

KEY APPROACHES TO CRIMINOLOGY



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# MEDIA & CRIME

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# 7

## Crime Films and Prison Films

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## OVERVIEW

Chapter 7 provides:

- A consideration of the enduring appeal of crime films.
- A discussion of some of the most popular crime film genres including cop films, private eye movies, the Western, pirate films, gangster movies and the gritty British crime film.
- An analysis of some of the main themes which commonly emerge within these genres, with a particular focus on the various forms of masculinity represented in crime films.
- A discussion of the prison in cinema, its role as allegory and its relationship to penal reform.
- A consideration of the documentary film.
- An exploration of what 'remakes' of classic crime films can tell us about changing cultural attitudes to crime and justice, using *The Taking of Pelham 123* as a case study.

## KEY TERMS

- |               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| ■ audience    | ■ masculinity   |
| ■ catharsis   | ■ narrative arc |
| ■ crime film  | ■ prison film   |
| ■ documentary | ■ realism       |
| ■ film noir   | ■ remakes       |
| ■ genre       |                 |

The *crime film* is arguably the most enduring of all cinematic *genres* which makes writing this chapter somewhat daunting. Where does one start and finish with a subject as vast as 'crime film'? What to include and what to miss out? How to condense into a single chapter movies as diverse as *Bullitt* (1968) and *Batman* (1989), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974) and *Midnight Express* (1978), *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Heat* (1995), *Tightrope* (1984) and *Man On Wire* (2008), or *Pirates of the Caribbean: the Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and *Captain Phillips* (2013)? The answer is that it is impossible. The 'crime film' incorporates and underpins an array of better-known genres including cops-and-robbers, the gangster film, the pirate movie, the Western, the private eye film, the classic 'whodunnit', the heist movie, anime and *film noir* and, ultimately, all this chapter can do is to introduce the reader to a few ideas and encourage further reading and watching. The chapter discusses crime films, *prison films*, documentaries and '*remakes*', and will largely focus on those films that have enjoyed significant commercial success. This highly selective

and deliberately populist stance is in contrast to other criminological treatments of film which aim to cover 'the best and most important crime films and avoid the worst and most trivial' (Rafter, 2000: 7), and/or which try to say *something* (however pithy) about every film that can be included within a particular genre for fear that some pedant will shout 'but what about ...?'. This chapter simply hopes to raise some interesting but exploratory issues about a handful of somewhat randomly selected films which tie in to some of the themes raised elsewhere in this volume.

### The appeal of crime films

First of all, though, it is instructive to ask the question: what accounts for the enduring popularity of the crime film? Generally such movies will centre on a criminal, a victim and an avenger (Leitch, 2002) and the similarities, differences and interactions between these adversaries usually constitute an exciting and tension-building dynamic. Another possible reason for their attraction is that they incorporate elements which appeal to the audience's own antisocial or deviant tendencies or to their ambivalence toward the police and other authorities; hence the number of incompetent or corrupt cops and judges we encounter in movies. We sometimes find ourselves empathizing with the villain rather than the good guy and even the most depraved offenders can be attractive and charismatic in the movie world (Anthony Hopkins' portrayal of serial killer Hannibal Lecter in the 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example). In cinema, activities which in real life are often grubby, mundane or quite administrative – such as organized crime – are given an aura of mystery, glamour and recklessness. Some film-makers and critics maintain that crime film is cathartic; it allows audiences to live out their normally suppressed deviant fantasies in a vicarious but harmless manner and gives them a glimpse of other worlds (from the old-fashioned casino to the courtroom) that may be unknown to them in the real world. In some cases, film may illuminate worlds that are not just unknown but unknowable to many viewers. Films about prisons and the Mafia are two examples of subjects that are surrounded in myth; hidden societies that fascinate and intrigue. Curiously, then, the mediated version of these worlds is better known to most people than the reality, and many individuals who do enter these realms may have expectations of them that come straight from the movies – and may even adopt personas or modes of behaviour in imitation of characters from films (Jewkes, 2002; Larke, 2003; Fiddler, 2007; Parker, 2009b).

*Audiences* may also achieve *catharsis* through the conversion of potentially unbearable social anxieties into entertainment, as latent moral panics are

scaled down from the global to the subcultural and threats as diverse as terrorism, invading aliens and natural disasters are vanquished by charismatic heroes within the comfortably generic lines of the crime film (Leitch, 2002). Alternatively, as noted in Chapter 1, the media's inclination to make all audience members equal in their potential 'victimness', may result in an obsessive fascination with such narratives. Consequently, like all other media, films may represent an hysterical replaying of the possibility of being a victim and staving it off (Osborne, 1995). Or perhaps crime films appeal simply because they permit closure: they reassure us that criminal behaviours *can* be explained and that serious offences *can* be solved. They offer immutable definitions of the 'crime problem' and guide our emotional responses to it (Rafter, 2007).

While much of the appeal lies in the thrill inherent in most crime film genres – the pursuit of the 'baddie', the high-speed car chase, the casual violence, the clever build-up of tension, or whatever – these scenes are often little more than set pieces which would leave the audience disappointed and unfulfilled if left out. Many crime films have a limited *narrative arc* and are relatively predictable in terms of their structure, storyline and dialogue. For example, the 23-part *James Bond* series succeeds in being a multi-million dollar global franchise, as well as a very British institution, partly by virtue of its sheer formulaic-ness. While Daniel Craig's 007 is a darker and more violent character than Bond as played by Pierce Brosnan or Roger Moore, it is only his new-found sensitivity to (some) women – and, much to some fans' chagrin, his blond hair – that differentiate him from the first incarnation of Bond played by Sean Connery in 1962. While the production team behind Bond have had to respond to the rapid-fire camerawork and impressive stunts that showcase Jason Bourne, the decision to continue with the tried-and-tested formula of 007 movies also suggests that the franchise is impervious to the ideas of different directors (there have been ten directors so far). Both Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino are reported to have wanted to direct a Bond film, perhaps thinking they could bring something fresh and personal to the franchise. They may have been rejected precisely because something new is not considered desirable.

To take another example, gangster or 'mob' movies usually have a structure formed, in part, by the obsession with rules that is fundamental to the genre. Based on unquestioning loyalty to the 'family', honouring one's debts to each other, and regarding the 'godfather' or gang leader with a mixture of fear and respect, the group is constituted as the supreme social authority and, while the rules are frequently broken, with double-crossing and dealing providing much of the pace and anticipation of the genre (as well as underlining the message that crime doesn't pay), the social structure and unshakeable authority of the gangster family remains intact. Moreover, there is a strong, recognizable lineage that takes us from the gangster movies of the 1920s and 1930s through *The Godfather Trilogy* (1972, 1974, 1990) and *Goodfellas* (1990) to Guy Ritchie's parodic *Lock,*

*Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and Quentin Tarantino's even more stylized pastiches of gangsterdom in *Reservoir Dogs* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). We understand each by reference to the others and it is partly the audience's assured familiarity with the codes and conventions of the genre that accounts for their continuing success (Langford, 2005). Finally, the message that crime doesn't pay also frequently underpins movies based on real-life stories – for example *Blow* (2001), *The Krays* (1990) and *Goodfellas* (1990) – even if they have spent the best part of two hours demonstrating quite graphically that it does.

### **The crime film: masculinity, autonomy, the city**

The pleasing familiarity of a formula also extends to cinematic themes. Indeed, what strikes me as I start to reflect on the topic is that there are a small number of key premises and characterizations that shape many crime movies. One theme that appears to run through all crime genres is a particular type of 'manliness'; a rugged *masculinity* that combines with heroic agency (Sparks, 1996) to form a self-confident and self-reliant protagonist. The 'tough guy' has been a staple of cinema since the first gangster movies were produced in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Exemplified by characters such as Tony Camonte in *Scarface* (1932; remade in 1983) and Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931), strong heroes (even if engaged in illegal activities) held huge appeal for American audiences in the Depression era who were disenchanted by authority and wanted to take control of their lives (Leitch, 2002).

