

Better Than Sex: A Heroin-Journey To Hell and Back

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The car comes to a dead, confused stop as Renton crashes into the side-mirror, rolls with a grunt across the hood, and rises to his feet to stare through the windshield with a desperate, bloody grin. His teeth are slightly crooked; his eyes bloodshot and open so wide that the iris seems to disappear into marred whiteness. He breathes heavily. We have just watched him race nimbly through the detritus of city sidewalks to keep ahead of the cops close behind. A moment, as he grins. Then a flash of dark-blue movement off to our left—perhaps a police-officer, baton extended—but the camera goes dark and opens next on Renton breathing deeply, staring at the ceiling as he falls flat onto his back, lit cigarette dangling limply from slightly blue lips.

These are the images that begin *Trainspotting*, a surreal vision of drug addiction in Scotland made by director Danny Boyle. But laid over Renton's drugged, euphoric grin; over the senseless collapse into the floor; there is also his narration, providing a moral counterpoint to the apathetic anarchy of the scene. "Choose life," he tells us: "Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family." As he runs, an emaciated criminal, we're simultaneously encouraged to examine what might, instead, really be occurring. We watch and wait, restless for the revelation in the images, for the sudden transformation when anarchy will become necessity. But instead it is the narration that changes: "Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting 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 you spawned to replace yourself." Full-stop, collapse to the floor. Around him an empty room looms, beige walls defining the silent scene.

Danny Boyle's work shows a consistent fascination with the unreal—that which is shocking, nightmarish—enmeshed through details of mundane everyday life. Throughout his films lies a thread of horrid fascination with

endings, with the monstrous and the grotesque. This sensibility finds its apex in *Trainspotting*, which achieves true beauty through the elevation of grotesquerie. This conceit is particularly potent because the horror in these characters' lives is the mundane; the very passage of life from day to day is filled, for them, with death, sickness, and plague. The film invests itself in their failings and recoveries, slowly unraveling the questions posed by the dichotomy of the opening scenes. Boyle, it seems, wishes to question the tenuous line between choice and responsibility, and in *Trainspotting*, that line is made clear by depicting in full, brutal detail the lives of those who found "something better than choice" in heroin. They tie themselves to static existence. The challenge, Boyle suggests, is to shatter that stillness through obligation, either to themselves or to some vision of the world. And so throughout the film we are confronted with scenes that inspire our disdain, but at the same time encourage the investigation of choice as a mode of existence.

There are moments when words seem to fail utterly. They fail, not because what we see is too horrible, although an aspect of these brutal images is certainly invested in drawing their viewers so deep within the horror that words become meaningless. More vitally, however, there are images that carry with them such fraught power that to attribute description misses the point. Good films all contain such moments, when the image reaches off the screen to conquer its audience. We can't help but stare, silent, unbreathing, until the unitary power of each image becomes memory. When Renton awakens, groggy and drugged from a long hazy heroin binge, I enter such a place. Renton rolls slowly to his feet, eyes clouded with drugged exhaustion, as screams of anguish echo through a filthy apartment. "Perhaps," he comments, "She'd been screaming all day"—perhaps she'd been screaming for a week. Around the room, others rouse themselves, stare vacuously at the gaping doorway as the screams undulate. The camera slides smoothly around the room, peering into their eyes, noting their irritation at being interrupted by this jagged reminder of real life. Spud shouts back, trying to reassure: "Calm down, calm down. It's going to be all right, everything's going to be just fine."

The room feels tight, wrapped up in tension as the screams quieten: Sick Boy runs to comfort Allison while she points through another open doorway. Almost reluctantly, the camera pans around the headboard of a crib—toes, calves, thighs... Unmoving, we realize with a queasy shock. And then we see the baby, putrid and desiccated, a virulent shade of green and yellow. Her eyes, pits of bruised blue-back stare back at the camera, and no sound breaks the moment. No smile shatters the icy cry on her face: baby-fat, melting into glucotamine byproducts, gives her body a plastic, lumpy appearance. Boyle

delivers a universal horror, the death of a child, and through that potent universality I cannot help but be transported into this world. I *feel* the deadness. I hear silent screams, and the bubbling of heroin paraphernalia in the next room. Suddenly Allison's cries become the background, Baby Dawn's vacant eyes the only reality, and six adults stand around the crib and stare into their failed lives. This is the beginning of the end.

