In February 1996, British audiences watched Trainspotting’s Francis Begbie casually lob a glass tankard over a balcony and onto the head of an unsuspecting punter below. For no other reason than to provoke a right good square-go. Spaceman by Babylon Zoo was top of the charts. Tony Blair was a year away from becoming prime minister. Scotland had qualified for the European Football Championships to be held in England, which went ahead despite the outbreak of mad cow disease. As the novelist LP Hartley noted, the past is a foreign country.

Danny Boyle’s film adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s novel tapped into the rampant optimism and consumer-driven individualism that would define the 1990s. It was seen as an ecstasy-fuelled race away from the misery and drudgery of Thatcher’s Britain and into the era known, to everyone’s embarrassment, as “Cool Britannia”; Blair, Blur and Geri Halliwell in a Union Jack dress. Its influence was so wide-reaching that former Chancellor George Osborne could invoke the film’s “Choose Life” soliloquy without irony at the Conservative Party Conference in 2014; talk about postmodernism and the cultural logic of late capitalism.

The success of Trainspotting arguably led to the release of similarly “edgy” Scottish film adaptations, such as Morvern Callar (2002) and Young Adam (2003). Welsh’s writing had been compared back to Young Adam’s author Alexander Trocchi, whose writing had almost as much sex and drugs in them as Welsh’s. Similarly, Alan Warner was marketed as “the next Irvine Welsh” when Morvern Callar, his debut novel, was released.

But Scottish culture wasn’t all about art-house cinema, shagging and swearing in the local vernacular. A month after Trainspotting’s release, Braveheart won five Academy Awards. The two films could hardly be less similar, but they perhaps signpost the primary ways Scottish films are often thought about: Scottish misrebalism vs Tartan kitsch. But Trainspotting had scenery too: its most iconic scene takes place in the great outdoors, with Tommy’s urge to Renton, Spud and Sickboy to take national pride in the glory of scenic Scotland met by a memorable and visceral rebuke.

That this scene takes place in the Highlands is an alteration made by John Hodge’s brilliant script. In the book, Renton muses on the inadequacies of the Scots in the pub right before Begbie loses his grip on his pint of Carling Export. Trainspotting not only reflected the enthusiasm of boomtown Britain, but a Scottish culture self-confident enough to set fire to conventional ways of thinking about national identity.

Image: Back to the future? Sony Pictures

Round two

T2, the sequel to Trainspotting, recently arrived in cinemas. Mark had betrayed his best mates at the end of the first film, and vanished with £12,000 in his pocket. So if the past is very much a foreign country, what does T2 have to say about now – about austerity, indyref, Brexit and Trump? On the face of it, not much. As Jonny Murray has persuasively argued, the film seems less interested in current socio-political contexts than it is revisiting the past of its characters, and its relationship to the earlier film.
But an argument can be made for reading aspects of the film as indicative of the here and now. The big heist in the film is worlds away from a skag deal with Keith Allen. Instead, Renton and Sick Boy borrow £100,000 from the EU through a trip to the Scottish Parliament to market their brothel as an artisanal B&B, which will both invoke the heritage of Leith, and align itself with the ongoing gentrification of the old port. “Leith 2.0,” as Sick Boy calls it.

When Sickboy, Spud and Renton (or Simon, Murphy and Mark in the matured vernacular of T2) revisit the Ossianic landscape of Renton’s anti-nationalist diatribe, the film’s central theme is clear. “You’re a tourist in your own youth,” Sickboy tells Renton, after the two needle each other about the mistakes of their younger days. Similarly, Spud explains to an addiction support group how his lack of knowledge about British Summer Time contributed to the loss of his family and his inability to kick the smack. Begbie, towards the end of the film, reiterates the point, letting his family know that they won’t see him for a while: “The world kept moving forward, and we didnae.”

The thought arises at this point: is the film’s melancholy obsession with the past (its and ours) readable as an indictment of the present? Of a Western civilisation furious about, and in denial of, its decline and increasing irrelevance? On the day of T2’s release, the meeting of Theresa May and Donald Trump reiterated the triumphalist, imperialist, backward-looking narrative of the Brexit/Trump age. Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle parodied this in his characterisation of UKIP voters last year: a desire for return to the “fahkin good old days” of polio and Jimmy Savile.

Our desire to live in the past, with the cultural, social and political alienation it leads to is brilliantly parodied in the film’s funniest sequence. Renton and Sickboy target a social gathering in the West of Scotland, in which the past memorialised is a distant one indeed: 1690. Renton provides a voice-over (a little jarring given its lack of use elsewhere) to establish the scene for those not familiar with the intricacies of Scottish sectarianism.

T2, perhaps just occasionally, riffs on this pain. It seems to wonder what has become of the enthusiasm of its characters, and us. It seems to be at once more local (with a greater grounding in Leith) and more global (its focus on migration and human trafficking). As our quartet end the film either where they started, or worse off, Veronika, the Bulgarian sex worker being exploited by Sick Boy, takes off with the hundred grand. She returns home to a notably sunnier future, and a reunion with her family. While we wallow in the past, incapable of accepting a post-national present, somewhere out there people are still choosing life after all.