Since that time, crime films have presented an archetype of individualistic masculinity set against larger forces, whether the wide expanse of the high seas or cattle plains (and the primitives who inhabit these territories), or the formal, occupational organizations and structures that contain and curtail their individual autonomy and maverick tendencies. For example, *cop films* (let us use *Dirty Harry* as an archetype) are dominated by the loner who battles against the bureaucracy and incompetence of their own police department, or at least refuses to play by the rules (Carrabine, 2009). In addition to being obsessive and isolated at work, the American cop usually has a private life which is deviant, dysfunctional or nonexistent and his lonely isolation has been described as 'the most immutable of all the genre's conventions' (Leitch, 2002: 222). The *gangster movie* reveals the 'fantasy of a secret society with masculine rituals' (Larke, 2003: 128) and the 'Godfather' is surely the alpha male of the film world. The *pirate film* – from the swashbuckling epics of the first half of the 20th century that showcased matinee idols such as Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power, to the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* series starring Johnny Depp – has been characterized as 'a man fighting for the right in a world that does not

understand the right as he sees it' (Parish, 1995: 3, cited in Parker, 2009a: 174). The freedom, solitude and resourcefulness evoked in the *Western* appears to have a near universal appeal to men and boys: 'it's fair to say that in the minds of many men, even if only for fleeting moments, there's a hankering to be as free and rugged, as engaging and boisterous, as hardworking, daring and independent, as truly American, as the cowboy' (Hassrick 1974: 139; cited in Parker, 2011). The *heist movie* is about the masculine pursuit of professionalism and perfection – the 'perfect crime' – at the expense of domestic and familial ties (Rayner, 2003). More complex is the *film noir*, which may be read as a definition and defence of masculinity as the hard-boiled hero grapples with 'the dangers represented by the feminine – not just women in themselves but also any non-"tough" potentiality of his own identity as a man' (Leitch, 2002: 72; see also Krutnik, 1991). In short, the hero embodies a charismatic, self-contained, hyper-masculinity. He may be unusual, unpleasant even, but he is always a 'complete man' (Chandler, 1944: cited in Sparks, 1996).

The private eye – who often appears in film noir – is sometimes described as the urban cowboy of the screen and, once again masculinity is a defining feature:

The popular image of the private eye has less to do with his idealized, often obsessive professionalism, however, than with his masculinity. Far more than films about police detectives or amateur detectives, [private eye] films regard detective work as a test of what Frank Krutnik calls the private eye's 'self-sufficient phallic potency'. This convention is so deeply ingrained in private eye films that it is hard to appreciate how arbitrary and strange it is ... there is no reason to assume that testosterone ought to be a prerequisite for the job. (Leitch, 2002: 197)

Leitch goes on to explain that the genre's celebration of masculinity is exemplified by *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) in which the private eye hero, Sam Spade, is pitched against a voracious femme fatale and three men clearly characterized as homosexuals. Spade is thus 'admirably, heroically masculine' precisely because he is not female and not gay: hence the private eye's manliness must constantly be confirmed through conflicts with asexual or bisexual characters – or more often with female or gay male characters – whom the film leaves 'demystified, disempowered, defeated and dehumanized' (Leitch, 2002: 198).

That is not to say that all cinematic heroes are the same or even that their (hetero)sexuality is as clearly defined as Leitch's description suggests; crime films permit a wide variety of masculinities within a diverse array of settings and narratives (Sparks, 1996). In fact Davies and Smith (1997: 19) go so far as to suggest that since the late 1980s representations of white males as domesticated, feminized or paternal have dominated film genres to such a degree that it is only in the films of Quentin Tarantino that 'macho masculinity' (which we might characterize as violent and uncompromising, although always underpinned by

wit and humour) remains intact. This seems an overstatement and one that overlooks both that even 'macho masculinity' can have many facets. It is also worth remembering that some of Tarantino's regular cast members have taken a Tarantino-esque version of masculinity into other roles, as the discussion below of John Travolta's character in *The Taking of Pelham 123* will illustrate. Furthermore, hyperbolized representations of masculinity may be cyclical: Sparks observes that the exaggerated muscularity of Schwarzenegger, Stallone, and their ilk in the cinema of the late 1980s and 1990s may have been in reaction to instabilities in notions of masculine gender identities at the time, i.e. the domesticated, feminized and paternal roles that Davies and Smith refer to. But since that time we have seen a new type of hero emerge, personified by *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and its sequels. While undeniably an action hero, actor Matt Damon has said of his character; 'Bourne is about authenticity, not fashion, frippery and style. He's about essence and, unlike Bond, you'd never see him watching a girl coming out of the sea with a bikini on. There's none of those old-fashioned macho attitudes' (*Telegraph*, 11 August 2007).

Ironically, Bourne might not be directing his gaze at the near-naked female form but it seems that it is not just representations of women which are erotically charged in mainstream cinema. The appeal – to men rather than women – of the muscular physiques of Stallone and Schwarzenegger are summed up by Sparks, following Laura Mulvey, as a 'narcissistic identification of the male spectator with images of mastery and omnipotence' (Sparks, 1996: 352). To these former action heroes we might add Daniel Craig as James Bond in *Casino Royale* (2006) emerging from the sea in his swimming trunks in a pastiche of the iconic moment in *Dr No* (1962) where Ursula Andress steps from the sea in a white bikini, and Johnny Depp as camp pirate Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series who embodies the male beauty and joyous love of adventure that marked the classic pre-war films about outlaws and pirates and was intended to appeal to men and women equally (Parker, 2009a).

It is also not the case that there is no female counterpart to the masculine hero; there are, of course, examples of women leads in Westerns (*Calamity Jane*, 1953), cop films (*Blue Steel*, 1989; *Fargo*, 1996), assassin movies (*Nikita*, 1990; *Kill Bill Vols. I and II*, 2003 and 2004), films about serial killers (*Monster*, 2003), pirate films (*Cutthroat Island*, 1995), films about outlaws (*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967), buddy/road movies (*Thelma and Louise*, 1991), and 'girls-with-guns' (for example in countless Japanese anime films – and films starring Angelina Jolie), but they are anomalies. For Martin Parker, these heroines are interesting, and might be celebrated as examples of a feminist politics, but this is largely because there are so few examples of women in these genres, and he notes that, in the main, women are still portrayed in fairly predictable ways:

The suffering housewife, the raped hostage, the accomplice in love, the golden hearted prostitute and so on. Women usually only make sense in relation to men,



and are found in homes, towns and gardens, looking after men, yearning for men, being wounded by men. The Western director Budd Boetticher put it neatly (though without any obvious irony) when he suggested that a woman's job ... is to react. 'In herself she has no significance whatsoever'. (Parker, 2009a)

Bob Connell – who popularized the term 'hegemonic masculinity' – concurs, arguing that while there is 'a bewildering variety of traits considered characteristic of women' (1987: 183), there is no superordinate version of femininity which is deemed more structurally powerful than others. *All* versions of femininity are subordinate to the patriarchal power of men.

