

# Women—they drive you spare don't they?

Will McMahon reviews *Police and Thieves*, Volume One of a new British Film Institute collection of government-sponsored Central Office of Information films.



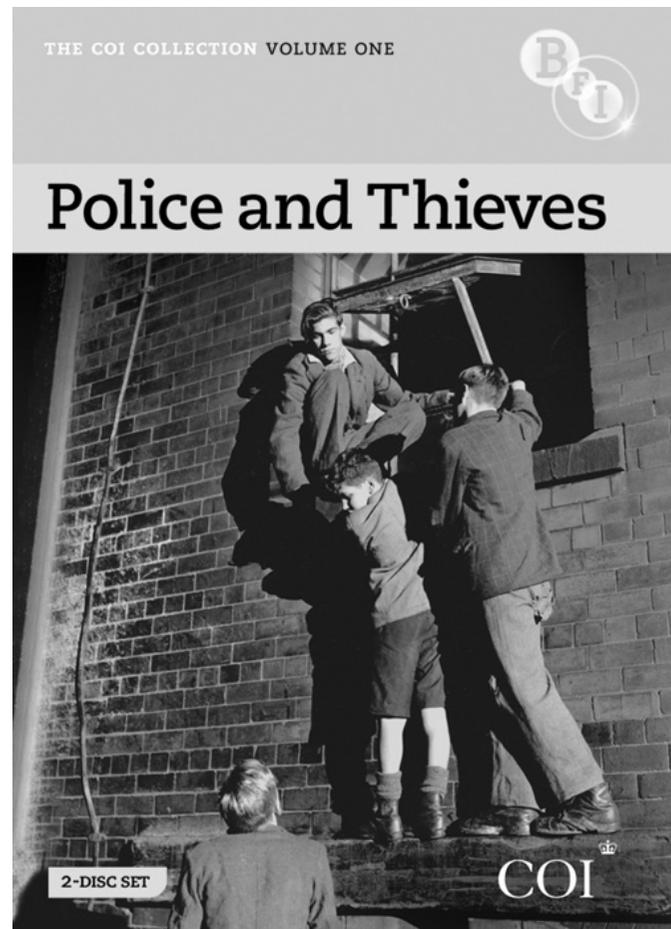
*The second wave of feminism had yet to wash over the makers of 'Anything Can Happen', a police recruitment film made in 1973 with the co-operation of Thames Valley Police. The opening line by the film's central character is 'Women—they drive you spare don't they?' and paves the way to a soft focus piece aimed at recruiting teenagers into the police force. By the end the message is clear: get the job, get the house and get the ornamental girl.*

The 20-minute film, is part of *Police and Thieves*—a two DVD set collection of films recently issued by the British Film Institute (BFI) that brings together the key 'law and order' output of the Central Office of Information between 1944 and 1975. The collection takes us from a world imagined that inspired *Dixon of Dock Green*, beginning with the post war 'Children on Trial' (1946), a film with a storyline that suggest the social causes for youthful misbehaviour, and concluding with 'Challenge of a Lifetime', made in 1975, where fraud, firearms, and illegal drugs are beginning to emerge as the central concern of the police force.

In between, there are some real treats. 'Children of the City' produced by Paul Rotha, who in 1943 produced 'World of Plenty', a film that had called for the centralisation of food production and distribution, and who in 'They Speak for Themselves' (1942) argued for the establishment of a national social services infrastructure, describes the disaffected children of Scotland's inner cities. 'Children of the City' advocates what today might be thought of as the 'end-to-end management' of children and young people who get caught up in the criminal justice system as a result of social circumstances.

The post war concern with the effects of the absent war-time father figure is present in these early pieces which are, to a degree, cinematic representations of the early intellectual work of John Bowlby, particularly his seminal 'Forty-four Juvenile Thieves'. Within 'Forty-four Juvenile Thieves' is an approach that views 'juvenile delinquency' as a public health problem treatable by a national network of centres for prevention and cure; as a 'problem of sociology and economics', one that needs to address the issues of 'poverty, bad housing' and 'lack of recreational facilities' as well as that of psychology.

The suggestion that ten-year-olds can be 'evil' is a thought entirely alien both to Bowlby and to the producers of these early films, and the common-sense is



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that every effort should be made, in a reversal of John Major's post Bulger dictum, to understand a little more and condemn a little less. The post war film focus is on the 'causes of crime' rather than any sense of inherent wickedness of children or young people and a major claim is made, following Bowlby, for the establishment of 'child guidance clinics'.

The whole tone of the early film is redemptive and non-judgmental, which does not suit the BFI reviewer of 'Children in the City', Leo Enticknap, who writes in the accompanying booklet 'Given that a significant proportion of these children were destined to grow up into the anti-heroes depicted in "Brighton Rock" and "The Blue Lamp", one can't help but wondering sparing



Source credit - "BFI"

the rod was really such a good idea'. Those familiar with Pinkie, the central protagonist in Greene's *Brighton Rock* (here the 1947 film noir, although with a spellbinding Richard Attenborough, is a poor guide, as director John Boulting committed the cardinal sin of changing the ending), would know that Pinkie would have been less concerned about the materiality of the rod being buried into his behind and more frozen mentally by the immateriality of the fear of God successfully embedded into his mind by organised Catholicism; consequently Pinkie was determined to be damned, a self-loathing individual who, to quote Bowlby, may have been a 'hard boiled' and 'affectionless character' who thought 'Whatever we do, do not let us care too much for anyone. At all costs let us avoid any risk of allowing our hearts to be broken again'.

