Contradiction and Resolution in *Trainspotting*


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CONTENTS

I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 3
   1. Purpose and Research Questions ........................................................................... 4
   2. Theory and Method ............................................................................................... 5
   3. Literature Review ................................................................................................. 8

II. Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 11
      1.1. Context and Form ............................................................................................ 11
      1.2. From Individual to Collective Antagonism .................................................... 13
      1.3. The Uses of Heroin ........................................................................................ 16
      1.4. Resolution: A Tragic Attempt at Emancipation .............................................. 18
   2. Contradiction and Resolution in the Metamorphosis of Adaptation: Danny Boyle’s
      *Trainspotting* (1996) ......................................................................................... 21
      2.1. Context and Form ............................................................................................ 21
      2.2. Altered Antagonism ....................................................................................... 23
      2.3. Framing Heroin .............................................................................................. 26
      2.4. Resolution: Cynical Reason .......................................................................... 28

III. Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 31
   1. Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................ 31
   2. Summary ............................................................................................................... 31

Bibliography .................................................................................................................... 33
I. Introduction

The recent release of Danny Boyle’s sequel *T2 Trainspotting* (2017) reaffirms the cultural importance of both Irvine Welsh’s novel *Trainspotting* (1993) and Danny Boyle’s film from 1996 with the same title. Although not the central object of study, it provides a telling backdrop to its primary concerns.

In the sequel, the main characters (Renton, Sick Boy, Begbie and Spud) of what has become a *Trainspotting* franchise are revisited in their native Edinburgh decades after the events of Welsh’s novel and Boyle’s film from 1996. As numerous reviews testify, the sequel is to a large extent an act of nostalgic reminiscence, reaching towards a long lost past in the hopes of attaining some guidance to an unfamiliar present.¹ This nostalgia echoes an episode from the novel (itself transposed in *T2 Trainspotting* through the use of flashback), where Renton and Begbie visit the old derelict Leith Central Station, prompting Renton to muse:

> We go fir a pish in the auld Central Station at the Fit ay the Walk, now a barren, desolate hangar, which is soon to be replaced by a supermarket and swimming centre. Somehow, that makes us sad, even though ah wis eywis too young tae mind ay trains ever being there.²

In his interpretation of this episode Aaron Kelly invokes Jean Baudrillard’s idea that “when the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning”, an idea which, to Kelly, “helps explain Renton’s sense of a loss not only of the past but also his waning grasp of the present. […] In Baudrillard’s terms, nostalgia indicates a crisis of our sense of our surrounding social reality.”³ Interestingly, the same episode contains the novel’s titular line, which emerges in an exchange with who Renton later realises is Begbie’s old drunken father:

> – What yis up tae lads? Trainspottin, eh? He sais, laughing uncontrollably at his ain fuckin wit.
> – Aye. That’s right, Begbie sais. Then under his breath: – Fuckin auld cunt.
> – Ah well, ah’ll leave yis tae it. Keep up the trainspottin mind! (p. 386)

The irony is of course that there are no trains to spot in the disused station.

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Furthermore, the title of the novel and its subsequent adaptations points towards one of its major themes: heroin addiction. Welsh explains the connection between the obsessional hobby of collecting the numbers of locomotives and the destructive drug habit thus: “both fill in time, but are otherwise completely futile. They are both a symptom of some sort of lack, of a deep spiritual crisis”. The presence of the title in such a socially significant passage of the novel, recycled in *T2 Trainspotting*, and the title’s reference to the trainspotting state of inertia, point towards what the present study revolves around: The imaginary resolutions to the social and political contradictions underlying such states of crisis.

1. Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to seek an explanation for the discrepancy between the resolution of the novel *Trainspotting* and that of the film adaptation of the same title. To that end, the entire narrative trajectory of both novel and film, from beginning to end, are taken into consideration. The interpretation that follows uncovers a confrontation by resolutions to various contradictions in both the novel and its adaptation, and the questions posed are: What do the contradictions look like and how are they resolved? Are the resolutions to be understood as oppositional, alternative, legitimizing or something else? How is this discrepancy, not solely emanating from medium-specific differences, between the resolution of the novel and that of its adaptation to be understood? A closer look at the lower level of the palimpsestuous object of study, the novel, might be illuminating.

The story comes before the reader in a fragmented form, through a choir of voices that brings the Bakhtinian dialogic to mind at the level of an individual work, carried through various instances of Scottish vernacular, depending on the narrator. The fictional place encountered bears strong resemblance to a not so distant reality; in short, it is a realistic account in vernacular of drug use and abuse in a class society.

Such a portrayal is necessarily politically potent, and the question arises through whose point of view it is delivered to us. The prevalence of a visible class system in Welsh’s work and the homing in on the lower strata of that system does not determine where the author’s sympathies lie, as the case of Balzac exemplifies. Now, the aim of this study is not to conclude where Welsh’s personal class sympathies lie, but rather to locate the narrative within the field of force between the two poles of the class system. Seeing these poles as two *ideal* factions engaged in dialogue, where one faction is the hegemonic or ruling class, and

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the other an oppressed, dissenting class, Fredric Jameson expands on the problem of locating a specific voice within that cacophonous dialogue:

Indeed, since by definition the cultural monuments and masterworks that have survived tend necessarily to perpetuate only a single voice in this class dialogue, the voice of a hegemonic class, they cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence, marginalised, its own utterances scattered to the winds, or reappropriated in turn by the hegemonic culture.⁵

So where on this binary scale, and here I speak of both novel and film, does Trainspotting belong? At a glance it does not seem like the undistorted voice of a hegemonic culture, but if it is an oppositional one being heard it is a rare example, for it has clearly neither been silenced nor marginalised. Is it then a case of appropriation? And does the novel fall into a different category than the film?

2. Theory and Method

The theoretical frameworks for this study are those of the sociology of literature, theory of adaptation, and Marxism. These frameworks, or perspectives, are characterised by a broad conception of what literature is taken to be: broad enough to fit the film adaptation of a novel within it. Through these perspectives the understanding of works of literature, or perhaps more fittingly cultural artefacts (as some might refuse to call a film adaptation “literature”), is sought primarily in the realm of context. It entails a materialistic, social, political, and historical way of interpretation.

The primary theory that underpins this study is Jameson’s Marxist method of interpretation as found in The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act. There, he describes the process of this method as taking place within three horizons or concentric frameworks:

First, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in

its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us. 6

Where the analysis within the first horizon looks at the text in terms of formal or narratological aspects, in the second horizon the focus is instead shifted to matters of content: how, socially, the text represents categories such as class.

The way this is perceived is relational as “normally, a ruling class ideology will explore various strategies of the legitimation of its power position, while an oppositional culture or ideology will, often in covert and disguised strategies, seek to contest and to undermine the dominant ‘value system’.” 7 In the case of Trainspotting, I believe much has been done to situate the novel and the film within the two poles of this horizon, and the same holds true for the third horizon, where a text is related to the mode of production in which it has been conceived. In laying out this third horizon of interpretation, Jameson claims that:

The analysis of the ideology of form, properly completed, should reveal the formal persistence of such archaic structures of alienation – and the sign systems specific to them – beneath the overlay of all the more recent and historically original types of alienation – such as political domination and commodity reification – which have become the dominants of that most complex of all cultural revolutions, late capitalism, in which all the earlier modes of production in one way or another structurally coexist. 8

To this brief sketch of the three horizons, a further clarification must be made regarding the notions of contradiction and resolution, both of which have already seen use. The term “contradiction” is central to any Marxist theory. 9 The reason for this lies in the basic Marxist idea of two dichotomous classes engaged in struggle with each other: in the work of Marx and Engels these ideal classes are termed the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but other, less specific terms are imaginable. Against this backdrop, the notion of contradiction can be understood in at least three senses:

First; in a structural sense, where the two classes form a contradictory whole; as two sides of one coin, second; in a refutational sense; they contradict one another, often quite literally and verbally, and third; in a logical sense, where contradiction denotes inconsistency or incoherence (as exemplified by a classic Marxist story: the individual proletarian gets exploited, alienated, and ultimately more impoverished through selling her labour-power to

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9 Jameson 2002, p. 79.
the bourgeois capitalist, but if she decides not to sell her labour-power, she finds herself on an
even quicker route to starvation in unemployment; a systemic inconsistency or contradiction).