Although hard to pin down as a 'genre' there is a particular type of crime film which has emerged since the mid-1990s (but whose lineage can be traced right back to films like the 1947 classic *Brighton Rock*), which combines masculinity, violence, class, race and nostalgia in a form that is immediately recognizable and unmistakably British. Tending to lack the gloss, the special effects and (not unrelatedly) the big budget of their Hollywood counterparts, the 'crimes' in these crime films include heroin use (*Trainspotting*), football hooliganism (*The Firm*; *The Football Factory*), gangster violence (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*; *Sexy Beast*) and crimes too complex to describe in a few words (*Shallow Grave*). What they have in common is a dark humour, a grittiness, and a presupposition that the audience will have – or at least recognize – shared popular cultural experiences. Although the violence may be casual and brutal ('more potent than sex and drugs put together', as the four male leads in *The Football Factory* put it) it is usually set against a backdrop and soundtrack designed to elicit pangs of nostalgia in the audience. To take an example, *This is England* (2006), is set in Margaret Thatcher's Britain of 1983, and is largely based on the director Shane Meadows' own experiences as a youngster. Facing the prospect of a long and lonely summer break from school, 12-year-old Shaun (Thomas Turgoose) runs into a group of amiable skinheads, one of whom – Woody – takes Shaun under his wing and introduces him to the wonders of Ben Sherman shirts, Doc Martin boots, Ska music, male friendship and girls. With skinhead uniform and newly shaved head, Shaun enjoys the feeling of belonging that the group provides; that is, until Combo comes out of prison and returns to the gang. Older than the others, Combo is a racist, militant psychotic who divides the group and draws the young Shaun into a murky world of nationalism and racist violence which eventually leads to the savage beating of Milky, the only black skinhead in the gang. The film is set against a backdrop of the Falklands War in which Shaun's soldier father was killed, and reflects a time of mass unemployment and casual racism that is becoming politicized and organized. The pain of losing the father he idolized and the exhilaration of being part of a gang and feeling accepted by older and more knowing peers is sensitively handled by the director and cast. *This is England* manages, at one and the same time, to be gritty *and* romantic.

In most of the British films mentioned, location is important in conveying the inner emotions and motivations of the characters. For Shaun in *This is England*, the grimness of growing up in a coastal town in the north of England is captured in the brutal architecture of the estate on which he lives and the bleakness of the North Sea where, in disillusionment, he throws the Union Flag at the end of the film. Both *Trainspotting* and *Shallow Grave* are set in Edinburgh but largely filmed in Glasgow, where the rather austere Georgian architecture lends both films a mordant quality perfectly suited to the graphic scenes that unfold. Hollywood has also produced numerous films where the location is an important signifier of the dark motives of the characters. The 1990s saw the emergence of postmodern fables offering a nightmare vision of middle America. Epitomised by David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), these portrayals 'mingled cloyingly saccharine glimpses' of small-town America with 'horrific revelations about its psychosexual underside' (Leitch, 2002: 48). In some films the location becomes almost a character in itself; for example the director of *Trainspotting* and *Shallow Grave* was Danny Boyle, who went on to make *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) where the city of Mumbai is used to dazzling, if controversial effect (some politicians and film-makers in India condemned it as 'poverty pornography').

The most famous city on film, however, must surely be New York which feels well known even to those who have never visited through its depiction in the movies (and TV programmes and song lyrics). Once known as a city with a particularly bad record of violent crime, New York has been used as a backdrop for countless crime films and its streets and subways, courtrooms and police department (NYPD) are familiar to audiences around the world. While Los Angeles and Chicago are also iconic settings (particularly for private eye/film noir and mob films respectively) no other city comes close to NYC for its number of instantly recognizable locations and landmarks. Films that used the twin towers of the World Trade Center as a location now have a particular poignancy – none more so than *Man On Wire* (2008) the Oscar-winning documentary about Frenchman Philippe Petit's daring tightrope walk (described variously as a 'real-life heist' and 'the artistic crime of the century') between the twin towers in August 1974. Since the very first gangster 'talkie' was produced in 1928, *The Lights of New York*, to contemporary films such as *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009) which is discussed below, New York has lent vividness, thrill and menace to the movies.

## The 'prison film'

The inclusion of the 'prison film' in a book entitled 'Media & Crime' might seem controversial. Crime and punishment are, after all, quite different entities. My

reasons for discussing prison films are twofold. First, the prison does not feature much elsewhere in this volume; and second, prison films arguably must be included because of their sheer popularity, both among the cinema-going public and with academic scholars (see, for example, Nellis and Hale, 1982; Rafter, 2000; Jarvis, 2004; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004; Mason, 2006). As Nellis (1982: 6) observes, 'no other type of crime film – the gangster movie, the police procedural movie and the characteristically English murder-mystery – has claimed such impressive credentials in its bid for genre status'. The author of several publications on the prison film genre, Paul Mason (2008), concurs, commenting that most people could probably name several films about prison and he speculates that most lists would feature *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Papillon* (1973), *Midnight Express* (1978), *Brubaker* (1980), *McVicar* (1980), *Scum* (1983), *The Green Mile* (1999) and, indisputably *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) which, nearly two decades after its original release, still tops many viewers' polls of their favourite films of all time. Among academic treatments of the genre, *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and *The Big House* (1931) are commonly discussed and, although unlikely to have been seen by the majority of this book's readers, many of the themes they deal with – the banality and repetitiveness of the prison regime, the limited movement afforded prisoners, the brutality of the chain gang, and so on – are familiar to modern audiences.

However, many 'prison films' are not really about prison at all but could actually be set in any number of other environments. Like the mob or gangster movie, the prison lends itself to being used allegorically; and like those genres, a staggering number of American prison films were made in the 1930s – the decade of the economic depression – in part because the prison offered filmmakers a metaphor for the disempowerment, injustice and isolation felt by the masses (Mason, 2008; and see Chapter 1 of this volume for a discussion of 'mass society'). Incarceration has also commonly been used as a backdrop for tales about individual perseverance and the indomitable human spirit, whereby the viewer is encouraged to empathize with the convicted offender and share in the highs and lows of their journey of self discovery. The central protagonist may have been wrongfully convicted, as Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins) was in *The Shawshank Redemption*, but even when this is not the case, prisoners are often portrayed as old-style romantic heroes struggling to beat (or at least survive) the system.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the prison film is that the prison is a highly ordered, repetitive and restrictive institution and it therefore can give a film an immediate structure and rhythm. Mason (2003) characterizes the cinematic prison as a dehumanizing 'machine' with an impenetrable set of rules and regulations which grind on relentlessly, and he notes that the convention of prison films to continually repeat shots of inmates doing the same tasks – whether it is walking the landings, tramping around the exercise yard,

queuing for and eating the unappetizing food presented to them in the food hall, or breaking rocks – is a powerful visual reminder to the audience of the mundane and monotonous routine inside prison. For Mason, the representation of the prison as a machine is fundamental to the prison film for it is from this metaphor that other themes flow: 'escape from the machine, riot against the machine, the role of the machine in processing and rehabilitating inmates, and entering the machine from the free world as a new inmate' (2003b: 291).

Like 'crime films' more generally, there are a very limited number of plots to be found in prison films – Nellis (1982) suggests no more than a dozen – and for the audience there is a certain gratification to be had from this awareness and recognition of character traits and plot devices. Images of rock breaking chain gangs, depictions of admissions into prison, pyjama-style prison uniforms consisting of broad black-and-white stripes or black arrows on a light background, and scenes of solitary confinement are part and parcel of most people's understanding of imprisonment and have become iconic symbols associated with loss of liberty. Jewkes (2013) goes further, arguing that the prison must be understood through a Dante-esque lens of darkness and lightness and Heaven and Hell, and that these metaphors – which underpin numerous cinematic portrayals – serve to justify and authorize the prison as infernal hell-hole. Of course, prison films also lend themselves to the commercially winning themes of sex and violence, with violent assaults, riots and rapes far more common in cinematic jails than they are in most real-life prisons. It also goes without saying that prison films are by and large about men.<sup>1</sup>

### **The prison film and the power to reform?**

That the prison is frequently depicted as a brutal institution which punishes, degrades and humiliates might be said to present opportunities for those concerned with prison reform to initiate public debates about the futility and inhumanity of incarceration. However, Mason (2008) argues that a closer reading of most prison films reveals not only a reluctance to challenge the existing penal system, but also a voyeuristic obsession with interpersonal violence. Even when the audience is encouraged to empathize with the prisoner protagonist, this is achieved by representing the rest of the prison population as dehumanized monsters and animals: 'while the prison hero/ine is afforded character, emotional development and agency, the rest of the jail is mere cardboard cut-out and cliché. Consequently, prison is constructed as necessary to keep such psychotic deviants caged and incapacitated and the public safe' (Mason, 2008).