This scene is enthralling, and horrific, because there is so much to discover; every moment, every single phrase, seems calculated to deepen our sense of overwhelming disgust and sadness. Renton breaks the silence: "I'm going to cook up," he says, sickeningly, turning away from the pain and need that fills the room. Yet there is something perverted about finding horror in a fragment of speech when I am confronted by the awful face of the dead child. Image and speech are, momentarily, placed against each other and found to be equal, despite the seeming dominance of the image in our minds. I might close my eyes, blind myself to the mental pictures, and nonetheless feel deep desperation as Renton, ignoring Sick Boy's sobs, returns to his needle. Death is change; heroin is stasis. Watching—no, drawn physically into the scene I do more than watch—I fall into Renton's desire for easy escape through drugs.

But then I am outside, and look at the screen: and I am caught anew by the tortured pain on Sick Boy's face, feel myself emptied by the dead countenance Renton presents as he turns away. If there is a paradox at work in *Trainspotting*, it comes forth most vividly here. Renton, who lectures us about choice and grins ecstatically out of the camera even as police knock him to the sidewalk, cannot be the same pointless hulk of angst as this man. Boyle wishes us to *refuse* this person the negation he desires; we are to deny his absence of being and draw him back to a world of choices. Yet it is only his choices that locate him within this time and place; not the absence of choice, as he implies in his narration, but the conscious decision to lead this life. Arguably it is Renton's rejection of his own responsibility that drives him through the film, burdening his life with the obligation for choices he didn't know he'd made. Irony: not only that Renton speaks of choices he cannot make, but that by living in stasis, he is in truth forced to change at an ever-accelerating pace.

When Renton leaves the room, Allison's cries stop. Instead she crawls, quickly now, now hesitating, after him, begging for a hit, another spike to dull the pain of realization. And Renton agrees: "To take the pain away. So I cooked up and she got a hit, but only after me. That went without saying." *That went without saying*. This scene expresses a total obsession with the

facade, the pretense that nothing has changed. It is immediate and ‘real’ and inherently fake. In many ways, this is the antithesis to the later scene when Renton OD’s—there is nothing at stake here for the characters. Trapped, thoroughly *surrounded* by the disaster of their lives, they pretend to refuse to choose. However, their invalidation of everything meaningful here is also the catalyst for everything that follows. It does not have to be recalled by any act of will; rather, it summons itself to our minds. After this, “nothing at all was going to be just fine.” Renton speaks to us here from the future; his calm, even thoughtful narration completely at odds with his thoroughly irresponsible and callous actions. There is no apology for Baby Dawn’s death. As Sick Boy begs for Mark, for an arbitrarily random anyone, to “fucking say something!” we are disconnected from the pain of her death by a lighter, a spoon, a powder, a needle. But his voice reminds me that they are not really in stasis; the walls they erect are shams. And although they appear to run from the horror of this moment into narcotic stillness, there is no true escape, for the stillness is a lie.

I cannot even imagine a world in which everything is static. Life demands movement, and to be alive is to be irreconcilably opposed to stillness, even to be deeply hurt inside whenever stasis is forced upon us. To me, then, these characters are salt on open wounds. They remind me inevitably of friends who have themselves sunk into drugged half-lives, mockeries of existence in which nothing matters but the next hit. They believe this is a stillness, they imagine a static peace. I know differently. Watching from without, it is an endless descent into lunacy and incoherence, a blind assault on the mind and body. By embracing heroin, they assuredly do not ‘choose life.’ And so they invest everything in the mundane and the day-to-day; by placing themselves so firmly in their machinery of drug use, these characters try to force their world to remain static. But life happens whether or not they accept it. Like Renton says of Sick Boy, dripping tears onto his decaying daughter, they have “no theory with which to explain a moment like this.”

What went without saying: that he who prepared the shots necessarily received the first. But something more is at stake here. This phrase, this entire scene, ensconces itself in the status quo, in the assertion that what has always been will always be. It is the joining point between Renton in the moment and Renton in voice-over; he is at once unwilling (and perhaps unable) to accept that a crisis has been reached, and he is beginning to understand that his behavior is but an attempt to dull the pain. But yet again, there is more at stake here. This situation is like nothing Renton has ever experienced: what went without saying, then, is not only resistance to change. It also declares

that his old life, entangled with friends, family, and heroin, is coming to an end.

