

TRAINSPOTTING: an analysis of the film

by Robert Northey

When our group decided on the theme of this year's series, "Entrapment", I was uncertain which movie to present even though I found the topic compelling, and recognized that it can be discussed in a plethora of film. At the same time I had toyed with presenting *Trainspotting* previously, but other choices always won out. It was just prior to our meeting where we discuss possible film choices that this film again returned to my consciousness, and quickly supplanted my other ideas. And I will freely admit there are selfish motives tied to my enjoyment in sharing this film: In the last decade or so, within my personal realm of art appreciation, I have contemplated the use of shocking images and ideas within film, literature, and other forms, as a means of engaging the audience. Also, since reading the novel on which this film is based I have continued to explore much of the writing by Irvine Welsh whom I now consider to be one of my favourite authors; certainly his other work greatly informed my thoughts as I prepared this talk.

While *Trainspotting* and other works are not explicitly autobiographical, Irvine Welsh's personal experience is very important in providing the backdrop to many of his characters and their stories. Welsh was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1958, growing up in the neighbourhoods of Leith, West Pilton, and Muirhouse, all of which were considered "working class" and filled with social housing, including housing schemes (in North America often referred to as 'projects'). Welsh left school at age sixteen and soon moved to London, where he was part of the punk scene in the late '70s, while furthering his education and starting some success in real estate. However, he had a series of arrests, culminating in a suspended sentence for trashing a community centre; as is written in an online biography, keeping up "the good Scots tradition of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory". Welsh cleaned up his act, married, returned to Edinburgh, worked as a local civil servant in the housing department, and completed an MBA. *Trainspotting* was originally a collection of short stories published in various magazines the beginning of the 1990s. The publisher took a risk putting these together in novel form, but its publication in 1993 quickly put Welsh on the international literary map.

Welsh's view of working class neighbourhoods, and particularly the impoverished housing schemes is bleak, and I put forth that it is one of the traps with which the characters struggle. Welsh often writes about the housing schemes as a culture on the bottom rung of a class system, full of families of generational poverty. Further, he highlights those particular families who are embittered with envy of the higher classes; in denial of their place in such a class hierarchy, they recreate a class system within their subculture. Such characters have risen to the top of this aberrant class system through bombast and violence, rationalizing their own failure as being victim to the greater society keeping them down (a projection of their own envy), while explaining their neighbours' identical failings as inevitable given their poor stock, ignorance, and ineptitude in raising their children properly. Many of his main characters are at the very least witness to such families, even a member, and certainly not far from the subculture. Yet many of Welsh's main characters tend to be intelligent, reflective, and have insight to the world in which they exist. This insight moves them beyond the envy, to a degree, but does not propel them out of the bleakness, the violence, and ultimately the boredom of their lives; their insight makes them aware of the social trap in which they are born and raised, but does not provide a way out.

In *Trainspotting*, the main character is clearly Renton, played by Ewan McGregor, the film essentially his perspective. But it is Frank Begbie, wonderfully acted by Robert Carlyle, who represents Welsh's stereotype of a man who seeks to rule in his neighbourhood. Begbie clearly sees himself as the leader of the group, wise, manly, brave, who must be afforded respect by his peers. He dresses down Mrs. Murphy, Spud's mother, after Spud has been sentenced to jail, chiding her for not providing the upbringing necessary for moral living and proclaiming it is only he who has sought to get Spud off heroin. He lords over the others at his table in the bar, telling grand tales of his adventures and expecting others to hang on to his every word. Begbie's hypocrisy is clear as he moralizes about the evils of putting chemicals in one's body while smoking and drinking. Or when Tommy describes what he witnessed, counter to Begbie's version of heroism and great pool playing, the reality of hung-over failure, humiliation and brutality. And after the drug sale towards the end of the film we see exactly how Begbie stays on his perch, in the bar scene where, despite the risk of police

intervention at a most inopportune time, he assaults the man who had not apologized well enough, controlling the whole bar, including his friends, with his threat of further violence. I will return to this scene later in my discussion.

I will briefly mention the Scots' national identity, or more specifically, Renton's view.

It's shite being Scottish. We're the lowest of the low! The scum of the fucking earth! The most wretched, miserable, servile, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization. Some people hate the English. I don't! They're just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers! We can't even find a decent culture to be colonized by! We're ruled by effete arseholes! It's a shite state of affairs to be in, Tommy. And all the fresh air in the world won't make any fucking difference!