An example that illustrates this point well is the 1997 film *Con Air*, which is about prisoners, if not set in a prison, and stars Nicholas Cage as the 'prisoner-good-guy', formerly a highly decorated United States Army Ranger



who accidentally killed a thug who was attacking his pregnant wife. After seven years in a Federal Penitentiary, our hero implausibly finds himself on a plane transporting some of America's most violent criminals to a maximum security prison. Predictably enough the cons take over the aircraft, killing the prison guards and diverting the plane to Las Vegas. Led by Cyrus 'The Virus' Grissom (played by John Malkovich), who charmingly claims to have 'killed more people than cancer', this motley bunch of serial killers, drug smugglers, kidnappers and rapists do nothing to challenge stereotypes of the prison population as inhuman 'others'. Indeed, in persisting in portraying 'the vilest aspects of prison life' (Cheatwood, 1998: 210), the movie industry might be said to be endorsing the view that penal reform is undesirable and unachievable.

It is arguable, then, that cardboard cut-out and clichéd portrayals of prisoners as brutal, violent and ultimately stupid thugs has a role in making prison population growth acceptable to – or at least unquestioned by – the public; in fact Thomas Mathiesen (2001) argues just this. For Mathiesen, the problem is not simply that the public turn a blind eye to dramatically rising global prison populations, but that the picture they *do* receive of imprisonment is grossly misrepresented. Some commentators have suggested that, given most of us will never even see a prison at first hand (it is probably the least visible part of the penal system), the prison film stands in for the real thing (Fiddler, 2007) and, in celebrating prison violence and encouraging voyeuristic participation among the audience, the prison film even has echoes of the spectacle of public executions described by Foucault (1977) in the *ancien regime*, with the film-viewing audience replacing the crowd at the gallows (Sparks, 1992; Mason, 2003; Jarvis, 2004). Furthermore, films which are set in the future – *Fortress* (1992), *Face/Off* (1997) and *Minority Report* (2002), among others – may be an accurate barometer with which to gauge the direction in which punishment is going. The prison of the (near) future is automated, dehumanized and secret, and it is run by sadistic and corrupt wardens working for faceless global corporations. Welcome to the dystopian world of 'Technocorrections' (Nellis, 2006: 226).

Of course, some might say 'why *should* cinema have a reforming agenda?' There are many reasons why audiences are drawn to particular films, not least because of the quality or celebrity status of the actors appearing in them, and the notion of being educated at the cinema may not have mass appeal. In the end, films are primarily about entertainment and even when film producers do try to make a case for prison reform their efforts may be open to misinterpretation (Nellis, 1982). Further, any inherent messages that movies may carry about the inappropriateness of certain aspects of punishment in a civilized society must compete with other media portrayals which Mason characterizes as: 'bottom-up pressure from an angry public, driven onwards by screaming red-top headlines, demands [for] more displays of repressive punishment:

longer prison sentences, boot camps, ASBOS...' (2006: 1). This is why, despite the considerable quantity of prison films made over the last 100 years, few (if any) have done anything to challenge the institution of the prison. Indeed, as film-making has become more sophisticated, able to show ever more graphic scenes designed to shock and titillate, so society has accepted – demanded, even – crueller, more retributive and more humiliating forms of punishment (Jewkes, 2013). For many observers it is of little surprise, then, that for most of the last century, the production and popularity of prison cinema has grown in line with actual incarceration rates. It is also why – despite the harrowing portrayals of capital punishment in movies as diverse as *Let Him Have It* (1991) which is based on the case of Derek Bentley, a British teenager who was hanged in 1953 for allegedly urging his 16-year-old friend to shoot a police officer in the course of a burglary (and posthumously pardoned in the 1990s), and *Dead Man Walking* (1995), a relatively unsentimental Hollywood movie about a convicted murderer on Death Row – mediated and sensationalized real-life offences are frequently greeted by politicians, commentators and newspaper readers in the UK with calls for the return of the death penalty and in the US with demands for its greater use.

## The documentary

Before closing this section on crime films and prison films and going on to discuss the 'remake', it is worth considering a genre that has a more explicit agenda in bringing to public attention the social contexts of crime and the realities of the experience of imprisonment – the *documentary*. Usually made for television rather than cinema release, there has been a long tradition of post-war television documentaries, especially in the UK and Australia, which aim to narrate social history from below. One of the most influential was the classic documentary series that started with *Seven Up!* about a group of seven-year-old children, first broadcast on commercial television in the UK in 1964. The man behind the series is Michael Apted who also directed such blockbusters as the Bond film, *The World Is Not Enough* (1999) and the spy thriller, *Gorky Park* (1983). Although not originally planned to have a follow-up, one of the production team had the idea of returning to film the children aged 14 and the series is still going strong, revisiting the participants every seven years.<sup>2</sup> The *Up!* series is essentially a longitudinal study of social class comprised of in-depth, open-ended interviews recorded on film, and might justifiably be regarded as a precursor to reality television (Burawoy, 2009) or, at the very least, the first example of 'Quality Tabloid TV' (Willis, 2009: 351). The subjects numbered 14 in all and they were from different areas of the

country and selected from all points on the socio-economic scale. The idea behind the series was to examine the proposition that the class system in the UK is so embedded that a person's life path is predestined and fixed. While there were a few cases of upward mobility among the 14 participants, one scholar has commented that at the extremes of the spectrum, i.e. the individuals from the upper classes and the very poor, 'the accuracy of the children's personal predictions for their own class trajectories is shocking in its precision' (Burawoy, 2009: 319). Although seen almost entirely through the lens of class and thus perhaps a very British take on individuals' lifecourses, the Jesuit maxim which inspired the series, 'Give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man', has universal resonance and the programme has spawned imitators in many other countries, including the US, Russia, South Africa and Japan.

### **Documentary as ethnography**

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Documentaries resonate with the work of ethnographic researchers who revisit the field, seek to create coherent narratives from an excess of material, and who confront ethical dilemmas as they investigate the private lives of subjects (Thorne, 2009). Like an ethnographer, documentary makers usually end up with a surplus of material: in *42 Up* Apted says that he uses about 1/30th of the footage gathered. While the documentary genre appears to offer transparency and honesty, it is of course within the power of the director to control, manipulate or exploit the medium. Like any sociological analysis, the most interesting variable can be applied retrospectively to make sense of the whole or to give the data a particular slant. Duneier (2009) cites the case of Nicholas, who grew up on a farm and had little structured activity to occupy him. 'The world of the seven-year-old can be primitive, even violent,' the narrator says as Nicholas discusses his enjoyment of fighting. For Duneier, Nicholas' lack of discipline makes him the same as the East End working-class children in an orphanage who were portrayed as having too much freedom and not enough structure and discipline, but because he went on to study physics at Oxford and became a university professor the focus moves to him at age seven saying that when he grew up he wanted to understand the moon, and as an adult saying he was always interested in technical and scientific things (Duneier, 2009).

