

# ‘NOT ANOTHER FOOTBALL HOOLIGAN STORY’?

## LEARNING FROM NARRATIVES OF ‘TRUE CRIME’ AND DESISTANCE

By Emma Poulton<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article discusses the value of using cultural representations of crime and criminal justice to extend mainstream criminological knowledge on desistance from crime. The article uses biographical interviews to explore the ‘true crime’ life-story of former ‘football hooligan’, Cass Pennant, as (re)presented in his autobiography (*CASS*) and a film of the same name. It is argued that *CASS* is ‘not another football hooligan story’, but a multi-dimensional narrative about identity, belonging and redemption. The article argues that analyses of ‘true crime’ autobiographies and their film adaptations (especially when complimented with biographical research interviews) provide an alternative lens through which to understand the stages of a ‘criminal career’ and experiences of the criminal justice system. From analysis of auto/biographical narratives of ‘true crime’ we can learn about the motivations for involvement in deviant behaviour, trajectories of crime, reasons for recidivism, epiphanal moments and processes of desistance. Consequently, the ‘true crime’ narrative turn offers us a valuable means of understanding life-course desistance.

### Key words

Football hooliganism, criminal career / hooligan career, desistance, ‘true crime’, life-stories, narrative / biographical methods.

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## Introduction

During the week most of us were law-abiding citizens. Soccer violence was a buzz to us... that gripped you like a drug. We were young men in peace time with money and no commitments except to ourselves who found a high in violence that could not be found anywhere else in our lives. We didn't mug old ladies or innocent by-standers... Perhaps when you've read my story you'll understand (Pennant, 2000: 2).

The above extract typifies the style of many of the 'football hooligan' autobiographies that have become a British cultural phenomenon over the past four decades (Poulton, 2008: 337-40 and Redhead, 2004, 2008, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Driven by a much broader popular interest in 'true crime' in Britain, Australia and the USA since the late 1980s, these hooligan memoirs give readers – including social scientists – a 'first hand' insight into a subculture whose behaviour still causes great public concern in Europe and beyond. As with the published life-stories of other 'underworld exhibitionists' (Penfold-Mounce, 2009: 115),<sup>2</sup> some have been made into films and take their message to a wider audience, such as Pennant's (2000) *CASS* (Dir. Jon S. Baird, 2008), Leach's (2008) *Rise of the Foot Soldier* (Dir. Julian Gilbey, 2007), and Sampson's (1998) *Awaydays* (Dir. Pat Holden, 2009). Others – about one hundred autobiographies have been published in the UK to date, along with nearly fifty biographies (Redhead, 2010) – are less well circulated, but remain as records of transgressive behaviours. The 'hit and tell' hooligan genre (Redhead, 2010) is often criticised for being a 'nostalgic, narcissistic wallow in football violence' (Dart, 2008: 42), but are these narratives anything other than a celebratory 'peepshow' into a deviant subculture by profiteering 'underworld exhibitionists' (Penfold-Mounce, 2009); in other words, just 'another football hooligan story'?

This article focuses upon the life-story of the 'retired' hooligan-turned-author cited above, Cass Pennant<sup>3</sup> – which is (re)presented in his best-selling autobiography, *CASS* (Pennant, 2000) and also a film of the same name – to first, demonstrate how cultural representations of 'true crime', supported and supplemented with narrative / biographical research methods, can be used in criminology to gain a better understanding of the stages and nature of 'hooligan' (and more broadly, 'criminal') careers, and second, to examine some of the reasons for getting 'in to' and 'out of' football hooligan violence. Pennant was a 'top boy' (leading member) in the notorious Inter City Firm (ICF) – an organised hooligan gang associated with West Ham United Football Club – during the 1970s/80s when the 'problem' of football hooliganism in Britain was most acute. Both his book and film biopic explore the motivations behind how Pennant became involved in violence and transgressive behaviours (as a street fighter, football hooligan and security doorman), his experiences of the criminal justice system and struggle to avoid recidivism before – in his own words – his 'retirement' from his 'life of violence' and 'reformation' as a successful writer and publisher of 'true crime' literature, film producer and self-styled 'hooliologist', with a considerable media profile.

In light of this thematic content, it is argued that *CASS* (both the book and filmic representation) should *not* be dismissed as merely another formulaic football hooligan story. Instead, it can be understood as a 'confessional tale' (Van Maanen, 1988/2011) and therefore – as the author and director intended and prefer – a 'redemption' narrative. Consequently, this article contends that analyses of hooligan autobiographies and their film adaptations can

move beyond traditional debates on violent media content and can helpfully contribute to desistance-focused criminal justice research, as other studies of cinematic representations of crime, law and punishment have done (Jewkes, 2005; Bennett, 2008; Nellis, 2009). This is especially so when complimented by narrative interviews with their producers using biographical research methods. In doing so, this article answers Rafter's (2007: 406) call for the development of 'popular criminology' – 'a discourse parallel to academic criminology and of equal social significance' – using cultural representations of crime and criminal justice to supplement and extend mainstream criminological knowledge.

