

BOOK REVIEWS

Jamie Bennett and Victoria Knight, *Prisoners on Prison Films* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. xiii + 134, ISBN 9783030609481 (hb), £44.99.

Jamie Bennett is in a unique position to write about prison films. He regularly reviews films for the *Prison Journal* and has worked in prisons since 1996. He is currently a Deputy Director for Security, Order and Counter Terrorism in HM Prison and Probation Service and has been a Governor of a variety of prisons including a therapeutic one. Victoria Knight is Director of the Prison and Probation Research Hub at De Montfort University.

This book examines the unique perspective that prisoners themselves bring to their viewing of prison films. But as the authors (and Yvonne Jewkes in her foreword) make clear, this study concerns male prisoners viewing films about men, and specifically men serving long and indeterminate sentences deep in the English prison system. They discuss only a small selection of British prison films, namely *Bronson* (2008), *Screwed* (2011), *Everyday* (2012), *Starred Up* (2013) and *We are Monster* (2014), and these are films that were released at a time that saw prison populations at historically high levels, with increased sentence lengths, greater use of indeterminate sentencing and, in the case of the more recent examples, a deterioration in conditions and safety on account of austerity.

An introductory chapter sets out some context for the penal and prison film before the five following examine each film in turn and provide a conclusion. The authors had hoped for a foreword from a former prisoner as well as an afterword by a film-maker, but unfortunately these were stymied by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each chapter emphasises different aspects of prison life as mediated through film and critiqued by its subjects. Understandably there are overlaps around several issues, such as masculinity and violence, and these come to the fore in the chapter on Michael Peterson, who goes

Journal of British Cinema and Television 18.4 (2021): 542–552

© Edinburgh University Press

www.euppublishing.com/jbctv

Book Reviews

by the *nom de guerre* Charles Bronson. The prisoners who viewed this film noted that it interrogated the tension between authoritarian modes of control and the soft power of the incentive schemes. Having themselves received ‘privileges’ under such schemes they recognised that the resistance that Bronson offered was not open to them, and that his actions continued to reveal the hard power beneath the soft.

Starred Up focuses on the experience of a young man on a long sentence transferring to an adult prison. The prison audience picked out themes around prison subculture and everyday prison life: rehabilitation, reform and redemption, and violence and corruption among prison staff. Although the prisoners had largely removed themselves from the subculture represented here, they clearly recognised it. While staff violence and corruption was something of which they were aware, it was more as a hint rather than a current threat. The film’s scepticism about rehabilitative programmes chimed with their own feelings and experience. As the film was written by Jonathon Asser, formerly a psychodynamic counsellor at Wandsworth prison, this should surely have concerned Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service more than it seems to have done.

Race is at the heart of *We Are Monster* as it tells the story of twenty-year-old Robert Stewart, who murdered his nineteen-year-old cellmate, Zahid Mubarek, in a racist attack at Feltham Young Offenders Institution. A clearly identified problem was this film’s focus on the perpetrator rather than the victim, yet the attempt to understand Stewart without excusing him was appreciated by the viewers. In this instance, Black and Asian prisoners were far keener than white ones to discuss issues of race.

Screwed focuses on a new recruit to the prison service and his eventual disillusion with it. Discussion of the film led to some empathetic insights into the difficulties faced by prison staff and a number of revelations about prison subculture.

Everyday (2012) was filmed over an extended period with the actors – particularly the child ones – ageing appropriately. The prison audience found its pace slow, but its focus on the pains of imprisonment for families was too much for some of the audience, for whom it triggered unwelcome feelings.

In issue 12: 2 of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Dario Llinares contrasted the differing ways that the imprisoned male body – violent and violated – is depicted in *Bronson* and in Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* (2008). It would have been interesting to have seen what Bennett/Knight and Llinares made of each other’s work, particularly as throughout the book criminologists and the prisoners

Book Reviews

are more frequently cited than media or cultural theorists. However, it is very worthwhile to hear prison voices, often at length, and the book serves as a useful corrective to a purely theoretical reading of such films, concluding that film discussion groups in prison and prisoner-led media production have distinct therapeutic value.

