

Trainspotting (Boyle, 1996)

Study Booklet

The poster features five main cast members against a solid orange background. At the top left is Ewan McGregor as Begbie, making a hand gesture. To his right is Kelly Macdonald as Diane, smiling. Below them are three more characters: Jonny Lee Miller as Sick Boy, Kevin McKidd as Spud, and Robert Carlyle as Renton. Each character is labeled with a number in a box and their name. The title 'Trainspotting' is in large white letters on a black band, with 'Available December 4' below it. At the bottom, there is a black band with white text listing the production details, a rating box, and a soundtrack availability notice.

PolyGram
Filmed Entertainment

01
Begbie

02
Diane

03
Sick boy

04
Spud

05
Renton

Trainspotting
Available December 4

R 18+ RESTRICTED TO ADULTS 18 YEARS AND OVER
DRUG USE, MEDIUM LEVEL SEX SCENES, MEDIUM LEVEL COARSE LANGUAGE

CHANNEL FOUR FILMS PRESENT A FIGMENT FILM IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE NOEL GAY MOTION PICTURE COMPANY TRAINSPOTTING
EWAN MCGREGOR EWEN BREMNER JONNY LEE MILLER KEVIN MCKIDD AND ROBERT CARLYLE AS BEGBIE INTRODUCING KELLY MACDONALD
COSTUMES RACHAEL FLEMING PRODUCTION DESIGN KAVE QUINN EDITOR MASAHIRO HIRAKUBO DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BRIAN TUFANO B.S.C.
BASED ON A NOVEL BY IRVINE WELSH SCREENPLAY JOHN HODGE PRODUCER ANDREW MACDONALD DIRECTOR DANNY BOYLE

Read the bestselling
MINERVA
novel

The screenplays of Trainspotting and
Shallow Grace are available in one
volume, published by Faber & Faber

SOUNDTRACK AVAILABLE FROM **EMI**

Film Fact File

Name	<i>Trainspotting</i>
Director	Danny Boyle
Producer(s)	Andrew Macdonald
Cinematographer	Brian Tufano
Editor	Masahiro Hirakubo
Starring	Ewan McGregor as Renton Ewen Bremner as Spud Jonny Lee Miller as Sick Boy Kevin McKidd as Tommy Robert Carlyle as Begbie Kelly Macdonald as Diane
Year of release	1996
Country of origin	Britain
Language	English
Genre	Black comedy
Budget	£1.5 million
Box office takings	£48 million
Production companies	Channel Four Films Figment Films Noel Gay Motion Picture Company
Awards	BAFTA for Best for Adapted Screenplay BAFTA Scotland for Best Actor (Ewan McGregor) British Film Award for Best Screenplay

Why study *Trainspotting*?



"In 1996 *Trainspotting* was the biggest thing in British culture. It crossed into the mainstream despite being a black comedy set against the backdrop of heroin addiction in Edinburgh. The film is crucial for understanding British culture in the context of devolution ...of Scottish identity, its attitude to deprivation, drugs and violence... its synthesis of realist and fantastic elements, and its complicated relationship to "heritage" - that make "*Trainspotting*" such a vivid document of its time."

BFI Classics Sleeve notes

Released in 1996, toward the end of eighteen years of conservative government, *Trainspotting* was an incredibly important film culturally and in defining a new confidence, style and international profile of British cinema. It simultaneously stands as a record of life in 'Thatcher's Britain' and an illustration of the changing culture and attitudes of the late nineties and noughties.

When studying *Trainspotting* we will examine all of the core elements of film form we have looked at when studying the texts for component one as well as the production, social, political, cultural and historical contexts that surround the film. We also look **at narrative theory** and **ideological content**.

History and Context

"By 1983 you had 3.6 million unemployed. It tells its own story – you've got a lot of people with a lot of time on their hands. The government was basically creating demand." And they were naive. "You're talking about people who wouldn't normally be involved in the heroin scene."

