

NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF *TRAINSPOTTING*

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Who needs reasons when you've got heroin? This is the main question that a Scottish drug addict struggles with throughout *Trainspotting*. Based on the novel by Irvine Welsh, the 1996 British film *Trainspotting* captures the lives of a group of young heroin addicts during the late 1980s in Edinburgh, Scotland. In a pivotal scene of the movie, Lou Reed's "Perfect Day" plays in the background as protagonist Mark Renton slips peacefully into a heroin overdose shortly after escaping rehab. Renton returns to consciousness blue-lipped and gasping for air in the ER after receiving a Naloxone injection. The pleasure depicted in the overdose scene juxtaposes the vile consequences of using heroin. I argue that the narratives within *Trainspotting* normalize extreme forms of pleasure and disgust through the portrayals of drug use and sex.

This analysis examines narrative as a rhetorical act that prompts audience members to question how themes of pleasure and disgust work together to shape reality. First, I will provide background information about the film and its political and cultural significance. Next, I will deliver a literature review in support of narrative as a rhetorical theory by providing theoretical grounding for my analysis. I then report my findings which address the film's expression of pleasure and disgust through drug use and sex. After presenting my findings, I will conclude by explaining how *Trainspotting* deepens rhetorical critics' theories about narrative by shaping a culture of drug use and sex as both comical and transgressive.

Artifact Description

Trainspotting, a critically-acclaimed piece of British cinema, depicts Scotland's struggle with its national identity as well as its disturbing drug subculture through the narration of heroin addict Mark Renton. A combination of historical and cultural factors have led to a weakened sense of national identity in Scotland. The narratives in the film reflect English political dominance along with the influence of American pop culture. For example, the film often refers to American icon, Iggy Pop, and incorporates American music and fashion trends throughout. Renton expresses distaste for his homeland and toxic friendships. Renton's friends include Simon "Sick Boy" Williamson, Daniel "Spud" Murphy, Francis "Franco" Begbie, and Tommy Lawrence. Renton repeatedly attempts to get his life back on track but falls back into old habits. Renton's narration emphasizes his struggle to escape from the everyday, by way of broken friendships and his brooding addiction.

Trainspotting is just one example of how the media represents addiction and drug use. Films such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Requiem for a Dream* display illicit drug content as the main feature of entertainment. Professor Rachel Shaw researched the narrative framework of violence in films such as *Trainspotting*, and whether it was deemed justifiable to those participating in the study.¹ Shaw interviewed six individuals from a local cinema about their responses to scenes of violence. Shaw's research reveals the "significance of narrative in individuals' experience of violence."² Shaw states, "the function of violent film is dependent on both the story it tells and the narrative devices it employs in telling it."³ Although *Trainspotting* is a work of fiction, it communicates a permissiveness of extreme behavior – one that parallels Shaw's own research of audiences' interest and reaction to screen violence.

¹ Rachel Shaw, "Making sense of violence: a study of narrative meaning." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1, 2004, 131. doi: 10.1191/1478088704qp009oa

² Ibid, 146.

³ Ibid, 149.

Literature Review

Narratives, or stories, dualistically gain meaning from their social environment while providing the social environment with its meaning.⁴ Shaw cites French literary critic Ronald Barthes' claim that "narrative is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; the history of narrative begins with the history of [hu]mankind; there does not exist, and never has existed, a people without narratives."⁵ The abundant presence of narrative in society plays an important role in informing public life. Stories help frame the way members of society remember what has happened and help to understand the world in which individuals reside.⁶ Pop culture encompasses media that is consumed by the majority of a society's population. Pop culture incorporates narrative to influence people's values and enable meaning making.

Kristen Hoerl states that by engaging in everyday life and entertainment "we inevitably participate in the political and social struggles of our time."⁷ Michelle Falter adds that pop culture is a "site where social understandings are created and played out in an attempt to sway people's opinion."⁸ In broad use, pop culture is comprised of "everyday objects, actions, and events that influence people to believe and behave in certain ways."⁹

Deanna Sellnow provides a specific definition of *mediated popular culture* which describes what "we experience through a media channel (e.g., movies, TV programs, songs, comic strips, advertisements) that

⁴ T. R. Peterson, "Telling the farmers' story: Competing responses to soil conservation rhetoric." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77(3), 1991. 291. doi: 10.1080/00335639109383961

⁵ Shaw, 132.

⁶ C. H. Palczewski, R. H. Ice, & J. H. Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (2nd ed.). State College, PA: Strata Pub, 2016, 131.

⁷ Kristen Hoerl, "Criticism of Popular Culture and Social Media." *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*, 2, 2016. 269.

⁸ Falter, Michelle, "'You're Wearing Kurt's Necklace!': The Rhetorical Power of Glee in the Literacy Classroom." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(4), 2013, 291.