Coupled with the notion of contradiction is the concept of resolution. It, too, has
multiple meanings, but only three bear relevance to the present study: first, in a sense which
seems temporal, as pertaining to narrative it may mark the end of a story, second, as in the
medicinal sense; a subsiding of symptoms to disease, but notably not necessarily the
subsiding of the disease itself, and third, in the sense of solution; to resolve a problem.

Drawing on the structural analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jameson extracts a basic
interpretive principle within his first horizon, namely that “the individual narrative, or the
individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real
contradiction.”\(^{10}\) Here, the term “resolution” is to be understood in the second, medicinal,
sense, so that the resolution of a narrative performs a masking or concealing function, hence
Jameson’s insertion of “imaginary” before “resolution”. However, the presence of the second
sense of “resolution” (as solution), suggests the possibility of some non-imaginary resolution
that the individual narrative might be reaching towards: I take this to be the double
hermeneutic in Jameson’s “dialectic of utopia and ideology”, and it is here that I hope to find
some clue to the meaning of the two incarnations of *Trainspotting*, hence the conclusion of
both analyses with a discussion on resolution.\(^{11}\)

Jameson’s theory of interpretation is indeed a complex one, but the way the three
horizons are understood and put into practice in the present study can be put in terms of a
basic formula: form – content – the content of form. The leading question to this formula is
‘why does it exist in the form that it does?’\(^{12}\)

Thus I take the guiding theme of the analysis in 1.1., 1.2., 2.1. and 2.2. to be formal,
first as an examination of the narrative structure of both novel and film and then a more
politically and relationally oriented analysis of the social forms present in the works (coupled
with some contextual notes befitting Jameson’s sense of the political in the first horizon).
Then, in 1.3 and 2.3, using examples connected to the use of heroin in both novel and film, an

\(^{10}\) Jameson 2002, p. 62. Jameson borrows largely from the article “The Structural Study of Myth” by Lévi-
pp. 428–444, but Jameson also makes reference to the, particularly illuminating with regards to the application
of the category of contradiction, analysis of the face paintings of the Caduveo Indians by Lévi-Strauss,
conducted in *Tristes Tropiques*; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, translated from the French by John and


\(^{12}\) The question is taken from Ian Buchanan, "political unconscious”, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Oxford
<http://www.oxfordreference.com.ezproxy.its.uu.se/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-
9780199532919-e-534>.
interpretation of the social content is undertaken. The focus here is to extract more or less direct political commentary from the artefacts, as related to class antagonisms. In 1.4. and 2.4., where the different resolutions to the novel and its adaptation are concerned, an attempt is made to let the formal aspects converge with the conclusions drawn in terms of content into an analysis of the content of form.

Furthermore, in attempting to understand the political content of both novel and film, I will make use of Raymond Williams’ notions of ‘alternative’ and ‘oppositional’ culture.\textsuperscript{13} I believe this distinction may shed light on the difference between Welsh’s novel and its film adaptation in terms of social positioning within Jameson’s second horizon. To a similar end, Georg Lukács’ reading of Goethe’s \textit{The Sorrows of Young Werther} (1774) will play a decisive role in the understanding of the novel’s resolution.\textsuperscript{14} In the case of the film, Slavoj Žižek’s take on Peter Sloterdijk’s idea of \textit{cynical reason} will be used to understand the political implications of the resolution.\textsuperscript{15}

Since the adaptation of the novel is of major interest to the study I make use of Linda Hutcheon’s \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}.\textsuperscript{16} There she presents a threefold definition of adaptation as:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works.
- A creative \textit{and} an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging.
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.\textsuperscript{17}

As Hutcheon suggests the process of adaptation will inevitably change a work of fiction, it is what the act of adaptation fundamentally \textit{is}. She stresses the importance of avoiding the banal notion of the adaptation as always lesser than the original, much in line with Robert Escarpit’s idea of creative treason: Without interpretation, translation and following Hutcheon, adaptation, works of literature will slip out of collective memory.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{13} Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” from \textit{Culture and Materialism}, London: Verso 2005, pp. 31-49.
\textsuperscript{14} Georg Lukács, “The Sorrows of Young Werther” from \textit{Goethe and His Age}, translated from the German by Robert Anchor, London: Merlin 1968, pp. 35-49.
\textsuperscript{16} Linda Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation} (2\textsuperscript{nd} edition), London: Routledge 2013.
\textsuperscript{17} Hutcheon 2013, p. 8.
3. Literature Review

There are two monographic works covering Irvine Welsh’s entire literary production to date: Aaron Kelly’s *Irvine Welsh* and Robert Morace’s *Irvine Welsh*. Both Kelly and Morace discuss the novel and film *Trainspotting* in detail, but approach the subject from slightly different angles.

Following David Borthwick in his simultaneous review of both monographs, what distinguishes Kelly’s approach is that it is “not only literary analysis, or a defence of an unjustly embattled writer, but also quite overtly political writing in itself”, as exemplified by Kelly’s rather strong statement in the conclusion that “Welsh’s work demonstrates that poverty, inequality and suffering exist not because capitalism is not working properly but rather because that is precisely how capitalism does work.” By contrast, Morace makes use of a more intertextual perspective, examining Welsh’s fiction through the lens of the contemporary culture he writes for and about. As Borthwick exemplifies: “Alternating narratives are ‘the equivalents of split-screens and parallel editing’ (Morace, p. 79) while Welsh also ‘employs the DJ’s tools of mixing, slipping, and scratching to create the print equivalent of dance culture in particular and the visual age in general’ (Morace, p. 103).”

The distinction between these monographs may be illuminated through the theoretical considerations made above: Following Williams we could say that Kelly reads Welsh’s fiction as oppositional whereas Morace understands it as alternative. As Kelly’s work lies closer in perspective to the present study it is the one that sees the most frequent use.

The analysis of the novel presented here works largely in tandem with that provided by Kelly, but there are differences in method: Where Kelly touches on the various poles that the characters represent (as archetypes and opposites), he does not follow through to the end with this somewhat structural analysis, especially not concerning the film, towards which he is critical on several accounts. Instead, Kelly’s heavily contextualising interpretation of the film leaves the cultural artefact overshadowed by his political critique of the social and cultural era from which the incarnations of *Trainspotting* grew. Kelly praises the novel while condemning the film, primarily for its alleged erasure of the novel’s class content:

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The aim of the present study is not to oppose such a political critique, but to follow the text more closely in order to detect its social significance, rather than risking a blunt projection of the political context onto the cultural artefact. Furthermore, as Kelly’s detailed reading of the novel does not find its counterpart in his account of the film, an attempt is made here to follow through with such an analysis.

The starting point for such a reading of the novel and film is provided by Bert Cardullo in his article ‘Trainspotting – Bringing Welsh to a Boyle’, where he claims that the framing soliloquies in the film together with their counterparts in the novel provides “the key to interpreting Boyle’s film and accounts for the difference in meaning between it and Welsh’s original fiction.” Cardullo’s interpretation, however helpful in providing a point of departure, comes with conclusions that will largely be countered in the present study.

If there is a void in Kelly’s account of the film that is partially filled by Cardullo’s analysis, some much needed formal consideration is delivered by Duncan Petrie in his contribution to The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh, ‘Trainspotting, the Film’. There, he conceives the film’s narrative trajectory as set in the classic beginning, middle, and end format, while “placing Renton much more firmly at the centre of the narrative”, as opposed to the novel’s “fragmented structure and array of internal monologues”. Apart from these formal considerations, Petrie offers some insightful words on the process of adaptation, refreshingly appreciative of the medium translation at play in the film. Such positivity towards the adaptation is shared by Derek Paget who, in “Speaking out: The transformations of Trainspotting”, sees the strength of the film in its facilitation of a younger, and to some extent stifled, sociological group who he refers to as “Trainspotters” – the majority of recipients of both the novel and the film.