Irvine Welsh, The Guardian, 15th August, 2009

Between 1979 until 1997 the UK was governed by the conservative party. **Margret Thatcher** governed as prime minister between 1979 until 1990 and was succeeded as party leader by John Major who, after winning the 1992 election, was replaced as PM by Tony Blair.

This period of Tory rule was typified by a reduction in public services, privatisation, unemployment and a widening of the wealth gap. These economic policies did not pass without resistance and the early years of Thatcher's reign were marked by industrial and communitarian disputes.

Not everybody lost out under Thatcher, a more deregulated, privatised economy had meant that some people had done quite well out of her time in office. What often denotes those individuals who benefited and those communities that lost out during Thatcherism was geography. When Welsh's novel *Trainspotting* was published in 1992 it was common for people to talk about the 'north south divide', a wealthy or at least more affluent south and poorer more disparate north. This **geographical inequality** is important to beware of when studying *Trainspotting*.

At the time *Trainspotting* was made, Scotland had seventy two parliamentary constituencies. At the 1992 election the Scottish Tories returned only eleven MPs yet despite this poor showing, Scotland continued to be governed by a party that on the whole it hadn't voted for. Scotland's main industries such as coal and shipbuilding had declined during the conservative's time in office, resulting in **high unemployment** and this feeling of a **lack of representation** and **economic hardship** fuelled **resentment towards Westminster** and **demands for devolution**. This demand for devolution was given a further boost by the introduction of the **Poll Tax** into Scotland in 1990, a year prior to its introduction in the rest of the UK.

Research Task



- What was the Poll Tax?
- Why was it introduced in Scotland first?
- What were the main strategies employed to resist the Tax?
- How did Scottish people respond to the introduction of the poll tax?

Ironically the Poll Tax is seen as one of the reasons that Margret Thatcher's government fell and although the conservatives (against all expectations) won the election in 1992, it was in a much weakened position.

Other significant political events of the 1990s:

- February 1990. After 27 years, Nelson Mandela is released from prison, beginning the dismantlement of apartheid. He is elected president in 1994.
- The first Gulf war begins in December of 1990.
- The dissolution of the Soviet Union is announced in December 1991.
- 1991. Civil war breaks out in the former Yugoslavia.
- 1992. Riots break out in Los Angeles after a jury acquits four police officers accused of beating taxi driver Rodney King.
- Bill Clinton becomes US president in 1993, ending three successive republican administrations.
- 1997. Tony Blair ends eighteen years of conservative rule in the UK.
- 1997. The Good Friday agreement is signed, ending twenty eight years of the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland.
- 1998. The formation of the Scottish assembly.

In the exam, you could be asked something along the lines of:

*How useful has an ideological critical approach been in understanding the narrative resolution of **Trainspotting**?*

TASK:

- Create a diagram to show how the areas of context we have covered so far link to the narrative of *Trainspotting*.
- Extension: Can you make specific links to key scenes and technical codes to support your ideas.

British Culture in the 1990s

Britain in the 1990's was experiencing a kind of **cultural change**.

- Radical
- Energetic
- Creative
- A huge shift in music culture
- Youth culture
- Young British art
- Puerile and infantile
- 'Laddism' and 'ladettes'

New British writers', artists, musicians and filmmakers were generating an interest (and controversy) both nationally and internationally and there was a genuine interest in cultural products coming from the UK. ***Trainspotting* is central to and reflective of both the cultural renaissance and cultural reactions of the times.**

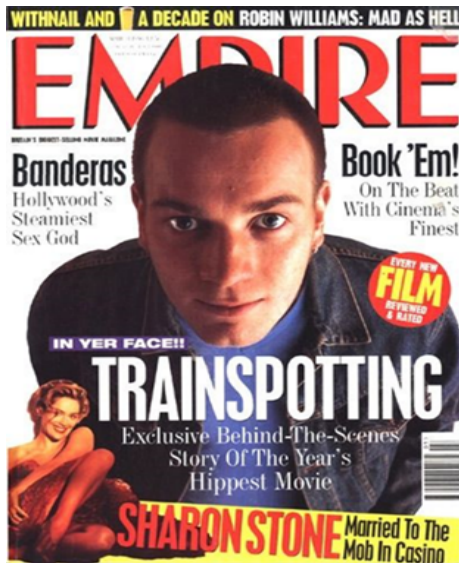
Trainspotting the novel was published initially with a print run of only three thousand copies and went on to sell over a million copies; quite an achievement for a book about the lives of **poor, young and**

dispossessed residents of Edinburgh Leith. The book almost made it on to the short list for the Booker prize but was withdrawn after two of the judges threatened to resign if it was included claiming the book was unsuitable because of its use of non-standard English.

