

Reviews

Film as radical pedagogic tool

By Deirdre O'Neill

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It has been widely argued that the general public have little or no direct experience of imprisonment and therefore rely upon media representations, whether documentary or fiction, to inform their views.¹ These representations often emphasise particular aspects including the most serious and violent prisoners, the most dramatic situations and the most unusual characters. They therefore reinforce the legitimacy of prisons and even support more punitive responses.² Although there are more empathic and reforming representations, these are less prominent.³

Inside Film is a project that challenges this orthodoxy by working with prisoners, ex-prisoners and people on probation to produce their own short films. These are then screened at small scale events and made available online. The intention of these projects is to raise the political consciousness of participants; offer an alternative form of production and distribution, and; create films that provoke and challenge audiences with different perspectives. As the title of the

book suggests, these projects aim to enable participants and viewers to undertake learning and personal growth (pedagogic) while also challenging dominant political ideas about the criminal justice system and those entangled within it (radical). This book examines the work of Inside Film, and is written by its co-founder, Dierdre O'Neill.

O'Neill describes that her particular concern is with class. Her own biography has shaped her work, particularly her experiences as a working class, single parent living in social housing, who came to academia later in life. She has undertaken her own journey to critical political consciousness, understanding the structures of power and inequality that dominate the world in which she lives. This is reflected in the work of Inside Film, where: 'Our aim is to build an awareness of the possibility of an oppositional consciousness and provide the students with an analytical framework within which they can begin to explore the ways in which this hierarchy, this them and us, is produced.' (p. 7).

The project involves practical sessions on film equipment and techniques as well as theoretical sessions on class politics and radical cinema practice. The participants produce '...short, questioning and angry films...' (p.4) that 'represent the

'embodied experience' of the working class...' (p.5). O'Neill nearly summarises the radical element of the project as offering: '...a counter-hegemonic intervention challenging the essentialist, personalised, and negative taxonomies of working-class people and working-class life. Not just by pointing out that they are, to put it very simply, 'wrong,' in the representational sense of bearing very little resemblance to working-class life but also wrong in what can only be called the moral sense because of the ideological role these representations play in normalising the negative images of working-class people utilised in the media to justify, legitimize, and continue the brutal inequalities that are the reality of working-class life in this country' (p. 14)

Throughout the book, O'Neill offers decoding and critique of popular films. These readings are significant in understanding the strengths and limitations of her approach. Predictably, as a Marxist, the films of Ken Loach are praised for exposing the problems experienced by working class people and the structural causes of inequality. While I also love the work of Ken Loach, I would also recognise the criticism that he offers a sometimes romanticised view of working class life, that his films can overplay the political critique at the expense of

1. Surette, R. (1997) Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice Second edition Belmont: West/Wadsworth

2. Brown, M. (2009) The culture of punishment: prison, society, and spectacle New York: New York University Press

3. Wilson, D. and O'Sullivan, S. (2004) Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama Winchester: Waterside Press

4. <https://www.amber-online.com/>

authentic dialogue and experiences. Better, if lesser known illustrations would be the work of the Amber collective in Newcastle, who have for over 40 years used photography, film and documentary to represent the lives and changing communities of the North East of England⁵; or Peter Watkins, who in films such as the six hour long *La Commune* (2000) mixes recreation, mock documentary and back stage material in order to radicalize the actors and technicians as well as the viewer. In contrast, a film such as *Billy Elliot* (UK 2000: dir Stephen Daldry) is dismissed by O'Neill for its representation of working class culture as an obstacle to the title character fulfilling his potential as a ballet dancer. Such a dismissal ignores that the film reveals some of the tensions between the intersection of class with masculine identity and sexual orientation. *Billy Elliott* is about more than simply a narrow concept of class and O'Neill's reading reveals a dogmatism in her approach: a film is either an acceptable Marxist text or it is nothing. Further, O'Neill describes how she viewed and discussed *The Green Mile* (US, 1999: dir Frank Darabont) with a group of students. While they were positive towards the film and its representation of the unjust sufferings of the main black character, O'Neill is insistent that her more critical reading is correct and that the alternative is simply the product of false consciousness on behalf of a group of people indoctrinated into dominant ideas and values. Such a stubborn and reductionist view again reveals the dogmatism at work.

This book is both fascinating and infuriating. O'Neill's work

with *Inside Film* offers a distinctive and particular approach to art in prisons. Arts have often been promoted on the basis that they humanise the prison experience, but have also been criticised for lending prisons an air of legitimacy for an elite audience.⁵ *Inside Film* seeks no such cosy accommodations, but instead intends to induce discomfort and resistance. The frustration comes from the narrow Marxist perspective, trenchantly expressed and inflexibly applied. Class is not the only lens through which to view the world and there is more than one perspective. Having said all of that, this book is to be applauded for being provocative, for stimulating a reaction and wanting to make some noise. Whether O'Neill is right or wrong, she certainly couldn't be accused of being bland.

Dr. Jamie Bennett
Deputy Director, HMPPS

Opening the Doors: a prison chaplain's life on the inside

By Paul Gill

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It is first important to say something about the format of this book. It is published in A4 and on each of the pages, a different design (sometimes a photograph) in colour provides the background of the text. The images are often of prison or objects commonly associated with crime and street life. The text itself is set in different typefaces and font sizes,

and the layout of the pages varies a great deal. This design is suited to its content which is divided into nine chapters (with titles such as 'On The Inside', 'In the Nick', 'Justice', and 'Finding God in Captivity'), each of which is subdivided into sections that are rarely longer than a page and frequently only a short paragraph. There are 167 of these sections in a book of just 154 pages (including the frontispiece, the 'Author's Note', 'A Word of Thanks', a foreword, the Contents and a short note on the author).

Although the book's sub-title indicates it is a prison chaplain's life, it is less an autobiography than an anthology of the experiences of the author's ministry in prisons (he served in prisons in Australia and latterly in England, before he recently retired). Much of its content can be described as a series of 'snapshot' contributions (sometimes with quotations) from prisoners, victims (and the families of both prisoners and victims) and staff. Accompanying almost every contribution is a brief reflection or religious commentary, sometimes a prayer or quotation from the Bible.

Some of the images used in the design are powerful, as are some of the insights the contributors have provided. For someone who has worked in a prison, however, few of either the images or the contributions will be new. That doesn't mean that they may not be meaningful: it is salutary to be reminded of the difficulties faced by those who live and work in prison, and those faced by their families and their victims. There is, for example, a poem about crystal meths written by a woman who was imprisoned

5. Cheliotis, L. (Ed) (2012) *The arts of imprisonment: Control, resistance and empowerment* Farnham: Ashgate