The article draws upon a series of seldom-granted interviews with Cass Pennant and Jon S. Baird,<sup>4</sup> screenwriter and director of *CASS*, the film adaptation of Pennant's autobiography. This level of access to football hooligans (and high profile filmmakers) is unusual and hard to come by (Giulianotti, 1995; Armstrong, 1998; Hughson, 1998; Poulton, 2012) and helps explain why the research was limited to a single subject. The article begins with a review of literature pertaining to the use of 'life-stories' in social research, particularly studies of desistance from crime. This is followed by a consideration of other cinematic representations of crime and the criminal justice system, since *CASS* portrays Pennant's experiences of these in chronicling his life-story. Next, the methodological approach is outlined before a critical discussion of the rich data gained through the biographical interviews with Pennant and Baird. The interviews gained rare first-hand insights into: first, why Pennant initially wrote his life-story and then sought its publication; second, the motivations behind making Pennant's autobiography into a film; and third, Pennant and Baird's preferred meaning(s) of their film's narrative and responses to oppositional readings. Finally, some conclusions are presented about the lessons we can learn from narratives of 'true crime' and desistance.

The article contends that these autobiographical 'true crime' testimonies – and sometimes their film adaptations – can actually offer insights into the life-histories, 'criminal careers', and lived (hyper-masculine) experiences of those involved in violent crime, including their encounters with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. From these narratives of 'true crime' and desistance – the processes through which people cease and refrain from offending (Sampson and Laub, 1993, 2005) – we can learn about their 'trajectories of crime' and their motivations to (re)offend and desist. The narratives can help us make sense of what the authors say about their violent pasts (and well as their futures), the meanings they give to the tales they tell, and also their motivations to write and publish their memoirs.<sup>5</sup> As Pennant (2000: 2) writes above: 'Perhaps when you've read my story you'll understand'.

### **Learning from Life-histories and Narrative/Biographical Methods**

Despite the 'bewildering use of different labels such as life history, narrative, life writing, autobiographical and auto/biographical research' (Merrill and West, 2011: 10), their value and significance requires further consideration since narrative/biographical methods have recently enjoyed something of a renaissance in the social sciences over the last thirty years (Denzin, 1989; Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Delamont and Atkinson, 2006; Merrill and West, 2011). While the terms used to describe these methods may vary, there are many similarities, albeit some differences of emphasis (Denzin, 1989). Merrill and West (2011: 10) offer a useful summary of the shared methodological approach in their definition of biographical research as that 'which utilises individual stories or other personal documents to understand lives within a social, psychological and/or historical frame'. This can provide

‘rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other’ (Merrill and West (2011: 1).

The use of such methods ‘are alive and well (if sometimes marginal and contested) in various academic disciplines’ (Merrill and West, 2011: 2), including anthropology, education, history, sociology and social policy. Yet there has been some resistance within some criminological circles due to the epistemological ‘hierarchy of credibility’ afforded to auto/biographical texts (Morgan, 1999: 330). Maruna and Matravers (2004) identified a need to ‘revive’ criminological interest in what was, prior to the positivist turn, a key text in the Chicago School’s canon: Shaw’s (1930/1966) seminal work on the life-story of ‘The Jack-Roller’. Since then, others have embraced narrative/biographical methods. Notably Presdee (2004), who promoted the process of ‘excavation’ and use of auto/biographical ‘true crime’ stories as key sources of knowledge for reconstructing an explanatory narrative of the *lived* experiences of the offender and the series of events and influences that led to their criminal activity.

Gelsthorpe (2009: 518) has recognised ‘the importance of the narrative turn in criminology’. She advocates the use of biography, conceptually and methodologically, noting how ‘individual stories have held and can hold huge sway in criminal justice policy’ (Gelsthorpe, 2009: 518). Auto/biographies have been particularly helpful in desistance-focused criminal justice research (Farrall and Maruna, 2004). Maruna’s work is embedded in this approach. He uses criminal autobiographies as a means of understanding the processes of ‘going straight’ (Maruna, 1997) and explores the use of narratives in offender counselling and rehabilitation in his examination of the phenomenology of ‘making good’ (Maruna, 2001). He found that criminals who desist from crime tend to construct powerful narratives that aid them in making sense of their pasts, finding fulfilment in productive behaviours, and feeling in control of their futures.

Sampson and Laub (2005: 16) are also key exponents of the use of life-story narratives (combined with quantitative approaches), which they maintain ‘can be used to develop a richer and more comprehensive picture of why some men persist in offending and others stop’. They argue for a ‘life-course perspective’ on ‘trajectories of crime’ that ‘emphasizes human agency and choice over the life-span, underscoring how people construct their lives within the context of ongoing constraints. From this view, trajectories [of crime] are interpreted not from a lens of unfolding inevitability but rather continuous social reproduction” (p.14). From their longitudinal studies of adolescent delinquents across the life-course, Sampson and Laub (2005: 18) observe:

The mechanisms underlying the desistance process are consistent with the general idea of social control. Namely, what appears to be important about institutional or structural turning points is that they all involve, to varying degrees, (1) new situations that ‘knife off’ the past from the present, (2) new situations that provide both supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social rapport and growth, (3) new situations that change and structure routine activities, and (4) new situations that provide the opportunity for identity transformation.