Nic Groombridge (St Mary's University, Twickenham)
DOI: 10.3366/jbtv.2021.0595

Cat Mahoney, *Women in Neoliberal Postfeminist Television Drama: Representing Gendered Experiences of the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. vii + 134, ISBN: 9783030304485 (hb), £44.99.

Cat Mahoney's *Women in Neoliberal Postfeminist Television Drama* illustrates the degree to which postfeminist narratives have permeated popular media focused on the Second World War era. Although it was created as a social category in the early 1990s, there is no agreed-upon definition of postfeminism, which is often used pejoratively to describe those who attempt to undermine or distort feminist goals or who oppose the second wave's radicalisation of the movement.

Mahoney's theoretical framework draws on Rosalind Gill's postfeminist 'sensibility' to explore popular media's flirtation with feminism which Mahoney characterises as postfeminist. Four of the book's five chapters each focus on a single series, most of which have received scant critical attention. Chapter 2 examines the BBC series *Land Girls* (2009–11), Chapter 3 explores transgressive femininity in *The Bletchley Circle* (ITV, 2012–14), Chapter 4 addresses issues of physical beauty and intelligence in Marvel's *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015–16), and the final chapter deconstructs the domestic ideal in *Home Fires* (ITV, 2015–16). According to the author, the historicisation of the women's movement allows each series to imply that individual choice negates the need for collective action/consciousness and, by extension, the need for the second wave at all.

The postfeminist portrayals of women's experiences in each series reveal a persistent pattern of negative characteristics, identifying the acceptable parameters of femininity (and masculinity), as well as the consequences of transgressive identities. This argument is made most convincingly in relation to *Land Girls*, a series that commemorates women's contributions to the Second World War. The decentring of men in the series and the recognition of women's work may seem to

Book Reviews

support a feminist reading, but Mahoney convincingly argues that the temporary nature of their employment and their ultimate embracing of domestic ideals at the end of the series reaffirms the ideology of separate spheres. In *Bletchley Circle* the focus on women's skills as detectives and their ability to solve crimes that confound their male counterparts are diminished by threats of physical violence that await women who contravene gender boundaries. Likewise, women's ability to solve their own problems in *Home Fires* is limited not by the circumstances of the war but by their own gender that renders them helpless as one member faces domestic violence and another suppresses her own sexuality for the benefit of the stability provided by heteronormative relationships. Paradoxically, the mobilisation of women within the Women's Institutes ultimately immobilises them as they are fixed to the home, village and, ultimately, domesticity, not because they have to, but because they choose to do so. Instead of these series advocating for structural/institutional change related to the work and lives of women, they instead illustrate ways in which women can navigate patriarchy and still live a happy life within the parameters of traditional gender roles.

The illusion of change is also evident in Mahoney's assessment of male characters in female ensemble dramas. The men struggle with what it means to be a man, traditionally defined as provider and protector, but reimagined within the feminised space of the series. Men, too, must steer a middle ground between sensitive masculinity and the traditional patriarchal model. Male support for the women sleuths in *Bletchley Circle*, for example, is fleeting, as once the women face real danger outside the safe space of the home, men's role as protector takes precedence over the women's desire for independence.

The postfeminist framework applied in this study is helpful in the sense that it provides an interpretative hook, but it also has the perhaps unintended effect of obstructing alternative analyses of the implications of the ways in which gender and protofeminism are depicted, especially in the context of the history and motives of the organisations of which these women were actually a part. Mahoney continually drifts between setting up the pseudo-feminist plots of various episodes and outlining the series' overarching narratives and then showing why what might otherwise be interpreted as a feminist reading of actions or plot points is really postfeminist and ultimately undermines any feminist reading. For example, writing about *Agent Carter*, Mahoney demonstrates that although Peggy Carter is a capable woman in her own right, the character is perpetually caught between feminist and postfeminist categorisations. She is capable, but uses her

