cemented when he successfully directed the staging of the 2012 Olympics.
- 90s UK Cinema - The 1990s was seen as a cultural watershed for all the arts. Aside from the music scene and a new political direction (all mentioned above) there was the Young British Artists movement typified by such creatives as Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin. This interest in the arts was reflected in UK film output which consciously or not captured some of the energy of the 'Cool Britannia' tag in commercially successful films like: *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994); *The Full Monty* (1997); *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998).
- Drug Films - *Trainspotting* can be seen as part of a cycle of films about drugs which have come out of Hollywood and the UK. They are usually films which also reflect on problems of generational conflict and youth alienation. A USA film that shares *Trainspotting*'s critique of culture and heroin addiction would be *Requiem for a Dream* (Aronofsky, 2000) and a film from the end of the USA studio era also about heroin could be *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger, 1955).
- Youth Underclass Movie Cycle - *Trainspotting* is also a movie about an underclass and so, despite its hyperrealism rather than social realism, and despite its irony and heavy use of non-diegetic music, it can still be seen as a film that helps us understand social groups often ignored and side-lined by conventional film. Thus *Trainspotting* could be read alongside working class youth films from the UK like *Kidulthood* (2006), *This is England* (2007) and *Attack the Block* (2011) and from overseas *La Haine* (France, 1995) and *City of God* (Brazil, 2003).