

# Prison, Education and Film

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**The *Inside Film* Project has so far run twice once in HMP Wandsworth and once in HMP Rochester Young Offenders Institution. The aim of the project is to act as a counter hegemonic intervention utilizing popular culture within a particular strand of the media (film) as a vehicle to develop a language that is analytical and adequate to understanding the social determinants that affect all our lives<sup>1</sup> but whose impact and consequences vary depending upon the social class to which we belong to. It is the possibility of putting this understanding and this language into practice that has the potential to lead to a transformation in personal consciousness and this transformation in personal consciousness creates the possibility of a critical interaction with the social world.**

This paper details the work of the project and considers the ways in which film can be used within prison education as a means of engaging people serving prison sentences in ways that more traditional subjects are unable to do. It also presents some ideas concerning a class specific education that acknowledges the majority of prisoners are working class and therefore their experience of formal education is one of alienation<sup>2</sup> from a system constructed for the benefit of the middle classes in which the odds are stacked against them succeeding.<sup>3</sup>

The *Inside Film* project enables the prisoners taking part in the course to make their own films this is achieved by running practical workshops where they learn to use a film camera and to edit their films. Before these practical sessions, the first six weeks or so of the course explores the theoretical and historical aspects of film and filmmaking. It is our contention that without this grounding the students taking part in the project uncritically mimic the established filmic practices they are familiar with from watching mainstream movies and television. This insistence on the theoretical and historical is not a sterile educational requirement but a

recognition that we exist in a world where we are constantly bombarded with media images and that in order to make sense of these images and the purposes they serve, we need to be able to engage critically with them.<sup>4</sup> After the theoretical sessions and before filming begins the students take part in ideas sessions where they discuss (and argue about) the kind of film they would like to make, what the subject matter will be and what form the film will take. These sessions have been lively and loud as by this point the students have all begun to develop ideas about how they want their films to look. For some of the students these ideas will have been influenced by the preceding theoretical sessions where they were exposed to the kind of filmmaking that they might not generally have the opportunity to view.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to witness in the discussions that take place during these sessions (which are only a few weeks into the course) a recognition that the mainstream dominant film product is not the only option available, this consideration of other possibilities takes place not only at the level of form but also in relation to representations of gender, class and race.

This suggests a cognitive shift on the part of the students towards areas not previously explored. The willingness of the students to explore these other areas indicates that it is not a reluctance on the part of the students that has prevented an engagement with alternative forms of filmmaking but evidence of the restricted choices available in the area of cultural resources. Of course at this point the cognitive shift relates to the specific area of film but I would argue this shift produces the potential for alternatives to hegemonic modes of thinking to be generalised to other areas.

When a decision has been made about what kind of film they would like to make the students write the scripts, storyboard their films and cast them. After which they act in, direct, shoot and edit their films. The postproduction process also allows for adding music, sound effects and special effects. All through this

1. O'Neill, D. & Wayne, M. (2008) *Film as a Radical Pedagogic Tool in Film International* vol. 5, no. 5, pp.10-16.

2. For Karl Marx the concept of alienation refers to the ways in which society often feels as though it is an alien force working against the needs of those living and working in that society. This is particularly true for the working classes but the bourgeois class is also distorted by the constant push for profits at the expense of all else. In education alienation results in the estrangement of the working class person from the processes of knowledge acquisition.

3. Benson, L. (1978) *Proletarians and Parties*, London: Tavistock p.73.

4. O'Neill & Wayne op.cit.

5. To take just one example — one of the theory sessions is devoted to a film making practice known as Third Cinema — a low budget, politically committed cinema that grew out of the anti colonial struggles taking place across South America and Africa in the 1960s and 70s (see Wayne, M. (2001) *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* London: Pluto Press) One of the most interesting films to have been produced by the students is a film very heavily influenced by the filmmaking practices and strategies of Third Cinema *WHO AM I?* In this documentary the students make connections between personal identity, national identity and international violence in an unconventional and thought provoking way.

process the students are exposed to alternatives that differ from the mainstream dominant filmmaking strategies consequently there is a need to engage with these alternatives and to think about which ones serves best the film they wish to make.

