
Prison Movies - Cinema Behind Bars

By Kevin Kehrwald

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Reviewed by Cassice Last

Kehrwald introduces the prison film by stating that, generally speaking, prison narratives are particularly popular in America at the moment. Of film in particular, Kehrwald quickly establishes that prison has featured in films since the silent era. He begins by querying what specifically constitutes a prison film, how can we as viewers define it? Must the prison itself actually feature, how do we define a prisoner, and what features are immediately recognisable in the prison film? In moving towards a definition Kehrwald sets up the parameters of his study and justifies his exclusion of kidnapping films, prisoner of war films and the mental institution film. The prison, he surmises 'should be the principle subject of investigation and the dominant agent of oppression' (p15) situating the prison as, unsurprisingly, integral to the genre. He maintains that a key feature of the prison film is an intense sense of identification between viewer and prisoner, a bond that he claims at times rivals the horror genre's concentrated link between viewer and victim. He also surmises that the genre particularly potently reveals wider cultural issues and states that one 'can tell a great deal about a society by the way it portrays its prisoners on screen.' (p4)

So how has film portrayed prison, prison life and prisoners on screen throughout the years? In his study tracing the development of the Prison film, Kehrwald begins by examining the formation of the genre during the Great Depression. During this Pre-Motion picture production code censorship era he argues that both the Gangster film and the Prison film enjoyed great popularity and tackles the tension between these films. Common discourse, he argues, places the gangster film as a key *earlier* inspiration to the Prison film. By examining early film releases in the Great Depression Kehrwald contests this view to argue that MGM's *The Big House* actually preceded the Gangster genre and initiated a cycle of Prison films in Pre-code Hollywood. More than this, Kehrwald argues for *The Big House* as prototype for the cycle, creating and introducing pivotal innovations of the genre. Relying on Rick Altman's discussion of the importance of semantic versus syntactic elements of a film to inform his discussion of defining the Prison film and its key genre characteristics, Kehrwald argues in his first chapter that *The Big House* brought to the fore key innovations of the genre such as: particular character types, iconic settings within the prison, atmospheric sounds such as clanking gates and situations such as prison riots and escape attempts. Using this established prototype Kehrwald contrasts the

Depression era -Prison film to the Gangster film arguing that at its core the Prison film focuses upon the fallen sincerely seeking self-redemption at the mercy of an oppressive judicial system. He dedicates the rest of chapter one to tracing the appearance of these characteristics in later Depression era films such as *Up The River*, *The Last Mile*, and *Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. He concludes chapter one defining this era of Prison films as notable for continually portraying the prisoner as victim of powerful external forces they have no hope to control, an image heavily resonant with the wider cultural climate of the Great Depression.

Kehrwald turns to women in Prison films of the 1950s and 60s. Women were decidedly lacking in the previous chapter thus he begins chapter two by clarifying that women did appear in pre-code Hollywood films, however, he focuses upon the Cold War era stipulating that it was not until these two decades that women in prison films came into their own. These films share similar conventions to the ones popularised by *The Big House* and Kehrwald examines four key films from this era that heavily focused upon gender roles and particularly upon the tension between the 'good girl/bad girl' conflict. Surprisingly beginning with Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*, his analysis of this animated film surmises the issues to follow in the Cold War era women in prison films, notably the issues around domesticity, pregnancy, pre-marital sex and threats to the patriarchy. He goes on to look at the figure of the 'prison lesbian' in *Caged* and the depiction of children behind bars in *House of Women*. This latter feature is obviously absent from men in prison films, and Kehrwald highlights the context of the 60s in which issues of childcare for working mothers came to the fore. He also scrutinises the rise of television in the 50s particularly concerning the media's role in manipulating the public's opinion on female prisoners. Overall, he highlights many of these women in prison films raise pertinent questions about care for female prisoners but fail to provide any solutions. Despite this, he argues these films should not be dismissed as they at least highlight very real anxieties pertinent to viewers and he appears to lament the films later being used as 'fodder' for 70s/80s sexploitation films.

In Chapter Three, Kehrwald turns to popular prison films released between the 60s and the 90s to analyse identity and violence. Violence has featured throughout the genre but Kehrwald makes the argument that with the relaxing of censorship codes violence became more explicitly and directly portrayed. He begins by looking at prisoner buddy films analysing *The Defiant Ones* before going on to employ *Cool Hand Luke* as a prime example of the increasingly popular 'anti-hero' films. Women seem notably absent in these popular films and Kehrwald addresses this by analysing the role of sports in prison films with *The Longest Yard*. Here, Kehrwald argues that the prison's football stadium becomes an area to prove or re-discover masculinity, with the protagonist

seemingly actively denouncing a domestic life with his wife to enter an all-male populated and dominated world-prison. Kehrwald then tackles the difficult issue of rape in prison films which he introduces with the disclaimer that the proclivity of the act in the movies reveals more about popular culture rather than realistic prison culture. He closes his third chapter arguing that attitudes to incarceration changed in the 1990s becoming 'more punitive and pervasive' and particularly evident of this was Clinton passing the largest crime bill in US history in 1994. Analysing the two key prison films *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Green Mile* that both embraced nostalgia he confronts issues of race and dubs this era as 'the looking away of the 1990s' (p97).

Kehrwald concludes his study by drawing the reader's attention to a number of films released post 9/11 that 'speak for those that can't.' (p100.) Dealing mostly with documentary releases Kehrwald sums up that the main focuses of releases include mass incarceration, the dilemma of capital punishment and the particularly pertinent issue of torture given the context of the Bush/Cheney/ Rumsfeld administration. Kehrwald's final word on prison films concerns recidivism and the effectiveness of prisons themselves. Circling back to his examination of prison films released during the Great Depression and women's prison films of the 50s/60s, he questions the reformative capability of incarceration. Ultimately he queries prison movies' complicity in naturalising the concept of incarceration and quotes a line from *Attica* to close his study, urging readers to not shy away from, but rather to face filmic representations of suffering in prisons.