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It Happened Fast and it was Dark: Cinema, Theatre and Television, Comic Books

Cinema

The history of the representation of Scotland and Scottishness in television and film presents innumerable examples of the crass cliché but it also reveals unexpected complexities. It is not defined by its medium. Film is not only film. Both the complexities and the clichés were developed from literary forms and work alongside and in dialogue with them. Film is literature.

Scotland is the oldest of European nations and in the media made possible by modern technology, the nation remains a central question. From the country’s foundations vivaciously depicted in the saga of William Wallace to the physical and linguistic energy abounding among the 1990s drug-addicts of Irvine Welsh’s Leith, nationality in 1990s Scottish cinema was a continuing concern. How much did Mel Gibson understand about what he was tapping into with Braveheart and what he was giving to the Scottish National Party? Was there actual moral conviction in all the Hollywood neon and glitz? Whose conviction? Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish National Party between 1990 and 2000, commented,

In 1995, Braveheart mania broke out, and it had a pretty powerful political impact. The SNP campaigned on the back of the film, and surged to 30 per cent in the polls. I well remember 20th Century Fox sending the SNP a lawyer’s letter demanding that we ‘cease and desist’ from distributing Braveheart leaflets outside cinemas. They changed their minds when I gently pointed out that while we may have appropriated the stills from their film, they had appropriated the story of our hero!

The Conservative Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth was roundly booed at the Braveheart premiere. The road was opening up to the 1997 referendum when the people of Scotland voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resumed parliament, devolved from Westminster to Edinburgh.
But to understand how the rising tide of national self-confidence in Scotland in the 1990s altered the country’s political identity, *Braveheart* would have to be held alongside its contemporary post-punk version, *Trainspotting* (directed by Danny Boyle, 1996). They are two sides of the same coin, for what is Gibson’s Wallace if not Hollywood’s wode version of Mark Renton, and what is Ewan McGregor’s Renton if not the defiant hero in extremity, taking drugs, as his author puts it, ‘in psychic defence’? There is a complex hinterland to these strange and unpredicted sibling film successes.

The assertion of national identity traditionally associates individual and landscape and remains politically ambivalent. The unionist argument is that national identity can be incorporated by the British state and express itself through patriotic unionism. In 1805, in Canto 6, stanza 1, lines 1–3 of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Walter Scott made the ultimate Romantic identification of self and land:

> Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
> Who never to himself hath said,  
> This is my own my native land!

One of the most memorable scenes in the film version of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* shows the four main characters arriving by train in the middle of a typically Romantic Scottish landscape. Their response to Scotland’s natural beauty is rejection. One of them asks, ‘Doesn’t it make you proud to be Scottish?’ and is answered with stunning invective by the central character, Renton, who says he hates being Scottish, because the Scots are ‘the scum of the earth, the most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash […] we can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonised by’ – and all the fresh air in the world will not make any difference.

This is not an escape from national identity, it is the curse of it. Fresh air and natural beauty magnify the frustrations of the stateless nation. If ‘Scotland takes drugs in psychic defence’ then the nationalism of Walter Scott has not been abandoned at all, but its tendency towards complacency has been shattered. It is nationalism of a kind, reintroduced in a different mask: Renton’s speech depends upon a national distinction in being Scottish (as opposed to English – ‘we can’t even pick a decent culture to be colonised by’). In a text so blatantly concerned with operations of the body and bodily functions as *Trainspotting* this negative identification of self and land distorts and reinterprets Scott’s conservative affirmation. Indeed, such juxtaposition throws light back on the ambivalence of Scott’s position: while he appears to endorse patriotic unionism his poem is after all, the lay of the last minstrel, signifying the final representative of a kind of Scot and Scottish song that cannot be incorporated into a new world and may well die in it. Yet the minstrel and his song might be surplus to the requirements