'Children on Trial' (1946), directed by Jack Lee, who also directed the famed war-time drama *A Town Like Alice* and was also, incidentally, the brother of Laurie, the author of *Cider With Rosie*, deals with burglary and prostitution and follows the journey of a teenage boy and girl through the court system and the 'approved school'. The film is quaint but clearly aims to convince the viewer that change is possible. In one signal scene it challenges the notion that crime is necessarily a product of poverty. Mr Wilkins, the father of a middle class boy who is persistently in trouble with the police, claims that his son has merely got involved with the wrong type, is put right by the approved school head teacher who tells him that he has been in 'this kind of work' for 25 years and he 'still doesn't know what the "criminal type" is' and that

'you find children go wrong in all classes of society' and that 'what you call crime doesn't only happen in the poor areas or the slum homes' but that 'in the middle and upper class the boy can be sent to an aunt or an uncle' or 'to another school'. A year later in 1947 this theory was fleshed out in the Basil Dearden-directed caper *The League of Gentlemen*, also starring Richard Attenborough, which culminates in a gang of middle and upper class gentlemen robbers being rounded up by the constabulary.

Both 'Children on Trial' and 'Children of the City' are to be found on the first DVD, which is titled 'Juvenile Delinquency and the Probation Service'. 'Probation Officer' (1950) aims to educate the public about the work of a probation service operating halfway between social and legal services. The ethos presented is that probation is a branch line of social work (much like criminology used to be a minor branch line of sociology) that has problem solving as its main concern. No doubt many NAPO members would find the caseload and the solutions offered both an eye-opener and a mind-boggler.

The first DVD concludes with two short films; one from the mid-1950s that depicts the youth club as a haven of conflict resolution where 'disagreement can be settled by a quiet word with a pipe smoking youth worker'. For unexplained reasons the Ministry of Education banned the domestic circulation of the film, as it was made primarily for overseas audiences. The BFI booklet explains 'To this end it was apparently dubbed into Burmese, Hindi, Urdu, Indonesian, Sinhalese, Siamese and North and South Vietnamese'. Quite how it went down with the youth of Burma and Vietnam, many

of whose were engaged at the time in ongoing wars of national liberation against the occupying British and the French, is hard to tell.

The final offering is the seven-minute blizzard of tank tops and flares, 'A Chance for Brian'. Certainly post glam rock and on the cusp of punk this film shows troubled teenager Brian who runs away from home and ends up visiting Project 870 where 'the sound of a disco' persuades him to stay the night. After a talk with project lead Jerry, Brian is gently persuaded to call his mum. The police like 870 because it stops young people getting into the criminal justice system too early and the centre is based on encouraging young people to talk about their problems and to discipline themselves rather than being disciplined by others. Surely a film that would have the anti-social behaviour storm troopers foaming at the mouth, 'A Chance for Brian' appears to show the mid to late 1970s youth justice system as an exemplar of multi-agency working that prevents young people getting involved in criminal justice proper through addressing the social problems that they face.

Much of the second DVD focuses, as the title suggests, on 'Crime Policing and Prison'. The stupendous and at times amusing 'Man on the Beat' (1956) was made for an audience in the United States. The unarmed police is the central subject of the film which begins with a short discussion with then Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Nott-Bower who suggests that neither the police nor their adversaries want an 'arms race' and then cuts to an interview with two 'bobbies' (Sergeant Sparks and Constable Wood) who explain what their job entails while standing in front of 'The Blue Posts' pub that can still be found in Berwick Street at the heart of Soho. You can hear the US interviewer's puzzled mind asking: 'How is it that you do your job without a gun by your side?' Meanwhile some members of the public do their best to stay on camera, spending times simply gazing ahead, fiddling with a fag, or simply walking past, and past again; one almost expects a cross-dressing Eric Idle to slide, Python-like, across the screen.

Those readers who grew up in the 1970s can relive childhood memories by watching 'Snatch of the Day' a one-minute film taking place in a football stadium that attempted to educate the public about how pickpockets work in teams and given half a chance will unburden the unsuspecting punter of their wallet, and 'Bicycle Thefts' a 45-second medley of confused grannies, baffled professionals, and absent-minded youth who, having forgotten to lock their bicycles, explain to a desk sergeant that they have had them nicked—the punch line, it might be remembered, is the returning constable who has also been relieved of his cycle. Oh how the makers of this gem must have chuckled to themselves.

Wallow in nostalgia? Well 'Snatch of the Day' did it for me; the whole collection offers resources for those who wish to be whisked away either to a Majorite world of warm beer and cricket or even a post summer of love world of male social workers with unfeasibly long hair and peculiar glasses (the latter of which have recently made a surprising return to vogue). For the social historian it is a five-hour treasure trove and for the

criminology lecturer it will certainly provoke discussion with a firm focus on the artefact rather than the actuality. The world presented, if ever it existed, has since been blown away by the excoriating realism of the post Bulger, post Blair, and post 9/11 risk society that certainly offers less hope and more fear in the age of uncertainty in which we now all live. ■

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*Police and Thieves* is available for £19.99 from the BFI website: [www.filmstore.bfi.org.uk/acatalog/info\\_15486.html](http://www.filmstore.bfi.org.uk/acatalog/info_15486.html)



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