Book Reviews

body to get results. She is a skilled fighter, but if she goes too far, she will be vilified for her gender transgressions. She is a career-minded, independent woman, but, in the end, she chooses to marry Steve Rogers. The argument rests on postfeminism substituting individual choice for structural change, with the implication that individual choice is really the absence of real change. Postfeminism is used as a lens for interrogating these series, but it then becomes the primary object of study itself. Mahoney misses an opportunity to strengthen her argument by discussing the extent to which the actual societies depicted in these series are close to or distanced from how they are represented. Likewise, a more detailed discussion of the shifts in genre between the various series under scrutiny would be critically and theoretically valuable. For example, the inclusion of *Agent Carter*, which Mahoney indicates is due to its historical setting that makes it comparable to the other series under consideration, is questionable without that discussion of genre. After all, the imagined future of Agent Carter is a world in which half of the population has been exterminated by an alien wielding mystical stones. The future of the Women's Institutes and the Women's Land Army is something quite different, and while historical fantasy and anachronism are a part of any representation of history, some of the series under discussion are so varied in terms of genre that the reasons for their inclusion really merit an extended discussion in themselves.

Ultimately, Mahoney's study does shed important light on the ways in which the women's movement has been represented in historical television. It would benefit, however, from more contextual dialogue, and the absence of a conclusion prevents Mahoney from tying the various series together.

Bonnie White
(Grenfell Campus, Memorial University of Newfoundland)
DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2021.0596

Lindsey Decker, *Transnationalism and Genre Hybridity in New British Horror Cinema* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021), pp. ix + 258, 8 illus., ISBN 97817866836984 (pb), £45.00.

Transnationalism and Genre Hybridity in New British Horror Cinema offers an examination of the way in which transnationalism and genre hybridity have helped to reinvigorate British horror in the period since 2000, as well as an analysis of the continued tension between horror and, as Lindsey Decker phrases it, 'middlebrow British film culture'.

Book Reviews

Decker defines middlebrow British film culture as including ‘sources that place more emphasis on improvement and cultural advancement and in doing so elevate “artsy” commercial cinema alongside art cinema’ (8). The Introduction provides a useful outline of the historical tension between this middlebrow British film culture and horror and sets the scene for the British horror resurgence of the 2000s and the shifting relationship that followed.

Decker’s examination of British cultural history in Chapter One takes in the Thatcher-Major-Blair era, and the huge shifts in British film business, changes at the BBFC, anti-Americanism and moral panics that contributed to ‘a cultural climate that could allow for the British horror resurgence of the 2000s’ (60). This chapter provides a rich backdrop for the case studies that follow in the rest of the book.

In Chapters Two, Three and Four Decker examines the transnational genre hybridity of specific film case studies in order to chart the changing relationship of British horror and middlebrow British film culture. *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) use different established British genres to interrogate Americanisation via the zombie film; *Eden Lake* (2008) and *Attack the Block* (2011) take American genres to interrogate the very British cultural concern of the ‘hoodie’; and *The Woman in Black* (2012) attempts to appeal to a broadly international audience through star-power and J-horror tropes in order to re-establish the Hammer brand.

In the Conclusion, Decker ties the various strands of the book together with another pair of films, *A Field in England* (2013) and *Under the Skin* (2013), considering the hybrid approach to horror and art cinema and the way that this appealed to middlebrow film culture.

Overall, Decker’s book is a valuable and thought-provoking appraisal of an exciting period in British cinema. It is at its strongest with its dissection of industry practices and fits well with other recent books examining the business of horror, such as Johnny Walker’s *Contemporary British Horror Cinema* (2015). Her astute and at times challenging analysis of middlebrow British film culture—represented by, for example, publications such as *Sight & Sound* and the film pages of the *Guardian*—presents a worthwhile update to well-established views of the relationship between British film criticism and British horror.

Throughout the book I would have liked to have seen some clearer definition and precision in the use of certain terms and labels. For example, Decker refers to Hammer films such as *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) as ‘sexploitation’ (144), which would seem to be using an extremely wide definition of the term. Elsewhere, she refers to

Book Reviews

'New Asian Horror' (147), with no parameters offered as to what this refers to—the example given here is *Audition* (2001), which is later referred to as J-Horror, a much more established industrial category. While these and other examples do not necessarily undermine any of the arguments being made, at times the relatively imprecise use of genre labels feel a little jarring.

In fact, Decker's brief consideration of the BFI's 'Gothic' film season (173–4) might have proven an interesting opportunity for consideration of the way in which genre and sub-genre labels can be used in an imprecise way—while the BFI Gothic season included more than 150 films and around 1,000 screenings, arguably not all the films screened were 'Gothic'.