Unsaid, even, perhaps, unfelt, Baby Dawn's face and the conjoined escape into heroin mark the collapse of this way of life; of this group of people; of the rejection of choice. When Renton rises from that grimy mattress on the floor, he realizes that "it had been days since [he'd] heard anyone speak; but surely to fuck someone must have said something in all that time." Allison's screams call him to a reality that he again rejects. But this rejection is but a step against the river of change that now flows; the next time we watch Renton inject, he ends up in a hospital, rising out of a red coffin into reality. I mark here the crucial turning point in *Trainspotting*, though none of its central ideas are truly revealed until Renton accepts his choice. Through the mounting horror of the awful and mundane in opposition, Renton is thrown into unseen chaos, and stasis can no longer rule his life.

Renton cannot live both within the surreal and the real. It is destructive; by embracing stasis, he maintains a life in which the most horrible things are normal. It is the explicit movement towards change and transformation that allows my perception of Renton to 'break,' revealing that part of him that perceives guilt, that cannot forever evade experiencing reality. Though I am pained by his apathy as he shoots up, I also recognize the change that is implicit in "what went without saying."

Later in the film, after robbing a liquor store and being chased down through the streets (from which is taken the running sequence that opens the film), Renton and Spud go up before a judge on misdemeanor charges. Spud goes to jail; Renton walks free. His friends and family celebrate noisily at a pub while the film slows; we feel the tension of guilt and betrayal, a guilt spurred by his decision after Baby Dawn's death to leave the drug-infested world his friends inhabited, and the unintended consequences engendered through that choice. And so he flees through a back door, climbing a tall concrete wall to escape the freedom. As he scrambles skyward, fleeing Spud's grieving mother, Boyle demands that we question the complexity of a character who commands his audience to "choose life" while evidencing his own impassioned refusal to do so. Boyle is doing more than painting a dichotomy, so let us not be reductive. The film, rather, is an exploration of Renton attempting the transition from freedom (as rejection of responsibility) to freedom in the celebration of choice.

This scene is perhaps the most confusing in *Trainspotting*, and the most beautiful. Renton shoots up for the last time and overdoses: paradoxically it is through that experience, through a suffusion of the drug that has torment-

ed his life, that he somehow escapes into a world beyond. One hit, to last between the sickly-sweet methadone injections that tick off the days; one last hit to release him from the bondage of responsibility towards himself and towards his friends. Renton tells us he's "going to visit the Mother Superior." Of course, this 'holy figure' is no more than a dealer providing the latest fix, but I cannot refuse Renton's subtle and desperate plea for forgiveness. Heroin is his only confessional. He runs from the memory of his quick, glib answers making Spud look worse and worse, from the outward appearance of physical health that make Spud look like the *real* junkie before a judge. But in heroin lies the outlet of all sin, the end of all responsibility. It is the priest passing down chemical pardons through the point of a needle. And in that ultimate forgiveness lies heaven, and death.

I am overwhelmed by compassion for these pitiful creatures. Little more than automatons tied into their drug addiction, all their choices are made by mindless need. Society prepares us for these horrors, and for the dangers of a heroin overdose; we squirm when that needle spikes home, and red blood meets darkly orange pumping narcotic, but our discomfort is sympathetic, and we pretend to understand. But none of that compassion can prepare me for what follows. Time slows, like stepping through a beaded curtain; injection, then pause, fall into the floor, and the grave opens wide. Falling vertiginously into the surreal carpeted coffin, the audience finds itself in an unexpected kind of euphoria. From inside, looking out upon the world bathed in clean, pure light, no external sound can penetrate this bliss. Only Lou Reed's quiet voice provides any auditory backdrop to the scene. An ambulance passes by, but doesn't stop beside the body on the asphalt. The funereal pacing of Renton's experience distances us from all but the most intellectual horrors of his collapse. Instead we are invited to spend this most "perfect day" far down in the diacetylmorphine-laden pleasure centers of his brain, rejoicing in the rejection of guilt, responsibility, and the weighty obligation to choose life. His transcendence insists that we escape compassion (and the superiority inherent in this) and dive instead into beautiful confusion.

Renton's approach to the Mother Superior, though it too is an investment into the drug world that was once his entire world, represents a complete turning point. It is his *perfect day*, the discovery of a world outside of his addiction. Certainly there is irony in the need for drugs to produce such a discovery: but irony, as such, is an *opposition*, an insistent movement. Irony is life. In Renton's temporary death he comes up against a wall of paradox; and moving through it, beyond it, is the rejection of stasis.