Key Terms Test

- What do the following terms mean? Sociolect, Dialectic and Accent
- Extension: Why are these terms relevant to your study of Trainspotting?

"That's spot on man ... eh ... ye goat it ... ah mean ... nae hassle likesay."



When the film of the book appeared in 1996, it manifested **three cultural contexts of the decade.**

1. The film both incorporates some of the **laddish model of masculinity** that emerged in the 1990s but also at the same time undermines it. This is a story about male friendships with all of its competitive and sometimes aggressive overtones yet Renton's voice over in the London club scene questions fixed definitions of masculinity and even suggests to Begbie that his contact with a transsexual may not have been a negative experience.
2. *Trainspotting* also echoed and contributed towards a **shift in attitudes to the use of drugs** in Britain at the time. The debate around drug use in the UK had changed and had become more rational and informed instead of simple calls for outright prohibition. The debates around the film feed into this new discourse with its ambivalent attitude to the pleasures and problems of drug use.
3. The film reflects a more confident and commercial product, a film that has both **an eye on the art house and multiplex**. The film soundtrack is a mixture of Brit pop, UK house and American rock music that express this attitude; an eclectic mix that reflects the film style, content, context and its ambition in terms of its cultural relevance.

Production History

"Something Britain can be proud of and Hollywood must be afraid of. If we Brits can make movies this good about subjects this horrific, what chance does Tinsel town have?"

Neil Jeffries - Empire Magazine

The 1970s had seen **dwindling cinema attendances** and, apart from the occasional notable exception, creatively this was a stagnant period for UK cinema.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the UK film industry was in a very unhealthy state and was in desperate need of support that it didn't receive.

A conviction that market forces rather than any government intervention should drive the economy led the conservative government of the time to oppose to any state subsidy of industry and the film industry was to be no exception.

A small national cinema such as the British film industry will always struggle to survive in a market place against Hollywood without state assistance. **In the 1980s the UK film industry almost ceased to exist** and probably would have gone under had it not been for the intervention of Channel Four; via Film on Four, **they began to part-finance small UK film productions** early in the 1980s. The first film to be financed by them (in fact by any UK TV company) was Steven Frears' *Walter* in 1982.

Trainspotting was to be the first ever film to be fully funded by Channel Four. In 1994, development funds were given to help with the script and in total, Channel Four gave £1.7 million to the project, the largest amount of money they had invested into a film up until that point.

The production team were Danny Boyle (director) Andrew Macdonald (producer) and John Hodge (scriptwriter). This team had worked together on another Channel Four supported project *Shallow Grave* (1994) which had taken £5 million in UK box office and had a respectable showing in the USA taking \$3 million.

The film was **shot partly on location in Edinburgh and Glasgow** with the internal shots created in a disused Clydeside cigarette factory.

The film was screened at the Cannes Film Festival but was shown out of competition which some claim was due to its subject matter.

It was released in the UK on 7th of November 1996 and took an estimated £18 Million in UK box office and an estimated £72 million worldwide, making it **one of the most successful UK films of all time**.

Trivial Pursuits

The film was re-dubbed to help American audiences follow the dialogue.

US Senator Bob Dole accused it of moral depravity and glorifying drug use during the 1996 US presidential campaign, although he later admitted that he had not seen the film.

