

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe
Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann
Podcast Contribution, Author: Denise Borchardt
Movie: *T2 Trainspotting* (2017)

T2 - From *Trainspotting* to Window Dressing

Author:

Even if Danny Boyle's *T2 Trainspotting* claims to be a non-political movie, it inevitably engages with the current situation of the United Kingdom, and especially of Scotland. Shot during the time of the EU referendum, it is the sequel to Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* of 1996. Starring the same actors, the story is set 20 years after Mark Renton betrayed his best friends, stole 12,000 pounds, the proceeds of a joint drug deal, and vanished. Renton, played by Ewan McGregor, who has lived a respectable life in Amsterdam, comes back to Edinburgh willing to face the friends he betrayed and to pay back the stolen money. Spud and Sickboy now prefer to be called Murphy and Simon; they have aged, and perhaps even matured, but faced with Mark, and Begbie, who has escaped from prison, they get up to their old tricks again, drawn into a spiral of violence, revenge and nostalgia.

Not only the characters have changed, also their old neighbourhood, Leith as an area of Edinburgh, appears altered. Leith has been modernized: the urban district appears more energetic and younger than before, partly due to the many immigrants. However, while the city area, like many British cities, has undergone a process of gentrification, with elegant flats, and Cafés catering to young urban professionals, the more "isolated" areas, like the part of Leith where Simon's pub is located, remain run down. As Simon says:

Speaker:

"the great wave of gentrification has yet to engulf us".

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His pub is on the losing side of developments: while it was busy and financially stable in the past, patrons now prefer the modern city centre – the heart of Edinburgh. This younger and more diversified picture of Edinburgh is showcased right at the beginning of the movie. Creatively combining gentrification with the low-life heritage of Leith, Simon and Mark want to transform the pub into a brothel. To fulfil their dreams of a “Leith 2.0” as Simon calls it, and drawing on Mark’s experience from Continental Europe, they market their brothel as an artisanal B&B and apply for a 100.000-pound loan from the EU. While they get the money under false pretences, which might be read as an ironic comment on Britain’s attitude to support from the European Union, the considerable sum is then embezzled by the Bulgarian prostitute Veronika, who takes the money back to her country. The suggestion is that change is more on the surface than people realize – as Begbie says:

Speaker:

“world is changing, even if we don’t”.

Author:

Even if the characters look older, or more wasted, and seem to be more mature, they are still the same people with the same problems. Time and again, they find themselves in similar tricky circumstances: stealing money made through a drug-deal – stealing money from the EU, only to see it slip through their fingers.

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For the director Danny Boyle and the actors, it was a risk to revisit their cult film of the mid-1990s, and they just about pull it off. For them, as they explain in an interview, the film is very much about ageing and masculinity – and hence also about nostalgia and sentimentality. In the context of Brexit, however, it may be read as an oblique comment on Britain's, and in this case particularly Scotland's relationship with Europe.

Mark comes back from Amsterdam to shake his old friends out of their apathy and make them change their ways. But his “choose life” speech is ambivalent at best, since choosing life also means to ignore the lessons of the past, and to watch history repeat itself. This is captured at the end when Mark moves in with his father, into exactly the boyhood room he had left so many years ago. This suggests that the changes are only skin-deep, if not entirely on the surface, and lurking underneath is the energy of men that becomes unruly because it has no sense of direction – then, and now. The only difference: Now the option has gone to escape to the continent, in Mark's case Amsterdam, and to better oneself there. Thanks to Brexit, this might become a reality for all Britons soon.