To my ear, this is the historical depth of the same class system described in Welsh's housing schemes. The Scots' as a defeated and subservient people attempting to exist within the confines of the conqueror's culture; Scottish pride, from Renton's view, is as authentic as an Australian road warrior playing William Wallace.

I wish to touch on one other aspect of the trap faced by Renton before I can discuss his attempts to escape. This, of course, is the manifest trap of the heroin addiction. The power of the addiction is made clear early in the film with Renton's first on screen attempt at detoxification, using 'the Sick Boy method' - as soon as he has finalized all the preparation he tears through his own barriers to seek out his next hit, suppositories offered by the dealer, Mikey Forrester (played by Irvine Welsh). And when he loses these during a bowel movement of sudden withdrawal in the worst toilet in Scotland, he suppresses his disgust to chase the dragon, as such. I recall results from a study I saw at a conference where poly-substance abusers rated the relative addictiveness of substances they used; alcohol as the comparison was given a rating of '1'. While most substances rated higher than alcohol, heroin (and other opiates) was regarded as over one hundred times more addictive, with only cocaine and nicotine in the same league. I will also mention here that a primary symptom of chronic withdrawal, after the acute, severe physical withdrawal, is contending with the boredom and depression that inevitably rises.

The heroin as a trap within a trap is how the film begins. During the opening credits the friends are running from a couple of security guards through the streets of Edinburgh - we know from later in the film that Renton and Spud will be caught and tried for this petty crime

(they are shoplifting CDs, though the actual crime was in a cut scene). During this chase we hear a voice-over by Renton:

Choose life.
Choose a job.
Choose a career.
Choose a family.
Choose a fucking big television.
Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers.

Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance.
Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments.
Choose a starter home.
Choose your friends.
Choose leisure wear and matching luggage.
Choose a three-piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics.
Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning.
Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin' junk food in your mouth.

Choose rottin' away at the end of it all, pissing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish fucked up brats that you've spawned to replace for yourselves.
Choose your future.
Choose life.

But why would I want to do a thing like that?
I chose not to choose life. I chose something else.
And the reasons? There are no reasons.
Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

In this piece of poetry Renton's whole dilemma can be found. The first words, 'choose life' could come from a motivational poster, but the reality is we don't choose life, we have nothing to do with the choices and matters of fate that ultimately bring us into the world. We do not choose to be born, and we do not choose the existence into which we are born. This, to me, is symbolized in the infant, Baby Dawn, we first see after the voice-over; at that point in the film we may not be aware of her impending death, but we do sense her minimal chances at a nurturing that leads into a fulfilling future. The voice-over poem continues to command one to choose, holding out the idea that such apparently simple choices are entirely in our command and thus redemption is easily attained. Choose your trappings in life and you choose your identity. But as the poem continues, the harsh reality is clear: you are not choosing anything real and are simply existing within a generational ennui. And in the final stanza, the trap of the heroin, the drug that for moments lets you step out of the life as if you

were redeemed and had attained nirvana. In the film the high from heroin is declared better than sex and orgasm.

However, the film also clearly shows that what heroin offers, too, is illusory. We are repeatedly witness to the filth to which the characters subject themselves; consider when we see the dealer, Sulley, a.k.a. Mother Superior, being injected in the only good veins he has left, in his penis. In Tommy's case we see how he moves from the sparseness of poverty before he starts using, to the absolute destitution once he is addicted, wasting away and eventually succumbing to AIDS. Renton nearly dies from an overdose near the end of the film, and he is the lucky one. Baby Dawn's death to me is the most horrific scene in the film, the innocent bystander so neglected, fatally forgotten.

So Mark Renton is twice trapped. Born into a life of ennui, he cannot escape in staying high forever; he is constantly returned to the perils of his using life-style or, if he manages sobriety, faced with the very life he had hoped to escape. This is the insight he has attained by the beginning of the film. His attempts at a true escape are documented in the film. I also argue that these attempts are symbolized in some of the relationships shown in the film, though not necessarily attempts to escape through these same relationships.

I believe it is important that the film essentially opens, after the initial montages, with an attempt by Renton to quit heroin using 'the Sick Boy method'. We may laugh at the outward manifestation of this attempt - the cold soup, the three buckets, and the pornography - but when we look deeper we learn much more about Renton, Sick Boy, and why this attempt is bound to fail.