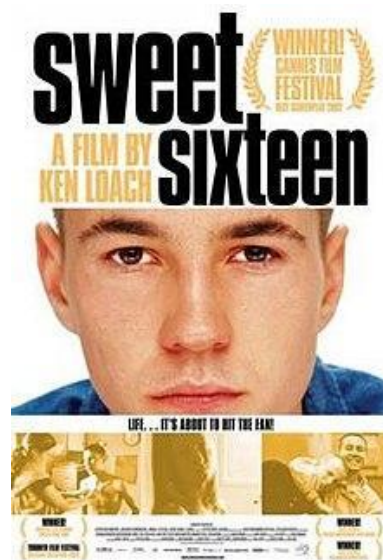
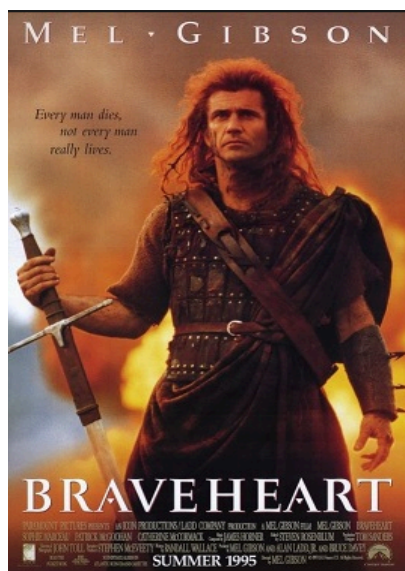
Representations

“Over the last year or so cinemas screens have been filled with images of a place called Scotland. *Braveheart*, *Rob Roy* with their high common purpose and battle fatigues, have opened up and revisited vistas of pure romance which have absolutely nothing to do with the lives being lived in that country. Scottish people don’t even experience their own history in that way... people may well go along with these films but they won’t be waking up to them in the morning....*Trainspotting* is set in Scotland that has hereto been without existence for filmgoers. It features places that are little known outside themselves.”

Andrew O’Hagan, *The boys are back in town*, Sight and Sound, February 1997

As Martin Strolly comments in his book *Trainspotting* (2001), we can broadly divide films about Scotland into two categories those that are ‘Tartany’ and those that feature ‘Clydesideism’.

- ‘Tartany’ refers to those films that depict Scotland’s history with often romantic visions of its traditions and struggles. These involve picturesque images of Scotland’s countryside and wide mountainous vistas. These films include those such as *Braveheart* (Gibson, 1995), *Rob Roy* (Caton-Jones, 1995) and *Mrs Brown* (Madden, 1997). They focus on the impressive greenery of Scotland and represent what is arguably an imagined past. Another side of ‘Tartany’ is more contemporary representation of Scotland that focus on a quaint image that is ultimately unrealistic and aimed at US audiences. For example *Local Hero* (Forsyth, 1983).
- ‘Clydesideism’ on the other had plays on Glasgow’s tough urban images. These tend to be social realism pieces with a focus on social issues such as *The Big Man* (Leland, 1990), *Sweet Sixteen* (Loach, 2002) and *Ratcatcher* (Ramsay, 1999).



Trainspotting falls more into the category of ‘Clydesideism’ with its drug references, the obvious working class origins of its characters, references to Hibs FC and in the character of Begbie. What is interesting about *Trainspotting*’s representations of Scotland is that **it isn’t really represented at all**; the internal scenes could have been shot anywhere and in the one scene where we do see the great outdoors, Renton **ridicules the ideo of nationalism**.

The film is clearly **marketed at a youth audience outside of Scotland** and has a **universal appeal** with its style and UK and American sound track. When we go to the Volcano club the décor **references the Milk Bar from Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange** and Renton stands in front of an image from **Taxi Driver**, universal images that have standing in youth culture.

The film received some criticism as an adaption of the book; some people argued that the film had **depoliticised the characters**. There are chapters in the book where the characters discuss politics but these are absent from the final film. Also, female characters who because of the multiple narrative have a voice in the book, are conspicuously **absent from the film**.

The film is **very masculine** the **female characters are secondary** and if we look closely enough are treated very badly by the text. Begbie berates Spud's mother for allowing Spud to go to prison, Dawn and Liz are respectively disgraced by Spud and Tommy's behaviour, and Liz ultimately becomes the force that drives Tommy into drug addiction and eventually death.