Among other scholars effectively using auto/biographical accounts in desistance-related research are: Gadd and Farrall (2004), who examined processes of desistance from criminal careers, interpreting men’s narratives of change; and Presser (2009), who also studied the narratives of offenders. Goodey (2000) considered the possibilities and practicalities of the

biographical research interview with specific reference to the importance of ‘epiphany’ – significant ‘turning-point’ moments in life – for understanding the direction individual lives take with respect to crime and victimization. O’Neill and Campbell (2010) also explored the complex trajectories of moving in and out of sex work in a wider frame via biographical and cultural analysis of women’s narratives of desistance at the intersections of structures, social and cultural meaning, everyday interactions and routine practices, and individual subjectivities. They found the use of life-story interviews particularly helpful since: ‘They tell us what is personally meaningful to them, of experience personally felt. As such they can also act as ciphers for the meta conditions of society, for relating the particular to the general’.

Further to this, Redhead (2010: 27) is a keen advocate of ‘hit and tell’ hooligan memoirs, appreciating their use as a valuable resource, which he claims contributes to ‘an oral history of football, hooliganism and youth subculture’. While acknowledging this “‘low culture’” amateur journalism celebrates and romanticises’ hooliganism, Redhead (2010: 6) argues that: ‘The connections between football hooligan literature and football hooligan subcultures need to be taken seriously within contemporary studies of deviance’, since these autobiographies offer academics from a range of disciplines first-hand accounts of ‘events, stories, language and colour to a history of youth’. Hooligan memoirs can be narcissistic, self-serving and characterised by bragging and bravado, and often bad writing (Poulton, 2008: 337). Consequently, Pearson (2011, 2012: 9) warns that they should be used ‘with extreme care due to concerns about authenticity and bias’. Nevertheless, Redhead (2008, 2010) makes a valid case for their usefulness, despite claims to the contrary by Dart (2008). Indeed, it is argued here that the insights proffered from hooligan autobiographies – and indeed their cinematic representations – could also helpfully contribute to desistance-focused criminal justice research in ways that analysts of law, crime and prison films have attempted to do by helping us to understand the pathways into and out of this violent subculture. This is especially when complimented with biographical interviews with their authors/producers to probe further into these ‘true crime’ narratives.

### **Cinematic Representations of Crime and the Criminal Justice System**

While some consumers find the focus upon crime and criminality in certain media formats as inappropriate at best, and offensive or distasteful at worst, there is an undoubted popularity with crime, particular violent crime, within the entertainment media (Hayward and Presdee, 2009). Studies on the cinematic representation of crime and deviance have been steadily developing since the early-2000s (see: Horeck’s, 2003; O’Brien, Tzanelli and Yar, 2005; O’Brien, Tzanelli, Yar and Penna, 2005; Poulton, 2006; Jarvis, 2007; Rafter, 2000/2006, 2007; Frauley, 2010; Young, 2010; Rafter and Brown, 2011). However, Rafter (2007: 404) laments that: ‘In its current, still-emerging form, the crime-films literature remains amorphous, lacking the coherence of the closely related literature on law films’. In contrast, analyses of law films (i.e. those based on trials, lawyers, civil or criminal cases, etc.) begun as early as the 1980s and have developed significantly to the point that they ‘are now regarded as not only a valid source of information on popular attitudes toward law but as a form of legal discourse, a constituent of law itself’ (Rafter, 2007: 405). Indeed Kamir (2006) argues that law films have constructed a cinematic jurisprudence, whereby audiences are ‘trained’ in patterns of judgement. See for example the work of Greenfield, Osborn and Robson (2001), Machura and Robson (2001), Osborn (2001), Chase (2002), Orit (2005) and Sarat, Douglas and Umphrey (2005) for some insightful analyses of law films.

Rafter's (2007: 404) concern then is the relationship between criminology and crime films; specifically the 'fertile criminological material' the latter can contribute to the discipline 'through the perspective they provide on cops, drug mules, heisters, prisoners, serial killers, victims and so on'. This article adds 'football hooligans' to the list. Kohm and Greenhill (2011: 213) – also responding to Rafter's call to develop 'popular criminology' using cultural representations of crime and criminal justice to supplement and extend mainstream criminological knowledge – present their analysis of films about paedophiles as 'a resource in the quest for a more nuanced understanding of and appreciation for differing standpoints on justice'. There is much then to be learned from cultural narratives of 'true crime' and desistance. As Rafter and Brown (2011: 5) state: 'Dismissing these accounts as voyeurism or schlock limits our understanding of their social function'.

In a similar way, the social role and significance of prison films has also attracted criminological and penological interest (Jewkes, 2005; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2005; Bennett, 2008; Nellis, 2009). Jewkes (2005) is especially critical of how cultural representations of prison/prisoners have failed to affect any meaningful penal policy reforms or changes in public perceptions. On a more positive note, Bennett (2008) observes that while prison films generally reflect and reinforce conventional views about crime and punishment – with the predominant representation being of violent, unreformed criminals being released to re-offend again – there are some occasional images of reform and redemption that can play a role in maintaining a popular space for an alternative discourse that can challenge popular conceptions of criminal justice. He advocates the promotion of criminal justice and penal reform through films, but acknowledges the difficulties of realising this.

