

FILM REVIEW



Trainspotting 2

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, Danny Boyle employed a group of young, fairly unknown actors to star in what was to become an iconic and cult film, *Trainspotting*. Twenty years on, not only does he have a lucrative career as a director, but he also brought back together the same actors, who now have highly successful careers. The stakes were high to make *Trainspotting 2* a hit.

Twenty years ago, I was working as an IT worker. At that time, IT stood for Intermediate Treatment, which was working with 12–16-year-old youths who could not manage in mainstream education. They were continually truanting or disrupting classes, so they were getting suspended. We worked closely with the social work department and a special school unit in the Stirlingshire and Clackmannanshire areas of Scotland. A lot of these kids were involved in the drug world in some shape or form, from being children of users and/or dealers, using cannabis themselves, through to dealing in drugs. They got into a lot of ‘petty crime’ to aid their own survival in the world they found themselves inhabiting. None of us who worked at the unit had personal experience of this world, so we went to see *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) as part of our continuing professional development, and to see if it portrayed accurately some of the experiences that the young people were relaying to us. To say I was sceptical before I went was an understatement, as I expected it to glamourize and make this world more dramatic than it is for the sake of box office sales. I had recently returned a 13-year-old to his home, only for his father to ask me to bring him back in half an hour as the police were at that moment carrying out a drugs raid in the home. This was the real world this young person lived in and tried to deal with every day. Was it any wonder he ‘acted out’ in school?

Anyway, 20 years on, my experience of *Trainspotting* has stayed with me. The graphic scene where Renton (Ewan McGregor) goes through ‘cold turkey’ was not glamourized and was a no-holds-barred account. This is definitely a film that has influenced my feelings, thoughts and attitudes throughout the last 20 years, professionally and personally. The depth of insight into a world so alien to my own experiences and yet, in reality, also a huge part of that world through my work was astounding.

So, when *Trainspotting 2* was released, I was interested to see how the characters had developed 20 years on, especially as I now work with adults, some of whom have or have had similar pasts to those represented in both films.

Trainspotting 2

As *Trainspotting 2* (T2) opens, we meet Renton (Ewan McGregor) returning from abroad to his home town of Edinburgh, which he left 20 years earlier. In *Trainspotting*, Renton and his 'friends' were in their youth, mid to late twenties, and were using illegal drugs as a way to numb the reality of their existence. Renton went through cold turkey in *Trainspotting* and, apparently, has been 'clean' ever since. Twenty years on, his first contact is not Sickboy (Jonny Lee Miller), who had been his best mate, but Spud (Ewen Bremner), who is still an addict and has lost everything to feed his habit. There is a very poignant scene where these two sit on top of Arthur's Seat, looking over a panorama of Edinburgh, while Renton gives Spud a lesson on 'choosing life'. He is explaining to Spud that all life comprises choices of our own making and that, therefore, we can be masters of our own destiny. The cinematography of the scene demonstrates this so that the message is re-enforced for the viewer. Spud talks to Renton about seeing Sickboy as they had been so close as youths. So, in this, Spud also gives Renton advice about life, i.e. that it is never too late to make amends.

At the end of *Trainspotting*, Renton betrayed all his friends by stealing money they had all procured and leaving town. Renton seems to be under the impression that if he just takes Sickboy's share to him then all will be forgiven. After all, 20 years have passed and he has been able to live a life and make something of himself, so what's the problem? However, Sickboy is not on the same page with this at all, so his welcome is not quite as friendly as Renton expects. This scene takes place in a run-down, almost derelict pub, where there is only one 'punter' and wasteland all around. This is a pictorial image of Sickboy's life. He is into all sorts of shady deals and has never been able to progress, although he seems to be making lots of money and living in a nice flat in the city. He is stuck in the past, unable to move on. He has a girlfriend, Veronika (Anjela Nedyalkova), whom he appears to care about and yet also exploits by getting her to perform sex acts so as to blackmail the paying participants of these acts. He has truly become a victim of his circumstances and has no way of breaking free from this. He lives with the grudge that life has screwed him over and he is doing the same right back. You get the impression that he has totally closed down all feelings in order to survive, as the one person he really cared about, Renton, betrayed him and left without a word.

Re-enter Begbie (Robert Carlyle), who has been languishing in prison for the last few years. As yet, he is unaware of Renton's return, but plots a successful escape. He returns to his marital home where his son is approximately 20 years old and studying at college. This does not go down well with Begbie, who has always been a nasty character, believing that life owed him, and that crime was the only way to live. He 'persuades' (bullies) his son into carrying out a robbery with him, which is not successful. He also finds out that 'the lads' have not told him Renton is back, and the proverbial hits the fan.

So, now, we have all four guys in the one city, all in contact with each other in different forms, so life should be sweet, right? Wrong!

There are a lot of flashbacks to the original *Trainspotting*, which re-enforce the point that history is repeating itself. These are usually superseded by similar shots from T2 then followed by footage from the original. These are also used to show that, although history is repeating itself, the guys, especially Renton, are in fact 20 years older and not as physically fit and able as they were. Renton proclaims to have lived a healthy lifestyle

abroad – in Amsterdam. (A strange place to go to get away from the drug scene, so is his life really as he has been saying it is? You will need to see the film for the answer to that one.)

