

Textual Analysis of 'Trainspotting' (1996)

Trainspotting, released on the 23rd of February 1996, is a British social realist film directed by Danny Boyle. Rated 18 for 'graphic drug use, frequent strong language, sex, nudity and violence', this controversial text depicts the life of Mark Renton (Ewan McGregor) and his circle of supposed drug addict/thieving/psycho 'friends', leading the viewer from the highs of hits to the lows of trying to get clean, ending with a drug deal and a final betrayal. This movie does not simply show the awful world of drug addiction, but hits the viewer with comic points to break up the heavy content of inevitable self destruction.

The piece is narrated by the main character Mark Renton, a Scottish self confessed junkie, in first person. This method of narration involves the audience in the story by the principal character speaking directly to them, giving them the illusion of a real situation. The equilibrium we are shown at the outset of the film is, in real terms, actually halfway through the story, however this that we are shown is still the equilibrium, being the last point of 'madness' before Renton decides to go on the straight and narrow, it sums up his life before that point, stealing to buy drugs. After the beginning sequence we are shown a sum up of Renton's life before that point; addiction and the life that goes with it. After this series of events the turning point of the story comes with Renton and Spud both being caught, and Renton overdosing on heroin. After the overdose is the real turning point with the detox scene taking place and the latter rejection of his old life and friends. The equilibrium is established at the end of the film when Mark walks over the bridge and we hear his narration once again.

The story, therefore, pretty much equals the set equilibrium model, however some twists, such as the way that the first scene takes place halfway through the story, make this plot not fit like a glove. The reason why the director has made the film this way seems to be to break conventions of normal storytelling, making the movie seem more gritty and interesting than a totally conventional set up. Obviously, Boyle has chosen to follow pretty much the equilibrium model, as it is, evidently, the best way to tell a basic story. You could also say that Boyle's choice to differ slightly from the totally normal model is metaphoric to the way a drug addict's life does not run in strict order, the frame placement is slightly different as the subject's lives are also. It could be said further that the choice of narrative structure is to fit in with the rest of the film's oddball camera techniques and chopped together, but impeccable and understandable, style.

This reason I chose to analyse this film is because it is in no doubt a great example of a British social realist film, but it still includes other non-realistic techniques that highlight the film making process. Although the subject matter may not be what is to be shown in my film does not mean I cannot be inspired by Boyle's unique way of producing this piece, with experimental filming techniques and a take of a subject that is unrivalled by most films of the same genre. Boyle's shot choices turn a could be unremarkable gritty subject into a trippy and varied masterpiece, a feat which I aim to do with my film. Let it be understated but still make the viewer be gripped by experimenting with shots to show the subject in the most entertaining and interesting light.

The characters that are shown in this film are an example of the hidden underbelly of society. A lot of the character traits are based around drug use, however among the group are those who do not do drugs but are nonetheless influenced by them. Working class attitudes are an integral part to the story, with family attitudes being seen primarily with Renton and his parents. I took interest with this working class culture as my film is based around a the pretty much lowest part of society. The attitude that the family takes is that the institution holds nothing for them. This is evident in the decision of Renton's parents to get him off drugs at home, they being of the opinion that their way is the best. Renton's mother and father represent a stereotypical part of working class culture, both smokers, eating in front of the television and wearing cheap man made materials. The mother's way of speaking to her son is very typical of the class, saying things like 'You're nothing but trouble, but we still love ya!' while pinching his cheeks, also mentioning Renton

as a child and, when he overdoses, undressing him and putting him to bed.

Mark Renton himself is depicted as a stereotypical drug addict. His clothing reflects this heavily, a too short tight tee shirt, skinny grey jeans and some converse style shoes, all worn with an unhealthy tinge of dirty grottness. His language, and also that of the rest of the group, reflects heavily Scottish roots, using slang and frequent heavy profanity with deep accents. These linguistic choices show the class of the characters and also what kind of people they are. Importantly, the most violent character of the group uses the most swearing and has the strongest Scottish accent, perhaps insinuating that these traits show how formidable a character is.

The locations that feature in this film reflect the social realist genre, all being filmed on site and not in studio's. The squats that a lot of the film is set in paint a dismal picture of a druggy culture with holes in the walls, graffiti, bare floorboards, peeling wallpaper and a dark, cluttered atmosphere. In the main drug house needles and dirt litter the floor, the whole feeling of the place is musty and stripped back. In many of the houses that the film shows, mattresses are seen on the floor acting as beds, reflecting their low status in society. Noticeably the difference between Tommy's flat when he is not taking heroin to when he is, shows a dramatic difference. The relative tidiness before shows how someone who leads, like the character, a clean, athletic, organised life will prosper, compared to when he starts to take drugs, he is diagnosed with HIV and his flat turns into a filthy squat. I would say that this dramatic difference was probably placed in the film to avoid it being criticised for glamourising drug taking.

Trainspotting, however, is more complex than your typical social realist film with many 'anti-realist' techniques that bring to the forefront the expert process of film making rather than simply documenting reality in a naturalistic fashion, such as the work of Ken Loach. The editing and variety of shots that Boyle uses reflects a psychedelic take on the subject matter and is no doubt the reason why the film is so successful and eye catching. The legendary 'toilet scene' sees Renton delve into a toilet and swim around looking for drugs, a take on the characters desperation for drugs. Another legendary and unique part of the film shows Renton coming off drugs, with the baby that died earlier in the film crawling across the ceiling, Diane singing at the end of his bed and Francis speaking to him under his bed sheets. This trip-like effect that Boyle creates uses jerky and focussed filming movements with the camera feeling claustrophobic to Renton, infiltrating his space and story.