23 Kelly 2005, p. 68.
24 Bert Cardullo, ”Fiction into Film, or Bringing Welsh to a Boyle”, Literature Film Quarterly, 25, 1997:3, pp. 158-162, p. 160.
26 Petrie 2010, p. 44.
27 Petrie 2010, p. 45.
28 On the success of the film, Paget concludes that “the degree to which any novel, play and film can be politically ‘oppositional’ or ‘counter-cultural’ will always be arguable, but the triumph of the Trainspotting artworks surely lies in the way they facilitated the release of a group (let’s call them the Trainspotters) into
Returning to Petrie’s contribution, it offers rich contextual data surrounding the production and marketing of the film, something that puts his text alongside Kelly’s account in providing context for the present study. When it comes to the marketing of the novel, Claire Squires’ exceptional “marketing story” of *Trainspotting* sees some in-depth use in the contextualizing part of the analysis of the novel here presented.  

To summarise, the general approach taken to Welsh’s fiction is not very different from the one presented here. The political content of *Trainspotting* has attracted the attention of all the authors presented thus far, and beyond — *Trainspotting* is listed in Ian Haywood’s *Working-class fiction from Chartism to Trainspotting*, three out of ten chapters in *The Edinburgh Companion to Irvine Welsh* deal with explicitly political aspects of Welsh’s work (Carole Jones’ “Welsh and Gender”, Bethold Schoene’s “Welsh, Drugs and Subculture”, and Gavin Miller’s “Welsh and Identity Politics” respectively, although political considerations are made elsewhere in the anthology as well), and Elspeth Findlay’s “The Bourgeois Values of Irvine Welsh” stands as a clear example of how the political implications of Welsh’s fiction have been subject to debate.

Although the general perspective assumed in this study is far from unique, I hope to contribute to the political analysis of the novel and film incarnations of *Trainspotting* through a focused and simultaneous interpretation of the two artefacts, comparing and evaluating them through the same theoretical lens: by tracing the underlying social contradictions and comparing their respective imaginary resolutions.

**II. Analysis**

1. **Contradiction and Resolution in the Novel *Trainspotting* (1993)**

1.1. **Context and Form**

Irvine Welsh, described by *The Face* as “the poet laureate of the chemical generation”, was born in 1958 in Leith, the port area of Edinburgh. His debut novel *Trainspotting* is comprised of material assembled in the late 1980s and it appeared as short stories in various independent wider cultural prominence and more visible expression.” Derek Paget, “Speaking out: The transformations of *Trainspotting*, Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text, Ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, London and New York: Routledge 1999, pp. 128-140, p. 139.


31 ‘Generation Ecstasy: Forty Things that Started with an E’, *The Face*, October 1995, p. 120.
magazines before finally being published in 1993 by Secker & Warburg. Much has been said to mythologise Welsh’s persona, something Kelly attempts to deflate by reference to Welsh himself: “Welsh was an intermittent heroin user for around eighteen months, but has always been keen to deflect any claims of long-standing addiction: ‘What stopped me getting really bad was having crap veins’.” However, coupled with the rumour of Edinburgh as the HIV capital of Europe in the 1980s (related to the influx of cheap heroin and the practice of sharing needles) it made for a good story that has persisted in the image of Welsh’s author-persona. And it certainly is an important theme in the novel.

The narrative of the novel unfolds through a “community of voices” – in forty-four episodes the reader encounters no less than nine different narrators. The most frequently heard is Renton, but his voice only recounts less than half of the episodes; the rest are delivered by Sick Boy, Spud, Begbie, Tommy, Renton’s brother Billy, Nina, Kelly, or an omniscient narrator. Most of them are given their own distinct phonetic rendering of Scottish vernacular, with the notable exception of the omniscient narrator, who communicates through Standard English.

The episodes are divided into seven sections or parts with titles addressing some common thematic denominator while also suggesting an overarching plot trajectory: “Kicking”, “Relapsing”, “Kicking Again”, “Blowing It”, “Exile”, “Home”, and “Exit”. The connections are vague, however, and in terms of plot the episodes are largely unrelated.

Only the recurring short episodes conveying glimpses of life with heroin addiction, “Junk Dilemmas No.” followed by a random number (63, 64, 65, 66 and 67), offer a sense of stability. Towards the end of the story a slight variation occurs through the episode “Straight Dilemmas No. 1”, repeating the pattern already set out but instead conveying a glimpse of life off heroin. All of the “Dilemmas”-episodes are set in italics with the notable exception of “Straight Dilemmas No. 1”. Kelly relates these episodes to the metaphor of the novel’s title: “These sequential and interspersed episodes in the novel compound the trainspotting metaphor by bespeaking heroin’s reduction of contemporary life to a meaningless pattern of inexorable and unchanging seriality.”

The novel begins in medias res with the introduction of Renton and Sick Boy, a scene explored further below. Given the novel’s fragmented state, a detailed summary of the

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32 Squires 2009, pp. 120-121.
33 Kelly 2005, p. 2.
34 Kelly 2005, p. 37.
plot would prove difficult. Instead I proceed straight to the final part, “Exit”, where several of the characters’ plotlines converge, in what is summed up in *T2 Trainspotting* (2017) as “first an opportunity, then a betrayal”: having stumbled upon a hefty amount of heroin, Renton, Sick Boy, Begbie, Spud, and Second Prize travel from Edinburgh to London with the hope of converting the drugs into pound sterling. That would be the opportunity part. It proves successful, although the cash they receive for their goods comes nowhere near the profits that the London-based dealer/distributor will eventually make once the heroin has been cut, distributed, and sold.

In mapping the marketing process of Welsh’s novel, Squires perceives this part of the novel’s story as an allegory of its own publishing context: the novel standing in for the heroin, the so-called “Edinburgh consortium” (Renton and his friends) for the author, and the London-based publisher for the London-based dealer.\(^{37}\) The southbound journey that the Edinburgh consortium makes becomes the novel’s journey from small independent Edinburgh publishers (such as South Queensferry Clocktower Press and Rebel Inc) to a corporate publisher in London (Secker & Warburg).\(^{38}\) But the allegory ends before the novel’s concluding betrayal part: after the deal has been sealed, Renton decides to make off with the cash on his own instead of sharing it equally with the rest of the consortium as intended. At the end of the novel, we find him on a ferry bound for Hoek van Holland from Harwich, London, with the intention of starting a new life in Amsterdam.

### 1.2. From Individual to Collective Antagonism

Already in the first few paragraphs of the novel antagonism proves to be the engine of the story: through the voice of Renton we are introduced to his friend Sick Boy, whose body is trembling from heroin withdrawal. When asked by Sick Boy to accompany him to their dealer Mother Superior, Renton is at first far too busy watching the action film starring Jean-Claude Van Damme: “Ah wanted the radge tae jist fuck ootay ma visage, tae go oan his ain, n jist leave us wi Jean-Claude.” (p. 3) What eventually prompts him to leave is not concern for his friend, but rather the prospect that Sick Boy, if left to his own accord, would “haud oot oan us” (p. 3). When they arrive at the shooting gallery of Mother Superior it is established that there are “nae friends in this game. Jist associates” (p. 7), something Renton takes to be “a brilliant metaphor for our times” (p. 13), underscoring a state of constant antagonistic competition driving the actions of the characters.

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\(^{37}\) Squires 2009, pp.119-120.