The insistence on the theoretical component of the course presents us with one of the dialectical tensions inherent in the project. We accept as valuable the popular culture that the prisoners enjoy and recognise that in however a distorted form this popular culture does deal with the very real needs, desires and contradictions existing within capitalism at the present moment and therefore demands to be engaged with in a serious way. But we are at the same time offering the students alternative methods of engaging and processing that culture in order to reject the way in which that culture positions them. It is by challenging the dominant worldview and the normative power of dominant representations that the potential to transform the way in which they view the world and by extension the way in which they act in the world comes into being. This melding of theory and practice — this praxis — creates a space between the established and the possible in which those taking part in the project can develop (a limited) personal agency and it is the *practice* of agency which the project works to foster. It is through praxis that we are able to combine the way we live our lives with the ability to reflect upon on why we live them in the way that we do.

It is this combination of what Gramsci called 'being' and 'thinking' that creates the possibility for both social and personal agency.<sup>6</sup> By engaging critically with their lives not just as individuals but as part of a wider society, by reflecting on their experiences in that society, by considering alternatives to their present mode of being in the world, the students can begin to act upon the world in ways that can bring about change.

Most of the prisoners who have taken part in the *Inside Film* project already have an extensive knowledge

of film language and are familiar with filmic conventions (because they spend so much of their time watching films). They arrive on the course with a shared knowledge of film, of the codes and conventions that are in place to represent prisoners, the working classes, different races, and different genders, and the ways in which mainstream films are edited, lit and scored (even if these are not the terms they would use to articulate this knowledge) Like all of us they have internalised

many of the values and attitudes that are presented through the medium of mainstream films, TV and other media outlets. It is these values and attitudes that we attempt to analyse and to deconstruct emphasising the importance of questioning whose values we are being asked to accept when we watch an 'entertainment' film, what and whose purpose do those values serves, what kind of lifestyle is being given legitimacy and whose social reality is being denigrated or ignored?

A radical pedagogy of film is not just a matter of the prisoners producing films that deal with the politics of working class life in a more *authentic* way, reworking the inherited conventions of the dominant culture although of course that is exactly what these films do (I am here collapsing the categories of prisoner and working classes—because I think it is important to acknowledge that the vast majority of prisoners are working class and that the reasons they

find themselves in prison is because of their responses to working class life in a capitalist society). It is also a question of challenging the values and ideological practices of a capitalist society and about creating spaces in which to achieve this aim this means there must be an attempt to construct a geographical space within the confines of the prison, a space differentiated from the usual education provision and a cognitive space that is able to consider different perspectives. Within these spaces the prisoners can create their own representations of their own lives, provide evidence of their daily experiences both inside and outside of the prison and thereby challenge

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6. Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quinton Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith London: Lawrence and Wishart pp323- 324.

assumptions of working class people, working class life and of course prisoners.

This cannot be achieved through films made *about* the working class and prisoners that are mediated by the life experiences and assumptions of middle class professionals who make films to be shown on the art house / competition circuit. It can only be done by creating these spaces in which the working class person can claim an agency that has to a greater or lesser degree been denied them most of their lives. This is not an idealistic attempt to claim making a film about personal experiences is going to change everything, but the pedagogic value of taking popular culture seriously and creating spaces for the prisoners to access their own experiences lies in the possibility of producing complex representations with the power to reverse homogenising representations of the working classes. It is also concerned with creating cultural artefacts that can be owned and in the process those taking part can move towards being subjects rather than objects.

Access to the means of representation is denied the working classes in general but in particular the section of the working class that make up the prison population where those inside the prison are defined by the crime they have committed. Their lives are narrated by others, their actions decontextualised to fit into categories of crime and sentencing. They are not in a position to, neither do they have the power to, directly challenge the ways in which they are constructed by those who have that power: filmmakers, politicians, educators, journalists, the legal system. All of these groups represent the working classes in ways that share many assumptions about working class life and working class people and which recreate the hierarchal norms that allow prisoners to be categorised and classified by the middle class expert. But the way in which life is actually lived and experienced by the prisoners might bear little resemblance to these representations.

