Abstract

In this essay I am going to explore and critically engage with the discourse of masculinity in crisis while focusing on *Trainspotting* (Boyle D., 1996) as a case study. In particular I will look at the representation of men and women in the film while also engaging with gender writings by Itulua-Abumere and Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity. I will also look at the social context and Thatcherist government which arguably caused the concern of masculinity in crisis. Furthermore I will study the protagonists in terms of Scottish national identity and look how this contributes to the discourse while also studying social class as an important aspect of my argument.
How does the Scottish film Trainspotting negotiate and represent the discourse of masculinity in crisis?

The theme of ‘masculinity in crisis’ has been one of the most dominant topics in British realist film and television. Some of the most frequently illustrated issues portrayed in these movies include poverty, unemployment and social problems, which arguably caused decline in the traditional understanding of a male role in the modern British society. This sense of crisis in British masculinity has been widely attributed to Thatcherist politics of the era which were seen as the reason for instability, high unemployment rate and poverty among the working class.

Itulua-Abumere offers a valuable definition of masculinity that will form the basis of my discussion: “…masculinity consists of those behaviors, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine” (Itulua-Abumere F., 2013, p. 42). It is important to note that the definition of masculinity and gender changes over time. According to Kimmel, “Gender is constructed from cultural and subjective meanings that constantly shift and vary, depending on the time and place” (1995, p. 254), therefore it is important to mention that Trainspotting (Boyle D., 1996) is a reflection of a certain period in Scotland, rather than of a nation overall. This is to say that the modern definition of masculinity would vary from the norms of over twenty years ago when the film came out. The aim of the essay is to explore and analyse Scottish masculinity in relation to Trainspotting.
In this essay I am going to analyze *Trainspotting* in relation to the portrayal of masculinity, also touching on the representation of women in the film and the theme of national identity that is present throughout. As a post-Thatcherist (after 1990) movie, this is a good example of a screen text that could be seen as a reflection of the society’s attitude towards Thatcher’s policies at the time.

As mentioned earlier, it would be necessary to link the image of masculinity projected in the film to Scottish national identity. National identity is a sense of a notion as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture and language as defined by oxford dictionary online. Since the definitions of masculinity and femininity are an important part of culture, Scottish identity and its relation to England would be essential in understanding whether masculinity is illustrated as in crisis. Furthermore it could be argued that since the representation of gender reflects the identity of the nation as a whole it could be mentioned that national identity is also in crisis, again to be linked back to the Thatcherist government and its effects on working class status.

Connell and Messerschmidt write how the behavior of the protagonists of the film could be described as complicit masculinity as they tend to receive the benefits of patriarchy without enacting dominance (Connell R. W. and Messerschmidt J. W., 2005, p. 832). This categorization is also useful in understanding how exactly the protagonists contribute to the idea of masculinity and which segment of male culture they could be associated with. Hill also notes that the British social realism of the 1990s articulates “weakening of the ideologies of masculinity” where men find themselves in circumstances that they cannot or do not want to change (Hill J., 2000,
p. 249-260). So perhaps *Trainspotting* is reflecting an overall situation of masculinity in crisis around Britain, not just the case of Scotland.

The representation of modern masculinity in *Trainspotting* is also worsened by the portrayal of the dominance of female characters. In particular Diane (Kelly Macdonald) is shown as responsible, mature and smart young woman despite her age. During a one-night stand she is able to dictate her rules to Renton who is portrayed as desperate for sex like an animal that lives on instincts. After they have an intercourse, Diane forces Mark out of her room illustrating her strong will and independence. She also blackmails Renton with the involvement of the police, leaving him no other choice but to obey her terms and wishes. Similarly Spud’s girlfriend shows her dominance in the relationship by making it clear what she desires. At the same time she is very caring towards Spud when he passes out after a night out. Finally Tommy’s girlfriend acts as dominant in their relationship and this is shown by her initiative to break up after she finds out about the sex tape mix up. After Tommy (Kevin Mckidd) becomes single, his life goes downhill: his flat becomes filthy and he looses his resistance to heroin eventually contracting HIV and dying. Tommy’s case illustrates the extent of male dependence on women and inability to function without them. MacKinnon believes that patriarchy is shaped by contemporary society: “women are the property that constitutes the personhood, the masculinity, of men under capitalism” (1987, p. 159). *Trainspotting*, however illustrates an opposite view suggesting female dominance in Scottish society, thus reversing the common stereotypes and implying masculinity in crisis. The female characters are empowered especially when comparing to men in the film and possess many of the traditional and stereotypical masculine characteristics also fulfilling male roles. Such illustration of
femininity is one of the reasons why the discourse of masculinity in crisis is evident throughout the movie.

Furthermore the portrayal of the drug culture in relevance to gender illustrates the crisis in masculinity since in the film it is commonly associated with the male protagonists. *Trainspotting* also makes a good point about the portrayal of drug culture in relevance to gender. Bartholmes in *Gender Representations in British Film* writes: “the fact that there is only one woman in *Trainspotting* that is represented as a heroin consumer (compared to five male consumers) goes along with the traditional tendency to understand the drug subculture as highly male-dominated” *(Bartholmess K., 2002, p.7)*. Interestingly, although women are represented in a more positive light compared to males, their portrayal in *Trainspotting* still follows common stereotypes. Although they are authoritative, there is still lack of independence, as they do not seem to be very successful either. For instance, Allison (Susan Vidler) fails to fulfill her role as a mother because of her addiction to heroin and indifference to her child. This creates a sense of an even greater crisis in masculinity, because men are compared to flawed characters and still look inferior.

Although Renton in his rant about Scottish colonisation by England says how Scots are the ones to be criticised, it is most likely that he still believes in England's fault but sees no point in blaming it for his problems. The idea of Scots being seen as 'Others' is dominant in *Trainspotting*. Horton writes: “The threat the characters pose is inextricably linked to their working-class status and their Scottish identity” *(Horton P., 2001, p. 221)*. The protagonists are seen as dangerous to the society due to the lack of their contribution and input to it. As a result they are shown as takers rather than
givers or valuable segment of it. The fact that they are Scottish contributes to their image of a threat and social outcasts. Horton also writes about the lack of subjectivity and personal views in Scotland expressed by the protagonists because of the extensive history of its colonization. At the same time it could be argued that Renton and his friends are not forced to live their lives the way they do, therefore it is their choice to be unemployed drug addicts who do not contribute to the society.

In conclusion *Trainspotting* is a rich text to look at in relevance to the discourse of masculinity and national identity. The film portrays the reaction and the consequences of the Thatcherist government, not only acting as a criticism of Thatcher’s political system, but also illustrating the concerns of its effect on the modern masculinity. Although the original main idea of the film may have been an illustration of the drug culture as entertainment, it contributes to the discourse of masculinity in crisis due to the negative representation of male characters and subversion of the traditional male role and partially handling it to women in the movie. The idea of the protagonists being Scottish also contributes to the negative portrayal of masculinity and encourages further discussions in relevance to national identity and representation of Britain since a group of texts has to be studied to gain an insight to the accuracy of such portrayal.

Reference:

Bartholmess, K, (Journal, May 2002), *Gender Representations in British Film.*

*Trainspotting*. Berlin, Elaboration


Filmography: