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What is left in between: *Trainspotting*, from Novel to Film

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The radical challenging of some of the social conventions on which our Western societies are based is, from my point of view, one of the most interesting aspects of *Trainspotting*. The concept of difference, both in form and in content, is one of the most appealing aspects not only in Irvine Welsh's novel, but also in Danny Boyle's filmic adaptation of it. I can't agree with critic Geoff Brown when he defines the film as a story about 'a jumble of junkies, layabouts and psychos, aimed at youngsters willing to go with the flow' (Brown 2000, p.35). I consider it too simplistic and, to a certain extent, patronizing, to think of the film as a product 'aimed at youngsters willing to go with the flow' and, as I intend to show, there is much more to it than Brown suggests.

Before discussing the value of *Trainspotting*, I would like to introduce some general remarks about the often unfair comparisons between a film adaptation and its literary source. It is commonly claimed that the film will never reach the degree of excellence in the minds of those who have previously read the literary text. However, there are, paradoxically, many examples of film adaptations of great relevance whose literary origins are hardly known or considered mediocre, as it is the case of most of Alfred Hitchcock's films (*The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *I Confess* (1953), *Rear Window* (1954) or *Vertigo* (1958), to mention but a few) or *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) to include a paradigmatic case. The relationship between the film and its literary source becomes unbalanced because comparisons are usually made at the level of plot and character, that

is, the content of the narrative. In addition, the effort made by the reader in order to understand and construct the meaning of a written text is generally opposed to the supposed directness of film. According to Brunette & Wills:

Traditionally, film is held to be natural and direct [...] in opposition to the supposedly obvious artificiality of writing. We now know from the many semiological studies that have considered narrative cinema as industry and institution, as system of representation, and as subject effect, that cinema can never be directly ‘spoken’. We would merely add that this is because it is always written (1989, p.61).

Thus, as Ramón Carmona notes, when analysing a filmic adaptation we shouldn’t pay so much attention to the ‘degree of fidelity in relation to the previous narrative content’ but to the ‘pertinent proceedings in the film taken from the discursive articulations of the literary source’ (1993, p.212)¹. What is relevant for this critic is the analysis of the ‘translation process’ implied in adapting the narrative strategies present in the novel to the film and not the inclusion (or exclusion) of a character, a situation or a particular event. In this sense, when commenting on Cocteau’s adaptation of his own play *Les Parents Terribles* (1949), André Bazin praised it for using exclusively an external perspective, with the camera offering the only point of view the events are watched from in any play, that is, the public’s.

If we apply the same criterion to *Trainspotting*, we can affirm that Danny Boyle is very respectful with the discourse articulating the narrative and, in particular, with those aspects related to the focaliser. Thus, we find Mark Renton as a diegetic narrator – a character implicated in the narrative – accompanied by different characters who “steal” the narration from him (Begbie, Tommy,

¹ All translations from Spanish are mine.

Liza), underlining the significance of the very act of narrating. The public's perspective is also included by means of objective shots and we may even find the point of view of the subject of the enunciation, in what Francesco Casetti (84) defines as an 'objective unreal shot', a situational shot taken from a non-realistic position which refers explicitly to the responsible of the film narrative². There is an almost perfect match, then, between the narrative voice(s) in the novel and that/those in the film, as in the novel we also find highly intrusive focalisers (Renton, Begbie, Sick Boy), episodes narrated in third person singular (for instance, 'Speedy Recruitment' pp. 62-7, or 'The Elusive Mr. Hunt' pp. 278-9) and explicit references to the reader (pp. 85, 109) as if they were invitations by Irvine Welsh to participate in the construction of the meaning within the novel.