The cultural politics of penal reform, including the educational use of prison movies and prisoners' autobiographies, has also been examined by Nellis (2002, 2009), who observes how cinematic representations of the released prisoner provide opportunities to experience the criminal's/prisoner's world *by proxy* and are also significant in constructing the 'ex-offender' and 'redemption' narratives. Nellis (2009: 130) suggests that 'such works contribute to an amorphous public conversation about crime, punishment and re-settlement' and that 'at their best these works have always asked – and sometimes attempted answers to – searching questions about the nature of rehabilitation, redemption and public forgiveness'. He identifies an 'aesthetic of redemption' – 'a cluster of motifs and tropes intended to make the idea of redemption intellectually plausible and emotionally appealing to modern audiences' (Nellis, 2009: 142) – usually underscored by the offender's moments of epiphany.

However, most of these studies of crime, prison and law films have tended to focus on the politics of representation, not the processes of production. While acknowledging there is 'no escaping the "politics of representation"', Greer, Ferrell and Jewkes (2007: 5-6) advocate that a scholarly engagement with it 'requires theorizing the complex construction and dissemination of visual media and carefully unpacking their connections to crime and crime control'. This article addresses this omission by gaining a rare 'behind the scenes' insight into some of the production issues underpinning the writing and making of *CASS*, as a means of exploring and learning from the construction and dissemination of narratives of 'true crime' and desistance by their actual authors and producers.

## **Methodological Issues**

The primary data was acquired from personally conducted semi-structured interviews: three with Pennant and two with Baird, over a period of eighteen months in the post-production

phase of the *CASS* film. This level of access to football hooligans (and also filmmakers) is unusual and difficult to secure (Giulianotti, 1995; Armstrong, 1998; Hughson, 1998) – especially for a female academic (Poulton, 2012)<sup>6</sup> – and helps justify why the research focused upon a single subject. While other studies might have been able to secure a larger sample, the methodological approach of conducting narrative interviews is similar to that employed by Maruna (1997, 2001), Sampson and Laub (2005), Gadd and Farrall (2009), and O’Neill and Campbell (2010). The interview material is supplemented with secondary data drawn from Pennant’s (2000) autobiography, Baird’s (2008) annotated screenplay and film reviews, where appropriate.

Obviously, there is a need for caution with any interview and autobiographical data due to the possibility of selective or biased recall, exaggeration and their potentially self-serving nature. As Merrill and West (2011: 1) note, auto/biographies are ‘prime vehicles for self and social exploration, or maybe self promotion’. Such circumspection was particularly required here given the propensity for hooligan memoirs to be boastful and self-aggrandizing (Poulton, 2008; Redhead, 2010; Pearson, 2011, 2012). In this connection, Baird acknowledged during interview that he ‘made the central character probably more sympathetic than it should have been’ in his direction of *CASS*. Given Baird’s admission of using what he called ‘artistic license’, the film adaptation of Pennant’s autobiography should be approached with particular care, but is still a useful resource.

What follows is a critical discussion of the rich data yielded from the interviews with Baird and Pennant. This takes a linear, chronological approach to Pennant’s life-story, as this was deemed helpful in moving towards an understanding of: firstly, why Pennant wrote his autobiography and sought its publication; second, the motivations behind making Pennant’s autobiography into a film; and third, Pennant and Baird’s preferred meaning(s) for their film’s narrative.

### **‘Your Story Reads Like a Hollywood Movie’: Profiling Pennant’s Life-story**

The above quote is taken from Pennant’s interview account of his book publisher’s response to reading the manuscript of his life-story, which resulted in his first book deal, as will be explained below. *CASS* is a dramatisation of Pennant’s life-story and ‘criminal career’, although the latter is not a term he would associate himself with. Pennant explained early in his first interview how: ‘I never saw myself as a criminal. Our actions might have been criminal, but we weren’t. The people I knew weren’t criminals, yeah? They were hooligans’. Pennant explained how this differentiation was also made by significant others: ‘I was a novelty in prison. I wasn’t regarded as a criminal by the criminals. The screws [prison officers] all regarded me as a hooligan. I was known as “the hooligan”’. This is an interesting distinction, which raises important socio-legal questions about what constitutes *real* criminal activity. It would seem that football hooligans are perceived by themselves and some convicted criminals and members of the prison service (circa the late 1970s at least) as ‘doing wrong’ rather than ‘doing crime’ (Presdee, 1994). For these reasons, the term ‘hooligan career’, rather than ‘criminal career’, will be used in relation to Pennant throughout this article.

Born in 1958, Cass Pennant – real name *Carol* Pennant (he opted for the name of his boxing hero, Cassius Clay, at school in a bid to escape the teasing for having a ‘girl’s’ name) – was given up as a baby by his Jamaican mother and fostered from a Dr Barnardo’s orphanage by elderly white parents. He was brought up in an all-white, outer-London suburb

where he was subjected to racist bullying, until one day he retaliated with violence. Pennant explained how he gradually found a previously absent sense of belonging and identity through the subculture of football hooliganism. Graduating through the ranks on the basis of his fighting prowess, he became one of the leaders of the infamous ICF, establishing a notorious reputation nationwide as a street fighter in the late 1970s and 1980s, then later as a formidable doorman running London's largest nightclub security business.