I slip off my couch and into the scene: *an insistent memory joins Renton and myself into an imperfect whole. A blood-red coffin wanders through Edinburgh, deep as death and softly carpeted. Lou Reed in the background and Life in the foreground—for I am not within Life but beyond it, residing in a most “perfect day.” The world will never match this stillness.*

I think I find this scene so overwhelming because it, in itself, is perfect. In a sense, it is a moment beyond time; Renton leaves his world behind him and approaches a heaven that I cannot even comprehend, sent there by the agent of his living hell. Floating dead through the streets of Edinburgh: a motionless, soundless, timeless war taking place within him. But this time, it is Lucifer on the throne, the demons who rebel and flee Heavenward. Stasis and transformation, tied inextricably into one perfect moment. The floor giving way beneath him is only the most potent visual representation of his collapse into movement; Renton fights, one last time, for the right not to choose, to live in absolute stillness. And he loses.

Perhaps that which makes the extraordinary compelling is the drive to bend it to our will: only when it is couched in the overriding *ordinary* of daily life can it become something real. It is the incorporation of otherness into the banal details of ourselves that command such surreal attributes to our fixed (and, perhaps, horrified) attention. “Thank you, no,” he replies to various offers of garlic bread and coffee: “I’ll proceed directly to the intravenous injection of hard drugs, please.” This is conversation at its most pointless, concealing in the interstices all the power of this unreality. As Renton collapses beautifully, there is nothing to shock him; from the moment he makes the decision to return to heroin, through the sarcastic banter between him and the dealer, right up until a methadone shot drags him out of heavenly death and back into cold hard life, he stubbornly fixes his eyes and his mind only on the minutiae of the mundane, avoiding all recognition of his transformation.

Renton ignores that which could change him: therefore, those elements that slip his mind are the most revealing. In the thralls of his overdose there are no choices to be made. There is no job, no relationship, no ‘kitsch’ or burden. He ceases to be Spud’s betrayer, and is forgiven of all failing and sin. In a sense, this is a return to an unblemished existence: a “perfect day” marred only by the need to produce it unnaturally, with heroin. The irony, of course, is that heroin is really no less an obligation than the ties of human friendship and society: it is only the seemingly rebellious nature of the drug habit that pseudo-differentiates it from some conventional drudgery.

And so a quick shot to the arm is all it takes to drag Renton back down to Earth. Freedom, I might imagine, is neither so easily granted nor so lightly taken away; the heavenly freedom of his swag coffin is but an illusion. Moreover the heart of his rejection of choice is illusory as well; if heroin is but another form of obligation, it too is a decision. Responsibility and choice: not an opposition, but the appearance of opposition to create order out of conflict. The chaotic dualism of freedom and obligation make the revelatory process slow and weighty. *Trainspotting* gives us a character unwilling to submit to a long litany of social duties: life, a job, a career, a fucking big television, fixed interest mortgage repayments. But the flight from obligation entails its own costs, and heroin is perhaps the highest cost of all. In seeing Renton die a little bit, we begin to realize just how deep a desire for freedom lies within everyone; and then, we prepare ourselves for that brutal yank back into reality. Unlimited freedom is as illusory as never-ending stasis. Looking back on the beginning of the film, I can see it all; in Renton's first grin at the camera, perhaps I could have uncovered everything. Every choice, right and wrong, every friend betrayed, every needle driven past pus and scabs into swollen veins. In his face was lurking a dead child and swirling, amorphous obligation. It is all there, hiding between chipped teeth; but *Trainspotting* takes it slow, and allows the audience to fall with Renton into hell before climbing out again.

Renton rejects responsibility and because of that is dragged ever deeper into a world where consequences are final. We realize, paradoxically, that no refusal to choose life is ever the unburdening that we imagine; in other words, the act of living is itself the first choice and there is no going back. There is a morbid beauty in the horrors that *Trainspotting* subjects us to, and in this way of life that seems to trip ever-unsuspectingly upon pain and sadness. That Renton recovers, and makes it out; that his final choice in the film is to walk away and betray everything but himself, speaks to the heart of the question in this film: Choice is our only true responsibility. If we cannot or will not choose, we reject also all ties that contain within them the essence of our humanity.

WORKS CITED

Trainspotting. Dir. Danny Boyle. Perf. Ewan McGregor, Ewen Bremner, and Johnny Lee Miller. Miramax, 1996.