It is even possible to explain Renton's opening monologue as a **rant against consumerism** that could be interpreted as **anti-female**.

TASK:

Having watched the film, make notes on how the following characters are represented:

Extension Task

- To extent do you feel the use of **voice over as a narrative device** favours a general male perspective?
- Does the fact that the **negative consequences** of drug addiction are shown graphically in the film outweigh any possible **positive representations** of drug use?

The film's presentation of drug use and drug addiction continues to divide film theorists and critics. Previous films such as *Christiana X* (Edal, 1970) and *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Preminger, 1955) that have dealt with drug addiction, in particular heroin addiction, often addressed it as a **social problem** and presented addicts as **tragically doomed victims**.

Given the different debates around drugs in the 1990s (see context), the film was unlikely to take such an **out of step** approach. This approach to drug use has left the film **open to several different interpretations**. Some critics have pointed to the **overall pace and style** of the film which combined with its soundtrack gives the film **dynamism** and **appeals to young people**. This means it **trivialises the use of heroin**. Others have pointed out that the final shot of a relatively healthy looking Renton walking towards us gives of the **wrong kind of message**; that drug use does not affect the outcome of your life.

Other critics have pointed to the fact that the film is **ambiguous about moral or immoral questions** around drug use and to interpret it as possessing one message is to focus on single scenes and not see the film as a whole.

Screening Notes

Whilst watching any of the films in class it is important to take notes through-out the screening. This hand-out should be used as a guide in order to help you follow the film and identify the key areas you should focus on.

You will need to refer to your class notes and handouts on cinematography, editing and mise-en-scene.

The Opening Scene:

- Think about the pace of the music and the pace of the editing. It's worth also comparing this to the other two locations and how the pace of the editing may differ. Why do you think this is?
- Each of the characters are introduced in the sequence. Look at how the male and female characters are first presented to the audience differently. Why do you think this is?
- Consider the meaning of Renton's monologue and how heroin is presented to us in this scene.

Mise en scene:

- Primarily look at the uses of colour and lighting in the internal scene. In particular the mother superior's flat, Micky Forester's room, Renton's flat, the bookies toilet and its underwater world. Think about how these places create mood and provide us with meaning and may relate to the themes of the film.



Learning Check:

What do the terms 'colourist' and 'expressionistic' mean and how can you apply them to *Trainspotting*?

Cinematography:

- Look at the uses of cinematography in the film. How do these represent the life of a drug dealer? Think about camera work from obscure positions or camera work that feels disorientating.

Editing:

- Take a look at how editing both contributes to and detracts from the chronology of the film.
- Why does the chase through Princess Street occur twice?

- What effect does the parallel editing have in suggesting a compression of time, the actual chronology of events or creating links between characters?

Sound:

- Pay close attention to the use of music. How does it support the images on screen?
- How does Renton's voice over assist our understanding of the film and help unify and move the narrative along?

Other key questions to consider while watching the film:

- Is Renton's apparent alienation from those around him because he sees himself as separate from or better than them, or because he actually sees himself *in* them?
- How do you respond to the references to drug use? What impression of these activities do you take from the film?
- In your opinion, what gives the film its international appeal?



The Aesthetics of *Trainspotting*

Look back at the section on representations of Scotland. Arguably, even though *Trainspotting* is set in Edinburgh, it falls in to Strolly's definition of what he calls '**Clydesideism**'. Examples of other films that fit this category can broadly be described as social realist. This is most definitely a style of filmmaking that cannot easily be applied to *Trainspotting*.

Research Task



- What are the conventions of social realism?
- What kind of political ideologies are most associated with this style of film making?
- What is Hyperrealism?
- **Extension:** How do these link to *Trainspotting*?

The set design of *Trainspotting* often feels very **theatrical**. The internal spaces are filled with **primary colour albeit tarnished and faded**. The sets are **minimal in terms of any decreative objects** and this is true of not only the space occupied by the drug users, but on occasion even Renton's parent's house. They tend to **defy realism** as they do not feel like actual lived locations.