Pennant (2000) claims to have been the first football hooligan to receive a custodial sentence for football-related disorder; convicted for affray at the Old Bailey, London in 1978 having 'already done two years in borstal on bail'. He 'experienced the first race riots in [a British] prison' in the late 1970s and was subjected to racism from white prison officers, as well as some 'swaltzers' (black prisoners) because he 'didn't fit in and wouldn't conform'. He served further time in prison on remand until he was acquitted for a fatal stabbing he did not commit. Pennant states he chose to 'retire' (i.e. desist) from football-related violence following the 1985 Heysel Stadium Disaster in Belgium when 39 Italian fans died, which appears to have been an 'epiphany' for him; he explains: 'Football violence was a drug and a hard habit to kick but as I watched those fans dying before my eyes I vowed to turn my back on terrace violence for good' (Pennant, 2000: 142). But his attempt to 'go straight' was problematic.

After two years 'retirement' from football-related violence, Pennant was subjected to what he describes as 'another miscarriage of justice: a proper fit-up'. In early 1987, he was one of a number of 'known hooligans' arrested and charged with conspiracy to cause affray in a major undercover police investigation (Operation Full-Time) driven by the Thatcher Government's 'law and order' policies to combat football hooliganism. The ensuing 'ICF Show Trials' collapsed due to the integrity of the police evidence (Spaaij, 2006: 141). Then in 1993, his violent way of life caught up with him when he was shot three times at close range outside a south London nightclub, while running his security business. This was another significant 'turning-point' moment for Pennant. His survival left him with a dilemma: whether to re-offend and seek vengeance or maintain his desistance from his violent lifestyle. After experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, he chose the latter. His decision-making process and the meaning he attaches to 'going straight' are discussed below.

Given this synopsis, his life-story and 'hooligan career' would seem to lend itself very readily to both a book and dramatic film narrative, as his publisher suggested. During interview, Pennant explained how his life-story (eventually) found its way first into print and then later film:

To go back to the beginning, *CASS* is basically based on two books. *Congratulations [You Have Just Met the ICF]* about the firm, and *Cass, my life-story*. The originals. I wrote them inside in 1978, after being the first football fan to be jailed... When I first wrote the book, I was looking for a way out the gang... Because it [football violence] was a way of life for me then. It wasn't like I had a choice... And I knew once you get a reputation, it's very hard to shake and I knew that when I came out, that would be the case. And I didn't want to end up back there [in prison]. So I thought the book was a way out and maybe a way to fame and fortune too.

In this respect, Pennant does not simply fit into Penfold-Mounce's (2009: 116) classification of an 'underworld exhibitionist, defined by their intentional and active pursuit of celebrity status through crime and deviance'. Rather, Pennant – acknowledging the constraining nature

of his life-style and what he perceived as a lack of options – saw his original book as a vehicle for ‘making good’ (Maruna, 2001). However, his aim to avoid recidivism and his quest to publish his autobiography was difficult. Pennant recounted many challenges. The first of these was upon leaving prison when: ‘A racist screw took my first book off me. Tried to stop me. The one chance I had to try to put down the sword and pick up the pen and they ripped it up and destroyed it. Said I’d be back inside’. This is reinforced in the film adaptation. Driven by a sense of injustice, Pennant rewrote his autobiography during another stretch on remand in jail. He was encouraged by rejection letters identifying his ‘raw talent and energy’, but believes he was hampered by the fact he ‘couldn’t spell or do joined-up writing’ and so in the pre-computer era, he was submitting hand-written manuscripts in block capitals.

Looking back, Pennant recognises that another obstacle was ‘market-related’, which he ‘didn’t understand back then’. He explained how: ‘There was no true crime then. No books on gangs. You had crime in your fiction, but no true crime. There was no market’. Pennant told how he was demoralised when ‘over ten years after I wrote my book in ’78, Colin Ward’s *Steaming In* was runner-up in the William Hill Sports Books Awards in 1989’. With the successful publication of this rival hooligan autobiography, Pennant believed that he had ‘missed the boat’ and that there would be no further demand for similar books. Having ‘let it go to dust’, Pennant outlined how his ‘big break’ in finally securing a book contract came in the late 1990s: a result of a *quid pro quo* arrangement with Kate Kray (ex-wife of Ronnie, one of the notorious London gangland Kray Twins from the 1950s/60s), who was a best-selling ‘true crime’ author herself. In return for allowing her to profile him in her book *Ultimate Hard Bastards*, Pennant demanded ‘a shot at her big, powerful true crime publisher, John Blake’. Kray personally endorsed his manuscript and Pennant was granted an audience with Blake. Pennant explained:

I must have spent twenty minutes saying why I was the authority to write the book. The ultimate book from someone who’s lived it on the frontline, yeah? The real deal. And he [Blake] turned round and said, “I’ve got to go, but I could listen to you all day”. He said, “I could listen to your story because this reads like a Hollywood movie”.

These turned out to be prophetic words. Pennant recalled how Blake gave him his first book deal: ‘So I’d got what I wanted after 23 years of chasing’. Pennant’s autobiography *Cass* was first published in 2000 and, according to Pennant, ‘became a best-seller because it went into true crime’. The book’s transition from print to screen will now be charted; for as Pennant explained: ‘A lot of the [hooligan] film success is owed to the books. Through the books, you got to jump onto the films’.