There also appear to be a few striking omissions in the book which it would have been valuable to consider. For example, Decker rather underplays the significance of *Spaced* (Channel 4, 1999–2001) in the analysis of comedy in *Shaun of the Dead*. While *Spaced* is indeed referred to in passing, the influence of several other British comedy series and films is analysed to a greater extent.

In the analysis of J-Horror's impact on *The Woman in Black*, Decker makes no reference to the significant wave of Western remakes of Japanese horror films, which might bear some consideration in relation to Western horror's adoption of some of J-Horror's tropes (157–65). (She does, however, erroneously refer to *Ringu's* (1998) ghostly Sadako as Samara, which is the character name in Gore Verbinski's 2002 remake.) It would have been interesting to get a sense of the extent to which these tropes, namely the appearance and movement of onryō-style apparitions, were already embedded into Western horror by the time that *The Woman in Black* was in production.

Transnationalism and Genre Hybridity reveals a number of valuable avenues for further investigation. Decker notes in the introduction that the book considers what is essentially 'English' horror (11). An examination of other national and indeed regional British horror film-making would be a welcome development moving forward, particularly given, for example, the relatively significant presence of horror in Welsh film-making—from *Darklands* (1997) to North Bank Entertainment via *Yr Ymadawiad/The Passing* (2015).

In outlining the rise of British horror in the 2000s, Decker refers to the establishment of FrightFest and rightly identifies the festival as a significant presence across the decade (56). However, arguably the proliferation of horror festivals in the UK beyond FrightFest also ties into the horror resurgence which is outlined here. While an in-depth consideration of festivals is beyond the scope of the book, this would

Book Reviews

suggest a line of research that would enrich the work that she has started here.

Decker's final paragraph make a plea to middlebrow British film culture to take British horror as seriously as it seems to take horror from the USA, as reflected in its obsession with, and conception of, so-called 'elevated' or post-horror (187). For me, this plea also marks a clear invitation for further research into the contemporary reception of horror films in the UK.

Nia Edwards-Behi (independent scholar)
DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2021.0597

Emily Caston, *British Music Video, 1966–2016: Genre, Authenticity and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. xi + 221, 20 illus., ISBN 9781474435321 (hb), £75.

It may seem unusual for a book about British music video to be reviewed by a New Zealand academic. However, New Zealand is equally proximal to the cultural influences of the United Kingdom and the United States. As cultural hybrids, New Zealanders are shaped by a cultural heritage in which indigenous Māori cultural practices intermingle with those of postcolonial and immigrant communities. Also shaped by British, European and American popular culture and mediatised products, many New Zealanders have developed an acute awareness of the cultural memories that have been excluded or silenced by colonialist histories and cultural imperialisms. As a scholar of audio-visual media, and having researched cultural and national identities in relation to decolonising histories, I have come to understand how cultural colonialism has played a part in shaping the history of music video as one that is widely (and incorrectly) understood to have developed only after MTV and primarily in the USA.

Emily Caston wishes to give voice to those who have been ignored by what is effectively a culturally colonising view of music video in which the United States holds the privileged position of writing history and maintaining cultural hegemony over other nations. In *British Music Video*, Caston undertakes the mammoth task of researching and writing the first history of British music video. By drawing upon her extensive research, Caston provides the necessary evidence to write a revisionist history. She does this by revising the approach taken by much of the published literature on music video, in which British music videos

Book Reviews

have tended to either be forgotten, excluded or not deemed culturally relevant from the perspective of a hegemonic American worldview. In her Introduction, Caston explains how this situation is related to a perception among certain scholars that British film-makers and music video practitioners have been victims in a re-culturing process in which their works have taken on the aesthetics and cultural values of American music videos, particularly those that became dominant through their exposure on MTV. By citing interview and focus-group responses from numerous research participants in the British music video industry, and by linking these empirical research findings with her observations of technical and aesthetic innovation by a range of practitioners, Caston adroitly and methodically unpicks the uneven stitching of those authors who have failed to recognise the significant roles played by British music video practitioners long before the advent of MTV.

