

The Good Mother?

Andrew Conio

Accompanying text to Judy Price, *The Good Enough Mother* (2020). Script: Judy Price & Andrew Conio. Filming: Nelson Douglas & Judy Price. Video editing & colour grading: Nelson Douglas. Sound editing: Judy Price & Andrew Conio. Sound sweetening & design: Ben Hurd. Voice actors & scripting: Clean Break (Terri-Ann Oudjar, Edith Emenike & Jennifer Joseph). Duration 26 mins

For some women, prison is a place of refuge and stability. For lives ravaged by drugs, poverty, violence and mental health problems prison, as traduced an experience as it is, can be a welcome respite. Sometimes, the safety, order and predictability amount to a form of holding from which new foundations may be built. Many UK women's prisons provide a range of facilities for mothers with babies, such as mother and baby units, and some women achieve a sense of community with other prisoners based on the shared experience of motherhood. As there is a direct link between the poor treatment of mothers and the outcomes for their children, notable attempts can be found, somewhat restricted by policies and resources, to temper retribution with psychological, social, and practical resources in a spirit of restoration. Forensic Psychotherapist Pamela Windham Stewart observes; 'given their earlier adverse childhood experiences, prison could be a place of safety'. From a dedicated place for mothers to be with their baby, 'many started to flourish'.

However, the striking thing that emerged from the stories of women's experiences was how medieval the conditions are. It was jaw-dropping and very distressing for Judy and I to read first-hand accounts and talk to women about their experiences of prison. The greatest challenge in writing the script for *The Good Enough Mother* was how to give voice to the inhumane and punitive treatment of women prisoners without presenting an unrelenting horror-story. While the film conveys many moments of lived practical and psychic destitution, such is the inviolability of the human spirit and the multiplicity of perspectives, many stories have to be told.

While prison imposes a universalising rationale, (of guilt and 'just' punishment), we found personality was a key factor as disciplinary mechanisms were met with very personal responses. These included aggression, passivity, cynicism, empathy, self-reliance, self-pity, dependency and humour. Thus the clichéd dichotomies of women as victims, or as villains or agents was undone by the reality of women who weave many narratives across multiple contexts.

These dichotomies became most pressing in the decision we had to make regarding how to end the film. When the last character speaks of 'learning her lesson' and vowing not to repeat mistakes, we ask; is this a moment of maturation and growth? Or is it an example of the naturalisation of self-blame at the end of systemic social, economic and psychological impoverishment? A process Althusser calls interpolation. For Althusser people are interpellated by *repressive state apparatus* from even before they are born, as parents conceive

of the identity the child will assume. Thus, while the character appears to end on a redemptive note, we hope that the actors' presentation conveys the real complexities that lie behind these statements.

If one is in any doubt that we live in a patriarchal society, then look no further than what happens to pregnant women in prison. Here, where society should show the utmost care toward the sanctity and reverie of the moment when life itself and the future of humanity emerges, we find inhumanity, punishment and retribution. Here we see patriarchal society enacting a deep-seated, even archaic, revenge upon the woman's body.

Of the horror-story, we found three responses. First, in some prisons, Holloway being a notable example, there were many good intentions which seeped through. Second, the prisoners themselves, through their humanness, humour, personal resources and mutual support were able to help each other through. When one actor in the film reinterprets a lullaby as a hymn of resilience, she expresses the creative, agential preserve of working-class humour. This provokes a chorus of laughter animating the deepest of affectual bonds. "boom T, boom, that's what I'm talking about!" And, thirdly, one of the oldest roles of aesthetic is to resuscitate humanity in the face of despair. Out of these three 'beats' we frame our response to indigence.

The script only hints at an acknowledgement of direct political struggle. Common parlance may talk of a repressive society, and the link between wider social and economic oppressions and custodial power is evident. However, political engagement tends only to take the form of cynicism, sarcasm, affective-commonality and the refusal of the role of the passive supplicant the institution demands. This type of linguistic manoeuvring and defensiveness is vital in keeping sane, but collective political resistance to the prison-poverty-abandonment-patriarchal complex is much harder to find. We would suggest that without an overarching political struggle, such as to be found in civil rights movements, resistance is mostly negatively sublimated into self-harm, depression and retreat into self-defeating habits.

The actors are members of Clean Break, a feminist theatre company founded in 1979 by Jenny Hicks and Jackie Holborough while inmates of HMP Askham Grange. Clean Break's members have lived experience (not necessarily custodial) of the criminal justice system, and for 40 years have given a voice to one of the most marginalised groups in society whose experiences are all but invisible. The three actors Terri Ann Oudjar, Edith Emenike and Jennifer Joseph, brought great insight, talent and humour to the task of increasing visibility, empowering women and re-writing narratives. The script was drawn from transcriptions of 28 first-person accounts in several UK prisons by midwife Dr Laura Abbott and the fieldwork and writing of forensic psychotherapist Pamela Windham Stewart with whom Judy had extensive conversations over a long period.¹ The actors also contributed from their own experiences.