Apted acknowledges the manipulative possibilities of a genre that purports to tell the truth, and confesses that during the making of *21 Up* he believed Tony (who at seven was at an East End primary school and dreamed of being a jockey) would soon be in prison, so he filmed him around dangerous looking areas for use in later films:

He lived in a pretty violent environment, and was making quite a lot of cash running bets at an East London greyhound-racing track for some pretty unsavoury looking characters. It didn't look like the future held much promise, so I had him take me round all of the crime hot-spots in anticipation of shooting 28 Up! in one of Her Majesty's prisons. I was wrong and embarrassed. Tony married Debbie, they had children, and his life took a different course. Tony was decent about it and let me off the hook: 'Don't judge a book by its cover, Michael', he told me. (Apted, 2009: 362)

Nonetheless some critics have found it difficult to move away from a Marxist interpretation of the series. Paul Willis laments 'Class still matters to me' (Willis, 2009: 349), and he talks of the 'achingness I pick up in Michael's subjects [which] continues to relate to the structured exercise of power, the costs of domination and the pains of subordination' (ibid.).

The prison documentary brings the exercise of power and pains of subordination into particularly sharp relief. Given our earlier discussion of the failure of prison films to have any positive impact on prison reform, it seems a bold assertion to say that the prison documentary may be one of the few types of prison film that can claim to have made any difference at all to perceptions of prisons and prisoners but, given Michael Apted's belief that 'empathy is at the heart of most documentaries' (2009: 360), there may be a case for the suggestion. Of course, some prison documentaries are simply voyeuristic and pander to stereotypes: *America's Most Deadly Prison Gangs* and *Louis Theroux: Behind Bars* (filmed at San Quentin prison in California) are two examples which apparently set out to demonstrate that US jails really are like their Hollywood depictions.

By contrast there have been several thoughtful and challenging prison documentaries and series broadcast on British television which may genuinely be able to claim some influence; although, in the case of *Feltham Sings* (2002) a Channel 4 documentary musical filmed inside the biggest young offenders' prison in Europe and co-produced by well-regarded film-maker and academic Roger Graef, the notion of inmates expressing their thoughts and lives to reggae, R&B and hip hop beats did not precipitate a more enlightened attitude to prison arts. Despite the endorsement of Graef who is quoted as saying: 'The arts - especially music that links with their experience - can reach those parts that no other form of rehabilitation does' (<http://tinyurl.com/yehnwx4>), the programme pre-empted an announcement by the Justice Minister that arts in prison were to be curtailed. Embarrassed by a newspaper report that inmates at a high-security prison were offered courses in stand-up comedy, the Minister's directive to prison governors that they must consider how activities 'might be perceived by the public and victims' was interpreted by the course teacher rather differently: 'I wouldn't mind if it was a new idea, but we've been doing this programme for 10 years now. I'm trying to understand what



other areas of criminal justice the *Sun* gets to decide' (quoted in the *Independent*, 25 January 2009). In fact, the public at large may not be as punitive as the Minister assumes: prison documentaries are generally commercial as well as critical successes and it is unlikely that all viewers are tuning in to be disgusted and outraged at how cushy prisons are. For example, the first part of an ITV series about the women's prison *Holloway*, which focused on a teenage girl who self-harms, won the prime time slot with 4.2 million viewers, or a 17.9 per cent share of the 9pm to 10pm audience ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/18/tv-ratings-holloway](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/18/tv-ratings-holloway)). Moreover, several newspaper TV critics confessed that they tuned in with certain preconceptions largely based on their viewing of *Bad Girls* or *Cell Block H*, but watched instead with sadness or distress.

The Executive Producer of *Holloway*, Paul Hamann, has made several other documentaries about criminal justice, including *Fourteen Days in May* (1987), a film covering the last two weeks in the life of Edward Earl Johnson who became only the second man to be executed in Mississippi after the national hiatus in capital punishment was ended in 1977. *Fourteen Days in May* charts the build up to the execution; the preparations of the gas chamber, the media coverage and the legal challenges, led by the Human Rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith. Commenting on the film, Jamie Bennett (2009) says that the film is given 'an unusual moral depth' by virtue of the fact that it raises specific concerns about the validity of Johnson's conviction, including an alibi witness who came forward who was refused access to the court. As the execution approached, Hamann became increasingly disturbed by events and started not only to openly sympathize with Johnson, but also raise his concerns with those in authority. The difficulties – and indeed, undesirability – of impartiality on the part of the documentary film-maker are articulated by Hamann in an interview with Bennett:

I felt I was in a strange nightmare because it became clear off camera that the prison psychiatrist, the warden, the death row staff, all felt he did not commit the crime he was convicted of. At that moment I stopped being the objective BBC journalist and started doing everything I could to stop the execution ... In the end it didn't work. The last week of making that film was really horrible, I didn't want to be making it, but morally we had to. Afterwards, myself and Clive Stafford Smith ... made a follow up film called *The Journey* where we tracked down the man who everyone thought had really carried out the murder ... the film did prove that Edward Earl Johnson should not have been executed. It was a film made a year too late. (Bennett, 2009: 47)

In the same interview Hamann says that he was greatly influenced by the work of Fred Wiseman, an American pioneer of documentary film-making in the tradition of *cinéma vérité* and by the British documentary film-maker Rex Bloomstein, particularly his eight-part series *Strangeways* about life inside

HMP Manchester. As someone who has shown his work in prisons and lectured at criminological departments, and is a recipient of two British Academy Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) awards, Bloomstein has to a large degree built his reputation on exposing the realities of prison life and addressing aspects of the British penal system that are usually closed to public scrutiny. Employing apparently simple (though in fact highly sophisticated) film-making techniques that eschew background music and narrated voice-overs in favour of a more direct focus capturing genuine, spontaneous emotions (sometimes known as 'fly-on-the-wall' filming), Bloomstein is widely appreciated for humanizing his subjects, while still conveying the complexities of their personalities, motives and circumstances; a process he has called 'undermining the simplicities' (Bloomstein, 2008; cf. Bennett, 2006a).

Perhaps the most profoundly affecting of Bloomstein's subjects was Steve, who was interviewed twice; first for *Lifer*, a two-hour documentary made for ITV in 1982 and, 21 years later for the follow-up, *Lifer – Living With Murder*, which was broadcast on Channel 4. In the first film Steve is serving a life sentence for kicking a man to death at the age of 17. Twelve years into his sentence he is cocky, athletic-looking, restless and resistant. Prone to responding violently to provocation, he describes how his anger has led him to trash his cell and cause damage to the prison wing on several occasions. He speaks contemptuously of the prison officers who restrain him physically and with drugs. But 21 years later we see the effects that the 'liquid cosh' has had on Steve. Bloated, dulled and his speech so slurred that the interview has to be accompanied by subtitles, the effects of 32 years in custody are dramatically conveyed. Now held in the secure wing of a psychiatric hospital and reduced to a shell of his former self, there can be no more graphic or moving illustration of a life inside.

With a prolific back catalogue that includes *The Sentence* (1976), *Release* (1976), *Prisoners' Wives* (1977), *Parole* (1979), *Strangeways* (1980), *Lifer* (1983), *Lifers* (1984), *Strangeways Revisited* (2000), *Lifer: Living With Murder* (2003) and *Kids Behind Bars* (2005), Bloomstein has arguably done more than any other single individual to reveal the experience of imprisonment and its effects on inmates and their families. He has also influenced those who work within the Prison Service, including its senior personnel. The most published author on Bloomstein's work, Jamie Bennett (see, for example, Bennett, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) is also a serving prison Governor, while former Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, has cited *Strangeways* as the primary inspiration for his decision to join the service (Narey, 2002).

The question remains, however, whether the powerful, reflective and raw films created by Graef, Hamann, Bloomstein and others have the ability to challenge public attitudes to prisoners. Rex Bloomstein firmly believes that documentaries do have the ability to alter entrenched attitudes and he counsels against underestimating the potential for a change in public attitudes, if

the complexity of criminal conduct is allowed to be developed in documentary form (Bloomstein, 2010, personal correspondence). Conversely, the empathy inherent in the documentary process may only be felt by those viewers who already share the narrative's perspective and have pre-existing sympathies with its subjects. While prison documentaries such as those described here unquestionably create a profoundly important media space for more considered and thoughtful reflection (Bennett, 2006), the audience may inevitably view them – like any other media text – through the lens of their pre-existing cultural resources, experiences and prejudices.