### **Motivations Behind the Making of CASS**

Pennant’s motivation for making a film about his life-story appeared to be entrenched in a bitter sense of injustice at the institutional racism and other barriers he said he faced when trying to get his original autobiography published, coupled with a personal struggle to avoid re-offending. He spelt this out passionately:

Ambition drives me, yeah? That racist screw who ripped my first book up, said I couldn’t do it, said you’ll be back in prison, you’ll re-offend. They were right, I did, but I wanted to prove I’m much better than that, yeah? So I wrote the book again. I wrote the book *because* of them. I didn’t write the book for a best-seller... I wrote it for me. For me to survive. 23 years

it kept me going, banging on every publisher's door, that ambition that I can be better. And as one book comes off the print, that's ambition served. The fact that it went onto be a best-seller is a bonus. It just gave me another ambition: another book for them to make into a film.

From this account, it would seem that Pennant was not purely financially-driven, a key characteristic of 'underworld exhibitionists' who 'project their own rebellious image in an attempt to cash in on their own professed naughtiness' (Penfold-Mounce, 2009: 87). Instead, his quest was wrapped up in his attempts to 'go straight' and at 'making good' (Maruna, 1997, 2001).

Despite his involvement as a technical advisor with several previous hooligan-related feature films, Pennant outlined how he experienced a series of set-backs in getting a film deal, as he had with securing his book publication. While he 'trusts no one from experience and false promises', Pennant was finally persuaded by Baird's offer to work together making CASS 'because Jon saw the most important thing is to see the story, my story'. Yet, Baird (2008: 1) confesses to being 'really wary of him at first. I didn't really know that much about his story apart from his violent side... [or that] he was a reformed character'. While aware that Pennant was 'probably looking at me as a potential director', he was initially indifferent, especially when Pennant gave him a copy of his autobiography. Baird was candid about his cynicism at the time of this gesture. Baird recalled: 'I thought it was going to be another one dimensional hooligan story. Especially with him because all I knew of Cass Pennant was that he was a football hooligan and that was it'. This scepticism is underlined by his admission that: 'I took one look at the cover and thought, "Oh no, here we go, another East End hard-man story"' (Baird, 2008: 1). Baird's thoughts changed as he started to read the book. He explained: 'I thought, "This is good. You know, maybe we could do something different with this". Because it didn't just celebrate the fact that this guy was a hooligan. It explained *why* he was a hooligan'. Spelling out this attraction to Pennant's life-story, Baird expanded:

Not only was he the most infamous hooligan in the country – or in the world really, I think – but because he's black as well and also because he was given a girl's name, Carol, I thought, "There's a lot of facets here already before we even start". He was adopted and by white, older parents. He suffered racism, as a kid and in prison. There were lots of things in there that you could pick out that were potentially interesting and were sort of universal as well. It's an identity story.

For Baird then, Pennant's autobiography was not simply 'another football hooligan story'; it was about much more. Indeed, Pennant himself claimed hooliganism 'is only twenty-five percent of my life-story'. Baird described how, upon finishing the book, he recognised its potential as a screenplay: 'It had enough ingredients as a film narrative but also, more importantly for me, enough *different* ingredients from the things that had been done in the past. One, it was a true story; two, it had the identity issues; and three, it was a redemption story'. It was this preferred meaning – constructed and represented through the 'aesthetic of redemption highlighted by Nellis (2009) – that was to underpin the making of CASS.

### **'Not Another One Dimensional Hooligan Story': The Preferred Meaning for a Redemption Narrative**

Baird was keen to underline that for him, Pennant's autobiography (and the CASS film) is a about 'a man's identity struggle', addressing 'issues of masculinity and race'. This preferred meaning is reflected in the film's tagline: 'The hardest fight is finding out who you are'.

Baird was also keen to demarcate *CASS* as different from ‘all the other hooligan movies that had been done up until that point’. He contrasted *CASS* with *Rise of the Foot Soldier*, about which he claimed: ‘There’s no redemption story. There’s no point to a lot of it, yeah? A lot of it is just hugely gratuitous violence. Same with *The Football Factory* in a way. I don’t know if there’s a message at the end’. Explaining how he had ‘tried to do things differently with *CASS*’, he gave the analogy that: ‘A porn film is not a love story’. He maintained:

*CASS*, to me, is not purely porn because the story isn’t just about the violence, but about the motivation of *why* this character got involved in this way of life *and* importantly how he got out. It’s almost like a love story, in that we included the origins of it and wherever that leads to: the dilemma, the motivation to either stick with violence or get out of it...