One of the most striking aspects in Boyle's film is his use of narrative voice which is subjective, intrusive and fragmented, and uses a strong Scottish accent. From a present day perspective the popularity of the film among youngsters all over the world may be taken for granted, yet the success of the film was not guaranteed. There were many doubts about the actors (most of them unknown to the majority of the public at that time) and, as Robert Murphy points out, 'there were precedents to warn that Irvine Welsh's Scottish vernacular might not reach beyond the relatively small circle of his admirers' (2000, p.3). Although this use of language is not new (Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger in the sixties and Ken Loach some years later) it was the first time that subtitles were considered as an option for the English-speaking countries. In my opinion, Boyle's directorial team decision to maintain the Scottish accent paves the

² The film opens with one shot of this kind, with the camera right on the pavement (a perspective you don't get "naturally") to show us Mark Renton's swift feet.

way to an understanding of ‘difference’ as one of the keystones for the film, taking the abrogation theory of Ashcroft et al. to its final consequences:

The abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’ involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. [...] Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or ‘correct’ usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning ‘inscribed’ in the words (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p.38).

This is a strategy employed in order to reject any kind of centralism or hierarchization attending to language parameters, sanctioning (and privileging) what is ‘right’ and ‘normative’ and what is not. By highlighting the linguistic aspect, Welsh and Boyle are giving the first steps in introducing changes in thinking structures determined in the past by colonial and imperialist hierarchies, consequently giving voice to those who were once silenced:

Texts can employ vernacular as a linguistic variant to signify the insertion of the outsider into the discourse. In the same way, the vernacular appropriates the language for the tasks of constituting new experience and new place (Ashcroft et al. 1989, p.57).

In this sense, if the accent is what calls our attention first, the narrator and main character behind that accent moves away too from the traditional model of an omniscient and reliable narrator. From the very first moment in the film Mark Renton is introduced as a compulsive liar, manipulative and egotistical when compared with his friend Tommy, whose greatest defect according to Renton is that he cannot lie. Thus, both Welsh and Boyle are challenging the formal device of the reliable, omniscient narrative voice as the source of all truth and knowledge and, by extension, of hegemonic

discourse(s), so deeply installed in our societies and questioned systematically in recent years. In the case of *Trainspotting*, readers and viewers will have to take part actively in the construction of meaning of the novel and the film by contrasting not only the stories told by the narrators, but also the different (in some cases opposing) sources of information included simultaneously in the story. This forces the reader or audience to fill in the gap between what we see and what we listen to. That we cannot depend on Mark Renton as a narrator is made clear from the beginning. His addiction to heroin is prioritised for him and, and even more shockingly, with no apparent reason. As Renton argues ‘who needs reasons when you’ve got heroin?’ (Hodge 1996, p.5). In the first sequence of the film we can already observe some hints that we are faced with an alternative kind of narrative about life on the margins of society. Leaving aside the sarcastic ‘choose life’ mantra, I do find the first scenes are some of the best moments of the film visually speaking³. The succession of shots (more than forty in a one minute sequence) suggest the frantic life of the characters; the use of ‘Lust for Life’ by Iggy Pop as the soundtrack acts as a prolepsis for what is to come; the football game gives us clues about the personality of the characters in the film. Scriptwriter John Hodge describes this sequence in the following terms:

The boys are outclassed by the team with the strip but play much dirtier. As each performs a characteristic bit of play, the play freezes and their name is visible, printed or written on some item of clothing. In Begbie’s case, his name appears as a tattoo on his arm. Sick Boy commits a

³ A good example of opposing discourses in the same sequence: as we listen to Renton repeating the institutionalized discourse of “choosing life” instead of drugs, we watch him running away from two security guards (one of them played by the scriptwriter of the film, John Hodge), a sequence included again by the middle of the film in a narrative loop which foregrounds the relevance of the moment as a turning point in the story.

sneaky foul and indignantly denies it. Begbie commits an obvious foul and makes no effort to deny it. Spud, in goal, lets the ball in between his legs. Tommy kicks the ball as hard as he can (1996, p.4).

Finally, Renton is hit by a ball, he falls backwards and we see him falling by direct cut onto the floor after smoking some dope, thus introducing an ironic commentary about the effects of narcotics of both football and drugs on society.