## The remake

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There is nothing that divides film-goers more than a remake of a much-loved 'classic'. While there have been some notable critical and commercial successes (*The Departed*; *The Thomas Crown Affair*; *Ocean's 11*) other remakes have been met with indifference, mirth or even outrage (*The Italian Job*; *The Wicker Man*; *Psycho*). The most successful remakes are probably those that stay broadly true to their predecessor (perhaps with some oblique references to the original for those in the know) yet which also add something new. If a story is compelling, yet would benefit from a modern treatment or change of context, so much the better. Some film buffs will always argue that remakes are inferior, but that doesn't mean that the majority of current cinema goers won't prefer them. In part, the attraction of a remake to modern audiences lies in the quickened pace of action, the special effects and computer generated wizardry, and the inclusion of familiar A-list stars. But what can remakes of classic crime films tell us about changing social attitudes to crime over the decades?

At a fairly superficial level they may tell us that film-goers have a greater appetite for violence (including sexual violence) and verbal profanity than their forebears; and they certainly indicate more relaxed censorship laws than in previous eras. The remake usually highlights that ours truly is a celebrity culture and that sometimes movies become vehicles for high-profile stars even if some critics question the appropriateness of a particular actor in a role. Equally, stars are now more able to move between quite diverse roles as heroes, anti-heroes or downright villains and are more willing to play psychopaths, killers and characters who have few, if any, redeeming features. Hollywood movies fully exploit all the technological tools at the film-maker's disposal, creating spectacular, eye-popping, explosive action and underlining the fact that the film industry is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. But can movies help us chart deeper historical transitions; for example, changing social fears and anxieties? Let us consider one film, *The Taking of Pelham One Two*

*Three* (1974), and its remake, *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009) to see if it can shed light on this interesting proposition.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The Taking of Pelham One Two Three and The Taking of Pelham 123***

*The Taking of Pelham 123* (directed by Tony Scott, 2009) stars John Travolta as Ryder, a sociopath and leader of a kidnap gang who take over a train on the New York subway, but also (somewhat implausibly) a former financier on Wall Street who was convicted of fraud and has come out of prison with comic-book prisoner characterizations: shaved head, poor complexion, a handlebar moustache and a lot of tattoos. His demands are succinct: he wants \$10 million in 60 minutes or he'll start killing the hostages (18 passengers and a conductor) one-by-one. His adversary is Walter Garber (Denzel Washington); a train dispatcher who happens to be on duty at the time and becomes an unwitting hostage negotiator. As the film unfolds, we learn that the quiet, modest and well-meaning Garber has a back-story which Ryder learns of. He has been demoted while an investigation is conducted into allegations that he took a bribe (which, later, he is forced to confess when Ryder threatens to kill a young man onboard the train – his defence is that it was to pay for his kids' college education). The focus of the film is the relationship formed by Ryder and Garber, as they engage in a psychological chess-game.

In the 1974 original (directed by Joseph Sargent), the villain's adversary and 'avenger' was not a train dispatcher but a policeman, Lieutenant Zachary Garber, played by Walter Matthau (Zach Garber became Walter Garber in the remake, in homage to Matthau). A natural curmudgeon, Matthau's character is terse, cynical and 'hard-boiled' in the classic tradition of cinematic cops and private eyes who have seen it all before. The fact that modern cinema audiences bring to their viewing ambivalent, even hostile, attitudes to law enforcers might be partial explanation for the decision to make Garber a train dispatcher in the remake. In contrast to Matthau's character, Denzel Washington's Garber is a much softer, more sensitive character; presumably intended to elicit sympathy, but universally panned by film critics for being far less interesting than his predecessor. As the *Independent's* movie reviewer, Geoffrey Macnab, put it:

We are lumbered with details about his private life: we hear him promising his wife he'll pick up some milk before he gets home in the evening and we learn how he may have had his hand in the till to pay for his daughter's college fees. The remake creaks under the weight of its sentimentality. (*Independent*, 12 June 2009)

The 'villain' also diverged quite considerably between the 1974 film and its 2009 successor. Most critics who compared the two films suggested that, despite Travolta's cartoonish Hells Angel appearance and expletive-ridden dialogue (both of which owe debts to the character he played in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*), the urbane Robert Shaw was much more successful in conveying quiet menace and a cold-blooded and calculating attitude toward the hostages. Travolta's frenetic characterization suits the faster pace of the action. Where Shaw was quietly chilling, Travolta is a loose cannon 'willing to kill innocents not out of necessity but out of spite' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 June 2009), perhaps reflecting contemporary fears that violent crime is random and indiscriminatory. Although writing several years before *The Taking of Pelham 123* was made, Thomas Leitch might have been talking about the film when he said that violence was becoming 'more and more successful, and more and more in demand, in selling movies to a generation of teenagers who had grown up with remote controls that had sharpened their impatience, discouraged the deferred gratifications of slow-moving films, and reintroduced...[the] principle of slapstick comedy' (Leitch, 2002: 45–6). In the original movie, all the gang members are dressed conservatively and alike; all wear large framed glasses and false moustaches as disguise; and all go under colour-coded monikers, copied to similarly creepy effect by Quentin Tarantino in *Reservoir Dogs* 20 years later (Shaw is 'Mr Blue'; his accomplices Messrs. Green, Brown and Grey). The original movie thus follows the more common convention of the time of setting up relatively clear-cut distinctions between 'evil' and 'good' (personified by Blue and Lt. Garber). By the time of the remake, it was more usual to find distinctions blurred between 'good' people and 'bad' people and adversaries were frequently portrayed as mirror images or similarly morally ambiguous (*You're just like me!* says Ryder to Garber).

An immediate and obvious difference between the 1974 film and the 2009 version are the cultural attitudes towards 'minorities' and the use of language to express intolerance. While today's cinema audiences are more tolerant of frequent use of the 'f-word' (which does appear in the original but with far less frequency and to much more shocking effect), they are less broadminded about language that reveals socio-political motivated hatred of others. The original film was a very 1970s production, containing casual misogyny (*I gotta watch my language just because they let a few broads in?*), racism (*shut your mouth, nigger*) and xenophobia (a supposedly comic scene has Matthau referring to Japanese visitors as 'Chinamen' and 'monkeys' to their faces, unaware that they speak perfect English). Another area where the remake noticeably differs from its predecessor is in the use of technology; both in the cinematography and in the plotline. The hostage-takers set up a wi-fi booster to enable Ryder to access his laptop underground and monitor the Dow Jones Index (he has short-sold the market and invested in gold, earning him a profit far larger than the ransom money). But unknown to the kidnappers, a young male passenger

has an active laptop with a webcam, which has been knocked to the floor but is facing the interior of the carriage with a decent view of the action. It reconnects using the same wi-fi link, re-establishing a previously used videochat to his girlfriend's PC. When she realizes what she's witnessing via the webcam she alerts – and provides a feed to – the local television station, thus providing a perfect example of synopticism, to titillate, terrify and panic the TV audience watching at home (Mathiesen, 1997).

Some critics felt that the producer of the remake employed technical trickery simply because it was available and to cover up for a much thinner plot than in the original (hectic camera action, high colour contrast levels and frenetic editing and are the hallmarks of Tony Scott's films). The more mundane plot devices of the earlier film are also preferred by many:

It's all in the sneeze. If you want to know why 1970s thrillers are so much better than their counterparts today, you just need to pay attention to the part that flu and coughing play in the original ... The film-makers don't rely on the visual pyrotechnics that characterise Scott's movie, in which the camera never seems able to stay still for more than a moment. Instead, key plot points are conveyed in far more subtle fashion. Who needs a line of dialogue or a final-reel shootout when you can have a character giving himself away by blowing into a handkerchief? What better way to depict a corrupt and ineffectual mayor than to show him in bed with flu, being scolded by a nurse? (Macnab, *Independent*, 12 June 2009)

In 2009, the conflict takes place in the control room between Garber, his boss and a professional hostage negotiator, but in the original movie, all the conflict occurs within the gang and on board the train as Mr Blue fights to control dissent and disharmony among his men. In 1974, the gang are portrayed as a disparate band of thieves but by 2009 they reflect the *zeitgeist* by initially appearing as terrorists and then being revealed as the new enemies of the people; bankers and hedge fund operators (French, *Observer*, 2 August 2009).