\(^{38}\) Squires 2009, p. 121.
The most prominent example of how such antagonism serves to advance the plot is seen in Renton’s profound resentment towards his friend (or perhaps more accurately ‘associate’) Begbie – a resentment that later becomes the main justification for Renton to betray his friends. When listing the reasons behind the decision, the omniscient narrator states that “ironically, it was Begbie who was the key.” (p. 430) The distaste for Begbie is also what leads up to the famous tirade against the Scots, a passage that lets the antagonism levitate from the level of individual characters to society as a whole:

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 ay failures. It’s nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We’re ruled by efette arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don’t hate the English. They just git oan wi the shit e thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots. (p. 100)

Interestingly, these words are followed by the episode where Begbie flings his glass over a pub balcony onto the head of an innocent guest, an iconic scene recognised from the film discussed below. But returning to the notion of antagonism, this levitation from individual to collective enables the expression of greater, political antagonisms in which the characters of Trainspotting most often find themselves on the unprivileged side, as in the case above.39

In the face of such social antagonism, the characters’ responses differ widely. In Begbie’s case, the response is one of violent social control: The persona and very essence of his character is tellingly created and maintained through collective effort. After the glassing-scene referred to above, Renton reflects over the making of his psychotic friend: “A whole Begbie mythology hud been created by oor lies tae each other n oorsels. Like us, Begbie believed that bullshit. We played a big part in making him what he was.” (p. 105). An integral part of that mythology is the principle of near unconditional loyalty to your friends: when their friend Matty dies from the effects of contracting HIV, the omniscient narrator hovers over to Begbie’s reaction at the funeral: “Franco Begbie felt angry and confused. Any injury to a friend he took as a personal insult. He prided himself with looking after his mates.” (p. 365) This loyalty is not altogether benevolent, as he later on threatens Renton to dig up his corpse and “boot it up n doon Leith fucking Walk” (p. 371) should he go the same

39 Regarding the specifics of that unprivileged position, Kelly provides a lengthy discussion on the possibilities and problems of reading Trainspotting as post-colonial literature: Kelly 2005, pp. 61-66.
way as Matty. Renton sees the destructiveness of such loyalty and starts off the following exchange:

- Nice tae ken thit ye care, Frank.
- Course ah fuckin care. Ye back up yir mates. S’at fuckin right Nelly?
- Eh? Nelly turned around slowly, drunk.
- Ah’m just fuckin tellin this cunt here. Ye back up yir fuckin mates.
- Too fuckin right ye do. (p. 372)

Renton’s sarcasm is, as usual, lost on Begbie, and reveals the resistance Renton feels towards Begbie’s contradictory principles: The one who brings justice (as he claims to do in the glassing scene) is at the same time the perpetrator.

Quite different is the response given by the entrepreneurial Sick Boy, who seems to have adapted more smoothly to his times. Although in rebellious guise, he finds the state of constant antagonism neither alien nor frightening:

I am a dynamic young man, upwardly mobile and thrusting, thrusting, thrusting... The socialists go on about your comrades, your class, your union, and society. Fuck all that shite. The Tories go on about your employer, your country, your family. Fuck that even mair. It’s me, me, fucking ME, Simon David Williamson, NUMERO FUCKING UNO, versus the world, and it’s a one-sided swedge. (p. 38)

The rebelliousness fades somewhat in the face of historical context. For as Kelly points out, “[i]n this instance, Sick Boy’s seeming oppositional radicalism is nothing more than a reworking of the dominant strictures of the free-market policies pursued by the incumbent government in this decade”, referring to the government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980’s. The ironic contradiction of Sick Boy’s stance is of course the gap between his junky situation and that of his make-believe companion Sean Connery.

Sick Boy is not the only one adopting an individualist stance in that “one-sided swedge”, for Renton too thinks of himself as alone against the world. When reflecting on his various encounters with authorities trying to rehabilitate him, he asks himself “[w]hy should ah reject the world, see masel as better than it? Because ah do, that’s why. Because ah fuckin

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41 Internal dialogues with the Edinburgh-born actor are scattered throughout Sick Boy’s narration: “I admire your rampant individualism, Shimon. I shee parallellsh wish myself ash a young man. Glad you shed that Sean. Others have made similar comments.” (p. 38) They serve to contrast Sick Boy’s narcissistic self-perception to his external reality, as in the chapter “Deid Dugs” (p. 224) where he turns a Pitbull-terrier on its owner by shooting it with an air-rifle, only to heroically rescue the owner from the grip of the dog’s jaws by strangling it - the “scourge of the schemie” (p. 225) himself lives in a housing-scheme, effectively turning him into such a “schemie”.

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am, and that’s that.” (p. 236) But it is a limited similarity, as Kelly puts it: “To an extent, [Sick Boy] and Renton are adversarial alter-egos, parallel maverick individuals, but Sick Boy lacks – and tends to highlight – Renton’s redeeming self-awareness and openness to change.” This becomes apparent in Renton’s more authentically oppositional response to the situation of social antagonism that he finds himself in.

When Renton’s brother Billy dies from a bomb triggered by the IRA in Belfast, where he was serving with the army, we meet a resentful and cynical Renton at the funeral. He tells us of a “ruling class cunt”, speaking in an “Oxbridge voice”, saying that Billy was a brave young man, a claim that Renton dismisses completely: “This fucking walking abortion says that his killers will be ruthlessly hunted down. So they fucking should. Aw the wey tae fuckin Houses ay Parliament.” (pp. 266-267) Renton here voices a violently oppositional stance that stems from the alternative way of life he is representing. A way that, as the real historical context of the episode goes to show, may very well lead to what Williams calls “revolutionary practice”. But Renton never joins the IRA, or resorts to any other form of direct political action. This contradiction between oppositional attitudes and practical political apathy lies at the heart of the novel. Instead of taking to the streets he chooses something else to make it through “the long, dark night of late capitalism” – heroin.

1.3. The Uses of Heroin
The consumption of heroin creates an image of the addicted characters of Trainspotting as distinguished and set apart from the rest of society. The use of heroin even enhances the difference discussed above between Renton and Sick Boy on the one hand, and Begbie, whose drug of preference is alcohol, on the other. When asked why he does heroin, Renton puts the answer in existential terms, revolving around the general futility of life:

It kinday makes things seem mair real tae us. Life’s boring and futile. We start oaf wi high hopes, then we bottle it. We realise that we’re aw gaunnae die, without really findin oot the big answers. We develop aw they long-winded ideas which jist interpret the reality ay oor lives in different weys, without really extending oor body ay worthwhile knowledge, about the big things, the real things. Basically, we live a short, disappointing life; and then we die. We fill up oor lives wi shite, things like

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42 Kelly 2005, p. 58.
43 Williams 2005, p. 11.
44 The quote is taken from The Acid House (1994), the collection of short stories published shortly after Trainspotting, where the full sentence is “I think I’ll stick to drugs to get me through the long, dark night of late capitalism”. It forms part of an argument between two characters on the best approach to their social situation, where one of them argues for political action and the other for the pointlessness of such action. The latter gets the last word. Irvine Welsh, The Acid House (1994), London: Vintage Books 1995, p. 240.
careers and relationships tae delude oorsels that it isnae aw totally pointless. Smack’s an honest drug, because it strips away these delusions. Wi smack, whin ye feel good, ye feel immortal. Whin ye feel bad, it intensifies the shite that’s already thair. It’s the only really honest drug. It doesnae alter yir consciousness. It just gies ye a hit and a sense ay well-being. Eftir that, ye see the misery ay the world as it is, and ye cannae anaesthetise yirsel against it. (pp. 115-116).

The use of heroin paradoxically serves as both anaesthetic to and enhancement of that sense of futility or, as he puts it elsewhere, his “alienation from society” (p. 235). To Renton, the heroin habit with its extreme dips and peaks seems like a more honest alternative to other equally monotonous and meaningless pastimes, such as “careers and relationships”. Renton’s words reveal an uncanny resemblance between the consumption of heroin, with its habitual pattern, and the consumption of other commodities, as underscored in the monologue that inspired the film’s memorable framing soliloquies:

They won’t let ye dae it, because it’s a sign ay thir ain failure. The fact that ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye’ve produced. Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, it’s thair fuckin problem. (p. 237)

This resemblance enables Renton to draw comparisons between the junk habit and other phenomena, equally destructive but socially accepted: “Bein in the army, it’s like bein a junky” (p. 169) or; “Begbie, like junk, was a habit” (p. 170). In delving deeper into this aspect of the novel, the motives and machinations of the junky and its metaphorical parallel to the rest of society, Kelly makes the following suggestion:

The apotheosis of heroin addiction entails the enjoyment of a self that is not one’s own and simultaneous shackling of a self that is. Consuming heroin therefore provides a telling metaphor for the loss of identity in late capitalist consciousness and the putative pleasures and freedoms of consumer society. It affirms that consumer pleasure is a deeply alienated enjoyment.45

Heroin thus finds another use within the narrative – it becomes a way of saying de te fabula narratur.46 The use of heroin in Trainspotting reveals that the contradictory nature of the

46 The Latin phrase originating from Horace translates to “it is about you that the story is told”, and was used by Marx in Capital vol. 1 to explain to the German reader that the examination of the capitalist mode of production
heroin habit is equally applicable to consumer society at large, and thus serves as a form of immanent critique of that society.