The most explicit apology for the use of heroin as a way of life is to be found in the book, where we can read Mark expressing strong political statements, such as ‘rehabilitation is the surrender of the flesh’ (Welsh 1999, p.181) or in his lucid Lacanian analysis of his drug addiction:

Ah have oedipal feelings towards ma mother and an attendant unresolved jealousy towards ma faither. Ma junk behaviour is anal in concept, attention-seeking, yes, but instead of withholding the faeces tae rebel against parental authority, ah’m pitting smack intae ma body tae claim power over it vis-à-vis society in general (1999, p.185).

Renton deliberately installs himself on the margins of society, taking the concept of difference to radical extremes. He chooses heroin addiction as his way of life, but he does so in a self-conscious, reflexive way, establishing the difference inside the difference. If the traditional representation of the drug addict is that of the brainless junkie with no capacity to discern, both Welsh and Boyle create a character whose main appeal is his thinking, his fast wit and his use of irony and sarcasm. To illustrate this point with another example from the novel, when Mark is caught stealing books the judge asks him what he wanted those books for. He replies that his intentions were to read them. The judge is incredulous about Mark’s knowledge of Kierkegaard to which he answers:

I'm interested in his concepts of subjectivity and truth and particularly his ideas concerning choice; the notion that genuine choice is made out of doubt and uncertainty, and without recourse to the experience or advice of others. It could be argued, with some justification, that it's primarily a bourgeois, existential philosophy and would therefore seek to undermine collective societal wisdom. However, it's also a liberating philosophy (1999, p.166).

This episode was not included in the film (although we do see Renton in front of a judge) but I think it is revealing not just in order to describe the character but also as a metafictional reference, as the topics mentioned by Renton in this extract are all included in the book in one way or another, namely: 'concepts of subjectivity', 'ideas concerning choice', and a good deal of 'bourgeois, existential philosophy' which 'would seek to undermine collective societal wisdom'. Whether that collective wisdom be Scottish, English or British is a question open to debate.

Another relevant issue is the treatment of gender roles and sexual options in *Trainspotting*. Far from what is the misogynistic and homophobic trend in films dealing with youngsters, Mark Renton is introduced as a character with a special sensibility about personal relationships and sexual tendencies. There are two good examples of this aspect in the film. The first is his meeting with Diane, the only girl in the adaptation with any kind of dramatic weight. She takes the initiative in their first meeting fiercely answering back to Mark's initial approach. When she sees Renton is in a state of shock, she comments ironically:

The truth is that you're a quiet, sensitive type but if I'm prepared to take a chance I might just get to know the inner you: witty, adventurous, passionate, loving, loyal, a little bit crazy, a little bit bad, but, hey, don't us girls love that?

Mark is speechless when Diane says, 'Well, what's wrong, boy? Cat got your tongue?' and he finally gets into the taxi with Diane but only after the taxi driver asks him if he's getting in or not. From the beginning it's Diane who is setting the rules, to the extent that the morning after, when Mark discovers she is a minor and wants to stop seeing her, she threatens him with going to the police, so that he finally accepts her conditions once more.

Apart from this exchange of gender roles between Diane and Mark, images of what could be considered 'latent' homosexuality are to be found throughout the film, as in the close relationship between Sick Boy and Renton or through their hugs and kisses with Mother Superior, Spud or Sick Boy. However, the most entertaining sequence comes when Mark and the homophobic Begbie are in London. Renton describes his friend's meeting with a transvestite: they are at a disco and as we see Begbie leaving the place with a girl, we listen to Mark's voice over, noting how the world is evolving, 'even men and women are changing'. We follow Begbie and the girl to a car, they start kissing and as we see Begbie realising he's with a transvestite, Mark continues: 'You see, if you ask me, we're heterosexual by default, not by decision. It's just a question of who you fancy.'