⁹ Deanna D. Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture Considering Mediated Texts* (3rd ed.), 2018, 3.

may influence us to believe and behave in certain ways.”¹⁰ Sellnow uses the example of *US Weekly*, which sends messages about celebrity diets, fashion, gossip, etc. shaping how readers ought to believe and behave. In the same sense, mediated popular culture messages shape how individuals ought not to believe and behave.¹¹ The concept of pop culture mediating an individual’s moral behavior can be identified within the boundaries of pleasure and disgust.

Kevin Glynn, author of *Tabloid Culture*, studies how the production of disgust and popular pleasures portrayed in the media are central to organizing and reorganizing the meanings society makes of itself and the social world.¹² There is something to be said about pleasure and disgust that manifests the needs of an audience. Author Jennifer Hayward explains what fictional pleasure in comic strips say about the needs of its audience.¹³ After finishing each comic strip, readers were left wanting more and in need of a “new narrative experience.”¹⁴ Pleasure functions in pop culture to provide impressionable narratives to its audiences. Hayward adds that narratives generate pleasure from audiences through “collaborative readings, interpretations and predictions and from generally sharing gossip about characters and situations.”¹⁵

The concept of pleasure explains consumer behavior and its role in pop culture. Audience members favor certain content for its ability to make them feel good. For example, a popular television show might be filled with comical material that keeps the audience laughing. On the other hand, humorous content can make a caricature out of what is problematically addictive or transgressive behavior. Author Paul Duncum claims that “popular culture is both conformist

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*. (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 9.

¹³ Hayward, Jennifer, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*. (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2010), 108.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and transgressive in nature.”¹⁶ Conformity and transgression characterize the mass culture of popular forms of media such as television or cinema. Duncum cites Professor Malcolm Barnard who argues “in a consumer economy, the dominant message of mass culture is to consume, though many other mainstream messages about class, gender, ethnicity, and so on are also embedded, all of which has the effect of reinforcing social inequalities.”¹⁷ Duncum further notes that mass popular culture offers pleasure as well as the “appearance of liberality by including transgression.”¹⁸ The theme of disgust emphasizes the transgressive dimension of pop culture and explains how audiences incorporate what they see on screen into their own realities.

Disgust is a basic emotion present in all cultures. Philosopher Jenefer Robinson discusses aesthetic disgust, a paradox of disgust that produces pleasure or a positive emotional experience.¹⁹ Robinson argues that disgust is a negative emotion that functions as a source of insight that contributes to society’s appreciation for aesthetic.²⁰ Disgust is something that is “putrid”, “tainted, contaminated, and contaminating.”²¹ Robinson attempts to overshadow feelings of disgust that include nausea or wanting to withdraw from the disgusting object, and instead, offers a paradox that contributes to pleasurable aesthetic experiences.²² Robinson cites Philosopher Alex Niell’s insight:

“Whereas the disgusting is not always amusing, it seems as though the disgusting almost invariably has a fascinating aspect. However, the intentional objects of fascination and disgust seem to be inconsistent – being attractive and repulsive respectively – and the characteristic responses of

¹⁶ Paul Duncum, “Toward a Playful Pedagogy: Popular Culture and the Pleasures of Transgression.” *Studies in Art Education* 50, no. 3 (2009): 233. doi: 10.1080/00393541.2009.11518770

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Jenefer Robinson, Aesthetic Disgust? *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 75 (2014): 55. doi: 10.1017/s1358246114000253

²⁰ Ibid, 56.

²¹ Ibid, 62.

²² Ibid, 65.

fascination and disgust are also inconsistent – magnetic attraction versus more or less violent withdrawal. But although the ‘attractive’ is often identified with the pretty and endearing, some things attract us even though ‘unattractive in the usual sense.’²³

An example of how pleasure and disgust function together in pop culture is the television show *South Park*. The show is notorious for its sexual and transgressive material. Professor Jeffery Andrew Weinstock studies the relationship between the abject and pleasure in *South Park*.²⁴ Weinstock articulates that “abjection arises from the transgression of social taboos or the crossing of culturally constructed boundaries.”²⁵ *South Park* repeatedly features characters tasting or eating their own feces.²⁶ Scenes such as this would evoke intense disgust. In his analysis, Weinstock argues that “by watching the show repeatedly transgress the boundaries of social acceptability, viewers complete the communication circuit vital to the show’s violations.”²⁷ Consequently, narratives within pop culture have presented audiences with extreme forms of pleasure and disgust, thereby, normalizing what is seen on the screen. Narratives that portray pleasure and disgust work together to establish a sense of familiarity within audiences, keeping them coming back for more.

