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In Pursuit of Something Else: *Trainspotting* & *Requiem for a Dream*

Substance use carves a hidden notch out of the ordinary world which allows the user to separate themselves from anything and everything to do with the dull monotony that is understood to be life. This separation results in the formulation of a “secret agenda”. (Ebert, Roger) This agenda, to buy and consume drugs, is often understood by the person holding it as a deeper purpose than can be found in an ordinary life of jobs, love, and friends. The agenda is a cherished secret. No matter how terrible it can feel to simply exist through the days as they roll by, there is always something to look forward to, to remind you why you work so hard: the high of using.

Trainspotting (1996) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) argue that the desire for substance use is really a desire to break out of the everyday cycles of surviving and choose “something different”. Something where magic, whimsy, euphoria, and absurdity can exist. Although *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for a Dream* go about presenting substance use in different lights, they both center around similar motives for using: to rise above the monotony of everyday life and achieve “something else”, in other words, to live a dream.

Trainspotting and *Requiem for a Dream* are two movies within a subcategory of movies depicting the lives and activities of addicts. What sets these two films apart from the rest, however, is their portrayal of the characters' motives to use. These motives are not alien or criminal in nature. On the contrary, they are born out of a

very human and familiar pang: the chasing of dreams and the capturing of a life worth living. *Trainspotting* & *Requiem for a Dream* set themselves apart from other movies about addicts because of their emphasis on the motive for using as achieving something higher than an ordinary life.

This “on the inside looking out” idea of drug addicts creating a secret plane that they can enter and commune together in and observe the outside, “normal” world is further solidified by both movies utilising shots of characters opening cupboards. It can be inferred that these cupboards are where the characters store their drugs and/or drug money. These shots are filmed from inside the cupboards, showing only the increasingly agonized faces of the characters who open them, as if framed by the door of their secret slice of the world. Renton’s infamous “choose life” speech provides more background on why drug addicts may “choose not to choose life”.

“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 leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a 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 have spawned to

replace yourselves. Choose your future. Choose life . . . But why would I want to do a thing like that? I choose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?"

This opening dialogue from Renton, the main character of *Trainspotting*, defines what Renton believes to be normal society in Edinburgh, where he lives ("good health", "low cholesterol", "dental insurance", "fixed-interest mortgage repayments", "starter home", "friends", "leisurewear" and "matching luggage") and then distances himself, and his life, as far from it as possible. In doing so, Renton essentially equates doing heroin to an act of counterculture, mocking the rhetoric of anti-drug programs and justifying his deviance as calculated rebellion.

Harry, Marion, Tyrone, and Sarah Goldfarb in *Requiem for a Dream* are chasing the same thing as Renton in *Trainspotting* in its essence: to distance themselves from the lackluster monotony in which they live, and choose something else, something better. Sarah Goldfarb is Harry's mother, and a widow whose life consists of wallowing the days away in her small, dingy apartment in Coney Island. Renton mentions game shows, specifically "mind-numbing spirit-crushing game shows", in his choose life speech, identifying them as a symptom of an empty, monotonous life. Sarah watches the same game show every day just to pass the time, and begins to dream about being on the show. To her, being on the show is a chance to escape her loneliness and the leftover pieces of her past, and choose something else: fame, glory, cameras, beauty, and youth. She imagines she will wear her favorite red dress from her younger years to the show, but it no longer fits. So,

she seeks out a doctor who will prescribe her pills to help her lose weight. To Sarah, fitting into the red dress is the first step to making all her dreams come true.

Harry, Marion, and Tyrone are broke and disillusioned with their lives in their run-down suburb of Brooklyn. The first scene where Marion is shown, she and Harry break into an apartment building, pull the alarm, and make a break for it, kissing intensely in the elevator as they run from the authorities. This sets the scene for the kind of life the three of them live. There is nothing inherently built into their lives to make them worth living, so the three of them have to make their own fun to feel as though there is a reason to continue. This “fun” comes in the form of thrills, of an exciting and urgent swell of emotion in the midst of a broken-down, dead place where they reside. These thrills first are found in breaking and entering, then later progress into heroin usage. Sarah, too, sees her consumption of diet pills in pursuit of losing enough weight to fit in her red dress as “a reason to get up in the morning... a reason to smile. It makes tomorrow alright.”

The main characters of both *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for A Dream* are not idiots, and they understand that drugs come with danger. Renton explains in *Trainspotting* that “people think [heroin use] is all about misery and desperation and death and all that shit which is not to be ignored, but what they forget is the pleasure of it. Otherwise we wouldn't do it. After all, we're not fucking stupid. At least, we're not that fucking stupid.” The root cause of usage in both of these films is pleasure and dreams. Both films are a discussion on the pretense of pleasure, and that while pleasure is necessarily for a life well lived, it does not occur naturally in the normal lifestyle of young adults, therefore, the sensation of pleasure has to be created using drugs.

The subgenre of cinema revolving around substance abuse stories sets forth three main notions about those who use heroin, or “junkies”: 1) heroin users are criminogenic, 2) heroin users embody death and decay, and 3) female heroin users are perceived as “junkie whores”. (Allen, C., & Alberici, A.) Modern cinema’s tendency of depicting drug users and addicts as a threat to societal progression contributes to the general understanding that drugs are linked to crime, deviance, and immorality, with heroin holding the status of the ultimate ‘criminogenic drug’. This belief results in heroin users repeatedly being “othered” in film depictions, and *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for a Dream* are no exception to this rule.

Allen and Alberici identify that in *Requiem for a Dream*, the three main protagonists, Harry, Tyrone and Marion, use heroin for recreational purposes. Harry and Tyrone test their heroin to determine the quality, as they aim to build their own “drug empire”. Harry and Tyrone are criminalized and implied to have low morality as their need for a “drug empire” exists solely to fulfill the purpose that they can “have as much heroin and money as they like.” (Allen, C., & Alberici, A.). Marion is represented as being a more “creative or spiritual user” (Allen, C., & Alberici, A.); where heroin helps her to feel real and more loved by Harry who is also her boyfriend. The association of criminality and heroin is a primary feature of the film’s closing narrative, which shows Harry and Tyrone being arrested and mocked by the police.

The criminogenic nature of junkies is also evident in *Trainspotting*. The initial narrative that emerges in the opening credits is one of junkies engaging in criminal activity; stealing and hustling as a means of obtaining a ‘score’. Renton’s ‘Choose Life’ speech speaks about the limbo of heroin addiction and how anything within contemporary culture differs from living a life on the margins of society.

Just like *Requiem for a Dream*, the narrative associated with the main protagonist in *Trainspotting* functions to display a slow descent into deeper criminality. Renton and his group of friends plan to sell a large amount of heroin which they have obtained in exchange for cash. After having made the sale, Renton takes off with all the money in order to start a new life, leaving his friends behind in Edinburgh. This turn of events once again calls into question the protagonist's morality; which is a recurring theme throughout the film.

The emphasis on death and decay in both movies, exemplified by scenes such as Renton diving into a disgusting and putrid public toilet in the back of a bar as though it was a clean, blue ocean, Harry's infected vein from using a dirty needle, and Sarah Goldfarb's stained ceilings and dingy walls, create a stark juxtaposition between the life the characters live: bleak and sordid, against their aspirations for their lives: something higher and more meaningful. It is a romantic idea these movies are grappling with, but the style is not romanticized at all. Both films go to great lengths to appear repulsive.

The third notion set forward by Allen, C., & Alberici, A. surrounding cinema that depicts heroin abuse is that female heroin users are perceived as "junkie whores". (Allen, C., & Alberici, A.) Both Marion from *Requiem for a Dream* and Allison, the mother in *Trainspotting*, provide tragic yet empathetic takes on the "junkie whore" trope. Marion, Harry's girlfriend, takes heroin to feel "like a person". Despite Marion's heroin use initially being recreational, she soon descends into criminal acts such as prostitution. This is illustrated by scenes of her having sex with her therapist, pimps, and strangers at a sex party in exchange for money and sometimes heroin. Against her will, to fulfill her cravings, Marion goes from a girl trying to feel loved to nothing more than a "junkie whore".

Allison was the only woman in the *Trainspotting* friend group. She was a mother, and her baby was seen crawling around in the barren apartment where they all shot up. Her baby eventually dies due to her neglect. It was, up until that time, unclear who the father of the child was. Renton says "Maybe Allison knew. Maybe not." In this moment, the father was revealed to be Sick Boy, as he was the only one who seemed genuinely troubled by the incident, screaming at the others to "fucking say something". Renton was the first one to speak, saying "I'm cooking up." Allison crawled over to him and asked for a hit. "So I cooked up," Renton continued. "And she got a hit. But only after me." The baby's death scene contains the moment that Allison changed from a woman, a friend, to a junkie whore in the minds of the others. She was just a woman screaming, and she would get a hit to quiet down, but she was last in line.

Sarah Goldfarb's character in *Requiem for a Dream* provides us with a bigger picture of the 'junkie whore' phenomenon beyond just heroin users. Sarah did not use heroin. She was addicted to diet pills legally prescribed to her by a doctor. Sarah, despite using substances legally and with the best intentions, still was alienated and ignored just like Allison and Marion. She was ignored by her doctor, who claimed as long as her weight was on track there was no issue to be had. She was ignored by her son, who was preoccupied with his own usage. Sarah Goldfarb exposes a deeper insight into the way female addicts are viewed as disposable members of society.