Within the mainstream media working class life is mostly represented as lacking in any cultural capital, the

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film *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry 2000) being a significant example —the only way for Billy to have a good life, to succeed, to be happy is to move away from his working class community and become a... ballet dancer. Other mainstream films such as *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor 1974) or *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall 1990) are also premised on the notion that to be successful, to be valued is to be middle class.<sup>7</sup> This construction of working class culture as lacking, as an obstruction to fulfilment and a better life functions not only as an attack on working class individuals who must eventually accept that their lives are nasty, brutish and chaotic—which they very well might be—and choose to take flight from those lives, leaving behind the people who they

have grown up with, lived with, experienced their lives with —this attack encompasses the working classes as a whole and constructs them as a 'threat to all respectability, a danger to others and a burden on the nation'<sup>8</sup> This discourse has become entrenched within the institutions of politics, the media and education.<sup>9</sup> Of course it is imperative that the people surrounding the person who has the means to escape also recognises this, so in *Billy Elliot* his father and brother are brought to see the error of their ways (trying to keep Billy in the community in

which they live and which has been destroyed by the policies of the Thatcher government) and must sacrifice Billy and themselves for the sake of his own good which of course means leaving behind the old industrialised north and making a life for himself in the modern metropolis.

As Skeggs points out this means that any engagement with the structures that create inequalities can be avoided while these representations shift the blame for educational failure and crime onto the culture of the working classes.<sup>10</sup> I would go further. What these representations also do is to deny the possibility of a collective solution to working class deprivation and hardship —the protagonists of these films, through hard work, good luck, or in the case of the working class woman, good looks 'escape' the working classes.<sup>11</sup> Of course the other requirement for their escape is

7. Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture* Abingdon: Routledge p99.

8. Ibid p.80.

9. This has become apparent within the present discourse of the Conservative Liberal Democratic coalition government in order to justify the public service cuts that are being implemented.

10. Skeggs op.cit p.87.

11. Of course what these films are incapable of doing is dealing with the complexities of moving up the social ladder — just getting a better job/an education and the advantages those things bring in our society does not mean that it is possible to leave behind the class one originated from.

complete subservience to the demands of a capitalist system. These uplifting stories of one life being improved and lived in luxury and comfort leaves unanswered the question of all those other hard working people who are left behind to suffer the indignities, deprivations and inequalities of much working class life.

This negation and denigration of working class culture is of course not only apparent in the symbolic realm of representation, it also functions on a material level in the lived experiences of the working class life. One of the places where it is most apparent is in the education system where kids from backgrounds where Shakespeare and Literature are not valued are set up to fail in a system where the acquisition of an understanding of these cultural forms is considered to be the highest of educational achievements. Therefore the formation of working class consciousness and the positioning of working class children take place in institutions where their lives and experiences have at best no value and at worst are completely rejected. Understandably for most working class children their experience of education is one of alienation as Diane Reay puts it:

*The educational system is rarely about positive affirmation for the working classes. They are a far greater risk of losing rather than finding themselves, of both being unable to construct a successful. Learner identity and feeling that their working class roots and sense of self have no value in a context where working class culture and identity is constructed as a hindrance to academic achievement.*<sup>12</sup>

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Historically one of the ways that the working class has often been represented is as a social problem and

this has become more pronounced over the last 30 years: with the rolling back of the welfare state and the ravages of neo liberalism talking its toll working class poverty and deprivation have become increasingly criminalised. While at the same time crimes committed by the middle classes are obfuscated or ignored as Joe Simms has pointed out

*The constant barrage of publicity around benefit fraud compared to the ongoing silence around middle class fraud and tax evasion remains the classic example of how the crime problem is ideologically constructed by the majority of politicians, media commentators and state servants.*<sup>13</sup>