By unpicking and restitching cultural histories, Caston plays an important role as a 'cultural decoloniser' of music video history. An important aspect of this revisionist approach is giving voice to industry practitioners such as DOPs, editors, telecine operators, dance choreographers, production assistants and runners. By naming them and shining a light on their creative contributions, technical innovations and collaborative processes, Caston overturns the tendency of various prominent scholars to privilege music video directors as auteur figures without fully acknowledging the complexity of collaborative assemblage.

By redressing these tendencies, *British Music Video* may appear to sit at odds with much of the prior literature on music video, particularly that emerging from the United States or that which focuses on auteur directors, stars and celebrity figures. However, Caston respectfully acknowledges and extends upon works such as Carol Vernallis's *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) and *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (2013), Mathias Korsgaard's *Music Video After MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media, and Popular Music* (2017), and Lori A. Burns and Stan Hawkins's *Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis* (2019). By complementing and challenging the current literature, this book plays an important role in rupturing and exposing the cultural hegemony reinforced by some of the existing publications on music video and audiovisual media. But despite challenging the predominant narrative, *British Music Video* finds a degree of alignment with recently published books that reject the received idea that music video was born at the advent of MTV, and those that reveal the long pre-history of music video as an art

Book Reviews

form shaped by various antecedents, mediums and movements—for example *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*, edited by Gina Arnold et al. By documenting cultural memories of the British music video industry from 1966 to 2016, Caston fills a very significant hole in the historicisation of music video and its relationship to its birth parent, the ‘promo’. The tracing of such memories portrays multiple perspectives of what counts as a music video, a point to which I will return.

Although the book’s title might lead one to expect its chapters to follow a chronological structure, Caston adopts a thematic approach. Individual chapters step through a focused examination of British music videos in relation to commercial film art, genre, editing, movement and dance, gender, authorship, distribution, and art, commerce and America. With an unfolding logic, each chapter builds upon the insights of the previous ones. Individual chapters require readers to look at music video through different lenses, thus considering the production of music video from various perspectives, whether that be the director, editor, animator or dance choreographer. This approach is conducive to considering music video as a truly collaborative industrial entity, with multiple roles contributing to the creation and distribution of an audio-visual assemblage. In this way, the book offers ideal source material for the teaching of music video and audio-visual media, a purpose that would be accentuated by its use in combination with the accompanying six-disc limited edition DVD box set, *Power to the People*, distributed by Thunderbird.

The book’s value as a tertiary teaching resource is strengthened by the extensive research underpinning each chapter, the accessibility of Caston’s writing style, and her diverse background which spans academia and the creative industries. By knitting together her academic knowledge with that gained through her various roles in the British and American screen and music video industries, Caston is uniquely placed to contextualise changing perceptions of music video across time, production cultures and commercial interests, as well as in relation to prevailing national and cultural values. In this respect, she adheres to a definition of music video which has its roots in collaborative relationships, commercial contractual arrangements and audio-visual assemblages that emerge from industry settings. She defines music video as ‘an industrial product defined by a distinctive supply chain of the model identified by Peter Bloore’s work on the film industry for the UK Film Council’, adding that: ‘Promos and music videos are short films commissioned and released by record labels for mass audiences; they comprise a copyrighted synchronised picture and

Book Reviews

audio track in which a percentage of the royalties accrue to recording artist or record label' (19).

Such a definition is entirely consistent with the insights that have emerged from Caston's extensive body of research. However, in the context of recent research into the music video in transformation, how does such a definition account for the creation by participatory cultures of non-commissioned or fan-made music videos? Or for the type of dispersed authorship and collaborative assemblage that has recently been initiated by artists such as Radiohead, Sigur Rós and Elton John? Rather than viewing these new forms of audio-visual assemblage as outliers of an industry-centric definition, I argue that Caston's definition is entirely appropriate to the time frame of her study. In this age in which internet platforms provide unique conditions for the new types of assemblages created by industry practitioners and participatory cultures, *British Music Video* provides an immensely important examination of a previously excluded history while also offering a useful pivot for catalysing further discussion about what counts today as a music video, and exactly who counts as practitioner, artist or co-author, regardless of national identity.

Lisa Perrott (University of Waikato)
DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2021.0598