Jamie Bennett, Joe Sim, Peter Squires, Robert Reiner and Barry Loveday offer their own recollections of a stand out subject from the past 26 years.

Jamie Bennett – Rex Bloomstein’s films of reflection and empathy

Through his documentaries, Rex Bloomstein has charted the experience of imprisonment over the last 40 years. His films are carefully constructed, often drawing upon observational material harvested over long periods of time, and featuring extended interviews, sometimes revisiting people over many years.

His early films, such as *The Sentence* (1976) and *Parole* (1979), focused on the criminal justice process, showing the viewer how critical decisions were made and exposing them to interviews with people subject to those decisions. This approach puts the viewer in the uncomfortable position of becoming a participant-observer, experiencing the complexity and enormity of the everyday judicial decisions. His films *Release* (1976) and *Prisoners’ Wives* (1977) cast light upon the experiences of those leaving prison and those left behind when someone is sent to prison.

His most well known series, the eight-part *Strangeways* (1980), was an intimate study of HM Prison Manchester that remains one of the most important films to be made about a prison. Its detailed, almost ethnographic, attention to this prison revealed the dynamics of everyday life. The film received two BAFTA awards and was cited by a future Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, as an influence on his decision to work in prisons. In 1983, he made *Lifer*, focussing on the life sentence process and the diverse people serving that sentence. The interviews filmed for this were also developed into a seven part series, *Lifers* (1994).

In 2000, Bloomstein made *Strangeways Revisited*, in which he returned to the prison he had documented 20 years before. This film looked at how the prison and its population had changed in the intervening years, a period which included the devastating 25-day riot in April 1990. He also interviewed several of those who he met in his original films, documenting their subsequent lives. This approach was repeated in *Lifer: Living With Murder* (2003) a follow-up to *Lifer and Lifers*, in which he met with several people featured in those films. Their lives had panned out in varied ways and some had rebuilt their lives, whilst others had remained entangled in the criminal justice or mental health systems.

His most recent contributions have looked at two ends of the age spectrum. *Kids Behind Bars* (2005) featured children in custody including local authority secure homes and young offender prisons. This was followed by his Sony award-winning radio documentary *Dying inside* (2012) which looked at the experience of older prisoners, the fastest growing group in prison, many of whom faced ending their lives in custody.

Bloomstein’s contribution has been to maintain a space in popular culture for more measured reflection and empathy. The polemics and stereotypes, that so often characterise public discourse about crime and punishment, fall away as the viewer is exposed to a fuller expression of human experiences. Watching his films can be an uncomfortable and unsettling experience as they undermine those simplicities.

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