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Within this formulation of the working classes as social problem (rather than as victims of the neo liberal pursuit of profits) representations of the working class have become increasingly fixed and static leaving very little room to manoeuvre in contrast to the middle classes who are represented as mobile both geographically and intellectually. The working classes have become increasingly fixed firmly within a limited number of spaces — often the sink estate or the streets, in the case of

working class youth and of course the prison.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly true of representations of the working classes by both fictional and documentary filmmakers and journalists, very few of whom are from the working classes. Consequently their representations of the working classes cannot but fail to be inaccurate. This limited expression of working class life I would argue is because those representing the working class often have no understanding and crucially no experience of working class life. But it is the images of working class life and of crime produced by people with no experience of that kind of life that are circulated by the media and become the dominant decontextualised images with which people associate the working classes.

12. Reay, D. (2009) *Making Sense of White Working Class Underachievement* in Sveinsson, K. (ed) *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* Runnymede Trust p.25.

13. Sim, J. [http://www.alternatives2prison.uk.com/p\\_New\\_Labours\\_Law\\_and\\_Order\\_Crusade.ikml](http://www.alternatives2prison.uk.com/p_New_Labours_Law_and_Order_Crusade.ikml) (Accessed 21.06.10) in the same article he also points out that corporate fraud and VAT fraud cost the UK billions of pounds each year in lost revenue.

14. For a wider discussion of the issue of mobility and class see Skeggs op.cit p.55-60.

There are various outlets for these images to circulate and become fixed in the popular imagination. Among them is the reporting of crime by the mainstream TV news programmes, the various generic crime series on our TV and in reality TV programmes such as *Police, Camera, Action*. And of course the mainstream Hollywood film. In these visual regimes of crime and punishment the working classes are associated with crime and imprisonment is seen as the solution to the social and economic ills that are threatening to overrun our society.

These media representations of the working class compliment other discursive constructions of the working classes across multivariate strands of public discourse so for instance we can find examples of the denigration of working class culture and the blaming of working class people for the problems that beset their lives in the speeches of politicians, the pronouncements of educationalists and the sentencing policies of the judiciary. The conditioning process of repetitive reinforcement across a range of sites results in an acceptance of the working classes as more criminally inclined while denying the transgressions of white-collar middle class crime.

It is the right to self-representation that *Inside Film* attempts to provide — the right of the prisoners to represent their own lives and not to be consigned to a secondary character in dominant narratives that situate them as the obstacle to a better, safer society. In representing themselves and their own experiences the students come face to face with the reality of their own lives. Not in the sense that they suddenly have access to how dreadful their lives are — they are already fully aware of this and awareness will not alter the fact of their position in the hierarchal structures of a class ridden society. What I lay claim to here is the possibility of the consideration of their lives as part of a wider totality. The pedagogical practices of *Inside Film* emphasises the importance of placing dominant representations in the wider context of the economic system in which they exist, insisting on the relationship between economics and culture. This dialectical analysis allows for an

exploration of popular culture as just one aspect of dominant political, economic and ideological hegemonic practices and refuses to countenance its detachment as 'just entertainment'.

In 2005 the basic skills agency assessment recorded the results of a literacy survey among prisoners in England and Wales. They reported 60 per cent of the prison population had a reading ability equivalent to or less than a five-year-old child. The prison population stands at about 86,000 More than three quarters of prisoners cannot read or write to the standard expected of an 11-year-old child, half of all prisoners do not have the skills required by 96 per cent of jobs. Only one in five people in prison are able to complete a job application form.<sup>15</sup>

These figures are not definitive — reports of literacy levels fluctuate but it is generally accepted that two thirds of the prison population cannot read to a standard that enable them to understand what is going on around them. These figures suggest that the provision of educational courses designed to develop literacy skills or which entail reading and writing beyond a certain level of achievement can only reach a very limited number of people — the minority of the prison population that has already achieved acceptable levels of literacy skills. This means that by definition courses centred on reading and writing must exclude the majority of prisoners who cannot write and these are

arguably those who are the hardest to reach. This exclusion will only repeat a pattern that for many people serving sentences in prison has become the norm.

