

to see ourselves

August & September 2014
Across Scotland

2014 is a big year for Scotland: this touring film season offers you the chance to think again about questions of Scottish history, culture and identity.

Trainspotting

Director **Danny Boyle** | UK 1996 | 1h34m | cert 18

It's hard to think of a better-known example of contemporary Scottish cinema than *Trainspotting*. Along with the other unprecedented local successes of 1995/96 – *Shallow Grave* (the *Trainspotting* team's debut film) and *Rob Roy* (Michael Caton-Jones, USA/GB) – *Trainspotting* is routinely seen by film critics and historians as parent, midwife and role model for the New Scottish Cinema that has emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As an instructive example of local filmmakers' ability to achieve truly global critical and commercial success, *Trainspotting* has remained unmatched in the two decades since its theatrical release. The highest grossing British movie at the UK box office in 1996, director Danny Boyle's movie also took \$12m in its first eight weeks of commercial exhibition in North American cinemas. Indeed, *Trainspotting's* estimated \$72m of box office receipts worldwide made it the world's most profitable film of 1996, when production costs (£1.7m) are set against eventual box office takings.¹ Contrary to central protagonist Mark Renton's notorious, despairing *cri de Coeur* that "it's shite being Scottish," *Trainspotting* proved (and still proves) that in cinematic terms, this doesn't always have to be the case.

Yet with the benefit of nearly twenty years of hindsight, we might ask ourselves if this most successful of all contemporary Scottish films is really Scottish at all. This may seem an odd question, given the intense and exuberant locality of many of *Trainspotting's* cultural reference points. It might also be uncomfortable, given the understandable wish to claim this cinematic and popular cultural success as 'ours'. Yet a range of critics have argued the case for seeing *Trainspotting* as an essentially American and/or British film, rather than a Scottish one. Murray Smith, for example, highlights the emblematic nature of the movie's celebrated opening sequence, in which the Scots accent of Ewan McGregor's Mark Renton ("Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career") plays in counterpoint with the iconic and instantly recognisable American drawl of Iggy Pop's 'Lust for Life'. Smith concludes that, "for all its 'Scottishness', the impact and appeal of America – its glamour and vitality – is everywhere in *Trainspotting*."²

Smith's argument asks us to reconsider the thematic significance of *Trainspotting's* closing scene. After escaping from his fellow junkies, and armed with the £12000 proceeds of a heroin deal that he has just stolen from them, Renton's final act sees him cross a river bridge in central London. Walking towards the camera, Mark's image expands and distorts immediately before the final credits roll; his simultaneous voiceover announces to the audience that he has renounced both old friends and heroin for good, "cleaning up... [and] moving on" to become, ironically: "just like you: the job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine, the car." Many hostile critics have proposed that *Trainspotting* and its makers tried to do something similar, striving desperately to 'be just like' something and someone else: the commercially marketable, aesthetically slick early-1990s American Independent cinema of the Coen Brothers, Spike Lee

¹ See Sarah Street, 'Trainspotting,' in Jill Forbes and Sarah Street (eds.), *European Cinema: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pg. 183.

² Murray Smith, *Trainspotting* (London: BFI, 2002), pp. 18-19.

and others, all influences gladly and gratefully acknowledged in public by *Trainspotting's* creators. What potentially gets lost, or at least downgraded, so the argument goes, is a properly substantial attempt within *Trainspotting* to foreground a sense of proud local identity on the part of film and filmmakers alike. Maybe the film takes Renton's diagnosis of the shiteness of being Scottish at face value after all.

Other writers have instead portrayed *Trainspotting* as an essentially British, rather than Scottish, cinematic work. This is so both with regard to other cinematic traditions that the movie draws upon, and also to the contemporary socio-cultural issues and trends that it references. Bert Cardullo, for instance, focuses on *Trainspotting's* marked preoccupation with 1980s and early-'90s British youth and music cultures. As a result, he locates *Trainspotting* in a 'British youth' film cycle that traces its roots back to the early 1960s cinematic collaborations between Richard Lester and The Beatles, movies that *Trainspotting* self-consciously quotes during its climactic London sequences.³ Alternatively, Claire Monk locates *Trainspotting* within a contemporary cycle of other notably successful British movies, such as *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, GB, 1997). She gathers these under the label of 'the 1990s 'underclass film', "a notable cycle of British films that drew their subject... from the problems of unemployment and social exclusion faced by a [particular] social stratum".⁴ Elsewhere, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli note the paradox that "although only a fraction of *Trainspotting* is set in London, we see many more of London's well-known landmarks than we do Edinburgh's,"⁵ while Duncan Petrie, the most authoritative commentator on 1990s Scottish film, views the film as "a 'British' cultural product as opposed to the more narrowly conceived Scottish frame of reference defining Irvine Welsh's original novel."⁶

Moreover, in film industrial terms *Trainspotting's* Scottishness seems very tenuous indeed. No Scottish production finance was involved in the project: David Aukin, then Commissioning Editor for Drama at Channel 4, funded *Trainspotting's* £1.7m budget in full. This represented the broadcaster's largest single investment in any feature film project to that point in time. Figment Films, the independent production company run by the creative team behind *Trainspotting* was a London-based enterprise. It is perhaps for reasons such as these that Peter Mullan, who acted in the film before going on to become an internationally acclaimed writer/director in his own right, acknowledges *Trainspotting's* centrality for Scottish cinema while also presenting it as an intervention that was made from without, not within, that cinema itself: "the two most important directors in Scotland in the past 15 years have both been English, Danny Boyle and Ken Loach. They were the ones who let us out of the cage."⁷ Another of the project's lead actors, Kevin McKidd, was similarly considered in his analysis of *Trainspotting's* long-term impact for Scottish filmmaking. While acknowledging the doors that the film's international success opened for him and many other local artists, McKidd also argued that *Trainspotting* "did a lot of damage, not just to the Scottish film industry but the whole British movie scene... it gave everyone this big, false sense of bravado."⁸ Twenty years on, *Trainspotting's* iconic cinematic flair and cultural irreverence remains obviously intact. In film cultural and industrial terms, however, this movie can perhaps be seen as, like the character of Mark Renton within it, 'the one that got away,' leaving more locally specific and engaged forms of Scottish filmmaking for others to develop.

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³ Bert Cardullo, 'Fiction into Film, or Bringing Welsh to a Boyle,' in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 25.3 (1997), pp. 158-163.

⁴ Claire Monk, 'Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass film, masculinity and ideologies of the 'new' Britain,' in Justine Ashby & Andrew Higson (eds.), *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), pg. 274.

⁵ Ewa Mazierska & Laura Rascaroli, 'Escape from a Celtic City,' in Mazierska & Rascaroli, *From Moscow to Madrid: Postmodern Cities, European Cities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pg. 203.

⁶ Duncan Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2004), pg. 103.

⁷ Simon Hattenstone, 'Interview with Peter Mullan,' in *The Guardian* (4/11/03), available @ <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/nov/04/guardianinterviewsatbfisouthbank> [accessed July 31st 2014].

⁸ Yakub Qureshi & Aiden Smith, 'Iconic film "sent UK industry off rails",' in *Scotland on Sunday*, (11/7/04), pg. 6.