¹ Script drawn from: Laura Abbott PhD Thesis *The incarcerated pregnancy* 2016; Pamela Windham Stewart Thesis 1998; *The End of the Sentence*, ed. Pamela Windham Stewart & Jessica Collier; *Rose Report* 2016; *Mother Abused and Accused*; *Bad girls*, Caitlin Davies 2018; *The Conservationist*, Nadine Gordimer 1974; *Bean Pole*, Kantemir Balagov 2019; *Jailbirds*, Mim Skinner 2019 and the lived experience of Terriann Oudjar, Edith Emenike and Jennifer Joseph.

Judy and I rejected the theatrical temptation to present 'characters'. Instead, we show the individual as collective; we are a multitude. This is in line with centuries of women's literature that exposes the phallogocentric discipline imposed atop the natural flow of multiple roles and languages. Prison is the site of discipline and authority *par-excellence*; affect and discipline are co-enacted, experience is constructed, language alienated, narratives imposed. For Paulo Freire, in the *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*, education starts from unveiling the reality of oppression and the expulsion of imposed narratives. With *Clean Break*, as 're-creators' (Freire) the text releases multitudes. We hope the viewer might question their own internalised image of the oppressed and oppressor as we, working in dialogue with the actors did. If the audience feels a dichotomy between, on the one hand, wanting to dismiss these accounts as manipulative, self-serving and victimhood and on the other hand feeling anger at the conditions and empathy, the work of reason and reflection begins. Particularly at stake are the contested claims in contemporary feminist theory (from Judith Butler to Rosie Braidotti) around the authenticity of 'experience' as the ground of knowledge. While we may question whether experience can provide the 'ground' for truth or politics, the uniformity of experiences here seems to show one clear thing. The carceral logic *imposes upon* women what their experience, as passive recipients of state violence, must be. In turn, the film shows the strategies of self-preservation and resistance women develop.

Women writers have long employed the aesthetics of the fragment as the *sine-qua-non* of the woman's position. In *The Good Enough Mother* fragments, composed testimonies, interpretations and events weave between politics, retribution, cruelty, sisterhood and central to all, motherhood. The film is loosely held together through an event-chronology but mostly through a rhythm of thematic intensities. Often it feels like more than three actors are speaking - a melee of utterances which slip between the defensive to the rhetorical, from the self-pitying to the accusatory, from pride to alienation. In short, the film contracts and releases along the surfaces of multi-layered intensities.

That film, theatre or literature might present itself as a window onto the world which the viewer 'identifies' with the drama, is treated as another dichotomy in *The Good Enough Mother*. No truthful account is to be found here in the struggle to make sense. The 'truth' of the women's own experience of prison is hidden behind a multitude of lies/mistruths - "you deserve your punishment" - in a society that at once demands self-responsibility yet robs people of that same capacity. "You are responsible for your actions," says one of the voices. We are left hanging; is this the interpolation of the master or a clamour for personal sense? When the woman complains, of the bedding, food and lack of care, is this the delinquent woman's failure to accept the consequences of her actions? 'You brought it on yourself' says the guard. The script leaves the viewer hanging; but should they be? Should we take a stance, come to a position rather than passively reflect? Amongst these ambiguities, we see a single consistent note. The struggle to be a good mother and cherish the ideals of motherhood as a form of reclamation of the damaged self, as a recalibration of values or as self-preservation, is palpable.

Film, of course, is an illusion. Whatever is shown is only a representation never the thing itself. However, following Mika Bal, we present an aesthetics of commitment, which exudes from testimonies, source materials, the actors and the accounts of psychologists and therapists. Although we would like to think, that so strong is the acting and so authentic the script, the audience easily 'imagines' a real experience, and finds themselves swaying in and out of identification with the position of the women. We hope that this position is not reached by virtue of a romanticisation or idealism, bourgeois sensibility and aesthetics. The empirical research methodology means that *The Good Enough Mother* cannot but present a feminist *historical materialism* of; chains, locks, violence, medication, suicide, hygiene, bedding, routines, rules, noise, architecture and decrepitude and the accompanying coping strategies, hopes, wounds and disappointments of incarcerated women. Perhaps a feminist epistemology, a feminist politics, is a commitment to 'strategically, well-selected, precise finite demands' (Slavoj Žižek), rather than an appeal to abstract notions of the representation, subjectivity and Aesthetics? Here, Anna Motz' description of prison as the 'concrete mother' appears particularly apposite².

Revealing Judy's role as director, "can you do that again speaking into your chest?" exposes the conventions of film and also acknowledges the role of the viewer. We should hope it gives the viewer back their sense of critical distance, which counter-intuitively, affords the viewer licence to *engage with* pathos without sentimentality. Sentimentality is a problem for all art forms. A recent review of one theatre production said, 'to represent all women as equally victimised seems not only dispiriting but also politically reactionary'.³ Sentimentality presents the illusion that through a moment of identification with the distress of others, the viewer is bequeathed some kind of agency or purpose born of sincerity. However, there is no role for the viewer, actors, director or scriptwriters here. Just an account of unrepresentable experiences that are hidden from view so that 'justice' can be seen not 'to be done' but for what it is.

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² Anna Motz *The Psychology of Female Violence: Crimes Against the Body*, Taylor & Francis, 2008

³ <https://theartsdesk.com/theatre/blank-donmar-warehouse-review-strong-dispiriting>