Sexual tendencies do not have anything to do with morals, genetics or deviations, it's just a question of choice, although Begbie does not think the same. While we are listening to Mark, we watch Begbie's violent reaction when he discovers this girl is a transvestite. He is a character completely opposed from Renton and he could be described as a parody to the tough man, the central figure of what is known as the Clyde myth. Begbie never takes drugs because they are 'artificial', just a chemical substitute of the 'real thing', alcohol. He is extremely violent too and has everybody terrified: as Mark points

out, while ‘some people do drugs, Begbie did people’. When both Mark and Begbie are back at the apartment and Mark dares to suggest the experience with the transvestite could have been wonderful, his friend threatens him with a knife and tells him he will use it if Renton mentions the incident again: ‘I’m not a fucking buftie and that’s the end of it’.

In the book, there are many more references to homosexuality (pp. 8, 10, 161, 234, 236) and Welsh introduces a whole episode (‘Feeling Free’ pp. 273-7) about the patriarchal society we live in, narrated by Renton’s girlfriend (in the book named Kelly) and with two lesbians coming from New Zealand as protagonists. The episode narrates some word exchange between Kelly and her friend Ali and some ‘workies’ who whistle at them. The two friends reply and some old women comment about how terrible it is ‘lassies talkin like that tae laddies’. Kelly retorts ‘Aye, well what about *their* language?’ (Welsh 1999, p.275) and both friends end up with the couple from New Zealand, smoking hash at Kelly’s apartment and tearing men to pieces:

We slagged off men, agreeing that they are stupid, inadequate and inferior creatures. Ah’ve never felt so close tae other women before, and I really did wish I was gay. Sometimes I think that all men are good for is the odd shag. Other than that, they can be a real fuckin pain. Mibbe that’s crazy, but it’s true when you think about it. Our problem is, we don’t think about it that often and jist accept the bullshit these pricks dish oot tae us (Welsh 1999, p.276).

Once again, the issue of accepting or challenging social conventions is highlighted (‘our problem is, we don’t think about it that often and jist accept the bullshit these pricks dish oot tae us’), in this case concerned with gender relations. The episode continues when Mark gets into the apartment and they have a laugh at him:

Men just look so strange, these funny, flat bodies and weird heads [...]. They're freaky looking things that carry their reproductive organs on the outside of their bodies. (Welsh 1999, p.277)

Kelly is just turning the traditional androcentric discourse inside out, although, as she says, Mark 'takes it well though. Just shakes his head and laughs' (Welsh 1999, p.277).

However, in order to avoid presenting the protagonist as a romanticised, sympathetic version of the rebel, Renton is introduced as a character very difficult to identify with. Apart from his drug addiction, his unreliability as narrator or his selfishness, his positioning as far as his national identity is concerned is also problematic. He inscribes himself into the Scottish nation through language and by a certain conception of friendship as clan: the repeated reference to Begbie as a psycho but also a friend ('so what can you do?' all of his friends say repeatedly) makes us think of Mark's understanding of friendship as if it were out of any other (rational) consideration. By the end of the film he will free himself from such a tight conception of friendship and as a prolepsis of Renton's betrayal, he repudiates Scottish nationalist orthodox assumptions for their simplicity and gets angry with Tommy in one of the most iconic sequences in the film. After a stormy weekend Tommy persuades his urbanite friends into an excursion to the moors. On arrival Spud is the first one in expressing doubts about the idea, 'It's not... normal', he says. Excepting Tommy, they all seem out of place, dislocated in the natural environment which has been traditionally used as one of the identifying features of Scotland; the Highlands, the wilderness and the open spaces. When Tommy asks the question, 'It's the great outdoors. It's fresh air. Doesn't it

make you proud of being Scottish?’ this question seems too much for Renton, who answers in rage:

I hate being Scottish. We’re the lowest of the lowest of the fucking low, the scum of the earth, the most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization. Some people hate the English, but I don’t. They’re just wankers. We, on the other hand, are colonized by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonized by. We’re ruled by effete arseholes. It’s a shite state of affairs and all the fresh air in the world will not make any fucking difference (Hodge 1996, p.46).