Renton perceives this predicament as a two-option choice between either the dull and confined middle-class existence, or the destructive but exhilarating heroin habit. In the process of rehabilitation that he is forced to undergo after being convicted of theft, he likens the fetters of heroin dependence to the constrictions of mainstream society. When you give in to the words of counsellors, psychologists, and the courts and start believing them, Renton’s thoughts go, you find yourself moving from one deadlock to another: “Then yir theirs, no yir ain; the dependency shifts from the drug to them” (pp. 236-237).

Only towards the end does he make an attempt at emancipation.

1.4. Resolution: A Tragic Attempt at Emancipation

The start of Renton’s search for emancipation is signified by a break in the formal trajectory of the narrative: as already mentioned, the series of episodes entitled “Junk Dilemmas No.”, followed by a number, ceases with a final episode called “Straight Dilemmas No. 1”, notably differing even in font, as it is the only “Dilemma” not set in italics. Here, the formal break itself contains a clue to events that have yet to unfold – it is only some time after the events of “Straight Dilemmas No. 1”, that the plot reaches Renton’s decisive action towards the end of the novel: to rip off his mates and make off with the loot from their heroin deal on his own, effectively breaking with both his close ones, his past, and, to some extent, himself.

This part of the novel is notably delivered in the form of the traditional bourgeois novel, as Kelly asserts: “In terms of the politics of literary register, the Standard English of this passage and its omniscient narration suggest that Renton’s newly made selfhood is an assent to the bourgeois subject.”47 This is indeed a deviation from the portrayal of Renton in the rest of the novel where his is the voice of vernacular dissent.

As we recall from the discussion of antagonism above, Renton’s response in the face of the social antagonisms emanating from the capitalist mode of production is oppositional but politically apathetic. This stands in stark contrast to the responses prompted by both the violent collectivist Begbie and the narcissistically delusional individualist Sick Boy. A stance which, coupled with the immanent critique of late capitalism delivered through his thoughts undertaken in Capital, although primarily drawing on English conditions, was not an exclusively English phenomenon – it would soon apply to Germany as well. Karl Marx, Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, Volume 1 (1867), translated from the German by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, Ed. Friedrich Engels, Ware: Wordsworth 2013, p. 7.

on heroin use, leaves the reader perplexed when seeing off the protagonist on the ferry towards Amsterdam, where the narrator concludes that: “Now, free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He’d stand or fall alone. This thought both terrified and excited him as he contemplated life in Amsterdam.” (p. 430) Coupled with the surprising break in the formal trajectory of the novel, the ambivalence encountered through that “dialectic between terror and excitement” suggests an attempt at resolving the previously uncovered social contradictions imbedded and criticised through Renton’s words.48 Through such an imaginary resolution to the real social contradictions, the novel presents a problem to which previous interpretations offer conflicting answers.

Where Cardullo describes the novel’s conclusion as “guardedly optimistic”, Matt McGuire instead claims that “[t]he novel’s conclusion is deeply pessimistic”.49 Kelly, otherwise firm in his political interpretation of the novel, delivers a conclusion that mirrors the ambivalence of the novel: “Ultimately it is money and a jettisoning of social belonging that facilitates Renton’s freedom but this can be read as much as an indictment of his times as a capitulation to them.”50 Kelly seems to suggest that the ultimate understanding of the novel’s conclusion boils down to a matter of choice for the reader. Here, I believe a look at Georg Lukavec’s reading of The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) might serve to illuminate the political implications of the resolution of Trainspotting.51

Despite the vast distance in time between the two works, a schematic comparison reveals several points of contact. For example, Werther’s famous defence of suicide is very much in line with Renton’s defence of his heroin addiction, activities that share the same self-destructive spirit.52 Furthermore, Lukavec argues that Goethe depicted a man in a state of crisis before a society on the brink of revolution (as realised only a few years after the novel’s publication through the French revolution), a society unable to accommodate Werther despite him being a product of that very society – the ideals that Werther holds (ideals of bourgeois humanism) are not in opposition to society, but rather form part of that society’s own inner contradictions. We find a clear parallel to this contradiction in Renton’s previously discussed

48 The “dialectic between terror and excitement” that Renton experiences is reflected upon in conjunction with Kierkegaard’s form of existentialism by Kelly. Kelly 2005, p. 67.
50 Kelly 2005, p. 67.
51 Lukavec 1968, pp. 35-49.
52 And more broadly, the following words by Lukavec on The Sorrows of Young Werther could very well be used for Welsh and Trainspotting: ”Since Goethe starts from actual human beings, actual human destinies, he grasped all these problems in that concrete complexity and mediation in which they manifest themselves in the personal destinies of individual men. And because he fashioned his hero as a man remarkably differentiated subjectively, these problems emerge in a very complex manner which enters deeply the realm of ideology.” Lukavec 1968, p. 40.
thoughts on heroin use. Werther’s unwillingness to adapt, instead holding on to what Lukács terms the ideals of “bourgeois revolutionary humanism”, leads to his final uncompromising act.53 Werther’s suicide thus becomes a highly revolutionary act in Lukács’ reading.

This inability to adapt is displayed and considered by Renton as well. In contemplating the advice from one of the psychologists that he has been forced to see, Tom, Renton arrives at the following conclusion: “So it goes back tae ma alienation from society. The problem is that Tom refuses tae accept ma view that society cann ae be changed tae make it significantly better, or that ah cann change tae accommodate it.” (p. 235) Where Werther chooses death over capitulation, Renton’s experiences of flicking the self-destruct button have taught him the futility of such action, and so he chooses differently. But in both cases we seem to arrive at the tragic depiction of a failed attempt at emancipation.

The resolution of the novel is, at one and the same time, a resolution in the sense of a solution to a problem (where Renton’s heroin use is the primary example of a contradictory problem resolved by his actions, albeit not without an element of uncertainty), and in the sense of a subsiding of symptoms, without the subsiding of disease: the disease being the social conditions (in the broadest sense those of late capitalism as a mode of production) without which Renton would not have needed to make his attempt at emancipation in the first place, and the vanishing symptom the apparent success of Renton’s attempt, an attempt that clearly marks an exception (Sick Boy and Begbie, for example, suffer under the same predicament as Renton, and Renton’s solution is clearly not to their benefit).

Now, turning to the question posed at the outset of this study, of where Welsh’s Trainspotting might be located in Jameson’s “class dialogue”, the conclusion must be that the novel is a rare example of a voice that perpetuates both sides of the dialogue, at one and the same time. For although its resolution might be seen as the ideological masking of real, social contradictions, the oppositional or, in Lukács’ terms, revolutionary thrust of the novel is never fully stifled. Instead, as in the previously discussed “dialectic between terror and excitement”, found in Kelly’s interpretation of the final words of the novel, the ambivalence of its resolution must be read as something akin to the double hermeneutic of Jameson’s “dialectic of utopia and ideology” – Renton’s attempt at emancipation is simultaneously “optimistic” (as Cardullo puts it) and “pessimistic” (in McGuire’s terms), and there is no way of understanding it as purely one or the other, as Kelly seems to suggest. The somewhat rare instance of this double hermeneutic of the novel’s resolution is, of course, its oppositional

53 For Lukács, the most important ideal of such bourgeois revolutionary humanism is, with regards to Werther, the free and full development of the human personality. Lukács 1968, p. 39.
thrust: rather than a pure exchange of ideological consent to the gratification of a glimpse at utopian emancipation, this glimpse comes as the partial result of political dissent.\textsuperscript{54}

In a final note on the resolution of the novel, Kelly proposes that “Renton’s decision to ditch the past and reinvent himself anew also adumbrates the Britain in which the novel was adapted for the cinema screen and the \textit{Trainspotting} product became part of what was to become Cool Britannia.”\textsuperscript{55} In that context, the ambivalence of the novel was transformed into something rather different in the film adaptation of \textit{Trainspotting}.

\section{2. Contradiction and Resolution in the Metamorphosis of Adaptation: Danny Boyle’s \textit{Trainspotting} (1996)}

\subsection{2.1. Context and Form}

Only three years separate the publication of the novel in 1993 from the release of its film adaptation, directed by Danny Boyle and with a screenplay by John Hodge, in 1996. But as Hutcheon asserts: “Time, often very short stretches of it, can change the context even within the same place and culture.”\textsuperscript{56} This certainly holds true for the two incarnations of \textit{Trainspotting}, as the discussion made above surrounding the film’s connection to the Cool Britannia-campaign made clear. At the time of the film’s release, a new era of optimism was dawning, in contrast to Edinburgh’s 1980s and early 1990s during which the novel was composed.