While all of the characters in Renton's circle can be said to engage in antisocial behaviour I would only mark Begbie as an actual sociopath. Sick Boy is the more a narcissist who lives by the image he creates for himself. And he is largely successful in this venture. He is the good looking and charismatic one who also takes pride in his appearance - including the bleached hair, his suit and tie. He talks in an easy manner. In the nightclub scene he is with two women while Renton stands among the male rejects, desperate to meet a woman who will even acknowledge him. And Sick Boy has extensive knowledge about Sean Connery.

So what is this image in which Sick Boy exists? It is a man who leads his life with purpose, where decisions are cold, calculated, and without emotion. Morality is irrelevant in this life of purpose where hedonism reigns. Sick Boy has a fascination with Sean Connery as James Bond, a persona integral to his own image (all other Connery films, with the notable exception of *The Name of the Rose*, being evidence of a downward spiral of Connery's career). James Bond, of course, is the celebrated psychopath who in the end gets everything he wants. The fact that the focus is on Connery's Bond speaks to a national pride I raised previously. So we might conclude that 'the Sick Boy method' is about willing oneself into a life that one wishes, even in taming his addiction; Sick Boy quits heroin at the same time as Renton, not because he wants to quit the drug so much as he wants to degrade Renton's struggle by showing him how easy it is.

If this film were about Sick Boy we would have seemingly arrived at the solution, and in fact it is something we hear in our daily lives in many forms. To achieve success you must simply pull yourself up by the bootstraps, you must put your nose to the grindstone. If you want it enough you will have it, whatever 'it' is. Yet 'the Sick Boy method' is bound to fail. When Sulley points out to Renton that his mate on the floor in a drug stupor is evidence of the impending failure of the method, Renton quips "he's always been lacking in moral fibre". More accurately Renton should have said that Sick Boy fails because of moral fibre, because of the capacity for empathy and affection. Admittedly this is only hinted at in the film: with the death of Baby Dawn, Renton sees that his friend is actually devastated, and thus he knows the true parentage of the baby. This too is why Renton will fail, for while he can hardly be described as a good person, he too has the capacity for empathy and affection, which does not fit the cold, calculated force of will required for this method to truly succeed.

The 'Sick Boy method' does help Renton get off heroin, for the time being, only to be faced with needs so long suppressed; this comedically unfolds around the character of Diane, the next hope for redemption. Raw lust is unleashed, leading the posse of friends to a local nightclub. Standing amongst the other male outcasts, watching his friends succeed with women, Renton must admit he does not have the charm of an international spy. He spots Diane; seeing her callously reject another young man, he declares himself to be in love.

Unfortunately the character of Diane suffered in the editing of this film, with only a glimpse of her role in the story. I postulate that she represents Renton's attempt at a love solution, the sense that the love of the right woman will transform him and thus extricate him from the boredom and other horrors of daily life. Obviously we could speculate about pre-oedipal longing for his mother, or possibly a more oedipal drama seeking a manly identity, but the film does not really inform us in this regard. However, Diane immediately speaks to the fact that Renton wants to present an image to her different from the man she has just rejected. Diane declares the so-called "truth" - obviously an image - that Renton is truly a quiet and sensitive man who doesn't usually talk to girls, waiting for her to unlock an inner self who is "witty, adventurous, passionate, loving, loyal, a little bit crazy, a little bit bad". The irony is that there is truth in what she says. While he may not immediately endorse being an introvert, it is through the love solution that he hopes to release an inner self that can be adored and who can express passion in return. However, in Diane's cynicism she believes that Renton's only motive is to sleep with her, which she is willing to entertain and thus collude with the repression of his deeper desires and needs.

Renton will not find satisfaction in a love solution, and through the next scenes we are bombarded with some of the things that can go wrong. Like Spud he could fall right back in the trap of addiction, become inebriated and thus unable to perform or even to control any bodily function. Or like Tommy, the very physical romance may disappear within panic, fear, and humiliation where any genuine bond suffers in the inability for the couple to communicate and work through relational difficulties. Renton is faced with the fact that Diane is not who she said she was; she is a schoolgirl, underage, living with her parents. What is not clear in the film is how much Diane controls the relationship, though we are witness to her threat of calling the police if Renton does not continue to see her. Diane controls the relationship from the start to the end, important for her sake, though it also dooms any hope of the love solution being effective for Renton. One of the last scenes cut from the film was the breakup between Renton and Diane, so we are not directly witness to the effect on Renton, though the impact is reflected in Tommy's devastation when his girlfriend leaves him and he turns to heroin the first time.