Pleasure and Disgust as Balancing Agents

Through its portrayals of drug use and sex, the stories represented in *Trainspotting* normalize extreme forms of pleasure and disgust. There are many scenes within the film that are too grotesque to constitute an audience member’s idea of *normal*. However, the film’s twisted presentation of drug use and sex somewhat alleviates the bad behaviors that individuals encounter in everyday life. The characters’ involvement with drug use and sex soothes the typical viewer’s moral and ethical complications which are nowhere near as

²³ Ibid, 75.

²⁴ Jeffrey A. Weinstock, *Taking South Park Seriously*. (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2008), 41.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 42.

²⁷ Ibid.

extreme as what is seen in *Trainspotting*. The lighthearted displays of drug use and sex shown throughout the film minimizes the negative reaction to inappropriate behavior. Audiences may identify the negative consequences of bad behavior, however, the film's favorable response among audience members shows acceptance of and lack of sensitivity to its transgressive material.

The film is a form of mediated popular culture that sends messages to help audiences discover the underlying moral of the story and influence the audience's beliefs and behaviors. Renton's narration along with the visual narratives presented in the film reveal several examples of pleasure and disgust. By dissecting how the film's portrayals of drug use and sex are both pleasurable and disgusting, this analysis aims to deepen the understanding of narrative function in pop culture. I begin by examining one of the main focal points of the film, drug use, and how it is depicted as both pleasurable and disgusting.

Drug Use

Trainspotting depicts the pleasure that addicts receive from using drugs. There is a feeling of adrenaline at the very start of the movie that mirrors the way addicts feel on heroin. The view of heroin use as a pleasurable activity is stressed by Renton's narration: "Take the best orgasm you've ever had, multiply by 1000, and you're still nowhere near it."²⁸ Heroin is a highly addictive narcotic that poses dangerous long-term effects and risk of overdose. Renton's voice over attests to the pleasure associated with heroin use: "People associate it with misery, desperation and death, which is not to be ignored. But what they forget is the pleasure of it, otherwise we wouldn't do it."²⁹ This quote offers evidence to the normalization of extreme forms of pleasure such as heroin use. The narratives within *Trainspotting* orient the lifestyle of heroin addicts as everyday practices of choice – regular individuals within society also make everyday decisions. In the case of heroin addiction, the obvious choice is to outweigh the struggles of

²⁸ Boyle, D., & Macdonald, A., *Trainspotting*. Great Britain: Miramax Films, (1996). doi: 10.1080/00393541.2009.11518770

²⁹ Ibid.

everyday life with the pleasures of heroin. This is expressed by Renton's narration in the opening scene:

“Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television [...]. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. [...] Choose your future. Choose life. But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose somethin' else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs a reason when you've got heroin?”³⁰

The momentary high attributed with heroin is enough to keep characters like Renton seeking more. Despite his participation in a drug intervention program, Renton visits his drug dealer Swanney “Mother Superior”, and nearly dies after an overdose. Renton recognizes the ravaging consequences of his addiction, but the pleasure he receives from injecting heroin into his body interrupts his ability to overcome his addiction. Renton's tantalizing relationship with heroin enables audience members to justify his toxic behaviors by focusing on the satisfying aspects of drug use. The sheer pleasure Renton and his colleagues receive from heroin downplays the shameful consequences that ensue.

In contrast, the pleasure of heroin is accompanied by themes of disgust. A notable scene in the film is Renton's encounter with the “the worst toilet in Scotland”. Renton relieves himself in the foul bathroom and realizes he has dropped suppositories somewhere in his diarrhea. As he searches for the lost suppositories, he somehow manages to squeeze inside of the toilet and into clear blue water, where he retrieves the opium suppository. This magical narrative describes the disgusting reality of an addict's lifestyle. The visual display of a grimy public toilet, filled to the brim with feces, is enough to make audiences' stomachs churn. Yet, audience members continue to watch in amazement as the scene transitions to Renton swimming in a mystic sea of blue, signifying the euphoric effects of drugs. Another example of how the portrayal of drug use invokes disgust is the negligent death of Baby Dawn, the daughter of Sick Boy's girlfriend, Allison. One of the most horrific scenes of the film, Baby Dawn is seen rotting in her crib after Allison and the rest of the

³⁰ Ibid.

addicts failed to properly nurture her. The element of disgust engages with the audience to influence meaning-making of drug use. Despite the unsettling emotions that accompany the film's revolting scenes, disgust operates as a form of entertainment that conflicts with social acceptability and gives insight into the lifestyle of heroin users. While Renton's experience inside of a toilet demonstrates the horrors of drug use as amusing, the tragic death of Baby Dawn juxtaposes the film's comedic expression of drug use and sexual misadventure. In addition to the topic of drug use, the theme of sex is actively reinforced throughout the film, and relates the pleasures of heroin to the pleasures of sex.