Importantly for Baird: ‘*CASS* was a true story and most of the others weren’t; they were all based on fiction’; for example, *The Football Factory*, based on King’s (1996) novel. Baird continued: ‘I thought this gave it a different level of integrity. We were actually replicating something that people could definitely identify with and hear *true* stories as well, not just hearsay. You know, real life’. An emphasis on ‘realism’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘actuality’ is one of the common practices in the promotion of ‘true crime’-based films and literature; consumers are proffered stories of the *lived experiences* of crime, violence and the criminal justice system (Biressi, 2001; Murley, 2008). In this connection, Baird believes that their publicists ‘got us a lot more coverage than a film of our size would normally have got, probably because it’s a *true* story’.<sup>7</sup>

For Pennant too, writing his autobiography and then making it into a film was ‘my way of setting the record straight’ and providing a ‘first-hand brutal truth’ insight into his life-course: his ‘life of violence’ and then his reformed life: ‘being on the straight and narrow: how I turned it around and become a successful businessman’. His preferred meaning was: ‘There’s two paths in life, which I worked out: which one to take? It’s a personal message’. Pennant spoke candidly about what became a ‘turning-point’ moment in his life: the dilemma he was confronted with as a result of being shot and ‘seeing death: when the spirit leaves the body’. In the aftermath, having survived, he told how: ‘Over the next few days, it was like Noah’s Ark in the hospital: they came in two by two. Every gangster, every football face [reputed hooligan], every street guy, every bad guy you can think of, yeah? All saying, “Just say the word, Cass”’ [offering to help avenge his shooting, which would mean him re-offending]. He described at length the thought-processes he went through during his recovery, as he deliberated over whether to desist from violence or seek retribution:

On one side was the love of my wife and family. They were pulling me through and all they wanted from me was me, not the hard-man image, yeah? And on the other side was my life of violence... And for the first time I’m seeing these two paths. When I came out of hospital, that’s when I knew I’d turn my back on that path of violence. Because that was the easy path, to go for revenge, right? I suddenly realised my whole life had been about bloody violence, yeah? So I’ve seen the two paths and it suddenly hit home, right, which one to take... That’s the film’s message.

This passage is revealing both about Pennant’s reconciliation with, and desistance from, his violent (criminal) lifestyle. Pennant’s description of his deliberation over which path to take reflects Sampson and Laub’s (2005: 14) life-course perspective on crime, which ‘emphasises human agency and choice over the life span, underscoring how people construct their lives within the context of ongoing constraints’. During the life-course, as situations present

themselves, an individual makes choices, but not always in conditions of their own choosing (such as in the case of Pennant's shooting). Pennant's near-death experience presented him with a 'new situation that provide[d] the opportunity for identity transformation' (Sampson and Laub, 2005: 18).

The above passage also articulates the intended message of *CASS*, which the filmmakers reinforce with a homodiegetic narration throughout the film. Pennant went on to explain how some audience groups also recognised – and related to – his life-story. Outlining how he measured his film's success, Pennant explained: 'The triumph is we made the film we wanted to make. The bonus is people have debated the film'. Expanding on this, Pennant elaborated:

A film is about entertainment and the bonus is if it gives a message or a story. When you go and watch a film, you don't go to be preached to. You go to be entertained for an hour and a half, yeah? But the bonus with this film is people come away and they're all debating issues in the film. People are going away crying and saying, "It was the same for us", "I'm black, I'm adopted", "We know what you went through" and putting it on websites and writing letters to us, saying they're moved by the film, that it reminds them of their own life, or that my life-story's an inspiration. So I'm really proud of that.

From the feedback that Pennant relayed he had received, it seems that some consumers at least had understood and accepted the intended message that *CASS* is about a man's struggle for identity and belonging and a narrative of reformation and redemption, *not* simply 'another football hooligan story'. Of course, given the polysemic nature of media texts, consumers may take an oppositional reading to the preferred meaning of their authors/producers (Hall, 1973). This was certainly the case given some of the negative reviews of *CASS*.

Film critic Christopher Tookey (*Daily Mail*, 1 August 2008: 59) challenged the filmmakers preferred meaning head-on; he mused: 'We're meant to consider it a triumph of self-redemption when he decides to renounce violence. To this end, some unsavoury aspects of his thuggery are taken out, including a second visit to prison when he was nearly charged with murder'. While acknowledging that this was a 'fair comment' because some 'poetic license' had been extended to abridge his life-story into a film, Pennant was animated as he pointed out: 'The second stretch was for a stabbing I didn't do. A white guy did it and there I was, a black man doing time for a white man's crime... That's why I picked up the pen again during my second stretch, to set the record straight'. Pennant was acquitted of this offence. Baird was upset by the nature of what he said was 'a personal attack on Cass' in Tookey's review. In defending him, Baird sought to take full responsibility for the film adaptation of Pennant's autobiography and any 'artistic license' he may have employed in representing his life-story. As noted above, he admitted he 'made the central character probably more sympathetic than it should have been', while conscious of 'keeping it real'.

## Conclusion

Bennett (2008: 358) laments how 'there are only occasional, off-mainstream representations of released prisoners, including black people, undergoing reform or redemption'. *CASS*, a film adaptation of an autobiographical 'true crime' life-story of a former black British football hooligan, is one such example. It is argued here that the dominant narrative of *CASS* is '*not* another football hooligan story', but is instead – as the filmmakers prefer – a multi-dimensional narrative about identity, belonging and redemption, providing consumers with

much more than just a brief *frisson* with violent crime and deviance *by proxy* (see Poulton, 2008). Significantly, *CASS* provides an alternative lens through which to understand the stages of a 'hooligan/criminal career' – exploring the motivations for involvement in transgressive behaviours, trajectories of crime, reasons for recidivism, epiphanal moments and processes of desistance – as well as experiences of law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

Consequently, this article highlights the value of using cultural representations of crime and criminal justice to contribute to future desistance-focused research (Farrall and Maruna, 2004; Gelsthorpe, 2009). Criminology can, as Rafter and Brown (2011: 2) propose, greatly 'benefit from closer connections to popular culture' through the analysis of cultural representations of 'confessional tales' (Van Maanen, 1988/2011). Analyses of autobiographical narratives of 'true crime' and desistance (such as *CASS*) can move us beyond simplistic debates on violent media content and provide 'fertile criminological material' (Rafter, 2007) through 'first hand' insights into the life-stories and lived experiences of those involved in violent crime. This is especially pertinent when complimented with biographical research interviews with the (ex)offender/producer, which help to further explore the meanings they give to their behaviour and offences, past and future, on a micro level.