As the novel emits a cacophony of voices through its very narration, the film medium runs into interpretive difficulties by virtue of the bystander gaze of the camera – a natural equivalent to the omniscient narrator of the 19th century realist novel. Although this kind of voice is found in the novel (notably, for example, in the final chapter), it is more often the very particular voice of a single character that presents the narrative from a first person point of view uncommon in film.\textsuperscript{57} In the film \textit{Trainspotting}, Renton’s recurring and often humorous voiceovers serve a mediating purpose, but through its dominating presence it also places Renton more firmly at the centre of the story than in the novel. The number of voices in dialogue has also been, as Cardullo puts it, “sensibly cut down to five from the book’s larger cast of characters”.\textsuperscript{58} A further streamlining occurs on the level of narrative structure.

\textsuperscript{54} For a further discussion of such an exchange between ideological consent and utopian gratification, especially as pertains to so-called “mass culture”, see Jameson 2002, pp. 277-290.

\textsuperscript{55} Kelly 2005, pp. 67-68.

\textsuperscript{56} Hutcheon 2013, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{57} Hutcheon 2013, p. 54.

\textsuperscript{58} Cardullo 1997, p. 160.
Welsh’s decentred narrative is reworked in John Hodge’s screenplay into what Petrie refers to as the “classic three-act structure of mainstream cinema”. Following Petrie, the first act includes various adventures and the comical attempt to quit heroin “in a resolutely up-beat fashion” (as signified by the energetic drums of Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life” at the opening of the film), ending with the trip to “the great outdoors”, where the characters decide to start using again after Renton’s “it’s shite being Scottish” rant (the reworking of the “Ah hate the Scots” rant previously discussed from the novel). In the second act we see the characters back on heroin and the economic workings of the habit (to fund their addiction they resort to scamming and stealing), and as it gets “progressively darker in tone”, we are confronted by death in various incarnations: the death of Alison’s baby, Renton’s overdose, and Tommy being diagnosed with HIV. The third and final act sees Renton move to London in an attempt to escape the destructive life he’s bound to in Edinburgh and Leith, only to find himself accompanied by Begbie and Sick Boy. The final act concludes after the characters have struck the heroin deal, and Renton decides to make off with the £16,000 alone.

At the level of the purely textual we thus have a notable deviation from the fragmented narrative that stands as the point of departure; in its place we have a neatly organised beginning, middle, and end, with Renton as the main focalizor. Not only do the voiceovers fix Renton’s position as protagonist, they also ensure a more united narrative trajectory than what the novel provides. In McGuire’s words: “unlike the film, where Ewan MacGregor’s voiceover provides a sense of narrative continuity, the novel eschews such fixed anchor points.” This formal unity is further emphasised by the framing soliloquies which, as previously noted, Cardullo takes to hold the key to interpreting the political difference between the film and the novel.

But if the reworking of the novel into screenplay is an exercise in domestication, Boyle’s inventive visual rendering serves to compensate, for as Petrie asserts: “Boyle’s visual style brings about a direct cinematic translation of the vitality of Welsh’s writing”. An example of this is found in the scene where Renton overdoses on heroin and his subsequent forced rehabilitation; here, Welsh’s stream-of-consciousness prose represents the direct, random, and associative perception imaginable in the mental twilight zone between consciousness and unconsciousness. This is not necessarily a problem for the film medium,

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59 Petrie 2010, p. 44.
60 Petrie 2010, p. 44.
61 McGuire 2010, p. 20.
63 Petrie 2010, p. 45.
for as Hutcheon points out, “critics differ on whether the modern novel owes a debt to film or vice versa in its use of multiple points of view, ellipses, fragmentation and discontinuity”, but it none the less poses an interpretive challenge: conveying such interiority in the external showing mode of film. Boyle overcomes this issue through the use of some ingenious cinematography. The room in which Renton finds himself expands into a tunnel (reminiscent to that of a train tunnel), and claustrophobia is invoked through shots underneath the blanket where various intruders appear, such as Begbie, like demons from the past.

In cases where Welsh’s writing is grittily realistic in its depiction, as in the episode where Renton ends up in what is referred to in the film as “the worst toilet in Scotland”, Boyle’s visual interpretation transcends into a dreamlike state. After having abruptly lost his heroin-induced constipation, he realises that the opium suppositories for anal intake he previously inserted are now located deep in the filthy toilet; he resorts to “plunging ma hands and forearms intae the brown water” (p. 32) and “rummage[s] fastidiously” (p. 32) in order to find them. The relatively lengthy and detailed description in the novel is transformed into a surreal scene in the film, where Renton ends up diving into the toilet, entering an underwater world, the suppositories turned into glowing pearls. If in the novel this scene serves to mark the otherness of the junky’s problems to those of the reader with shocking clarity, the film allows us to see this contrast within itself. As Derek Paget puts it: “The pearl-diving music, Brian Eno’s ‘Deep Blue Day’, then underscores the contrast between underwater peace and tranquillity and surface vileness.” These examples illustrate the effectiveness of Boyle’s translation of the novel into the showing mode of film, but as Cardullo’s remarks hints at, they also affect the meaning of the story.

2.2. Altered Antagonism

In discussing the politics of the film *Trainspotting*, Kelly makes the following connection:

It is tempting to regard the opening sequence of the film, in which the screenwriter John Hodge cameos as one of the security guards chasing Renton from Edinburgh city centre, as a striking visual symbol of the banishing of the class content of the novel by the screenplay.67

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64 Hutcheon 2013, p. 53.
65 For a detailed discussion on various cinematographic solutions to the film medium’s problem of conveying character interiority, see Hutcheon 2013, pp. 56-63.
66 Paget, 1999, p. 139.
67 Kelly 2005, p. 68.
Through this neat observation we are able to discern two things: first that the film seems to lack much of the direct and outspoken political content of the novel (something that Kelly holds John Hodge responsible for), and secondly, that antagonistic tension as engine of the narrative at work in the novel seems present in the film as well (what motivates the running movement is quite obviously the conflict of interest between Renton and the security guards). Ironically, it is this basic antagonism which enables Kelly’s class-based critique – the symbolic establishment, embodied by the uniformed security guards, chasing representatives of the lower classes away from the main shopping street of Edinburgh.

But apart from such symbolic hints, Kelly’s critique of the erasure of political content in the film is indeed valid, for the enclosed cinematography of the film rarely manages to portray the dissent present in the novel. Instead “the film version of Trainspotting offers underclass existence not as the result of a complex set of socio-economic realities and conflicts but rather as a commodity to be consumed.”68 If we look at the antagonistic relations that we saw in the novel, we should detect the diluted remnants of them in the adaptation.

Although never explicitly stated in the film, as it is in the novel, that the psychotic Begbie provides the key for Renton’s actions at the end, the antagonism between the two characters is underscored by different means in the film. The image towards the end of the film of Begbie blowing smoke into Renton’s face from a cigarette lit by Renton serves that symbolic purpose. Immediately after this, the scene is cut to Renton’s theft in the hotel room. But Begbie’s magnetizing role, in both the repelling and attracting sense, is established much earlier in the film’s rendering of the glassing scene, at the end of which Renton concludes that the only thing one can do is to “just stand back and watch and try not to get involved.”69 The guarded indifference of these words stand in stark contrast to his assault on “cunts like Begbie” in the previously cited ‘Ah hate the Scots’-tirade of the novel, a segment which appears in the adaptation but in a very different setting.

In the film it is delivered during the trip to “the great outdoors” (arranged by Tommy before he contracts and succumbs to his newly established heroin addiction), leaving the politically potent words rather void as they appear directed towards the Scottish countryside. Thus, the levitation from the level of personal antagonism to the level of collective antagonism that we see in the novel does not come about in its adaptation.

