Review

Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representation of Incarceration. By Bill Yousman. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009, 200p. (paper) ISBN: 1433104776; ISBN-13: 978-1433104770. US List $32.95.

Though the United States has only five percent of the world's population, it currently accounts for more than a quarter of the globe's prisoners. As of 2007, some 2,293,000 Americans—or more than one in every 100 adult residents -- were incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails and this figure does not include the more than 119,000 individuals held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) centers, military prisons and juvenile detention facilities (Holleman et al. 2009, 5). Despite the fact that crime rates have declined precipitously in recent years, the US prison population at the dawn of the 21st century was an astounding ten times higher than in 1970 (Yousman 2009, 3). As the ranks of the imprisoned have expanded, the proportion of state and federal tax revenues devoted to prisons and the supervision of parolees has soared. According to one estimate, state spending on corrections has quadrupled over the past two decades; prison-related spending by state governments alone amounted to more than $47 billion in 2008 (Moore 2009).

As most readers of this journal know, America's massive prison-industrial complex disproportionately impacts the poor and the working-class, in particular low-income African Americans and Latinos living in urban areas. Roughly 50% of all inmates are black and the vast majority lacked full time employment at the time of their arrest (Yousman 2009, 7). Indeed, some historians have argued that mass incarceration of people of color since the late 1960s should be seen as a central cause, rather than merely an effect, of the economic decline and persistent poverty that have gripped the nation's inner cities in the post-Vietnam era (Thompson 2010).

Scholars and progressive critics have long maintained that alarmist images of crime in the media play a key role in legitimating repressive criminal justice policies like the ones behind our current incarceration boom. Back in the 1970s, Stuart Hall and his collaborators (1978) traced the way news coverage of a mugging wave in the UK gave rise to a moral panic, which in turn spurred a clampdown on immigrants and working class youth. More recently, Ray Surrette (1998) has documented how television tends to "overrepresent" violent crime far out of proportion to its incidence in real life and to obscure the underlying social causes of the crime it represents. Yet despite the fact that research on media representations of crime and criminals is by now a well established sub-field of media and cultural studies, there has been virtually no scholarly attention to media representations of prison life. Bill Yousman's *Prime Time Prisons on U.S. TV: Representation of Incarceration* aims to fill this void.

Yousman's overarching argument is that media stories and images form the public's primary source of information about "who prisoners are and what life in prison is 'really' like" (16) and that the stories and images about prison life on American TV demonize pris-

oners as frightening "others" and promote a series of ideological myths about the corrections system as a whole.

After previewing his argument and reviewing some basic facts about America's gargantuan prison industry in his introductory chapter, Yousman in Chapter 2 lays the theoretical foundation for his analysis of primetime TV representations of prisons and their inmates. He succinctly shows how insights from semiotics, the research on cultivation associated with George Gerbner, agenda setting theory, British cultural studies and the theory of moral panics set the groundwork for such an analysis. Chapter 3 reviews the extensive literature on media representations of crime and criminals. While hardly monolithic, the scholarly literature generally confirms that narratives about crime and criminals permeate American television, dominating both TV news and entertainment programming (34-39). According to Yousman, the literature clearly establishes that such narratives tend to focus on black and Latino lawlessness while ignoring crimes committed by whites (41). At the same time, the bulk of the literature tends to suggests that the media's discourse on crime perpetuates the myth that criminals are fundamentally different from their fellow citizens – that they are irreducibly, essentially "other"— and that criminal behavior is the result of individual deviance or immorality (44). What existing scholarly studies of media representations of crime fail to do, though, is look at what the media make of individual offenders after they have been arrested, convicted and jailed. It is in this area that *Prime Time Prisons* makes its original contribution.

Chapter 4 of the book summarizes the results of the author's study of the coverage of prisons, penal policy and prisoners on local television news. For this chapter, Yousman examined a total of eight weeks of local news shows broadcast on four different network-affiliated TV stations in the Hartford-New Haven, Ct. area. Predictably, the local TV news shows he studied featured very little coverage of the penal system, just three stories running a mere 59 seconds out of the 33 hours of TV news in his sample. Yet 52 of the 56 local news broadcasts in Yousman's sample included stories with images of prisoners in court or being transported by law enforcement officials, a veritable "parade of prisoner" (66). As he demonstrates, inmates sentenced for violent crimes were dramatically overrepresented in these stories and the frequent depiction of prisoners in shackles or restraints "reinforced the notion that inmates are dangerous, violent, misfits who require measures in order to keep them under control" (75). This visual stereotyping of prisoners as violent and out of control was bolstered by the "blatantly loaded terms" (74) applied to them by criminal justice officials in soundbites incorporated into the stories.

Chapter 5 investigates the coverage of the corrections system by national TV news. Using the Vanderbilt TV News Archives, Yousman analyzed all nightly news casts on ABC, CBS and NBC for the years 1990, 1995 and 2000. As with the local TV news, Yousman found that "[c]rime and criminals were a major preoccupation of the network news but what happens to criminals after they are convicted is barely of concern" (78). Indeed, in the three years he studied, the networks aired more than 4700 stories on crime but just 69 stories on prisons and prisoners. In the few stories the networks did run, Yousman identified a number of key themes that more or less echoed the anti-prisoner stereotypes perpetuated by local TV

news. The stories repeatedly depicted prisoners as dangerous, incarceration as necessary to protect society from potentially violent inmates and the harsh punishment meted out to those held in American jails as justified and deserved (81). On only a few occasions were critics of the abuse of prisoner rights or advocates of alternatives to incarceration afforded any time to speak on network newscasts and their voices were almost always marginalized (105). Yousman concludes the chapter by considering the reasons why there is so little coverage of the burgeoning prison population, citing the obstacles the penal system places in the way of journalists and underscoring the fact that advertiser-driven media are naturally not much interested in a group that is overwhelmingly poor.

