**“That Emotional Moment”: The Execution of Ruth Ellis in *Pierrepoint* (2005)**

**Abstract**

In 1955, Ruth Ellis became the last woman hanged in Britain. A 2003 appeal, which sought to revise her murder conviction to manslaughter, was dismissed on the grounds that “battered woman syndrome” was unknown at the time of her trial. In representing her hanging in slow motion, with an exchange of POV shots between Ellis and her executioner, *Pierrepoint* (2005) visualizes facets of Ellis’ contested legacy: the continued refusal to recognize the suffering of women caused by abusive men, and the extent to which Ellis’ conviction was shaped by prevailing cultural stereotypes which identified her as degenerate on grounds of her appearance and lifestyle. *Pierrepoint* recreates Ellis’ death but suggests her legacy remains “alive”: an ongoing injustice yet to be remedied.

**Key words**

*Pierrepoint*, Ruth Ellis, biopic, femininity, execution, hanging, Britain

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**Author bio**

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Numerous British biopics examine subjects at different stages of their life, including figures such as Winston Churchill (*Young Winston*, Dir. Richard Attenborough, 1972/*Darkest Hour*, Dir. Joe Wright, 2017) and Queen Victoria (*Victoria the Great*, Dir. Herbert Wilcox, 1937/*The Young Victoria*, Dir. Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009). Ruth Ellis, whose notoriety stems from her status as the last woman to be hanged in Britain, is represented in both *Dance with a Stranger* (Dir. Mike Newell, 1985) and *Pierrepoint* (Dir. Adrian Shergold, 2005) and thus merits inclusion in this list. That the life of a peroxide blonde murderess should be considered alongside such illustrious company is unsurprising: the lives of criminals have long held fascination, as testified by the numerous screen representations of figures such as Jack the Ripper (see Lennard 206–22). *Dance with a Stranger* recreated Ellis’ volatile relationship with David Blakely, whose shooting led to her conviction. Her execution for this crime was later represented in *Pierrepoint*, a biopic about the man who performed her hanging. Whereas the former ends with Ellis in prison, *Pierrepoint* dramatizes the execution in slow motion with an exchange of point-of-view (POV) shots in which Ellis smiles at her executioner. Such strategies visualize specific facets of Ellis’ legacy, particularly an appeal launched in 2003 which sought to revise her murder conviction to manslaughter. This appeal, based on the argument that Ellis suffered from battered woman syndrome, was dismissed on the grounds that the condition was unknown at the time of Ellis’ initial trial (Ballinger 450). In considering *Pierrepoint*’s relationship to this wider context, this article suggests that rather than merely representing Ellis’ death, the scene’s formal arrangement asserts that Ellis’ legacy remains alive: an ongoing injustice yet to be remedied.

After summarizing Ellis’ position in legal and popular contexts, this article turns to *Pierrepoint*. In refusing to identify Ellis by name or contextualize her crime, *Pierrepoint* identifies Ellis by her appearance, notably her peroxide hair. This reflects how, when preparing the condemned person for execution, prosecutors transform them into a character comprising their most deviant characteristics (Conquergood 353). In refusing to contextualize Ellis, *Pierrepoint* foregrounds how her peroxide hair and general appearance encouraged contemporary perceptions of Ellis as a deviant woman. Attention then turns to the execution itself. One method through which state execution is distinguished from murder is by the former’s attention to scenography and choreography which assert order and control (Conquergood 360). Presenting Ellis’ execution in slow motion locates this scenography as contrived and magnifies moments of choreographic rupture, such as a falling chair as Ellis is led into the chamber, emphasizing her execution as a contested ritual. The hangman’s POV shot reflects how Ellis was judged from a male standpoint which failed to appreciate women’s experience of domestic abuse and was criticized for that reason in debates following her hanging. The subsequent POV shot, of Ellis staring back at the executioner, is a further deviation from the typical execution process. Whereas executions contain opportunities for the accused to display deference and remorse, the Ellis POV suggests a challenge to the judicial system and a refusal to conform to the rituals of the execution. The hangman’s POV shot, which frames Ellis gazing back in slow motion, can also be considered as a moment of direct address. This violation of the cinematic boundary can be related to the discourses of femininity which the real Ellis was perceived to have violated by her lifestyle, transgressing contemporary gender norms. In suggesting Ellis violates the cinematic screen, *Pierrepoint* evokes those very discourses through which Ellis was judged and convicted. Mapping these techniques onto debates which characterize Ellis’ legacy demonstrates that it remains contested and subject to revision. Above all, it remains alive.

**Ellis’ Trial and Execution: A Contested Verdict**

Born into a working class family, Ruth Ellis was raised in Basingstoke and later secured work as a glamour model in London. She had a brief relationship with a married French-Canadian solider in 1944 and gave birth to a son. She became a nightclub hostess, meeting George Ellis with whom she had a second child. Their marriage quickly broke-down and Ellis returned to work and became manager of the Little Club in Knightsbridge (Tweg 3–4). At the club, which served as a cover for prostitution, she cultivated a relationship with Desmond Cussen and later began a romantic relationship with David Blakely, a young and wealthy racing car driver. Like her marriage to George, this relationship was characterized by frequent fights, fueled by both parties’ heavy drinking and Blakely’s relationships with other women. After Blakely abandoned her, Ellis shot him outside a London pub on Easter Sunday in 1955.

