TODAY, the issue of drug use divides opinions as much, if not more, than it did when the beautifully bleak brilliant British black comedy Trainspotting was released to an unsuspecting film audience in 1996.

In Scotland we are regularly presented with accounts of drug use that leads inevitably to poor health and criminality. Drug related crime, from a law and order perspective, form the mainstay of populist police reality television shows. Few consumers of such media have any reason to doubt the veracity of these lurid depictions of drug taking.

The original film, Trainspotting based on Irvine Welsh's book set during the HIV AIDS crisis of the late 1980s, suggests several memes in relation to drug use. The title of the book and the film refers to the track marks caused by repeated injecting, the visible signs of a long term illegal drug injector.

In Trainspotting, all of the central characters use drugs: Mark ‘Rent Boy’ Renton played by Ewan MacGregor, Simon ‘Sick Boy’ played by Johnny Lee Miller, and ‘Spud’ played by Ewen Bremner are all heroin users, and for ‘Begbie’ played by Robert Carlyle it is alcohol and tobacco. In the original film, heroin led to the overdose of Mark, and in one key scene, he descends into a slow central nervous system depression, until he is put into a taxi, and taken to hospital, where he is revived by the injection of an opiate antagonist hurling him back into the film and full consciousness.

In his writing, Welsh focuses on societal ills he considers located in intolerance

The new film Trainspotting 2 (T2) by director Danny Boyle, loosely based on the book ‘Porno’ as adapted for the screen by John Hodge, has most of the original actors reprising their iconic roles. In T2, drugs are not central to the plot and when drug taking is shown, it appears to be treated differently, both in terms of how it is portrayed and the likely outcomes. In this film the director Danny Boyle plays with stereotypes and challenges many of the ‘war on drugs’ conventions portrayed in the original film.

In T2 Spud informs the audience that ‘first there is an opportunity, then a betrayal’. The opportunities depicted in T2 are many. Mark Renton is clean and off heroin, working as an Accounts Manager in Holland. However, he discovers he has serious health problems while at the gym, and later that his employment is due to be terminated because he lacks formal qualifications. Mark’s experiences illustrate some of the main themes of the film; ageing, masculine identities in crisis and reminiscing about youthful drug experimentation. Simon is a pub landlord and entrepreneur, working with Veronika, played by Anjela Nedyalkova, a sex worker who films clients having sex, who are blackmailed by Simon to fund his cocaine habit. Spud is a ‘junkie’, still using heroin after 20 years, and Begbie, the alcohol soaked stereotypical hard man, is serving a long prison sentence.
Danny Boyle should be congratulated for not resorting to mainstream cinematic conventions of using female characters to set up central male character arcs. Women, like the city of Edinburgh in *Trainspotting* 2, are positively portrayed even if the female acting talent is often under-utilised, as the film chooses to concentrate on the relationships between Renton, Sick Boy, Spud, and Begbie.

Spud is a heroin injector, unemployed, and on his last legs, desperate, recently separated from his partner and child, who attempts to commit suicide and is saved by Renton at the last minute. Later, as Spud attempts to remain drug free, both he and Mark are seen running up Arthur’s Seat overlooking a picturesque Edinburgh landscape. Mark has swapped heroin for endorphins, and in this key scene, Mark tells Spud that drug addiction is as much about a mind-set as it is about physically taking drugs. In this scene, exercise is the buzz Mark is now dependent on.

Later in *T2*, Renton and Sick Boy both use cocaine and doing so is represented without there being any negative consequences, save the contempt expressed by Veronika of their male centred horseplay. However, in another drug taking scene, Renton and Sick Boy use heroin, expressing ‘that’s that then,’ watched by an uncomfortable Spud, who remains drug free for the remainder of the film.

Irvine Welsh (the author of the books the screenplays are based on) gets the opportunity to act in both films; appearing in *T1* as a heroin dealer, and in *T2* as a mid-level fence for stolen goods, peddling semi-legal Viagra drugs. In his writing, Welsh focuses on societal ills he considers located in intolerance. It was freemasonry in the police force in his book and film *Porno*, in his book *Porno*, from which *T2* draws some of its key scenes. There is one hilarious scene where Renton and Sick Boy crash an Orange Lodge social event and steal plastic bank cards, most of which are used with the pin number 1690, a reference to the date of the battle of the Boyne.

Diane, played by Kelly MacDonald, who has a one night stand with Renton in the original film, is now a successful lawyer and in one scene asks Renton if he is still using heroin; his reply of ‘not for 20 years’ is dismissed disdainfully by Diane who says ‘that’s good’. Boyle makes an important point in *T2* that those who do not take illegal drugs, or who are abstinent, are commonly portrayed or inferred to be ‘good’ and normal, while drug takers are considered abnormal and ‘bad’.

As an academic researcher who worked directly with drug users in treatment and care services, I am acutely aware that drug taking is not directly responsible for the negative consequences so often attributed to drugs: such as poverty, homelessness, crime, and poor health. Rather, these appear to be the result of drug prohibition, and the attendant societal reaction and disapproval of the use of drugs considered to be dangerous and addiction causing.

The original film suggested that drug experimentation commonly led to extremely negative consequences. *T2* is as more a film about ageing, forgiveness and acts of contrition than drug abuse, death and degradation depicted in *T1*. *T2* does not present a monolithic consensus as to drug use, but rather brings a diverse array of values to bear on the issues drug use raises. This presents an opportunity for a dialogue about drug taking in the 21st century.

Societal reaction to the use of illegal drugs can be vicious and intolerant, supported by a media barrage of half-truths, lies, misinformation and scare mongering. The opportunity that is presented by *T2* is that the film reveals that drug taking is just one of many things some people do, and addiction and death are not inevitable. The betrayal is that we continue to stigmatise drug users, and choose to ignore the important life message in this film.

**Dr Iain McPhee** is a senior lecturer in Learning Innovation based at the University of the West of Scotland. He has been working and researching in the field of drug use for 26 years and is an expert witness in drug crime cases. He is part of the Scottish drug policy conversations group, a group of individuals committed to solving the problems caused by drug taking, and drug policy.
Course leader: Tim Chapman  
(University of Ulster; Chair, European Forum for Restorative Justice).

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