Psychological Depiction in Movies: Drug Use and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting*

Part A: Exploring Psychological Concepts in Film

Introduction & Synopsis

The 1996 film *Trainspotting,* directed by Danny Boyle, follows a dysfunctional group of young Edinburgh locals and their struggles with battling addiction. The main protagonist of the story, Mark Renton, finds himself in a constant inner feud to conquer his issues with heroin abuse. The group consists of Tommy, Sick Boy, Begbie, Spud and, of course, Renton. The film highlights Renton's most formidable moments, conveying how far he will go for a fix.

There are substantial scenes throughout the movie that accurately depict the effects of heroin use on lifestyle, relationships and mental condition. The most notable, in my opinion, happens when Renton is experiencing a withdrawal state. The film displays intense figments of Renton's imagination amid his detox. Hallucinations, while uncommon with opioid withdrawal, are still present in this case. His delusions show images of his friends, such as Spud wearing a prison uniform and Tommy strung out on heroin. Each underlines a noteworthy meaning, symbolizing past crucial moments in the film.

Through cinematic lenses, Renton's addiction is portrayed as a never-ending cycle of moments of clarity and relapsing with bad decisions ultimately derived from the drug culture that surrounds him. Each of Renton's friends has some sort of vice in their own way, whether that be opioids, alcohol or violence. In struggling with death, betrayal and destruction, the film showcases Renton's perseverance and the consequences of his addiction.

Psychological Concept

The primary psychological concept portrayed in this film is drug use, specifically opioids. Opioids are a type of depressant known to aid with pain and cause sensations of euphoria as well

as drowsiness. The human body naturally produces small amounts of opioid chemicals to help with our responses to pain (Spielman et al., 2023). Opioids are inhibitory, meaning the electrical impulses passing through our brains come to a halt. The initial effect of opioid use begins in the Mu-opiate receptor, one of the leading opioid receptors responsible for the more intense side effects of using (Akpan & Griffin, 2017). This type of drug is highly addictive and has affected the lives of many since the Opioid Crisis first began in 1990.

Several pharmaceutical companies were promoting the prescription of opioid painkillers such as OxyContin, unaware of their lasting addictive traits (Spielman et al., 2023). Patients advised to use opioids for pain management started to experience symptoms of withdrawal once they no longer needed them. Typical effects mainly included nausea, anxiety, sweating/chills and insomnia (Sharma et al., 2021). More abnormal effects of opioid withdrawal involve hallucinations, delirium and panic attacks. One of the drugs within the opioid category emphasized in *Trainspotting* is heroin.

Heroin is a type of narcotic that comes in tablet form, which is then crushed into a fine powder. Consumption can occur by smoking, snorting or, most commonly, intravenous injection (Spielman et al., 2023). Users heat the substance on a spoon over a fire/candle, then inject it directly into their bloodstream via the veins. The effects of the drug are almost immediate, providing the user with intense feelings of euphoria and that first initial rush.

Portrayal in the movie

Danny Boyle created a picturesque masterpiece with his use of symbolism and dramatization to portray the severity of Mark Renton's addiction. As a Scottish native, the director highlights real-life examples of the opioid crisis throughout Scotland during the late 1980s. This historical accuracy of the story adds an autobiographical element, causing it to be

one of Scotland's most pivotal films (Henson, 2021). Through visual lenses, Boyle showcases metaphorical scenes to describe Renton's desire for the drug, the consequences of use and the experience of an opioid-related overdose.

The first taste of Danny Boyle's clever cinematic portrayal occurs when Renton is fishing through a toilet for his supply. While coming home from his dealer's, Renton is faced with a harsh case of diarrhea, forgetting about the opioid suppositories inside his rectum. In an intoxicated state, Renton "dives" into the toilet to retrieve his drugs after they become loose and fall into the feces-covered toilet. Boyle demonstrates how far Renton will go for his addiction by illustrating a scene where the toilet turns into a vast body of water. He is pictured swimming to the floor of the "ocean" to retrieve the lost suppositories, ultimately highlighting how deep a state Renton is in regarding his addiction.

One of the most disturbing scenes throughout the movie is introduced during Renton's detox. He begins to experience hallucinations of his friends at their lowest moments, including Spud wearing a prison uniform and Tommy strung out on heroin. Renton unintentionally sparks Tommy's downfall by introducing him to the drug, which sends him into a spiral of abusing heroin to the fullest extent, resulting in death by overdose. Regarding the look of Spud, it references how both Renton and himself are arrested for shoplifting to obtain more money for drugs. While Renton pleads his addiction and is sent to a rehabilitation center, Spud is condemned to 6 months incarcerated. The significance of how his friends are shown pertains to moments earlier in the film, where Renton's destructive behaviour causes their demise.

Towards the end of the film, Renton takes "one last hit" before committing to getting clean. After the first initial rush, he is sent into a trance-like state, sinking into the carpet beneath him. This "last hit" takes a borderline fatal turn, sending Renton into the first stage of overdose,

which is a coma. Danny Boyle uses the carpet as a metaphor for exuberance, covering two-thirds of the screen with the rug, while leaving the middle untouched. In the following scenes, we see the film through Renton's perspective as he is left in the middle of the road by his dealer and brought to the hospital by a passing car. With the carpet still in the frame, it alludes to the idea that Renton becomes submerged in an overdose state. While at the hospital, Renton receives a methadone shot, causing the carpet to disperse, depicting the resurrection from his coma. Although it is never explicitly said to be an overdose, the dramatization of the scenes, in addition to the implementation of methadone, the idea of one is strictly implied by the director.

The story concludes with Renton reiterating the famous monologue from the film, "Choose life, choose a job, choose a career…". The quote is featured at the beginning and end of the film with only one differing feature. In the opening scene, the monologue is followed by the phrase "But why would we do anything like that?" While at the end of the film, Renton is living in London, clean from heroin and has a successful career. This ultimately highlights his growth throughout the film and reflects the original quote's connotation.

Part B: Reflecting Through Research

The article, "Using a Movie as a Capstone Activity for the Introductory Course," explores the idea of how films can enhance one's understanding of specific scholarly topics. Researchers compiled a study of this concept by presenting some students with the capstone activity and others with an alternate assignment. They described mixed responses from participants, some showing a heightened understanding of psychological concepts, while others showed a rudimentary understanding (Blessing & Blessing, 2015). I found it interesting that the majority of students were intrigued by this style of learning and encouraged additional projects

related to the concept of film. I feel as though this derives from our generation's interest in movies and television growing up in a technology-heavy environment.

I agree with the students in the study, believing that professors should integrate more methods of this type of learning in their courses. As someone who heavily enjoys film, I found this assignment allowed me to dive deep into the importance of visual aspects when portraying psychological concepts. Analyzing films such as *Trainspotting* provides a visual representation of how directors portray altered states of mind through cinematography. It allows the viewer to see the representation of the given concept without any literal interpretation or explanation. Scenes such as Renton's overdose implied what was going on without the use of dialogue and strictly through artistic lenses.

Overall, this assignment strengthened my understanding of psychological concepts regarding drug use. I found *Trainspotting* presented accurate information concerning heroin abuse and even explained information I was unaware of prior to viewing. Connecting educational concepts with real-life situations illustrated in films allowed me to capture a more profound appreciation for complex psychological concepts. I encourage professors to incorporate similar approaches, uniting the fields of both art and psychology simultaneously.

Appendix

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