Her trial ignited discussion and “did more to focus public and international attention on the British criminal justice system than any other execution” (Langhamer 434). This was coupled with perceptions that Ellis’ lifestyle violated contemporary gender norms: descriptions of Ellis as a club-hostess and model “implied that she was of morally dubious character and had failed to conform to expected standards of respectability” (Ballinger 447) and her “physical appearance of peroxide blonde hair and heavy make-up elicited disapproval and contributed to a perception of her as a ‘promiscuous’ and disreputable woman” (Seal, *Women, Murder and Femininity* 96–7). Such factors have been used to explain the decision not to grant her a reprieve. Ellis admitted to shooting Blakely with the intent to kill him but pleaded not guilty due to provocation, and his behavior towards her did generate sympathy from some members of the public (Seal 97). Nevertheless Ellis, aged twenty-eight, was convicted of murder and at London’s Holloway Prison in 1955 she became the last woman to be hanged in England.

Ellis’ case continues to lack closure. An appeal was lodged in September 2003 by her sister Muriel Jakubait. Contemporary news reports recognized an opportunity to shift Ellis’ status in British history: “the appeals process offers a chance to redefine Ellis’s crime in the light of what the jury did not know, to acknowledge that this was a crime of passion by a mentally unstable person” (Macintyre 24). Michael Mansfield, the QC acting on behalf of Mrs. Jakubait, argued that Ellis suffered from battered woman syndrome and that her conviction should be changed to manslaughter (Dyer 11). The judges dismissed this argument on the grounds that the condition was unknown at the time of Ellis’ trial and upheld the murder conviction (Ballinger 450). Mrs. Jakubait announced she would continue to challenge the verdict: “The whole thing seems very unfair and I am never going to give up over this until I am taken from this earth” (quoted in Dyer 11). The appeal indicates that Ellis’ legacy remains subject to scrutiny:

the Ellis appeal was heard through similar discourses in 2003 as prevailed at the original trial, regardless of our increased understanding of the behavior [sic] of abused women who kill their victimisers [sic], including the creation of discourses such as “battered women’s syndrome”, through which such cases can now be heard. (Ballinger 446)

After the appeal readers wrote letters to newspapers criticizing the refusal of the then Home Secretary Gwilym Lloyd George to commute the death sentence at her trial: “condemning her life-style and moral culpability, he allowed judicial murder. My shame over this Welshman’s (repeated) thuggery against Ruth Ellis remains” (Owen 12). Another letter begins “I have always been fascinated by the tragic story of Ruth Ellis” before suggesting “I was sad to see Ruth’s son-in-law Mike Blackburn in the paper saying their appeal had been rejected once again” (Anon, “Fascinating Story” 12). Such letters exemplify the public’s continued emotional investment in the way Ellis is remembered, and the fact that her legacy remains contested. Ellis’ life has been the subject of several biographies (Goodman and Pringle; Hancock; Jakubait and Weller; Lee; Marks and Van den Bergh). Films and documentaries have further cultivated Ellis’ legacy in British popular memory.

**Representations of Ellis in Popular Culture**

In his study of the Hollywood studio biopic, George F. Custen remarked that “[d]eath in the biopic, though rare, is typically uplifting” (153) but this generalization cannot be applied to biopics about Ruth Ellis and other victims of the death penalty in the UK. The survival of the death penalty in parts of the United States serves to differentiate its treatment in British and American versions of the biopic. The subject “confronts filmmakers with a rhetorical stance more radical than that of most social problems for the simple reason that to tackle the death penalty is to take on American law” (Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* 244). Films including *Monster* (Dir. Patty Jenkins, 2003) and documentaries such as *Into the Abyss* (Dir. Werner Herzog, 2011) examine the death penalty in the American context. Though significant American biopics which address the topic have been made – see Dennis Bingham’s analysis of *I Want to Live!* (Dir. Robert Wise, 1958) (“I Do Want to Live!” 3–26; *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* 238–58) – the abolition of the death penalty for murder in 1969 has undoubtedly contributed to how filmmakers have addressed the death penalty in British biopics, particularly in the representations of Ellis.

The close resemblance between *Yield to the Night* (Dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1956), a fictional account of a blonde-haired woman waiting to be hanged, and events surrounding Ellis has led the former to be misidentified as a biopic although Joan Henry’s novel, from which the film was adapted, was published the year before Ellis shot Blakely (Chibnall 72). The film follows Mary Hilton (Diana Dors) as she awaits execution for murdering Lucy, a woman with whom her lover Jim had a romantic relationship (see Landy 198–208). *Yield to the Night* ends with Mary’s being led to the gallows, which was a source of disappointment for some reviewers: “One regrets the film’s closing camera movement – a track-back to the condemned cell after Mary has been led out to execution, to a close-up of her still burning, unfinished cigarette – which has a definite effect of anti-climax” (*Monthly Film Bulletin* 102).