The association of writing with school lessons also raises another problem. I have already pointed out the experience of school for most of the people in prison has been an alienating one. Enzensberger claimed that 'intimidation through the written word has remained a wide spread and class specific phenomenon even in advanced industrial countries.' This is because most people learn to write in the formalised setting of school in an authoritarian environment where good writing is based upon inviolable rules that result in penalisation if they are broken.<sup>16</sup>

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15. James, E.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2009/sep/17/erwin-james-education-prisoners-rehabilitation> (accessed 09.02.09)

16. Enzensberger, H. (1982) *Critical Essays*: London: Continuum p.71.

He argues that writing is a highly formalised technique and of course for those in prison this means sitting in one place for however many hours the class takes. This enforced inactivity is itself not ideal for many prisoners who have problems with concentration. The new media forms do not carry the weight of these traditions. It is the new technologies of laptops and palm held video cameras that have the potential to do away with the 'educational privileges and the cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligentsia'<sup>17</sup> to break down the specialised divisions of labour that exist within a capitalist society and that are normalised within most teacher student relationships—they do not bring with them the baggage of school lessons, exams and struggles to understand. Walter Benjamin claimed that film — in its most positive form — has 'a destructive, cathartic aspect — the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.'<sup>18</sup> For the majority of the students taking part in the *Inside Film* project — film and film viewing is associated with pleasure and filmmaking offers a positive validation of their cultural pastimes—often not considered cultural because the working class indulges them in. They do not consider film and filmmaking to be part of the institutionalised and formal education apparatus.<sup>19</sup>

Of course I am not suggesting there is not a place for the teaching of literacy skills to those serving prison sentences what I am asking is in what way does this serve the needs of prisoners

*What is achieved by teaching basic literacy skills to those thought to be in need of them when all that we are turning out is burglars who can read and write, packing plastic bags or cleaning out prison toilets. All these alone, do not in any sense, fit an offender to a productive life outside of prison where crime may continue to be seen as a more attractive proposition.*<sup>20</sup>

The *Inside Film* course is not just concerned with taking the viewing pleasure of the prisoners seriously that would result in a celebration of popular culture for no other reason than it is popular culture.

The pedagogically crucial issue at stake here is the way in which dominant representations interact with other prominent discourses in order to invite identification with a particular worldview while preventing knowledge or engagement with opposing ones and with the diverse narratives essential to a more egalitarian society. The utilisation of popular culture by the *Inside Film* project fostered a critical engagement with the dominant culture and worked against an easy assimilation into it. The films made by the students of *Inside Film* are not easily incorporated into mainstream culture. Their films resist this easy identification with the dominant culture. By their very existence these films bring into question assumptions about criminals, education and popular culture and crucially in its attempt to remove the divisions of labour between those who are teaching and those who are learning demystify the process of filmmaking.

*Inside Film* strives to develop working practices that negate the existing practices of capitalist education. Film is a collective endeavour and the students who take part in the *Inside Film* project work collaboratively, co-operating with each other over a range of jobs, from scripting, storyboarding, shooting, acting and editing. They all work on each other's films. There is no single 'teacher', the distinctions between filmmakers/artist/technician/ educator/ student are broken down. *Inside Film* utilises the skills of a number of practitioners: editors, scriptwriters, actors, and filmmakers, sound technicians all of whom work in collaboration with the students. No one is paid. There is no interference in what the students wish to film (obviously that can only be true insofar as we do not produce any material that the prison authorities might want to censor). The films produced are the work of the students

The approach of *Inside Film* is that of a reciprocal pedagogy where all those taking part contribute to the creation of specific kind of knowledge a knowledge that because it comes from the experience of being working class and a prisoner is mediated by those experiences.

Further information on *Inside Film* is available at <http://www.insidefilm.org>

17. *ibid* p.72.

18. Benjamin, W. (1999) *The work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction in Arendt, H. (ed) Illuminations: Walter Benjamin* London: Pimlico p.212.

19.

20. Hanson, C. [http://www.againstprisonslavery.org/education\\_&\\_training.html](http://www.againstprisonslavery.org/education_&_training.html) (accessed 21.06.10).