Another example of such neutralization or disarming is to be found in the relation between Sick Boy and Renton. In the analysis of the novel conducted above, the conclusion

68 Kelly 2005, p. 69.
regarding these two characters was that, although sharing certain traits, they differ greatly in politics. Furthermore, it is their respective opposition to what Begbie represents politically that aligns Renton’s trajectory towards an attempt at emancipation. Now, a look at another scene from the novel modified in the film reveals some realignment in these relations.

The scene in the film draws upon the chapter “Deid Dugs” in the novel, and pictures Renton and Sick Boy lying in the park with binoculars and an air rifle. After a humorous exchange between the two about Sick Boy’s “unifying theory of life”, Renton decides to turn a Pitbull terrier on its owner by shooting it with the air rifle. While aiming down the sights, Renton and Sick Boy both mimic the voice of actor Sean Connery. In the novel, this episode is entirely Sick Boy’s, and it can be taken as highly symbolic that Sick Boy’s characteristic internal dialogue with Sean Connery is put into Renton’s mouth as well in the film. Although the transposition of written thoughts presents a challenge to the film medium, requiring different means of communication of the internal, making Renton the partial vessel of Sick Boy’s narcissistic inner world undeniably alters the character.  

The moulding together of the characters in the process of adaptation is enhanced through the political turn of Renton’s voiceover upon moving from Edinburgh to London, where he gets a job in real estate:

I settled in not too badly and I kept myself to myself. Sometimes, of course, I thought about the guys, but mainly I didn’t miss them at all. After all, this was boom town where any fool could make cash from chaos and plenty did. I quite enjoyed the sound of it all. Profit, loss, margins, takeovers, lending, letting, subletting, subdividing, cheating, scamming, fragmenting, breaking away. There was no such thing as society and even if there was, I most certainly had nothing to do with it. For the first time in my adult life I was almost content.

Alan Sinfield’s comments in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* reinforce the political implications of this shift: “there is no equivalent to any of this in the novel […]. By destroying the distinction between [Renton and Sick Boy], the film cancels Renton’s leftish rebellion, making Thatcherite selfishness the ‘natural’ way, on or off heroin, to live.” Begbie’s character still stands in contrast to this through his imperative “never rip off your mates”, an imperative that Renton contemplates towards the end of the film, with regards to his final betraying actions, concluding that his actions would be the highest offence in

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70 Here, again, see Hutcheon 2013, p. 56-63.
71 Hodge 1996, pp. 77-78.
Begbie’s book. Begbie as the traditional working class hard-man, a violent enforcer of social codes, is also seen in the film, where he is the only one to cast a menacing gaze at Renton and his friend as they whisper during Tommy’s funeral, reflecting the episode in the novel discussed above.

Returning to the thought of the different responses to social contradiction that the three characters Renton, Begbie, and Sick Boy represent in the novel, we may conclude that the film only leaves two options: Either the outmoded and primitive form of violence that Begbie’s character represents, or the sophisticated and much more effective violence of the market.

2.3. Framing Heroin

Cardullo suggests the following difference between the heroin use in the film and that of the novel: “In the film, we see Renton and his pals’ drug-taking as a reaction to the absurd banality of such life, whereas in the novel heroin use seems more to be a proletarian escape from the alienation and depression induced by capitalist-colonialist oppression.” It certainly seems to be the case that the use of heroin in the film is taken to be a phenomenon (or choice) isolated from the rest of society, as opposed to its function within the novel.

The parallels drawn between the use of heroin and other destructive phenomena are largely limited to pointing out hypocrisy in non-heroin-using, but still substance abusing characters: Begbie says that, “no way would I poison my body with that shite, all they fucking chemicals, no fucking way”, whilst taking a gulp of hard liquor, and Tommy (who at this point has not used heroin himself) fills in: “It’s a waste of your life, Mark, poisoning your body with that shite”, and then proceeds to take a draw of his cigarette. These hints, however humorous, do not fulfil the function of the parallels drawn by Renton between heroin use and other destructive phenomena in the novel (such as being in the army or associating with Begbie). In isolating the case to substance abuse, the immanent critique of society offered by Renton in the novel is lost. Where the Renton of the film leaves the spectator with the words “I’m going to be just like you […]”, marking the difference between the “bad person” that he takes himself to be in presumed opposition to the rest of society, the novel’s Renton could have countered with a revealing ‘I am just like you’.

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75 Hodge 1996, p. 106.
This is evinced by the film’s framing soliloquies, where the heroin appears as just another option in the wide range of commodities to choose from, albeit a commodity that nullifies all others:

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 leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on Sunday morning. 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. 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?

Cardullo’s conclusion illustrates the point: “life without drugs is just as absurd, just as pointless in the end, as life on drugs; in this view, each is its own kind of inane trainspotting, and the sole issue becomes how much you can, or want to, take of either.” As previously noted the direct political dissent of the novel is largely absent, or diluted through displacement, in the adaptation. But in framing the use and abuse of heroin, the film still renders visible the economic process that conditions it.

After the trip to “the great outdoors”, the trio consisting of Renton, Sick Boy, and Spud decide to go back on heroin, and while the camera hovers around the characters in Mother Superior’s shooting gallery, Renton proclaims in a voiceover that “it looks easy, this, but it’s not. It looks like a doss, like a soft option, but living like this is a full-time business.” The comment leads on to a montage of the characters stealing, scamming, and robbing in order to fund their drug habit, images that provide the same view of ongoing primitive accumulation detected in the novel.

After the visually striking representation of Renton’s overdose, with its subsequent surreal withdrawal-scene, Renton moves to London to start fresh, working as a property letting agent. To the Renton of the film, the difference between engaging in London’s housing market, and the black market of heroin in Edinburgh seems to come down to a matter

76 Hodge 1996, p. 3-5.
78 Hodge 1996, p. 47.
of dress code, suggesting a similar parallel between heroin and the mainstream as the one previously uncovered in the novel. Now, instead of spending the fruits of his labour on the consumption of heroin, as the white collar worker in London he puts the excess towards savings. It is this frugality that makes the investment opportunity possible in the two kilograms of heroin, a deal provided by the small-time dealer Mikey Forrester, portrayed in the film by Irvine Welsh in a Hitchcockian cameo appearance. This acquisition then leads on to the great “skag deal” that Sick Boy proposes and Begbie enforces.

Kelly asserts that one of the novel’s many strengths “resides in the fact that it grasps this apparently anomalous dialectic of entrenched poverty and social climbing as mutually comprising a shared and dependent economic process.”

The qualities thus ascribed to the novel seem to hold true, albeit to a more limited extent, for the adaptation as well.

2.4. Resolution: Cynical Reason

In contrast to the conflicting views on the interpretation of the novel’s conclusion, there is far greater consensus regarding the interpretation of the film. Cardullo’s reading is the most forcefully expressed: “[Renton’s] moving on signifies not the clear-eyed, bourgeois defeat of drug supported idealism, but rather the moral equation of mind-numbing, spirit-crushing philistinism with narcotizing, soporific drug addiction in a world bereft of God and soul.”

While maintaining the religious undercurrents of the argument, he concludes that “Mark Renton says in the end that he chooses life, but what he really chooses is a living death without benefit of love of God or woman.”

If Cardullo phrases his interpretation in somewhat archaic terms, Petrie stands for a more sober reading arriving at a similarly pessimistic conclusion: “Indeed, on an ideological level the film can be regarded as endorsing the very values of neoliberal consumerism it initially seems to reject, and which are unquestionably contested by Welsh’s novel.”

Kelly draws on the same antinomy: “The contradiction between the content of the novel’s critique of consumer capitalism and the implication of Trainspotting as a product in precisely those economic imperatives is an issue that […] impels a consideration […] of the deep interrelations of cultural production and commerce.” What this relative consensus suggests is that the resolution of the film has done away with the ambivalence of the novel.

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80 Cardullo 1997, p. 162.
81 Cardullo 1997, p. 162.
82 Petrie 2010, p. 50.
83 Kelly 2005, p. 74.
Returning to the aspect of form, as in the analysis of the novel’s resolution, it would seem like the entire formal structure of the film has been fitted towards the, within the novel’s internal context, anomalous, resolution of the novel. The conclusion concerning the novel was that the resolution present ultimately fails its purpose of masking the social contradictions embedded in the narrative, as the distorting dissent is never fully stifled, which gives rise to the conflicting interpretations of the novel’s ending. The case is different with the adaptation.