Unlike *Yield to the Night*, *Dance with a Stranger* specifically featured Ellis (portrayed by Miranda Richardson). This biopic depicts Ellis’ struggles as a single parent and her relationship with Blakely (Rupert Everett), but it locates Ellis as a victim of other men as well: Desmond Cussen (Ian Holm), a man in love with her who provides her and Andy with lodgings after she is fired from the nightclub, forces himself on her. The film is sympathetic in its treatment of Ellis: “it is British society itself which is responsible for Ellis’s demise, unable to countenance either her sexual desires (her wish to be both sexually active and a mother) or social transgressions (her attraction to a man of a higher social station)” (Hill 128). The final scenes depict Ellis awaiting execution: a POV shot presents her narrating the contents of a letter to Blakely’s mother. The film concludes with a caption detailing the date and location of her execution. As in *Yield to the Night*, reviewers criticized the ending, noting the trial and execution is “tersely announced at the end of the film in a title card” (Canby 15) which was considered “odd since it tends to brush aside the legal and sociological implications” (Pulleine 21). In contrast to *Yield to the Night* and *Dance with a Stranger*, the television documentary *A Life for a Life* (Dir. Farren Blackburn, 1999) recreates Ellis’ trial. Drawing on archival material and witnesses, the documentary highlights issues including the limited time psychologists spent with Ellis to ascertain her psychological state before providing their testimony. However, the documentary ends with Ellis in her cell, and does not depict her hanging.

Much has been written about both *Yield to the Night* and *Dance with a Stranger* (see Hill 126–30; Landy 191–228; Tweg 1–28) and others studies have considered *Pierrepoint* (see Bennett 367–82; Greenfield 391–410; Seal, “Pierrepoint” 83–100). However, less attention has been given to the representation of Ellis’ execution in the latter, and its relationship to the 2003 appeal specifically. That both *Yield to the Night* and *Dance with a Stranger* did not depict the execution, and were criticized for not doing so, grants *Pierrepoint*’s scene additional significance. It reflects the fascination with the incarcerated criminal’s last days (Seal, “Condemned” 17) but can be understood in more recent contexts.

***Pierrepoint***

*Pierrepoint* was produced by Granada Television with a £2 million budget, including £330,000 of Lottery funding from the UK Film Council (Alberge 21; Jagasia 33). It was produced in a climate influenced by the cases of pedophile murderers Ian Huntley and Roy Whiting, and some politicians advocated the reintroduction of the death penalty for certain crimes (Brown and Bamber); the Ellis appeal was launched in 2003; and in 2004 Timothy Evans’ family argued in the High Court that Evans’ conviction should be officially quashed. Evans was sentenced to death in 1950 after he confessed to murdering his wife and baby but he subsequently identified John Christie, his neighbor, as the person responsible. The remains of six women’s bodies were uncovered in and outside Christie’s flat three years later (Seal, *Women, Murder and Femininity* 96). Despite describing Evans’ conviction as “an historic and unique injustice” the court refused the application for judicial review (Prior). Both *10 Rillington Place* (Dir. Richard Fleischer, 1971) and *Rillington Place* (Dir. Craig Viveiros, 2016) represented Christie’s crimes and Evan’s wrongful execution and *Pierrepoint* recreates the hanging of both Evans and Ellis. The film’s marketing suggests the production team wished to locate the film in the context of these wider debates: in promotional posters Ellis (Mary Stockley) was shown standing opposite Pierrepoint (Timothy Spall) with the noose hanging between the pair.

The film depicts Albert Pierrepoint’s life from 1932 to his resignation in 1956. Its key intervention in death penalty discourse is the depiction of the hangman as guilt-ridden. The director Adrian Shergold argued that Pierrepoint “had to have that emotional moment when he could connect with each person he was going to execute. He had to look them in the eyes … eventually it took its toll” (quoted in Maher 9). The construction of an “emotional moment” reflects the requirement for biopic filmmakers to mold their representation within dramatic structures: “Merely showing where a subject has come from and how they achieved their success (and then possible decline) does not necessarily create a compelling narrative” (Cheshire 11). However, it contrasts with Pierrepoint’s self-representation in his autobiography, which suggested that though he perceived the system as flawed he nevertheless took pride in his approach (Seal, “Pierrepoint” 95).

Instead, the film emphasizes the burden which the death penalty places on the executioner by moving between his private life and marriage to Annie (Juliet Stevenson) and his professional career (Greenfield 394). It posits that Pierrepoint attempted to live two separate lives: one as husband and the other as hangman. Following the Second World War he is assigned to execute Nazis convicted in the Nuremburg trials. These hangings are reported in the press, making Pierrepoint a public figure and making these separate identities difficult to maintain (Greenfield 403). The execution of James Corbitt (Eddie Marsan), a patron in Pierrepoint’s pub who strangles his lover, puts further strain on these separate identities. Corbitt’s “crime of passion”, which bears some resemblance to Ellis’ case, leads to Pierrepoint’s tearful breakdown in which he expresses his sense of guilt to Annie. Following this outpouring of emotion, he executes Ellis while protesters shout outside the gates and the police struggle to maintain control. The final scenes represent the couple agreeing Pierrepoint should resign, a depiction which grants that execution a significance lacking in Pierrepoint’s own account: Pierrepoint’s last hanging was two weeks after Ellis’ execution (Greenfield 405) and the latter was not a motivating factor in his resignation (Pierrepoint 207)