Sex

Sex functions as a backup option in the film; when Renton and his friends are not using heroin, they seek pleasure through sex. Renton believes promiscuous sex renders less consequences than using heroin so he decides to exchange one pleasure for another. The film hints at Renton's sexual tendencies when he watches the "100 Great Goals" DVD that was mistakenly Tommy's homemade porn video. After watching the video, Renton's narration suggests that he has lost his sex-drive because of heroin. In an attempt to regain his sexual appetite, Renton and his friends visit the club, Volcano, where the portrayal of sex is most abundant. The club is teeming with sexual energy, filled with loud music, dancing, and drinking. Tommy and Spud have a conversation about their sex lives which calls attention to the film's representation of presenting its characters as "normal" youths. During the club scene, the film references how Tommy and Spud's girlfriends read *Cosmopolitan* magazine to gather sex advice. Additionally, the two women are talking in the nightclub bathroom where a mural can be seen of Jodie Foster as Iris, a child prostitute from the film "Taxi Driver". Not only is this a metaphor for an oversexualized, underage girl, but it also foreshadows Renton's encounter with a schoolgirl, Diane. Despite the film's counter-culture attitude, the pleasures of sex are conveyed in a way that resonates with audiences due to its presence in pop culture.

Trainspotting alludes to sex as a pleasurable commodity that can be interpreted as disgusting. Renton's love interest in the film is an underage schoolgirl named Diane. After meeting at the club, Renton goes to what he thinks is Diane's apartment, where they engage in

sex. In the morning, Renton is horrified when he enters the dining room where Diane's parents are sitting. Diane walks into the dining room with her school uniform on and Renton immediately realizes he has slept with a minor. Sleeping with a minor is a criminal act and Renton is conscious of his own disgust. The natural chemistry between Diane and Renton distracts audience members from the substantial age difference between the two. Despite being a young teenager, the film introduces Diane's character at the club, being approached by several older men. The film denotes acts of pleasure through Diane's sexual relationship with Renton. Audiences are less drawn to the fact that it is an illegal relationship. Rather, Diane is accepted as a beneficial relationship in Renton's life.

Another example in which disgust is displayed through sex is the death of Tommy. After his girlfriend, Lizzie, dumps him, Tommy resorts to heroin and contracts HIV. The film does not show Tommy contracting HIV, thereby mitigating the disgust shown outside of the camera lens. Tommy's body is later shown strewn on the apartment floor, cold and rotting. Prior to his death, Tommy tells Renton about his temptation to try heroin for the first time after Renton tells Tommy that heroin is "better than sex."³¹ It can be assumed that Tommy either contracted HIV through an infected needle or had sex with someone also infected. In both examples, the film mulls over these transgressions by reframing the narrative back to Renton's struggle with addiction. In this way, the film normalizes the disgusting components of sex.

Contribution to Rhetorical Theory

The effect that pop culture has on audiences is expressed through narratives and offers insight on how pleasure and disgust work together to keep audiences entertained. The narratives presented in *Trainspotting* show the effects of pop culture as both harmful and productive. The elements of drug use and sex are considered immoral by a culture that views bodily pleasure as shameful. Society often receives negative messages about drug use and sex, but these messages often disregard why people enjoy partaking in these activities or how they become addicted to them in the first place.

³¹ Ibid.

Additionally, messages that are critical of drug use and sex overlook the disgusting aspect of it. *Trainspotting* generates sympathy from its audience, but it is not your typical public service announcement due to its inclusion of stomach-churning visuals and scenarios. My analysis shows how pleasure and disgust, two opposite feelings, can be dependent on one another. Narrative is used as a rhetorical mode that helps reconcile the oppositional feelings of pleasure and disgust. By presenting pleasure and disgust on screen, audiences are normalized to certain content because its exaggerated form makes unpleasant actions in everyday life seem not as unpleasant by comparison. Additionally, *Trainspotting* incorporates drug use and sex as serious elements in the film that fulfill comic functions. In response, pleasure and disgust work together as balancing agents to communicate the permissiveness of extreme behavior.

Conclusion

In this analysis, I argue that the narratives within *Trainspotting* normalize pleasure and disgust through its portrayal of drug use and sex. The film constructs narrative through the protagonist's voice-over and use of visual narratives. Renton's account of his battle with addiction and toxic friendships allow the audience to see a cinematic representation of the lifestyle of a heroin addict. Though the film illustrates pleasure and disgust, these fictional depictions of drug use and sex normalize what audiences see on screen. Activities that incite pleasure are often characterized as immoral or wrong by society. Messages of these "bad behaviors" leave out the disgusting component. Narratives containing pleasure and disgust operate to balance these oppositional feelings. *Trainspotting* utilizes narrative through its display of extreme forms of pleasure and disgust, generating a response that views forms of extreme behavior as less severe and permissible by society.

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