

# Trainspotting sequel – more about losing life than choosing it



by [Jonny Murray](#), [University of Edinburgh](#)

What a drag it is getting old. Trainspotting mid-life-crisis-cum-catch-up [sequel T2](#) feels that in its aching bones. But director Danny Boyle's film also knows that the passing of time hurts some more than others. We all lose our youth, but only the once-gorgeous have to mourn departed looks and desirability as well.

All of which begs the question: why would a film as fashionable and culturally cocksure as [Trainspotting \(1996\)](#) want to do anything other than let us lovingly remember its original iconic glory?

To its considerable credit, T2 doesn't duck that quandary. A heart attack brings a middle-aged Mark Renton (Ewan McGregor) back to Edinburgh from his home in Amsterdam and into the ambit of former partners-in-crime Spud (Ewen Bremner), Sick Boy (Jonny Lee Miller) and Begbie (Robert Carlyle). The characters' awareness of time's inexorable tick-tocking dictates a collective interest in settling scores rather than scoring smack. The passing of the years – what they do to us, and what we do (or don't) with them – is T2's central thematic preoccupation.

So what, you may say: middle-aged men make a movie about middle-aged men hating the fact that they're male and middle-aged. But then, large parts of the original Trainspotting's ideas – being young is a beautiful mess – were considerably less audacious than the cinematic energy and ingenuity with

which they were realised onscreen. Similarly, T2's discourse on the unpleasant facts of later life resonates because of the style with which it's frequently communicated.

## Speed of time

While anyone over the age of 30 probably doesn't need a movie to inform them that time is the enemy, you can't help but admire the witty verve with which T2 makes the point. Spud's set-piece job interview on speed from the original, for example, is refurbished in the new film as an older man regaling an addicts' support group with the tragicomic tale of how failure to know about British Summer Time ruined his life. His moral? The clocks move relentlessly forward whether we know it or not.

Elsewhere, Renton and Sick Boy hit upon the larcenous masterstroke of stealing wallets from a Loyalist social club. It turns out militant protestants' obsession with British sectarian history means they all use "1690" (the year of the Battle of the Boyne) as the PIN code on their bank cards. Conclusion? One can always try to live in the past, but eventually you pay the price.

Elements of the self-conscious and self-referential also make their presence felt in T2's updating of Trainspotting's fascination with the undersides of Scottish and British social experience in the 1990s. Trainspotting's portrayal of drug and music-based subcultures rang true for many at the time. The popular perception was that the film's makers possessed sufficient personal proximity to many of the scenes and substances of which they spoke.

T2, however, feels more like the work of an experienced travel writing collective: cosmopolitan observers conducting a psychosocial safari predicated on looking in rather than being part of something. As social commentary, T2 feels like the creation of artists who've been there and done that, as

opposed to being here and doing this.

This particularly crystallises around a succession of visual images of the usually overlooked or unseen side of things, which feel smart but superficial. Begbie's prison visiting room has, you'll be glad to know, bright yellow panic buttons beneath the meeting tables. Renton is tickled to find a small stash of gear still securely stuck to the bottom of a piece of furniture in the boyhood bedroom he hasn't entered for 20 years. Veronika (Anjela Nedyalkova) is the somewhat schematic replacement for Trainspotting's Diane as a Lolita-esque love interest. She is asked by the latter, in a brief returning cameo for actor Kelly Macdonald, about the appearance of her perineum.

Images and moments like these can be amusing, but there's no post-millennial equivalent to "[It's shite being Scottish](#)". It's enough, T2's makers seem to say, that the sheer cleverness of all this pleases both of us – no need for social or political meaning as well.

## **Clocking backwards**

Yet if Trainspotting possessed contemporary social and pop-cultural swagger aplenty, even in 1996 a few dissenting voices complained the movie lacked heart. If the sequel is a far less resonant document of How We Live Now, neither could it be accused of lacking sincerity or sentiment in its exploration of ageing.

T2's finest image is its final one. It deliberately circles back to Trainspotting's celebrated beginning by referencing the unmistakable sound of Iggy Pop. In doing so, the new finale deserves to be remembered as a bravura visualisation of existential paradox.

Human beings go through their allotted span revisiting and replaying certain core formational situations and states even

as they are carried further and further away from them. Got a lust for life, indeed. But what that constant hunger means to people, and what it puts them through, changes radically as the decades roll by.

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