This sequence differs from the events narrated in the book (Welsh 1999, p.78): in this case, Mark is sitting with Begbie and his friends in a bar with a balcony, a moment which is also included in the film to describe Begbie’s violent character. However, I consider the protagonist’s discourse gains strength in the film, as the great ‘Scottish outdoors’ offer the perfect setting for the tension between the institutional discourse on Scottish national identity and Mark’s feelings. He feels frustrated because he considers the topics shaping his national identity are just that, topics with no political strength, topics concerning themselves only with folklore (the bagpipes, the kilts), sport rivalry (in football, rugby) and picturesque elements to feed the tourist industry (the ‘great outdoors’). There are more scornful references throughout the film to tourism and the Edinburgh Festival, perhaps in the line of thinking of Hanif Kureishi who affirms:

If imperialism is the highest form of capitalism, then tourism is its ghostly afterlife in this form of commercial nostalgia which is sold as ‘art’ or ‘culture’ (1988, p.82).

Renton seems to share this view of tourism when he concludes that ‘all the fresh air in the world will not make any fucking

difference' (Hodge 1996, p.46). However, we should not leave out the irony about English colonialism in this sequence and the Scots being unable 'to pick a decent culture to be colonized by' as if colonization were a process you can choose. Mark is a clear example of hybridization, understanding the term not as the ideal conjunction of two (or more) identities, but as the site of inner conflict and struggle for understanding. Paraphrasing Robert Young, hybridity is 'an active moment of challenge and resistance against a dominant colonial power' (cited in Ashcroft et al 1998, p.121).

Although this might be a damning indictment, Mark's feelings about his national identity are more fully explored in the novel. The episode included in the film is preceded in the novel by a reference to Frank Begbie, Renton's violent friend:

Ah hate cunts like that. Cunts like Begbie. Cunts that are intae baseball-batting every fucker that's different; pakis, poofs, n what huv ye. Fuckin failures in a country of failures (Welsh 1999, p.78).

Frank Begbie (meaningfully nicknamed Franco after the Spanish dictator) incarnates, as alluded to above, the myth of the Clyde; a tough, hard-drinker macho-man always ready for a good fight. 'Clydesidism' can be seen as an answer to the other two archetypal 'discursive positions' (Colin McArthur 68) of Scotland, 'Kailyard' and 'Tartanry', and may be understood as the Scottish 20th century myth par excellence. It is another romantic representation of Scotland, although in this case it is an urban one:

Shipbuilding was to remain a matter of great cultural pride in the west of Scotland, and the epithet 'Clyde-built' became as applicable to a particular kind of hard-living, hard-drinking, working-class masculinity immortalised in numerous novels, plays and films (Petrie 2000, p.80).

When the industrial recession hit Scotland after World War II many shipbuilders had to close down and the proud worker became ‘associated more with violence and criminality than hard work and “rough” leisure pursuits’ (Petrie 2000, p.80). It might be argued that Renton hates Begbie and the kind of stereotypical masculinity he stands for.

Mark is furious at these right-wing, nationalist, racist, violent, reductionist and over idealised images of his country. There are also attacks against Scotland as taking part of the British state and, in Tom Nairn’s words, the ‘formidable energies poured [by our Scottish] intelligentsia [...] in formulating the new national and imperial culture–community [centred on London]’ (cited in Petrie 2000, p.20). This is evident when Mark tells us about his brother’s funeral, a soldier killed in Northern Ireland:

Ah cannae feel remorse, only anger and contempt. Ah seethed when ah saw that fuckin Union Jack oan his coffin. [...]. They’re fill ay shite aboot how he died in the service ay his country n aw that servile Hun crap. Billy was a silly cunt, pure and simple. No a hero, no a martyr, jist a daft cunt. [...]. He died a hero they sais. [...]. In fact, he died a spare prick in a uniform, walking along a country road wi a rifle in his hand. He died an ignorant victim ay imperialism, understanding fuck all about the myriad circumstances which led tae his death. That wis the biggest crime, he understood fuck all about it. Aw he had tae guide um through this great adventure in Ireland, which led to his death, wis a few vaguely formed sectarian sentiments (Welsh 1999, pp.209-210).