Terror striking on an underground train retains some currency as a modern urban nightmare. One only has to think of the incident on the Tokyo subway in 1995 when the deadly virus SARIN was released on several lines killing 12 people, or the suicide bombings on the London underground in July 2005 which killed the four bombers and 52 others, to be reminded of the threats that a subterranean transport system can harbour. Nevertheless, in a post- 9/11 world, the train no longer has quite the same potency as the passenger plane as a source of fear. Added to that, the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123* remains faithful to the 1974 original's simple plot device of having the hijackers fool the authorities into believing they are still aboard the train when they have in fact escaped. Employing the same, relatively low-tech method, they lock the driving lever in the full-speed position, bypassing the 'dead man's switch'; a supposedly fail-safe system that automatically comes into operation if the driver of the train becomes incapacitated. Even the energetic pace that

is maintained throughout Scott's version and the obligatory high-speed chase at the end of the film (a new addition since the 1974 version) do not prevent the remake from having a rather quaint, old-fashioned feel. Most surprising of all is that Scott's film makes no reference to 9/11 itself:

Tony Scott's version of *The Taking of Pelham 123* makes one very curious omission. It doesn't foreground at all the event that changed everything – the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. This gives the film's portrayal of New York a time-warp feel. The hijackers and the cops alike both seem to be playing by old-fashioned rules. We're not in the realm of suicide bombing or apocalyptic destruction. The robbers want a ransom, not necessarily to bring western democracy tumbling down. (Macnab, *Independent*, 12 June 2009)

This omission is especially puzzling because, although much of the action takes place beneath New York, *The Taking of Pelham 123*, like so many other films, is in part a fable about the city itself. As the *Independent* film critic implies, the character of the city mayor is an allegory for the state of the city itself. In the original film, the mayor is a neurotic, bloated and sickly figure who can be read semiotically as a symbol of the bureaucratic mess that New York was in, and of the US's political vulnerabilities following the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal. The original screenplay is rife with references to the instabilities troubling New Yorkers (*We don't want another Attica do we?*, in reference to the most serious prison riot in US history which occurred in 1971; *There's another strike taking place; The city is broke*). According to Macnab (2009), New York was a city 'coming apart at the seams', it had 'something apocalyptic about it'; a sense of urban unease later captured in extreme form in *Escape From New York* (1981) in which the whole city becomes a maximum-security prison. In the remake of *The Taking of Pelham 123* the mayor (played by James Gandolfini of *Sopranos* fame) has become a slick, sardonic, financially savvy figure in control of his technologically sophisticated multi-media environment, and New York is similarly clean-cut and efficient (even the train carriages are remarkably free of graffiti). The final shots when the action moves above ground are unashamedly sentimental and are perhaps the most telling – if still somewhat oblique – reference to the legacy of 9/11. Flying in a helicopter over the beautifully-lit Manhattan skyline at sunset, the official hostage negotiator remarks to Garber that the city's beauty reminds him of what he's fighting to preserve.

## Discussion

The analysis above has highlighted some of the differences between two versions of a film separated by 35 years, and what they have to tell us about

changing perceptions of, fears about, and attitudes to, crime. To broaden this discussion and generalize somewhat, the films of the 1960s were about art burglars, jewel thieves, bank robbers or Cold War spies, and the individuals that perpetrated them were essentially gentleman (usually English) who played by the rules. Crime was cool and the movies of this period were filled with dashing heroes, dastardly villains and glamorous but merely decorative women. However, by 1970, fears about violent, inter-personal crime were increasing and the shock of rising urban crime rates in the US was hitting home – literally. In 1969 the murder of Sharon Tate (an American actress and wife of film director Roman Polanski who was heavily pregnant at the time of her death) and four others at Tate's home and then, two days later, the equally brutal murder of Rosemary and Leno LaBianca in their home, stunned and repulsed the American public. It was reported that the gang that committed the crimes – Charles Manson and his 'family' of followers – had precipitated the murders by breaking into several homes; sometimes stealing items, but sometimes simply moving them around in what they called 'creepy crawlies'. The violation of the domestic space – particularly these homes in attractive, suburban, affluent neighbourhoods – have since become the theme of countless crime and horror movies (*The Last House on the Left*, 1972, remade in 2009; *Funny Games*, 1997, remade 2007 and *Panic Room*, 2002) (Simon, 2009; cf. Lowenstein, 2005).

As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, the 1970s also gave rise to several cop and private eye movies concerning a lone man taking on conspiracies and corruption by state, municipal and police organizations (*Dirty Harry*, 1971; *Chinatown*, 1974). By the 1980s the maverick police officer was still around but by now he had morphed into an all action hero with an excessive physique to make up for his limited dialogue. It is somewhat ironic that the US state which has chosen to pursue the most emotive, passionate and retributive approach to crime control (Barker, 2009) is California, the home of the movie industry and the state governed by Arnold Schwarzenegger who once played *The Terminator* (1984). Another iconic cop film of this period, cited in many policy documents, academic studies and media reports, is *Robocop*. Released in 1987, *Robocop* summed up the changes in policing that many felt were overdue. In the UK, a series of civil disturbances had demonstrated how ill-equipped police officers were to deal with large-scale disorder (they infamously faced rioters in Brixton, London in 1981 armed only with truncheons and dustbin lids) and there were growing demands for the police to get 'tooled-up'. As riot shields, full-face helmets, rubber bullets and tear gas were introduced and the term 'zero tolerance policing' was imported from the United States, many commentators made comparisons between law enforcers and the police cyborg of the film. The motif still retains sufficient currency for documentary maker Roger Graef to observe in 2009 (following a public demonstration which the police were accused of handling with undue force; analysed in Graef's Channel 4 film *Dispatches: Ready for a Riot*) that 'Police dressed up as Robocop act like him too' (*Independent*, 18 October 2009).



The early 1990s saw the rise of the serial killer movie (*Silence of the Lambs*, 1991; *American Psycho*, 1991; *Se7en*, 1995) which Jarvis (2007) argues was closely linked to the rise of a voracious consumer culture: society's greed and vanity in this period was transmuted into themes of cannibalistic consumption, orgiastic gluttony and fetishism in the movies. The decade also brought another kind of 'excess' – computer-generated imagery (CGI) – to most films, although the decade closed with an exceedingly low-budget riposte to CGI – *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – a horror film made to look like a grainy, home movie and seeking to emulate the *realism* of documentaries. Since then, movies (at least movies aimed exclusively at adults – we'll leave aside the pirates and magicians who have conquered the box office in recent years) have been dominated by technology, terrorists, military combat, environmental disasters and other apocalyptic global threats to the human race.

To an extent, this is simply art imitating life and life imitating art. Stories in cinema run parallel to stories in the news and film-makers are merely picking up on the issues that audiences will recognize and which provoke the strongest reactions. Hence, many of the themes that have been highlighted in this chapter – drama; predictable storylines and themes; a simple narrative arc; masculine individualism, autonomy and lack of normative social ties; the risk of random, violent (and sexual) crime; the importance of A-list celebrity actors, etc. – all spectacularly and graphically portrayed thanks to the technological tool-box at directors' disposal – are precisely the values that news journalists use to structure their reporting of crime (see Chapter 2). It is not surprising that the spate of films about children being left unsupervised by their parents (most famously, *Home Alone*, 1990) coincided with several real-life 'home alone' cases, or that recent cinema releases have reflected contemporary moral panics, including a sensitively-handled movie about the rape and murder of a little girl by a paedophile neighbour (*The Lovely Bones*, 2009) and a film about a four-year-old child abducted from her apartment, the release of which was postponed when Madeleine McCann disappeared (*Gone Baby Gone*, 2007).