**Constructing an Effigy**

Whereas in *Yield to the Night* and *Dance with a Stranger* the actual execution is not shown, *Pierrepoint* focuses extensively on the procedure of hanging (Bennett 368). The sequence depicting Ellis’ execution, like much of the film, is drained of color with a grey hue. The chamber itself reflects the construction of execution suites following the First World War which, in their arrangement of gallows, beams and pit over three floors, were designed to accelerate the speed of executions (Webb 118–9). As Pierrepoint unlocks the cell the scene enters a period of slow motion, the only one in the film. He enters the room. Ellis is shown standing up and her chair falling backwards. In a medium shot, Ellis’ blond hair is illuminated through the prison window behind her. Pierrepoint approaches. Both characters stare into one another’s eyes (Figure 1), he then turns her around and ties her hands before leading her into the chamber. Once inside, an exchange of point-of-view shots displays each character in close-up (Figure 2 and 3). As Pierrepoint takes out the hood, the camera returns to Ellis smiling before cutting to a close-up of a disconcerted Pierrepoint. The hood fastened, a long shot establishes the various wardens and assistants present. Pierrepoint pushes the lever and Ellis’ body falls through the trapdoor (Figure 4).

The use of close-ups in *Pierrepoint* recalls those presented in *The Ascent* (Dir. Larisa Shepitko, 1977), a Russian film concerning two Soviet partisans travelling through Belarus during the 1942 Nazi occupation. The film’s execution scene features a montage of close-ups to depict the hanging of prisoners and it includes camera shots of the faces of those German officers who witness events (Costlow 77). Furthermore, the emphasis on the exchange of looks between Ellis and hangman in *Pierrepoint*’s execution scene continues a central theme in *Dance with a Stranger*. That film also emphasizes Ellis’ facial appearance, frequent references are made by club staff and by Blakely to the fact she never wears her glasses and certain scenes suggest Ellis is hidden or masked from view:

The question of looking and of being looked at assumes a central place in the film through the emphasis on glasses, mirror shots, and on chiaroscuro noir scenes as a metaphor for perception and misperception by Ellis, by others in the film who look at her, and also by the external audience. (Landy 218)

*Pierrepoint*’s exchange of point-of-view shots echoes this theme of “looking and being looked at” but reworks it by locating Ellis as willingly returning the gaze of the hangman.

*Pierrepoint* is shaped by the earlier Ellis biopic in other ways as well. Before the execution scene, Ellis’ crime is not contextualized: unlike other hangings it is not discussed by Pierrepoint and his assistant, nor does Ellis speak throughout the sequence. Before the executions of Dorothea Waddingham, Evans and Corbitt, Pierrepoint and his assistants are depicted discussing their crimes; but Ellis is mentioned by name only *after* the execution, by protesters gathered outside the prison gates. Arguably this refusal to contextualize reflects the filmmakers’ awareness of Ellis’ position in wider culture: her execution “was an event that was slow in taking hold of the public imagination but that has now become an important fixture in British popular memory” (Landy 208). This refusal also lays emphasis on identifying Ellis through her peroxide hair, distinctive in the otherwise drab confines of the prison. The film draws on debates from the original trial and suggests how her hair color, a visual short-hand for assumed promiscuity, suggested a deviation from conventional feminine norms which became interwoven with her crime. This is reminiscent of how “effigies” manage the judicial process: “Because a jury will never vote to kill a human being, the fundamental task of the prosecutor is to turn the accused into an effigy composed of his or her worst parts and bad deeds” (Conquergood 353). The link between Ellis’ hair, its association with a deviant femininity, and her crimes remains key to perceptions of Ellis’ case and its injustice, as exemplified in press commentaries before *Pierrepoint*’s release: “Had Ruth Ellis selected a hair color other than peroxide blonde, she would probably still be alive” (Macintyre 24). *Pierrepoint*’s refusal to offer adequate filmic contextualization evokes how Ellis’ case was characterized by the construction of effigies which functioned to limit the context necessary to explain her motives.

**Placing Ellis under the Microscope**

The entire execution is presented in slow motion, the use of which “is often congruent with a desire to study body movements in intimate detail” (Fetveit 165). The speed of executions is particularly relevant in the British context: “hangings in this country were conducted very swiftly indeed, with the condemned person hardly aware of what was happening before they were falling through the trapdoor” (Webb 120). Pierrepoint himself took pride in his efficient hangings, typically taking no longer than ten or twelve seconds (134). Representing the Ellis’ execution in slow motion thus forms a critical departure from the historical record, prolonging an event the hangman sought to administer quickly and professionally.

Slow motion forces the viewer to comprehend the details of the execution process: the key turning in the lock as the hangman enters the cell, his pinioning the prisoner and applying the hood, through to his pushing the lever. Slow motion draws attention to each stage and foregrounds the “dramaturgy” which characterizes executions in their various forms. According to Dwight Conquergood “[t]he central performance challenge of execution rituals is to differentiate between judicial killing and murder” (360). Such distinctions are maintained through the staging of props and participants: “the entire scenography and choreography of the event signal order, control, propriety, and inevitability” (360). In the final shot of Ellis falling through the floor, the staging of characters is foregrounded in a manner which evokes this “scenography”; the long-shot shows each figure defined spatially through their respective roles: the prison officers in the background, wardresses on either side of the trapdoor, and the hangman in the foreground switching the trap.