Sickboy, Renton and Spud take a trip out to the countryside to remember their friend Tommy (Kevin McKidd) who, in *Trainspotting*, died of HIV-related toxoplasmosis through using a dirty needle. Has Spud really forgiven Renton for getting Tommy into drugs? As Spud goes to lay flowers, Sickboy and Renton reminisce about that time in their lives. Again, the cinematography shows the city behind them, while in front, barren wilderness, depicting the uncertainty of the future and actual aloneness of their lives. This is a very poignant scene where Renton comes face to face with the reality of his past youth and its lasting consequences. He has not been able to escape by leaving the country but, in fact, has carried all his emotional baggage with him. He has been able to bury it deep and, ostensibly, get on, but it has not been dealt with and it is now coming back to bite him.

Towards the end of the film, in the climactic scene, Begbie catches up with Renton and wants to kill him. Renton is hanging, being strangled, and Begbie almost takes pity on him and tries to make it a quick ending. The filming of this scene is dark and troubling, yet portrays that despite all the betrayals, loyalty among the guys is still the strongest force, like an 'honour amongst thieves': a brotherhood, distorted yet deep.

There is a returning of the main characters to places of safety and a helping of each other in some sort of twisted fashion – or was this another betrayal of the trust?

Throughout the film, Veronika says to Spud: 'First there was the trust. Then there was the betrayal' – which seems to be one of the main themes throughout the film. This seems such a cynical view of life and also how some people seem to live without the awareness of the consequences, or even the recognition, of their betrayal on others. Certainly, there is a narcissistic view in the film, especially in Renton's character, that everyone is out for their own gains regardless of who gets in the way.

In my view, this is a film about how the past cannot be revisited physically, even if we want to. As a representation of middle-aged crisis – or crises – wanting to hang onto youth and scared of growing older, the film does this well. Through his son, Begbie is shown that there is another way life could have been lived, but he is unwilling to change. On returning to Edinburgh, Renton finds that the whole of his former life cannot be revisited; his safe home, where his parents were, has only his dad now. Sickboy wants eternal youth and keeps repeating the patterns: 'If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always got'. Spud is the only one who finds some way of putting his ghosts to rest by ultimately redressing the balance of the original betrayal.

Scots, Scotland and ageing

There is definitely a stereotyping of the Scots as hard, violent, swearing, sexualized, holding onto grudges, and out to get what they want at any cost. At the same time, the film also reflects the strong loyalty that is entrenched in the Celtic culture. The addictions were still around but were now about nostalgia and not letting go of youth to embrace ageing, rather than illegal drugs.

Do I think this portrayed the life of an ageing Scot? Well, as an 'ageing Scot', I feel that there were many metaphors in this film that I could recognize in my own life. I, too, lived

abroad for many years, and found returning to my country, my family, my friends very difficult as none of us were the same and yet none of us had really changed. What had happened was that we had all evolved without each other and, try as we might, we could not revisit the past. We had to adjust to be in relationship with who we are now. Some of the relationships survived while others did not. For me, *T2* shows very eloquently this point, with the changing landscapes of the sets demonstrating the internal emotions of the main characters. Is this purely a Scots' issue? I am not so sure. I feel that setting the film in Scotland allowed a more romantic slant by using the beautiful scenery to offset the hard-hitting violence and language. Would it have worked if it were set anywhere else? To be honest, I am not sure there would have been enough contrast. It is interesting that it is set in Edinburgh and not Glasgow, as there is a softness there that also balances the violence, as Edinburgh is not as well known for its seamier side as is Glasgow. *T2* highlights very well that we cannot escape the past and that it shapes who we are today, whether we like it or not. Our choices then influence our choices now, unless we deal with them. Additionally, it addresses the fact that we are not always invested equally in relationship with each other, and yet the need for relationships as survival mechanism remains. So, overall, I feel that this film is worth seeing, especially as a follow-on from the first film.

I saw *Trainspotting* when it first came out 20 years ago, and so am 20 years older now seeing *Trainspotting 2*. This was an interesting perspective for me as my reactions were different now from then. I found myself less tolerant of the characters, especially Begbie. I got angry when he tried to corrupt his son, whereas before, in the original *Trainspotting*, I found him an interesting and complex character who was a victim of his upbringing. I also felt more in touch with my emotions this time as the characters reminisced about the past, as I recognized some of my own regrets about the consequences of previous choices. We can only look forward, while acknowledging the past and its influence on now but not living in it, not getting held by it or pulled back into it. To go backwards is never a good idea. Age shows itself in our physical and emotional bodies but, sometimes, the only way we become aware of time passing and taking its toll is when we find it difficult to do something we have been able to do with ease in our youth. This is depicted particularly strongly in the film when Renton and Begbie are running through the streets of Edinburgh and have to 'take breathers' while seeing in their minds the same scenarios from 20 years previously.

So, to end with: 'First there was the opportunity. Then there was the betrayal'. For me this is significant in the ageing process, where we have the opportunity to do something and our bodies are no longer capable either physically or emotionally – and that is the betrayal.

Reference

- Boyle, D. (Director). (1996). *Trainspotting*. London: Channel Four Films/Polygram Filmed Entertainment.
- Boyle, D. (Director). (2017). *Trainspotting 2*. Los Angeles, CA: TriStar Pictures.