Female addicts, even addicts to substances other than heroin, such as legal diet pills, already have to overcome the preconceived notion of being "tainted" or "impure" that is placed on women. Once they fall into disrepair they are often shunned. This idea of being "impure" or "ruined" is almost exclusively applied to

women, akin to the idea that a woman is no longer pure once she loses her virginity, or ruined once she has a child.

Marion, Allison, and Sarah were once included and involved in their respective social groups. However, once they crossed the line to becoming “junkie whores”, their significance to the people in their life was lost. Marion calls Harry while he is out traveling to “score”, and begs for him to come home as soon as possible. Harry says okay, but never comes home. Allison is not seen in later scenes with the *Trainspotting* group, leading viewers to believe she was excommunicated for being burdensome to the group, who absolve themselves of all responsibility. Sarah is seen as psychotic and not taken seriously once her addiction starts getting more visible. She is reduced to a spectacle to observe from afar, as seen when the businesswomen who work at the TV station simply look on as the police take Sarah away.

Although *Requiem for a Dream* and *Trainspotting* contain similar themes and ideas, their method of portraying addiction and its consequences is different. Both *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for a Dream* feature the use of heroin intravenously. Snorting heroin is depicted in *Requiem for a Dream*, but not *Trainspotting*. Rather than utilizing slow motion to dramatize the ritual of intravenous heroin use, *Requiem for a Dream* shows a rapid sequence of close-up images including a pupil constricting, a needle injecting the heroin, a spoon, and the flame from a lighter underneath the spoon. By providing a fast sequence of images, the movie gives a sense of the rush surrounding the injection of heroin. In contrast, *Trainspotting* shows the ritual in real time without any special camera tricks.

Medical literature puts forth the idea that “injection drug use is a social behavior.” (Tonkovich, R.) Both movies explore how a network of addicts enable

each other. While *Trainspotting* is based around the premise of friendship, the film's narrative constantly implies that junkies are little more than a connected group of criminals whose lives revolve around their need to secure their next "fix" or "score". The bond between the young men in *Trainspotting* is based on their heroin use; it is a shared experience. When the main character, Renton, is sober, he wants little to do with the friends with whom he had taken heroin. Heroin is what seemed to hold their friendship together.

In *Requiem for a Dream*, problems arise in the intimate relationship between Harry and Marion, who both use heroin. Fights occur between Marion and Harry as a result of the difficulty of obtaining heroin. Heroin usage does not seem to affect the friendship between Tyrone and Harry who seek to buy, sell, and use heroin together. Harry's heroin habit does affect his relationship with his mother, Sarah, who is sometimes scared of him. Tyrone, Marion, and Harry are in the same network and support each other's heroin addiction. They work together throughout the movie in order to get the money to buy heroin and share heroin with each other. This is a strong example of a network helping to sustain the addiction by increasing the collective resources of the individuals in obtaining heroin.

It could be said that *Requiem for a Dream* shocks, while *Trainspotting* entertains. *Requiem for a Dream* reads as horror and *Trainspotting* as highly stylized drama. *Requiem for a Dream* takes a "big picture" approach, providing us with flat characters, almost entirely defined by their addiction. The aim is to show viewers "the more extreme consequences associated with drug use." (Gunterman, Justin) A consistent submersion in darkness, sense of grit and realism, and multiple perspectives of addiction make *Requiem for a Dream* deeply unsettling. This ability to disturb is a large reason *Requiem for a Dream* is so unique and memorable. As

Screenrant.com explains, “the downbeat nature of the movie might make it less accessible, but it's hard to imagine that it would have been as powerful if it went easier on the audience.” (McCormick, C.)

Trainspotting “is more interested in showing people the smaller issues that come with using drugs,” (Gunterman, Justin) with multi-faceted characters that evoke empathy in the viewer. The strength of the character development, humor as a method of pulling the audience into the story, the glimmer of hope left at the end of the film, the understanding and insight given to the life of a drug user, and the balanced tone of the *Trainspotting* making it suitable for rewatching.

Trainspotting and *Requiem for a Dream* are two powerful films about using drugs to ascend above an ordinary, meaningless life and keep dreams alive in a bleak world. They are both cautionary tales in different respects, and powerful for different reasons. *Trainspotting* and *Requiem for a Dream* act as compliments to each other, exploring the various highs and lows that come with being an addict. Both films offer insight into the community that exists between addicts, and the secrecy of the agenda they share. As everyone who chose leisure wear and matching luggage looks down upon them, addicts turn to each other for camaraderie, comforted by the shared understanding that the disease is life and the treatment is another hit.

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