The careful staging of relevant props and participants is about “controlling the performance, making sure that it proceeds smoothly without a glitch … spontaneity and improvisation are foreclosed in the execution scenario” (360). When Pierrepoint executes officers convicted in the Nuremberg trials the smoothness of his approach is foregrounded: a series of executions are arranged in montage backed to Johann Strauss II’s Voices of Spring, the camera mimicking the movement of a waltz by circling the gallows as executions occur. In Ellis’ execution however, this control is immediately upended: as the hangman enters the cell, Ellis stands but in doing so knocks over her chair. As Ellis turns the chair falls in front of the camera accompanied with a jarring sound of wood hitting the floor. The sound punctures the scene and stands in contrast to those executions gracefully conducted with Strauss’ waltz. The chair’s slow motion fall complicates reading the Ellis execution as a carefully controlled, uncontested ritual: it disrupts the execution’s controlled choreography.

The execution as a controlled performance is further complicated by the images presented once Pierrepoint pushes the lever. The scene cuts to protestors gathered outside the prison gates. Staged shots and contemporary newsreel images are spliced together in a frantic collage; some shaky hand-held shots depict police officers on horseback attempting to maintain order, punctuated with extreme close-ups of the protesters’ angry faces and images of people holding posters bearing Ellis’ name. Both newsreel and staged shots are marked by a blueish hue which establishes visual continuity and makes them difficult to distinguish, reflecting the biopic genre’s broader tendency to mix such material for dramatic impact: “At a time of veritable visual-media saturation, available archival materials (and their digital reconstructions) often crowd the screen, standing side by side or blending with dramatic reenactment” (Vidal 22). These different images recall the crowds gathered outside Holloway Prison on 12 July, the night before Ellis’ execution. After breaking though the police line deployed to contain them, protestors knocked on the prison gates demanding to see Ellis and offer her the chance to pray with them (Anon, “Crowd’s Demand to See Mrs. Ellis” 8). Pierrepoint himself remarked that Holloway was “almost besieged by a storming mob” following Ellis’ execution (Pierrepoint 209). In evoking this protest after the execution scene, a disturbance the police struggled to control, *Pierrepoint* contrasts the heightened emotion of the protesters with the calculated dramaturgy of the execution.

The slow motion intersects with a further issue which characterized the perception of Ellis’ *trial* specifically: the speed with which the decision to execute her was made. Slow motion offers a scrutiny of time itself, it is described as “the microscope of time” (Deren 47) with slow motion shots forming “temporal close-ups, achieving in time what the close-up proper is achieving in space” (Kracauer 53). In various quarters, the speed of the decision to execute Ellis was scrutinized. A recurring feature of pro-reprieve letters sent to the Home Secretary was the argument that the trial failed to provide adequate time to contemplate Ellis’ treatment by Blakely: this offered an explanation for her actions “which was not properly taken into account during the trial process but that should have been understood in mitigation” (Seal, “Public Contestation” 497–8). The case was considered rushed in other ways as well. Ellis was found guilty after twenty three minutes of deliberation by the jury, “an outstandingly short time considering that a woman’s life hung in the balance” (Landy 211). While awaiting execution Ellis claimed Cussen provided her with the gun and drove her to confront Blakely, but only a perfunctory effort was made to locate him and he was never interviewed by police (Ballinger 448). Thus one of the key issues in Ellis’ trial and execution was the extent to which conclusions were rushed and made without evaluating the evidence.

Slow motion draws attention to Ellis’ legacy as contested: it foregrounds disruptions within the chamber and outside the prison to suggest Ellis’ case cannot be understood through the smooth “dramaturgy” of the execution. In prolonging the event, the slow motion evokes the perception that Ellis’ case received inadequate care and contextualization; the scene offers an opportunity to contemplate the decision to execute Ellis, an opportunity which many felt she was denied when she was alive.

**The POV Perspective: Culpability**

The exchange of point-of-view shots between Pierrepoint and Ellis reflects Shergold’s ambition to construct an “emotional moment” between hangman and prisoner and also hints at other discourses relating to Ellis specifically. *Pierrepoint*’s inclusion of a point-of-view shot from the hangman’s perspective – a *male* perspective – matches the popular perception that Ellis’ crime was assessed from a point of view which lacked knowledge of women’s experiences of domestic violence (Seal, “Public Contestation” 498). In letters sent to the Home Secretary her status as a mother and Blakely’s mistreatment of her were repeatedly mentioned in reference to a reprieve. The public’s “empathic identification” with Ellis was especially pronounced among female writers, “many of whom believed themselves to have insights into Ruth’s situation and actions that a man would lack” (Seal 501). There are potential opportunities to foreground Ellis from a female perspective (various female wardens are present in the scene) and the dynamic between murderess, prison governors and wardens was a prominent feature of *Yield to the Night* (Landy 203–4), but in *Pierrepoint* these are withheld. One of the problematic outcomes of the 2003 appeal was that contemporary discourses of domestic abuse were disregarded, and the scene’s privileging of the male point of view reaffirms that Ellis *continues* to be assessed from a perspective which lacks understanding of women’s experience of domestic abuse.