In chapter 6, Yousman turns his attention to depictions of incarceration on the prime time crime dramas *Law & Order, NYPD Blue* and *The Practice*. In stark contrast to both local and national TV news, all of these shows regularly included characters identified as inmates, ex-convicts and parolees. Yet, like TV news, these dramas largely ignored the daily routines and realities of prison life and tended to portray inmates in ways that legitimate the prison-industrial complex as "a necessary response to an out-of-control-world of vicious crime and savage criminals" (140). Yousman's analysis of some 70 episodes of these shows underscores a number of recurring patterns in the way prison and prisoners are represented. To begin with, he discovers that the majority of inmates pictured in the episodes are depicted as guilty and that black criminals, in particular, tended to be portrayed as "simply immoral creatures, violent and evil by nature" (120). Indeed, Yousman argues persuasively that on shows like *NYPD Blue* characters who represent "forces of good" tend to be primarily white while those who represent forces of evil are more frequently black and Latino. In addition, he contends that many of the programs he analyzed dwell on the brutality of prison life while at the same time suggesting that such brutality is a necessary and fully justified response to the deadly threat posed by the inmates (125). The discourse of these shows uniformly rejects the concept of rehabilitation in favor of harsh punishment and neglects "any consideration of why humane treatment counseling, education and the like might, at the very least, produce better outcomes when individuals are released from prison" (131).

By far the most consistent pattern Yousman found was the tendency of prime time crime dramas to construct a picture of a corrections system that is remarkably free of racial bias or institutional dysfunction. Some episodes of *The Practice* and *Law and Order* did revolve around plots about people being wrongly imprisoned; invariably, though, such episodes ended with the innocent party being released from jail or being otherwise redeemed thanks to the diligent efforts of some crusading, good-hearted white lawyer. The occasional failures of the criminal justice system in these programs are almost always blamed on isolated and deviant individuals—a lying police officer, a prejudiced judge, a mentally unstable forensic scientist. As Yousman explains, this tendency to focus on corrupt or deviant individuals within the corrections infrastructure obscures larger, more serious problems such as the systematically unequal sentencing of black and white defendants for similar crimes or the highly racist way in which the law enforcement has chosen to pursue the so-called war on drugs. Finally, and perhaps most damningly, Yousman finds that inmates or ex-prisoners on these shows are never "fully realized characters" but rather mere "window dressing," victims or

villans whose sole narrative function is "to move the plot along and foils for the lawyers and police who are the protagonists of these dramas" (140).

The final substantial chapter of the book, Chapter 7, examines the critically-acclaimed HBO series *Oz*, one of the few TV programs to offer viewers an "inside view" of an imagined corrections facility and one of the few to make inmates into central characters. Set in a fictional maximum security prison populated by heavily minority prisoners, the series ran from 1997 to 2003 and won plaudits from critics for its "realism." Unlike the reactionary, punitive view of prisoners showcased in the crime shows anatomized in Chapter 6, Yousman suggests that *Oz* is an ideologically contradictory text. On the one hand, *Oz* perpetuates the association of prisoners with violence and savagery that pervades shows like *NYPD Blue*. Indeed, by Yousman's estimate, murder is so commonplace on the show that virtually every episode includes at least one violent death, a clear distortion of the reality inside America's prisons where inmates are far more likely to die of old age, disease or suicide than assault (145). Moreover, like most prime time crime shows, *Oz* repeatedly promotes an image of black masculinity as essentially depraved and predatory in its depiction of its central African American characters and "racializes" the space of the prison by incorporating gangster rap and African music into the soundtrack (156). On the other hand, the program *does* portray prisoners as complex characters with some psychological depth, on several occasions showing prisoners weeping with remorse over their plight or mourning the deaths of loved ones. It broke with standard TV treatments of prison sexuality by including an ongoing story about a homosexual romance between two prisoners. And the show from time-to-time articulated pointed criticisms of the penal system, notably by including as an occasional character a corrupt, immoral politician who uses law and order rhetoric in a "cynical attempt to win voter approval" (165). Despite this complexity, Yousman ultimately argues that, by consistently dwelling on the "spectacle of horrific violence", *Oz* "may serve to cultivate fear in its viewers who have few alternative representations of inmates to draw on" (169).

It quickly becomes obvious to the reader that *Prime Time Prisons* began life as a dissertation and that it suffers from the characteristic flaws of the genre: the prose is sometime repetitive, too much space is devoted to the literature review and the conclusions to the individual chapters too often mechanically rehearse the main points that have just been covered. Yet, despite this, Yousman's book makes a timely intellectual intervention at a crucial juncture in the history of public discourse surrounding America's prison-industrial complex. As Holleman et al. argue, because of the current economic crisis, we have entered "a moment where it will be possible to open up a debate about the obscenity and absurdity of the present order and its punitive social control mechanisms" (16). By cataloging and debunking the various ways that TV has represented and legitimated the bloated US prison system, Bill Yousman's book makes an invaluable contribution to this nascent debate.

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