At the very end of the film, as Renton delivers his final voiceover (the second framing soliloquy), he symbolically crosses a bridge as if to underscore the harmony of the narrative’s conclusion. With a bag full of cash from the great drug deal firmly in his hand, Renton walks towards the camera, smiling:

Now, I’ve justified this to myself in all sorts of ways: it wasn’t a big deal, just a minor betrayal, or we’d outgrown each other, you know, that sort of thing, but let’s face it, I ripped them off. My so-called mates. But Begbie, I couldn’t give a shit about him, and Sick Boy, well, he’d done the same to me, if only he’d thought of it first, and Spud, well, OK, I felt sorry for Spud - he never hurt anybody.

So why did I do it? I could offer a million answers, all false. The truth is that I’m a bad person, but that’s going to change, I’m going to change. This is the last of that sort of thing. I’m cleaning up and I’m moving on, going straight and choosing life. I’m looking forward to it already. I’m going to be just like you: the job, the family, the fucking big television, the washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electric tin opener, good health, low cholesterol, dental insurance, mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food, children, walks in the park, nine to five, good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead, to the day you die.84

What Renton’s parting words convey is a form of cynical reason that enables him to pursue the lie he previously opposed. In dialogue with Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek puts the phenomenon in the following terms: “The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’.”85 And Renton indeed seems to know what he is doing, but still, he does it. While making note of the operation of late capitalism's cultural

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84 Hodge 1996, pp. 105-106.
85 Žižek 2008, p. 25. The phrase “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” is a reversal of the phrase from Marx’s Capital, where, in discussing commodity fetishism, he makes the following statement with regards to the unconscious equation of value as created by labour and exchange-value, in the act of exchange: “We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it”. Marx 2013, p. 49.
appearance, postmodernism, Petrie offers an accurate interpretation of the scene: “While maintaining a certain tongue-in-cheek – postmodern culture’s cynical get-out gesture – it is difficult to read this symbolic embrace of mainstream values as anything other than a capitulation to the values of consumerism. The film provides no other appropriate social alternative.”  

Through its framing soliloquies, firmly centred protagonist, and harmonising three-act structure, the film not only erases much the dissent of the novel, but also masks the social contradictions present in its own narrative. The resolution seen in the film is a resolution in the medicinal sense, as defined in the introduction of the present study: a ceasing of symptoms without curing the source of those symptoms. Thus, the resolution is effective in its masking function, as it leaves Renton’s betrayal as the natural conclusion to everything previously said and done: far from being a source of ambivalence and doubt, as in the novel, it can instead be seen as the reassuring punishing of the wicked (as the officers of the law knock on the door behind which the fugitive Begbie is raving over Renton’s betrayal) and reward of the righteous (Spud receives his share after all, something only nodded to in the novel), thus restoring balance and order to a world of chaos through the unflawed mechanism of self-interest.

Returning to the question of whose voice in that great class dialogue that the film projects, the conclusion must be, in line with previous research, that it is the voice of the hegemonic culture at the time. Specifically, it is a case of appropriation of a dissenting voice: in maintaining the words of opposition (for example, the “Ah hate the Scots”-tirade), while shifting or removing the intended recipient (again, the tirade against the Scots appears to be directed at “the great outdoors” rather than some collective entity, “the likes ay Begbie”), the oppositional or revolutionary thrust is largely cancelled.

However, as the film Trainspotting necessarily contains sedimented layers of the novel it was adapted from, the curious Jamesonian double hermeneutic persists in the film: if the dissent of the novel is stifled and appropriated into assent to the hegemonic culture of the times of the film, the basic desire towards emancipation still lingers, albeit at a high ideological price. But given the film’s success amongst members of the sociological group referred to by Paget as “Trainspotters”, this rather expensive utopian gratification might be seen as providing an opening for reappropriation, in the minds of the “Trainspotters”.

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86 Petrie 2010, p. 51.
87 Paget 1999, pp. 128-140.
III. Conclusion

1. Concluding Remarks
The analysis conducted in this study, although hopefully illuminating at certain points, is far from complete. Further considerations need to be made, closest to hand a reconsidering of the formal aspects of Jameson’s first horizon, and further down the line regarding the relation between *Trainspotting* and its position in the sequence of modes of production, within the third horizon. To reach a satisfying conclusion, such a project should encompass the briefly mentioned sequel to the film *Trainspotting* – *T2 Trainspotting* – along with the novel by Welsh that provided the inspiration and conditions for the sequel: *Porno* (2002). To that end, this study concludes with a note on the sequel.

   I believe the recent release of *T2 Trainspotting* has opened up a window for the understanding of the political implications of the various *Trainspotting* incarnations. In the introduction the presence of nostalgia in Boyle’s sequel was taken as proof of the prevalence of social crisis in the novel *Trainspotting*. But what the nostalgia of the sequel also indicates is that, despite the passing of time, such crisis has not come to pass. An important clue to the ultimate resolution of the *Trainspotting*-saga hides behind the end-credits of *T2 Trainspotting*: the presence of collapsing buildings, an image recognised from other socially significant works, such as David Fincher’s *Fight Club*.\(^{88}\) Significantly found after the end, as it were, these apocalyptic images bring to mind the declaration that “it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”\(^{89}\) Whether it is Renton or some other character (the sequel notably lets Spud, the amiably childlike idealist not discussed in the present study, compete with Renton over the centre of the story) that brings resolution to that predicament, the answer in the face of apocalypse will surely carry implications for the reading and watching of previous incarnations of *Trainspotting*.

2. Summary
The purpose of this study is to seek an explanation for the discrepancy between the resolution of the novel *Trainspotting* (1993) and that of its film adaptation from 1996. Through analysis

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\(^{88}\) David Fincher, *Fight Club*, 1999. This film is also a case of adaptation, here from the novel by the same title, by Chuck Palahniuk, 1996.  
\(^{89}\) The quote has undergone various transformations, but seems to stem from Fredric Jameson’s words in *The Seeds of Time*: ”it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.” Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time*, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, p. xii. In its current form it is found in the article “Future City”, where Jameson claims that “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.” Fredric Jameson, “Future City”, *New Left Review*, 2003:21, pp. 65-79, p. 76.
of the entirety of both the novel and the film, questions such as whether their respective resolutions are cases of oppositional, legitimising or, perhaps, legitimising reappropriations of dissenting voices, are posed.

In order to answer these questions, three commensurable theoretical approaches are employed: the sociology of literature, Marxism, and theory of adaptation. From these perspectives a materialistic, social, political, and historical way of interpretation follows. The particular form of Marxist interpretation conducted in the study draws to a large extent on the method put forward by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. The categories of *contradiction*, here understood as logical inconsistency and in a refutational sense, and *resolution*, understood as solution to a problem and, in a medicinal sense, as the subsiding of symptoms of disease, are of great importance to the study; both are largely drawn from Jameson’s work. For interpretational problems stemming from medium specificity, Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* is consulted.

To meet the purpose of the study, an analysis of antagonism is undertaken, starting on the level of character, as present in both novel and film. In the novel’s case, a levitation of the instance of antagonism is found to take place from the level of characters to a larger, political plane. Furthermore, the thoughts of one of the novel’s protagonists on heroin use, as related to other social phenomena, reveal an immanent critique of society in the text. The conclusion concerning the resolution of the novel holds that a tragic attempt at emancipation takes place, and that the novel represents an interesting case of the Jamesonian double hermeneutics: ideologically vested in exchange for utopian gratification, *but*, with a politically oppositional thrust, all at the same time.

The analysis of the film follows a similar pattern to that of the novel: while addressing issues of medium specificity, the instance of antagonism and the use of heroin is considered and compared to the conclusions of the novel. The conclusion surrounding the resolution of the film is that, as highlighted by the presence of *cynical reason*, the film is a purer example of a legitimising cultural artefact. Through modifications to the formal structure of the narrative, while maintaining some of the words of political dissent, but repositioning characters and their objects of social critique, the oppositional thrust present in the novel is largely cancelled in the film. However, the remnants of an emancipatory narrative still leave the utopian dimension open in the film, and although the ideological exchange for that gratification is far more costly than it is in the novel, it may just have opened up a space for reappropriation.
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