Just as it implicates the viewer in a male perspective, the POV shot simultaneously locates viewers in the position of executioner. Such was the coverage of Ellis’ execution, issues of culpability and responsibility quickly became national in scope and employing shots which serve to “imagine ‘from the inside’ the character’s experience” (Smith, “Imagining from the Inside” 412) corresponds with press coverage which sought to locate the British public in the position of executor. POV shots serve to “create the illusion that I (the spectator) am a character in the story world, faced with the dilemmas and experiences of … the protagonist” (Smith 412). These are frequently arranged within a two-part structure alongside reaction shots, the former revealing the focus of the character’s attention and the latter providing an indication of their psychological response (Smith 417). In *Pierrepoint*, this is achieved through an exchange of POV shots between Ellis and the hangman. The secrecy surrounding executions (the last public execution occurred in 1868, and hangmen were required to sign the Official Secrets Act (Webb 126–7)) adds to a certain morbid fascination; but this structuring of images in *Pierrepoint* holds particular significance in relation to comments by critics of the death penalty, addressing the British public as well as the authorities.

Some critics encouraged readers to consider the process of explaining Ellis’ execution to her son and argued that the issue of accountability for Ellis’ death was not limited to those enforcing the legislation: “This boy, who is also fatherless, has had something done to him that is so brutal it is difficult to imagine. We should realise [sic] it is we who have done it” (quoted in Campbell). A reader’s letter to *Picture Post* indicates that the issue of accountability was central to the debate after the Ellis execution, for both sides: “So we’re all guilty of killing, are we, if a murderer hangs? Let’s do away with killing then – and let the murderers begin” (Hodgson 5). This discourse was appropriated in the marketing campaign for *Yield to the Night*:film posters bearing the question “Would you hang Mary Hilton?” were displayed to advertize the film (Tweg 13). This issue of accountability is addressed overtly in *Pierrepoint*: following Ellis’ execution the sequence cuts to the prison gates where one protester addresses the gathered crowd via loudspeaker: “Today, the murder of Ruth Ellis committed in our name”. *Pierrepoint*’s hangman POV shot follows other contemporary sources which sought to consider the experience of executions from the hangman’s perspective. Novels such as William Muir’s *The 18th Pale Descendant* (2001), in which an ordinary citizen – Riley – is tasked with carrying out executions on behalf of the government, offers a further interpretation of the experience from the hangman’s perspective. Certain passages construct a similar “emotional moment” to the one Shergold strove for in their emphasis on the experience of the executioner and victim staring back at each other in close proximity. This is illustrated following Riley’s execution of Tim Hughes: “he knew that if he was to take the hood off Tim Hughes the man would still be there to ask him why he did it” (176). Similarly in *Pierrepoint*, following his execution of Corbitt, the hangman visualizes a scarecrow masked by a white hood which he removes, to reveal Corbitt underneath.

Whereas the ending of *Dance with a Stranger*, its avoidance of Ellis’ trial and execution, “tends to brush aside the legal and sociological implications” *Pierrepoint*’s POV shots foreground such implications in different ways. They reflect the extent to which Ellis’ conviction was viewed from a male perspective which was unable to accommodate the real life experience of victims of domestic abuse. In positioning the viewer in the hangman’s perspective *Pierrepoint* continues an ethical, legal and moral debate about accountability which was evident in the discussions surrounding the Ellis case specifically and subsequently in the continuing controversy about the possible reintroduction of the death penalty.

**The POV Perspective: Retaliation**

The execution sequence is marked by an attempt to offer a subjective position to Ellis as well. POV shots are frequently negotiated through their relationship to reaction shots; in *Pierrepoint* this reaction shot is itself a further POV shot, taken from Ellis’ perspective. This exchange of POV shots forms a further disruption, like that of the falling chair, but one which contests the execution’s function as a “degradation” ceremony. Executions generally afford opportunities for the accused to display deference in submitting to the punishment ordered by the State. There is, however, a paradox at the heart of such ceremonies:

Fully effective, publicly exhibited and accountable degradation requires not merely physical coercion of the body, but also the consent and self-abasement of the spirit. The compliance of the mind is displayable only through action, and for action to be meaningful it must be non-constrained. (Smith, “Executing Executions” 253)

The degradation ceremony contains state-sanctioned spaces – “windows of opportunity” – in which the accused can display deference (Smith 253). Such windows would include the customary “last words” frequently offered by the guilty party’s lawyer shortly before or after the execution is completed (Smith 261). Such opportunities cannot be completely controlled by the State and can be appropriated by the victim for alternative aims: “some victims are still able to deconstruct and aestheticise [sic] their own deaths, exhibiting patterns of identity asserting behavior remarkably similar to those of previous centuries” (Smith 252). Such appropriation was a characteristic of Ellis’ actual execution. Though she reportedly spent her final hour praying for forgiveness beneath a crucifix which she had personally requested – actions suggesting self-abasement which feature in *A Life for a Life*’s dramatic reconstruction – in her final moments she “reaffirmed her selfhood” by pursing her lips as she was tied up. Rather than deference, such a gesture evoked her earlier modelling work and thus formed an “orientation to her deviant past” (Smith 254).

As an attempt to “imagine from the inside”, the Ellis POV shot forms a filmic rendition of identity assertion, but this must be understood within the context of *Pierrepoint*’s production following the 2003 appeal. Ellis’ reported praying is not depicted but the sequence does present Ellis appropriating the execution and in doing so emphasizes her execution as a contested ritual. The Ellis POV, and the POV shot from Pierrepoint’s perspective which shows Ellis smiling directly before death, closely resemble each other in framing without being shot at an angle which might connote an unequal power dynamic. Close-ups of their faces occupy the screen in turn, their eyes meeting each other. Rather than deference, this formal equality suggests a *confrontation* between executor and murderess.