Lighting is use to **create dramatic effect** such as in the worst toilet in Scotland and in the scene where Begbie, Renton, Sick Boy and Spud discuss the drug deal.



In *Trainspotting*, cinematography also **defies those realist traditions** that seeks to create an objective reality and feel as natural as possible without drawing attention to itself.

The camera work in *Trainspotting* is **consciously unreal** sometimes; taken from **impossible angles** such as inside a syringe, from inside a toilet bowl or Renton's POV shot from inside his own 'grave'. The opening sequence includes characters **posing directly into camera** and **freeze frames** are used to introduce each character. The camera work is used to create a **subjective experience**, uses of **point of view shots** such as when Sick boy and Renton go to the park and specific uses of **movements and focal lengths** to **replicate the effects of drugs**.



Angles and **different lenses** are used to **stretch or reduce space** such as when Spud goes for the interview or Renton's cold turkey. The camera often **pans or tracks** around rooms from a **very low angle** as if, like the other junkies, we are lying on the ground.

Not all of the camera work is so **highly stylised**; when mother superior drags Renton out of the flats and is waiting for a taxi, the lighting is **very naturalistic**, focussing our attention on the song and the **ironic juxtaposition** with the visuals, giving us a feeling of the **hyperreal**.

Sound and soundtrack is also a vital element of the aesthetic. Music and voice over are absolutely essential in giving us narrative context and also a **sense of time period**. The film opens with Iggy Pop but ends with Underworld. This indicates change and growth, and reflects conversations that Renton has with himself and Diane.

In the exam, you could be asked a question on any of the technical codes. For example:

Examine how one example of mise-en-scène creates meaning in the opening of the films.

TASK:

- Create an essay plan to show how you would answer this question in relation to Trainspotting.
- Extension: Can you write up the introduction and first paragraph of this essay, showing how you can equally balance AO1 and AO2. Refer to your notes for a recap of these assessment objectives.

Developing your Understanding of Key Scenes

Look again at the following sequences and analyse them using your knowledge of film form. **You could refer to your notes and handouts on film form – you received these in Year 12.**

The Opening Sequence

Editing:

- The sequence cuts between three locations. This is usually suggesting parallel action but can't in this instance as Renton is in all three.
- The pace of the edits and music is in parallel.
- Freeze frame and titles introduce all of the boys but not the girls. Why?

Cinematography:

- What impact does the pace of the camera movements have?
- Think about the shots used in the freeze frames of the boys. Why have they been used? What impression do they create?
- How does the camera and colour work contribute to the aesthetic of the sequence?

Mise en scene:

- What do the costumes imply about the characters?
- What impression do the settings create?
- How does the mise en scene imply themes of drug abuse and the cultural shift of the 1990s?



Task:

Answer each question in as much detail as possible:

- Look at the use of editing and sound. How do these technical codes shape the audience's initial reaction to the characters and narrative?
- How are characters and themes introduced?
- How does the voice over position or align the audience? Why?
- In what ways is the music important in this scene?

The Worst Toilet in Scotland Sequence

Cinematography:

- What effect does the naturalistic lighting in this scene create?
- Think about the camera movements as Renton enters the betting shop. How do these imply his physical state or state of mind?

Voice over and performance:

- Renton gives us contextual information via voice over, reinforced by his performance. What is the effect of this? How does it change our response to the scene?

Mise en scene:

- The betting shop is filmed with high levels of verisimilitude, often from Renton's point of view. Why?
- How is the transition between the 'real' world and the 'underwater world' handled?
- How has colour been used to mark the transition?
- Why do you think the two worlds are represented as being so different? Can you make any links to context here?



Task:

Answer each question in as much detail as possible:

- How does McGregor's performance in this scene alter the audience's consumption of it?
- Why do you think Danny Boyle included this scene in the film?
- Is there a preferred reading and if so, what is it?
- **Extension:** Is there a negotiated or oppositional reading? How do these link to the social and production contexts of the film?