## Concluding thoughts

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The question of what makes a film a crime film is a tricky one and this chapter – by including pirate movies, Westerns, prison films and documentaries – has pushed the definition about as far as is possible. But the truth is that there are few films which contain zero visual references to crime, deviance, anti-social behaviour, policing, punishment, justice, or any number of other criminological themes. Is *Superman* a crime film? Or *Some Like It Hot*? What about *The Truman Show*?

While academics attempt to address the thorny question of why people become criminals via recourse to competing theories such as 'rational choice', disadvantageous life chances, genetic predispositions, environmental factors, and so on, crime films offer a similarly diverse range of motivations for criminal behaviour. Gangster, pirate and outlaw movies link crime to a sociopathic alienation from a remote or uncaring society combined with excessive vanity or megalomania. Private eye and classic cop films blame institutional corruption or a malfunctioning system. Modern police films link criminal behaviour to psychopathy. Heist movies and kidnap films peg it on simple greed. Film noir blames sexual victimization by a predatory femme fatale. British films use class, and sometimes race, to explore how the disenchantment of those who are economically and culturally at the margins of society can turn into aggression and violence. For the criminologist the themes of crime films may overlap with their academic interests but, equally, their appeal might be that they deal with matters beyond the range of academic criminology:

Philosophically, [crime films] raise questions concerning the nature of good and evil. Psychologically, they encourage viewers to identify with victims and offenders – even serial killers – whose sexualities, vulnerabilities and moralities may be totally unfamiliar. Ethically, they take passionate moral positions that would be out of place in academic analyses. Crime films constitute a type of discourse different from academic criminology, one with its own types of truth and its own constraints. (Rafter, 2007)

In fact, part of the appeal of writing scholarly treatments of crime movies may also be that they permit more passion and moral positioning than most 'criminological' subjects; certainly, academic analyses of film usually betray the personal predilections of the author. All of which leaves me slightly puzzled as I realize that I have come to the end of this chapter without mentioning my own favourite crime film: *Battle Royale* (2000). Directed by Kinji Fukasaku, the movie is a kitsch Japanese take on teenage delinquency which contains cartoonish, bloody brutality similar to that seen in Quentin Tarantino's movies (Tarantino has discussed in many interviews his debt to Fukasaku and his son, Kenta Fukasaku, who wrote the screenplay). The film has a simple plot. While on a school field trip, 42 students are taken hostage and find themselves on a remote island where they must play a fascist government sponsored game called Battle Royale. Each is made to wear a collar which will explode, killing them instantly, if they break any rules, and each is randomly assigned a different weapon and told that they must fight each other to the death. They have three days to kill each other until one survives – or they all die. The film has a quality which is part video-game and part reality TV. What does *Battle Royale* tell us about its socio-political context and about public attitudes to crime in the 21st century? Must it be viewed differently in the light of the ghastly events on Utøya island in July 2011, described in Chapter 2? These are discussions that will have to wait for another time ...

## Summary

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- This chapter has attempted to account for the enduring appeal of crime and prison films, both to scholars of media criminology and to the wider public. It has offered several possible explanations for their attraction to audiences, ranging from an appeal to everyone's innate desire to be deviant, to a cathartic satisfaction in seeing offenders get their just deserts.
- It has been argued that a relatively small number of generic themes dominate crime film. This chapter has chosen to focus on three: masculinity, autonomy and the city, all of which are examined via some of the most popular sub-genres including: the Western, the gangster movie, the pirate film, the spy franchises, the classic American cop movie, the private eye or film noir, and gritty British cinematic realism.
- The 'prison film' has been included because of its sheer popularity and longevity. It has been noted that, while most academic scholars are content to analyse crime films without going much beyond their entertainment value, there have historically been greater demands of prison films to educate and influence the public on matters of penal reform. It is generally recognized, however, that prison films have on the whole not succeeded in this endeavour and have instead continued to create and perpetuate stereotypes of prisoners as a dangerous and violent underclass.
- The documentary has arguably had more success in informing the viewing public about the pains of imprisonment, although its claims to realism may be compromised, as the discussion of Apted's 'Up' films has demonstrated. Like other forms of ethnography, the documentary cannot be separated from the beliefs, motives and agenda of its originator; and, like all other media content, the documentary also has a mission to entertain.
- The cinematic remake has much to tell us about changing socio-political climates and attitudes to crime and punishment over the decades. Our discussion of two versions of *The Taking of Pelham 123*, made three decades apart, illustrates the ways in which audience's perceptions of offenders, crime, the police and other authorities, have evolved; the different entertainment imperatives that viewers bring with them; and the sentimental affection with which New York is held, especially since 9/11.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

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1. Reflect on some of your own favourite crime and prison films and why it is that you enjoy them. In what ways do you think your responses might be different to those of your parents' and grandparents' generation?
2. Write a review comparing an original crime film and its remake. From this comparative analysis, what can you observe about emerging social anxieties and

changing attitudes to crime and justice over the years covered by the two films you have reviewed?

3. Given this volume's earlier discussions about media influence and effects (and the problems with making causal links between screen violence and real-life offending behaviours) how would you characterize the relationship between crime movies and criminals?
4. Why have prison movies, despite their popularity, failed to inform penal reform agendas? Do you agree with Rex Bloomstein that documentaries such as those he produces have greater potential to change public perceptions of prisoners and lead to less punitive attitudes more widely?

### **FURTHER READING**

Just as there are a vast amount of crime films to choose from, there seems to be an almost equally daunting array of academic commentaries on them, making any particular recommendations appear highly subjective. However, since first writing this chapter, one excellent book has been published which I would thoroughly recommend: Rafter, N. and Brown, M. (2011) *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture* (New York University Press). In this, the authors base each chapter on a criminological theory and apply it to a famous Hollywood movie, so, for example: Strain Theories and *Traffic*; Feminist Criminology and *Thelma and Louise*. Although, like this chapter, inevitably highly selective in the films they discuss, Rafter and Brown provide an inventive and very readable treatment of many of the theories discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume. Other than that, I will limit my suggestions to the two books I found especially useful: Leitch, T. (2002) *Crime Films* (Cambridge University Press); and Mason, P. (ed.) (2006) *Captured By the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture* (Willan/Routledge). In addition, I would urge readers to follow up the references to some of the criminologists mentioned here who have written about film, among them, Mike Nellis, Jamie Bennett, Michael Fiddler, Richard Sparks, Eamonn Carrabine, Michelle Brown and Nicole Rafter; and some of the media/cultural theorists who are interested in crime movies, including Martin Parker, Steve Chibnall and Brian Jarvis.

### **Notes**

1. The titles of many prison films about women give an indication of their agenda, among them: *Girls in Prison* (1956), *Women in Cages* (1971), *The Big Doll's House* (1971) and *Chicks in Chains* (1982). There are, however, exceptions, including *Yield to the Night* (1957) which starred Diana Dors as the

condemned murderess, Mary Hilton, and which Steve Chibnall (2006) credits with making a crucial contribution to the abolition of the death penalty almost a decade later.

2. The most recent instalment with the original participants was *49 Up*, broadcast in 2005, and *56 Up* is currently planned to be shown in 2011/12. A new version of *7 Up* was started in 2000, continuing with *14 Up 2000* in 2007.
3. Both films adapt their basic plot from John Godey's 1973 novel. There was an additional made-for-TV version in 1998.