This matches with the perception of Ellis as courageous in her retaliation against Blakely. Her insistence that she wished for death “enabled a subversive popular press representation of a woman who would not bow to what the authorities demanded of her – submissive penitence” (Seal, “Condemned” 19). In harnessing this perception following the 2003 appeal, which exemplified the continued injustices experienced by women who retaliate against their male abusers, the shift from hangman POV shot to Ellis POV suggests a filmic retaliation to the system which put her there and which *continues* to keep her there by refusing requests for review:

while the Ellis case has been resolved from a purely legal perspective, for those in pursuit of social justice it remains a troubling example of the long history of social injustice that retaliating women have encountered when standing trial for having killed their abusers. (Ballinger 451)

The Ellis POV asserts her individuality: it forms a visual counter-attack which resonates with the contentious issues which continue to characterize her legacy: the injustices which continue to be meted out to women who dare to fight back. In returning the hangman’s gaze, *Pierrepoint*’sEllis refuses to defer to a system which itself refused to acknowledge battered woman syndrome both at the time of her original trial and in the 2003 appeal.

**Transgressing Cinematic and Social Boundaries**

In *Pierrepoint*’s execution sequence Ellis smiles back at her executioner in a point of view shot taken as if from the hangman’s perspective. Though this is a POV shot, it can be read simultaneously as an instance of direct address. In his study *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Direct Address in the Cinema,* Tom Brown avoids discussing such “first person” shots because the character is not technically breaking the fourth wall but is instead looking back at another character whose position we have taken (Brown xi). Though it might appear otherwise, the look of the character is still contained within the diegetic world: “In memory, it is possible to believe that the gaze of the face in close-up is directed at me, whereas in reality, given the strictures of the classical cinema, it is more often caught in a network of other gazes” (Doane 97). This ambiguity is exploited in *Pierrepoint* and is strengthened by the slow motion footage which causes the scene to linger on Ellis’ face: “Slow motion heightens our perception of time by expanding the amount of data for a given action … [o]ur scrutiny of an action in time is prolonged and made closer” (McGlynn 189). Slow motion affords time to study this representation of Ellis before her execution in a manner which exceeds its diegetic function.

There are further issues which support reading this moment as a direct address. According to Brown, direct address is characterized by an “ontological strangeness” created in “moments in which fictionalcharacters seem to look out of their world and into ours” (xiii). The notion of “fictional” is complicated by the appeal to truth manifested in biopics, not least the use of real names which form a key generic feature (Custen 6). In *Pierrepoint* Ellis is not a “fictional” character in a straight-forward sense. Though she is represented by Mary Stockley in the film’s diegetic world, Ellis holds a wider significance which centers on the extent to which her downfall was linked to her violation of boundaries. Where direct address suggests a violation of cinematic boundaries, Ellis transgressed the *social* boundaries of femininity. Remarking on the trial, Jacqueline Rose observes that Ellis’ rationality and the absence of hysteria made her case particularly problematic, the lack of overt emotion forming a violation of the codes of femininity expected of her: “because it would not respect the existing conceptual boundaries, Ellis’s femininity could appear only as an outrage, as something inappropriate and out of place - the peroxide she insisted on for her hair for her appearance in court, for example” (Rose 10). Furthermore, direct address “questions the bounded-ness of the fictional world … a character’s knowledge may extend beyond or, at least, question that fiction’s bounds” (Brown 14–5) and the boundaries between fictional and external worlds are particularly permeable in biopics. The biopic has a political function which invites viewers to consider the fictional world and its relevance outside that fiction. It has a similar capacity to *question*. The biopic “has the means to pose questions to the viewer, to challenge received understandings of issues around their subject” (Minier and Pennacchia 12). The direct address’ capacity to challenge the borders of the diegesis, and the biopic’s potential to critique the issues in question, merge in this sequence in which Ellis is depicted gazing back at Pierrepoint but also, it would seem, gazing out of the screen.

Direct address has been utilized in biopics before *Pierrepoint*. The closing sequence of *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) depicts the ageing King (Charles Laughton) turning to the camera in close-up and, reflecting on his marriage to Katherine Parr, uttering “Six wives. And the best of ’em’s the worst!” It is direct address “performed for the sake of encouraging our sympathy or some other kind of special connection with a character” (Brown 13). This was also utilized in the dramatic re-enactments featured in *A Life for a Life*: sequences depict Ellis recounting Blakely’s violence directly to camera. Other films utilize direct address to contest the legitimacy of the narrative. In *24 Hour Party People* (Dir. Michael Winterbottom, 2002), which depicts the musicians signed to Tony Wilson’s Factory Records music label, the former Buzzocks frontman Howard Devoto (Martin Hancock) is discovered by Wilson (Steve Coogan) having sex with Wilson’s wife in a nightclub toilet. As Wilson leaves, the camera focuses on the toilet janitor (played by the real Devoto) who says to camera: “I definitely don’t remember this happening” (Smith, “History and the Notion of Authenticity” 476–7). In this direct address the character occupies a “superior epistemological position within the fictional world” (Brown 14).