The use of the camera in the non-trip scenes is still of interest with slight tilts being used to create an effect of realism, giving an indie style view. The way the scenes are filmed does not bring unnecessary attention to the filming techniques however. The way that the pictures are shown is observant and emotive, not over doing or over exaggerating when not needed.

Some techniques in this film can be identified as conventions by looking at other films in the genre. Although grossly different, Stephen Daldry's Billy Elliot also begins with a constant moving image with music played over it. This somewhat similar opening brings the viewer into the film by grabbing their attention straight away. Other social realist films such as This is England by Shane Meadows and East is East by Damien O'Donnell are more typical 'Kitchen Sink' realist dramas that focus, like Trainspotting, around social issues.

An extract of this film that sums up it's unforgettable style is the scene where Renton overdoses on heroin in a visit to 'the mother superior'. This scene is so typical of the rest of the film for it's mix of conventional social realist filming techniques and 'magic realism'. The scene starts with the principal character Mark Renton walking out into a pub courtyard while a voiceover is heard as well as some indie rock style music. The music is slightly grungy as well as indie, symbolising the type of world that Renton belongs to. The voiceover used just in the beginning of the scene represents his psychological state, speaking inside his head for more drugs. The language that he uses contains profanity and words such as 'hit' and 'smack', examples within the semantic field of heroin addicts

and addiction. He also speaks of 'they' and 'state' which gives the audience an idea of how his view on the government trying to help him as typical of a working class attitude; them and us.

The mise-en-scene paints a picture of a grotty, working class pub. The courtyard is concrete based, the windows have several holes in them and there are cracks, stains and weeds growing up the walls. The man made nature of many of the materials showing the kind of place it is. The door that Renton walks out of is labelled as 'Fire Exit' symbolising his strong desire to escape and take drugs away from normal society. The fact that it is a pub is recognisable by the stacks of metal kegs and plastic crates that Renton climbs up to escape.

Renton himself is dressed in cheap work style clothing. The suit is a murky brown colour with an equally plain tie and a hastily tucked in shirt, looking cheap and tatty representing the wearers status in society and his motives; he does not want to impress being too preoccupied with addiction. The lighting at the beginning is natural murky daylight, a convention of social realist dramas. The world that Renton is trying to escape at that moment in time is one of working class claustrophobia and hopelessness. The film ultimately tries to show the audience how drugs are a way for the characters to escape the numbness of a working life.

The camera work at the beginning of this scene in documentary like with the camera simply showing Renton in his journey coming out of the door, and climbing up the wall. In this part of the scene the camera is in two positions, one further away from the subject that pans his progress out of the door and across to the pile of kegs and crates, and another that is closer and at a steeper tilt showing his progress up the wall. The camera's switch from each other in a 1:2:1:2 fashion, showing match cuts in the action, allowing the action to flow in a naturalistic style.

The second part of the scene is set in Mother Superior's flat where Renton takes the overdose. The styling of this part of the scene is a good example of Trainspotting as a whole, changing from a conventional social realist piece to a more trippy 'magic realist' feel. This is evident from the transition between the two parts of the scene from Renton jumping off the wall on the courtyard to landing on the floor in the apartment. This choice by the director represents Renton's desperation for drugs and his want of speed to get them.

The cinematography in this part of the scene has more unique effects. The first shot is noticeably hand held and at a lower tilt, showing an observational and slightly off key style. This shot is of importance as Danny Boyle has chosen specifically to put it at a tilt instead of a normal head on shot, giving the audience an idea of the drug fuelled environment the scene has moved to. A conventional style is adopted once again when Mother Superior is walking away and checking Renton's money with a match cut being used also.

Once the drugs are served to Renton the camera grows closer to his face and starts to use more close ups of the heroin being injected, noticeably the camera shows the point of view of the inside of the needle, a unique looking effect to bring interest to the drug taking, making it more than just a conventional piece of film. Once the drugs are injected the camera changes position, showing Renton sinking into the carpet. The simple understated nature of these shots juxtapose the odd trippy effects that are being filmed.

The sound in this scene is of importance with the original guitar music stopping when Renton drops down into the flat, representing the change in setting and filming style. The dialogue that we hear between Mother Superior and Renton is a mock waiter to customer conversation, showing a twist on the normal choice of life and what the drug addict character has chosen, how this is his reality. The silence becomes more absolute when the drugs are served with Renton's breath being heard more and the 'whoosh' of the drugs being injected from within the needle chamber. This change is symbolising the relationship between Mark Renton and heroin as one of closeness and dependency with ever detail being of beauty to his eye. The second choice of music comes in when Renton

passes out, the song 'Perfect Day' by Lou Reed, a slow haunting score over the Renton's demise, showing the different sides to addiction.

The mise-en-scene is also different from the start of the scene in this extract. The light is all artificial and transmits a red glow over the flat which is mismatched and cluttered. From what you can see it looks dirty with peeling wallpaper and tatty possessions, a typical 'drug squat'. The success of this scene depends on the drastic difference from the first and second parts, the first being one of natural dullness and the second being of neon fakery.

To conclude, my analysis of this film has enlightened me to the craft of modern social realism and the twists that you can put upon it to make it more desirable and watchable for the audience. What Danny Boyle does is clash together the realistic 'kitchen sink' social realism and the 'magic' realism that juxtapose each other and create a unique product. The picture that is painted is of an escape from the mundane working class lifestyle, represented by the difference in filming and editing techniques. The 'choose life' line that this film is famous for is referenced throughout, with the characters not choosing life, but choosing an escape from it; much less work than changing your social status. It is a critique on a generation's mind set placed together with seamless editing and influential effects, creating a modern classic that will go down in history as one of the great social realist dramas of all time.