We learn that Mark’s family is divided: his mother’s side, Scottish Nationalists; his father’s, Loyalists. And Mark’s contempt for both sides is manifest: ‘Ah come fae some stock, right enough. Ayesur papish bastards oan ma Ma’s side, soapdodging orange cunts oan ma faither’s’ (Welsh 1999, p.218). Once again, in case we sympathise with Mark’s positioning about his national identity, there

comes right in the same episode the moment in which he has sex with his brother's wife who is pregnant and drunk, at the funeral ceremony, a scene too hard to be included in the film.

We may affirm that *Trainspotting* the film includes most of the issues present in the novel if only in a reduced scale and after a process of commodification, as there are some questions (in particular, those related to drug abuse and politics about national identity) which would not find their way into a film production, depending as they do on external public funding. In this sense, the term 'independent' has been largely questioned in recent years when related to financial matters, as there is no filmmaker who does not 'depend' on other people's money, be it from TV channels, inter/national film festivals or local companies. As Peter Todd notes:

Barbara Kopple, David Lynch and Spike Lee all received funding early in their careers from organisations such as the American Film Institute and New York State Council of the Arts. Hollywood looks on the American independents festival, Sundance, as a source of new talent and product (2000, p.24).

Thus, attention should be paid to form and content in order to determine if a film may be labelled as independent or alternative to hegemonic cinematographic narrations. Although this is not the place to analyse *Trainspotting* from this perspective, suffice to say that the film combines numerous characteristics of what could be understood as an independent production.

What is lacking in the film is the treatment of the character Spud who is stripped of his post-colonial importance from the book and reduced to a buffoon with little prominence in the film. He is in charge of the narration of several episodes, such as the one included in 'Speedy Recruitment' (pp.65-66), 'Traditional Sunday Breakfast' (pp.91-94) or 'Strolling Through the Meadows' (pp.153-161),

although it is the one titled ‘Na Na and Other Nazis’ (pp.119–129) where we get to know more about him. He comes from a dysfunctional family: Na Na, his grandmother, had “eight bairns by five different men, ken” (Welsh 1999, p.124); his family is ethnically mixed: Uncle Dode is ‘likesay half-caste, the son ay a West Indian sailor’ (1999, p.125). He is concerned about racism in society, in particular when he ‘began to suss the kinday abuse [Uncle Dode] wis takin, at school n in the streets n aw that’ (1999, p.126) and he is very critical of the extended belief that it is always other communities that are the racist ones: ‘Ah sortay laugh whin some cats say that racism’s an English thing and we’re aw Jock Tamson’s bairns up here’ (1999, p.126). He points out the power relations and the institutional violence that racism provokes: ‘thirs nothing like a darker skin tone tae increase the vigilance ay the police n the magistrates’ (1999, p.126). Spud continues by describing the aggression he suffers while watching the annual march by ‘these Orange cats fi the wild west [who], it has to be said, have never really bothered us [though] ah cannae take tae them’ (1999, p.127). The episode ends with Spud and his uncle severely beaten up by some neo-nazis.

The discursive articulation of the film (the fragmentation, the narrative voice, intertextual references, metafictional devices, fantastic elements) is in perfect accordance with that of the book, something which pleased Irvine Welsh:

I would have been disappointed if [the film] had been a kind of worthy piece of social realism. I think there’s more to it than that. [...]. To see it as just a kind of reaction to social oppression, to social circumstances, is to rip some of the soul out of it and to make the characters into victims. I don’t think that they really are. I think that they’re people whose ideals and ambitions perhaps outstrip what society has to offer them, but I

think they've got great strength in spite of that (cited in Hodge 1996, pp.118-9)

The final balance is definitely positive since *Trainspotting* proves to be a complex and multilayered film that addresses a variety of interests for a wide audience who may enjoy the movie for its entertaining qualities while also delving into deeper socio-cultural and political issues in contemporary urban Scotland.

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