Renton falls into despair, his initial attempts to escape his life having failed. He returns to the well practised solution for his pain, his heroin addiction, and it is at this point that he becomes more desperate, and the film turns much darker. Soon after Tommy succumbs to addiction there is the death of Baby Dawn. Renton wants to say something sympathetic, something human. His friends want him to say something. But all he can do is cook up another shot of heroin, and at best offer Allison, Baby Dawn's mother, similar solace, though only after his own hit. Renton is well and truly trapped again.

The next attempts at escape are much more self destructive, and again are symbolized in a couple of his friends. Spud Murphy is possibly the most likable of the group; he is simple and surprisingly naive. He will always be subservient to the likes of Frank Begbie, looking for others to lead, to show him what to do. One can easily imagine that he became an addict because his friends became addicts. To some extent he represents those who have surrendered to the 'schemie'-life, those whose goals will not try and reach beyond the current situation in life. What solution does Spud represent? The manifest solution is represented in Spud's conviction. He is actually taken from the group, taken away from not only the addiction and its consequences, but from the entirety of his life. Renton expresses his wish that it were he, not Spud, who had gone to jail. On a deeper level, as Renton sees himself in his friend, he is actually closer to his ultimate escape as he is closer to a true identity, rather than creating a false self that he cannot sustain. But this deeper insight leads only to worsening depression, and Renton again throws himself off the wagon, and nearly fatally overdoses.

Renton's parents attempt to impose the next solution on him, tough love. Might it be an echo of the cause of Renton's lifelong depression? We witness how after the overdose his parents carefully carry him into his boyhood room, gently undress him and tuck him in. Then, in a moment, the care is withdrawn, the door bolted shut, and Renton is left alone with his nightmares, his unfulfilled needs, his craving to be delivered from the pain. When the hallucinations and other aspects of the acute physical withdrawal are over, the situation is no better. While his family celebrates their win (at a bingo-like game), Renton continues to suffer his suicidal depression and boredom.

Tommy represents the most destructive of solutions, death. When Renton visits Tommy he is suffering from AIDS, emaciated and filthy. He is in such despair that he has divested absolutely from self-care, and is quickly letting go of his mortal coil. He is immune to the hate of the community (the evidence of this hate is scrawled in graffiti across his door); how can you feel the pain of life when you have entirely let go of it? Maybe it is the brief return of Diane that helps Renton stay away from suicide. She certainly triggers yet another escape attempt, the geographical cure.

Renton moves to London with the idea that he can physically escape the situation of his life. If all the attempts at redemption symbolized in his friends have failed, it stands to reason he should remove his friends. Again, the start looks good. He finds a job, makes some money, and seems to be living a life different from the one he felt damned to live. His success is very short as Begbie, hiding out after an armed robbery, seeks him out. And Sick Boy is not far behind. He attempts to hide them away in a rental property his company manages, hide his old life from the new, but this too fails.

And this brings us to the culmination of the film, Renton's successful escape. I have outlined how the trap of Renton's heroin addiction simply reflects the more latent pain of his depressing ennui. I hope I have demonstrated repeated attempts to escape his situation by seeking redemption, seeking to be transformed into something he is not. So what is left for Renton? This is the awful punch line of *Trainspotting*: there is no redemption.

Begbie embodies the true escape for Renton. After Renton sacrifices his sobriety to test the drugs, after the paranoid bus trip to London, after the drugs have been sold, our four friends end up in a bar where Renton's fledgling plan casts off all doubt and is ready to be implemented. We hear how Sick Boy admits he cannot be trusted with the money. And Begbie announces the cost of ripping him off, that he will hunt down and kill anyone who crosses him. When Begbie unleashes his violence yet again moments later, it provides Renton the clarity he needs. Begbie has reached the pinnacle of his violent life, is actualizing the dream of absolute control of everyone around him, commanding respect through violence. This is Renton's nightmare, but he realizes in that moment, while he cannot transform and thus escape this horror, he can use this violence, can use this nightmare, can use the reality of

who he and his friends are in actuality. He is not a nice person, and neither are his friends. So, in understanding this he is able to steal the money from his friends and invoke the threat of terminal retribution by Begbie, and possibly Sick Boy. The nearly wordless communication when he makes eye contact with Spud before he leaves tells us that he is closer than ever to his humanness; his choice is not simple as he is sacrificing real friends, a real past. But the only way he can escape the life he hates is to bar himself from ever returning.

And so ends the story of *Trainspotting*. There is no redemption, there is only retribution.