The direct address in *Pierrepoint* is different because Ellis remains silent. Rather than intimacy or an expression of a superior epistemological position, the Ellis direct address illustrates that the Ellis narrative remains active after her death, highlighted in letters to the press and the 2003 appeal. The scene does not offer narrative closure by showing Ellis’ death but instead, through the direct address, it highlights her persistent, unstable position in popular memory. Brown suggests the fluidity of the direct address when he comments: “Response to these moments occurs neither inside nor outside the film world but in a non-spatial in-between, in which we are encouraged to enter into a kind of dialogue with characters who strive to communicate ‘to’ us” (177). The notion of a “non-spatial in-between” is particular relevant in the context of Ellis because her legacy continues to be contested: the 2003 appeal remains an example of the social injustice faced by women who retaliate against violent men (Ballinger 451). Her case thus occupies an ambiguous position of being legally closed but “open” in the debates which persist regarding her treatment by Blakely. Furthermore, critical to crafting Ellis as an effigy was the connection cultivated between her transgressions of the boundaries of 1950s femininity and her crime. Ellis’ physical appearance, class status and role as a hostess contributed to understandings of her as a “promiscuous” woman, and *Pierrepoint*’s execution sequence, Ellis’ disconcerting gaze which appears to break through the boundary of the screen, reaffirm that Ellis’ crime became interwoven with her perceived disrespect for *social* boundaries prevalent in Britain when she was alive.

**Post-*Pierrepoint*: An Active Narrative**

*Pierrepoint* was received positively. Writing in the *Observer*, Philip French praised *Pierrepoint* and noted the film’s contemporary relevance: “Given that a referendum might well lead to the restoration of the gallows in this country, people of good will should welcome Adrian Shergold’s modestly powerful *Pierrepoint*” (French). Some viewers were less complimentary. One IMDb user review criticized the film for its historical omissions regarding the Timothy Evans case: “Some vital facts are omitted, probably intentionally. Timothy Evans goes to the gallows protesting his innocence, but we’re never told that he was posthumously pardoned and was almost certainly innocent” (F Gwynplaine MacIntyre). This corroborates with existing observations about the relationship between biopics and audiences: “viewers expect biopics to tell a kind of truth in reconstructing a life … their pleasure depends to an important degree on how faithful to ‘real’ character and events they assess this cinematic resurrection to be” (Pettey and Palmer xxiv). The same IMDb user wanted the film to acknowledge historical injustices more forcefully, and took issue with the scenes centering on Ellis: “We’re shown the huge crowds protesting the execution of Ruth Ellis – the last woman to hang in Britain – but we’re never told the circumstances of this” (F Gwynplaine MacIntyre). Given Ellis’ notoriety it is doubtful that the filmmakers felt they needed to explain Ellis’ circumstances. More significant is that the viewer described the representation of Ellis in *Pierrepoint* despite her occupying few scenes, affirming Ellis’ centrality to any discussion of the British death penalty. This centrality is supported in representations of Ellis post-*Pierrepoint*: the BBC documentary *The Ruth Ellis Files: A Very British Crime Story* (Dir. Gillian Pachter, 2018) and Christina Reihill’s exhibition of Ellis’ life *Glad I Did It* (2018). Such productions reflect the broader sense in which the Ellis narrative remains alive and subject to debate. *Pierrepoint*’s execution sequence is then just one facet of a broader questioning of Ellis’ legacy in popular culture which shows little sign of abating.

**Conclusion**

In its exchange of POV shots, its slow motion disruption of the execution’s choreography, direct address and recreation of protestors breaking through the prison gates, *Pierrepoint* presents Ellis’ legacy as one which spills over and refuses to be contained. Rather than presenting Ellis’ hanging as a smooth, organized process, the scene is marked by disruptions which slow motion serves to foreground, inside the execution chamber and outside the prison gates. In constructing such disruptions, *Pierrepoint* characterizes Ellis’ case as an historic injustice which cannot be assimilated into the execution ritual’s order. By locating viewers in the hangman’s position the scene implicates them in the execution; POV shots evoke the discourse of public accountability which was prevalent at the time of Ellis’ execution and continued to be active in fictional accounts of the death penalty prior to *Pierrepoint*’s release. In then offering an Ellis POV shot as a counterpoint to the hangman’s perspective, *Pierrepoint* offers a reading of Ellis’ execution as a confrontation between accused and executor. Whereas the execution process features moments in which the accused is offered the opportunity to display deference in their final moments, the Ellis POV forms a visual counter-attack which can be contextualized within the ongoing injustice of the 2003 appeal. *Pierrepoint*’s portrayal of Ellis’ refusal to defer to the system forms a challenge to the 2003 appeal, when the judges refused to acknowledge “battered woman syndrome” by revising her conviction. The slow motion POV shot from Pierrepoint’s perspective of Ellis can be read as an instance of direct address which ruptures the boundaries of cinematic space and calls into question the notion of a contained diegetic world. Thus the scene reasserts that Ellis’ crime was tied to her *social* transgressions, her refusal to live within the boundaries governing appropriate femininity in 1950s Britain.

Following closely on from the failed 2003 appeal, *Pierrepoint*’s formal strategies visualize different facets of Ellis’ legacy: the continued refusal to recognize the abuse suffered by women at the hands of violent men and the extent to which Ellis’ conviction was shaped by perceptions of her violation of appropriate gender expectations. Though it recreates her death, such strategies illustrate that Ellis’ legacy remains alive, unstable and insecure in popular memory.

**7628 words**

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