Seldom-granted interviews with the film's subject and screenwriter/director provided unparalleled insights into: first, the genesis of *CASS* as an autobiography; second, their motivations behind the film adaptation; and third, the preferred meaning(s) of their film's narrative. This data helps us to make sense of what Pennant says about his violent past – the paths he took and 'turning point' moments – and the meanings he (and Baird) give to his life-story. For example, as far as Pennant is concerned, as a 'football hooligan' he was guilty of 'doing wrong' rather than 'doing crime' (Presdee, 1994).

Of course, as noted above, caution is required when using autobiographical accounts and also cinematic representations of 'true crime' and criminal justice as a resource, due to possible embellishment and their potentially self-serving nature. This is especially true in relation to many published hooligan memoirs, which may not be written in the most sophisticated prose and have a reputation for bragging and bravado. In this connection, director Baird admitted to the use of 'artistic license' in his film adaptation. But that should not mean that all of these memoirs are dismissed as simply 'another football hooligan story' by an 'underworld exhibitionist': the 'true crime' narrative turn offers us something much more useful and revealing as a means of understanding life-course desistance.

## Notes

1. 'Football hooliganism' has no legal definition; it is a socially constructed generic term used to describe the disorderly and/or violent behaviour of football (soccer) supporters ranging from verbal abuse to fighting and affray. It is also used as a self-referent by participants. See Spaaij (2006), Ayres and Treadwell (2012) and Pearson (2012) for further definition and detail.
2. Penfold-Mounce's (2009: 86) defines 'underworld exhibitionists' as 'criminals who actively manufacture a celebrity career from their past activities with the intent of financial and status profit'. The historical origins of this can be traced back to thief and prison-breaker, John Sheppard, dictating his life-story to novelist Daniel Defoe in the eighteenth century. Notable examples from the mid-twentieth century are Truman Capote's (1966) *In Cold Blood* detailing the murders of the Clutter family and Norman Mailer's (1979) account of the life and crimes of Gary Gilmore. More recent examples helping to account for the increased popular interest in 'true crime' narratives since the 1980s include: the American serial killer, Ted Bundy; the British lifer, Charles Bronson; and the Australian ex-criminal, Mark Brandon 'Chopper' Read: all of whom have had books and films written about them by themselves and/or others.
3. Pennant has written 8 books to date, including: Pennant (2000, 2002), with total sales figures of around 300,000 (personal correspondence, 9 November 2012). Pennant outlined during interview: 'I got three different titles into the *Sunday Times* Top Ten in May 2003. The [*Running With the*] *6:57 Crew* book I co-wrote [Pennant and Silvester, 2003] was at No.6, just 100 copies behind Mrs Maggie Thatcher's [the former British Prime Minister] autobiography *State Memoirs*'. He has also been involved in a consultancy capacity with numerous film and television projects about football hooliganism and gang culture. Fiction-based feature films include: *The Firm* (Dir. Alan Clarke, 1988), *Snatch* (Dir. Guy Ritchie, 2000), *The Football Factory* (Dir. Nick Love, 2004) and *Green Street [Hooligans]* (Dir. Lexi Alexander, 2005). Television documentaries include: Thames TV's award-winning *Hooligan* (Dir. Ian Stuttard, 1985), Bravo TV's *The Real Football Factories* (see Poulton, 2006, 2007), and ITV's *Bouncers*. His more recent projects involve film production; for example, the documentary, *Casuals: The Story of the Legendary Terrace Fashion* (2011).
4. Baird's early work includes writing and directing his debut 2003 short-film, *It's a Casual Life*, and then as an associate producer and technical advisor on *Green Street*. He is also screenwriter and director of *Filth* (based on Irvine Welsh's novel), due for release in 2013.
5. See Nellis (2002) and Brayford, Cowe and Deering (2010) for a critical evaluation of various schemes involving creative work with offenders (including improving literacy) to help rehabilitate and reintegrate them back into civic society. In this connection, Pennant was an invited panellist to discuss the rehabilitative powers of writing, alongside other former British prisoners-turned-authors (Jonathan Aitken and Erwin James), at the 2011 Harrogate International Crime Writing Festival.
6. Female researchers confront specific methodological challenges when gaining access to, developing rapport and 'doing gendered research' in the hyper-masculine subculture of football hooliganism due to gender incongruence with their informers. See Poulton (2012).
7. See Poulton (forthcoming) for an analysis of the 'circuit of culture' involved in the production of CASS, including Baird and Pennant's target audience; their

understandings of the consumer market(s) for football hooliganism, true crime and violence; and their promotion and distribution strategy.

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