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The carceral aesthetic: Seeing prison on film during the early cinema period

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This article examines how actuality and fictional films about prisoners made during the early cinema period construct a carceral imaginary that appropriated visual tropes from the Middle Ages while experimenting with motion picture's unique signifying properties. The essay constructs a genealogy of prison-set motion pictures made before 1914, a period overlooked in standard prison film histories, starting with actualities of prisoners including *The Lock Step* (1899) and *Female Prisoners: Detroit House of Corrections* (1899), and fictional one-reelers *Scenes of Convict Life* (1905) and *Children's Reformatory* (1907). Aspects of prison iconicity explored in this essay include the cell as a penitential but occasionally anarchic space, the lockstep and prison uniform, and the representation of escape. The trick film's mocking of penal authority via the metamorphoses of convicts' bodies in *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* (1909) and the subversion of time in *The Impossible Convicts*, provides a potentially deeper understanding of prison's 'structure of feeling' than the later prison film. Unencumbered by the generic conventions of the studio system era, early prison films provide a striking vantage point from which to explore prison and prisoner's paradoxical place within the popular imaginary.

Keywords: prison; early cinema; escape film; medieval art; carceral aesthetic; trick film

Introduction

Convicts have a long lineage as cinematic subjects, appearing frequently in early actualities, chase films, and D.W. Griffith's prison melodramas. Early filmmakers quickly recognized the marketability of prisoners, tapping into deep-seated cultural desires to see real criminals in actualities and actors play them in comedies and dramatic shorts. Garbed in black-and-white striped uniforms, prisoners function as 'reliable signs of embodied discipline', examples of what prison dress historian Juliet Ash calls sartorial punishment, clothes as 'signifiers of the power of political systems to bodily punish miscreants' (2010, 3–4).[1] Often filmed performing hard labor or marching the lockstep (Figure 1), an awkward, shuffling walk in which the convict's head is turned to one side as he grips the waist of the man in front, or escaping and being chased by guards, prisoners in motion pictures sated a desire to peer inside one of society's most notorious institutions and, in many instances, to see authority snubbed through riots or escape (McLennan 2008, 220).

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Figure 1. Prisoners performing the lockstep. Wikimedia commons.

Early cinema was embedded within a mediated landscape of prison imagery at the turn of the last century – one that included stereocards, postcards, newspapers, magazine illustrations and vaudeville skits. Cinema was one representational site among many shaping public attitudes toward prison, alternately pandering to the 'most voyeuristic and punitive emotions of the audience' and at other moments urging us to root for the prisoner pitted against merciless authority (Jewkes 2002, 150). The mass media, as Rebecca McLennan argues in *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, quickly became a 'coauthor in the penal drama' of incarceration, ensuring that notorious prisons such as New York's Sing Sing stayed in the headlines, especially when famous criminals were executed, riots erupted, or inmates staged escapes (2008, 314). According to penal scholar Nicole Hahn Rafter, prison films are mostly concerned with 'oppression, transgression, and the restoration of the natural order of justice', although even relatively mundane goings on at the prison claimed the imagination of a public eager for any tidbits about penitential life (2006, 122).[2] The same-sex sociality of incarceration creates ample narrative possibilities for stories of male or female friendship and bonding, homoerotic desire, and the cult of hyper-masculinity, prison stories that frequently foreground displays of the body and violence (or both).

In this essay I analyze the largely neglected representation of prison and associated penal industries in the early cinema period, an era in which cinematic carcerality was expressed in both predictable and sometimes surprising ways. My goal is to contextualize early prison films within the broader visual lexicon of prison representation from the Middle Ages, before considering how this nascent genre constructed a carceral imaginary that, while drawing upon pre-cinematic visual tropes, nevertheless gave expression to new, occasionally anarchic ways of telling stories about convicts that took advantage of cinema's more expansive modes of signification and spatio-temporal transmutations. This was especially true in the trick film, a virtual handmaiden for fantasies of escape and transgression (see Davis 1997; Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001; Caster 2008).[3] Content and form were sometimes echoed in these films, as deviant behavior was expressed through

the deviance of special effects. My investigation is shaped by two questions: first, how early films about prisons constructed and paradoxically questioned certain aspects of penality that are missing from carceral knowledge systems such as the 'anonymous exactitude of statistics as accounted by historians, sociologists, and US Department of Justice', the policy and academic research published in annual proceedings of national prison groups such as the National Prison Association, and even Foucault's theory of panopticism (1991).[4] My second goal is to explore whether early prison films, unburdened by cinema's institutional mode of representation and Production Code censorship, evoked something akin to prisoners' 'structures of feeling', through scenes of corporal punishment, spatial and temporal recalibration and bodily mutation (Williams 1978, 132). Could the relative freedom of early cinema's emerging style between the years 1895 to 1913 have created metaphors for understanding the experience of prison? Might the elliptical quality of early actualities or the grotesque metamorphoses in the early trick films come closer than conventional narrative films from the later studio era to evoking what it might feel like to live behind bars? I begin with a brief detour into the deep historical past of medieval visual culture as a vital source of carceral iconography before addressing several films made about prison life before 1909.

The medieval carceral aesthetic: Imagining the prison over time

We can trace the carceral aesthetic to religious art from the Middle Ages, as images of prisoners and imprisonment appeared in a range of public and private media, including stained glass windows, woodcuts, altarpieces and Books of Hours (personal prayer books). According to medievalist Megan Cassidy-Welch, St. Leonard of Limoges served as the 'patron' saint of prisoners and Saint Barbara of Nicomedia, incarcerated at the hands of her father, is frequently represented either within, alongside, or holding a prison tower (the act of holding one's space of incarceration, intriguing to be sure, suggests other connections between medieval visual culture and the early trick film where laws of verisimilitude are often abandoned). According to Cassidy-Welch, 'not only was the prison important in the individual vitae of various saintly individuals […] but experiences of imprisonment and the space of the prison itself could also be represented for wider didactic and devotional purposes in the visual culture surrounding saints' cults' (2009, 371). *Symbols* of incarceration, such as chains, were as important signifiers of imprisonment as *spaces* of confinement; for example, in a thirteenth-century clerestory window from Chartres cathedral, St. Peter is seen still wearing a chain on his foot despite being released from prison, and in a 1500 altarpiece of St. Leonard and St. Barbara, St. Leonard holds a heavy-looking chain with a lock (Cassidy-Welch 2009, 372–3).[5]

Ideas of incarceration within the medieval religious imagination were inexorably tied to 'salvific discourses' and played a crucial role in narrating the specific experiences of saints either through stained glass, altarpieces or smaller objects such as Books of Hours. Rules governing the visual iconography of imprisonment were established during this period; prison towers were referred to as cells, with containment and deprivation visualized via barred windows and specific representations of the body. As is common in most medieval art, similitude is less important than the *idea* of the experience; St. Peter is often shown enclosed within the initial 'N' (for *nunc*, meaning present), doubly confined by the space of imprisonment *and* the ornate manuscript letter located on the border of the page. Incarceration is also

rendered metonymically, as in images of St. Barbara shown either holding the prison tower in her arms, or in the 1480 *Legenda aurea*, standing with her hand lightly touching the roof. Enshrining a belief that imprisonment exceeds the corporeal and is as much a state of mind, this imagery underscores divine intervention and the possibility of escape or separation from imprisonment.

The image of a face separated from the onlooker by bars is a recurring trope in art and cinematic constructions of incarceration. Shown with clasped hands looking out through the upper section of his barred window at four oblivious guards walking past his cell, St. Peter gazes out at that which escapes him, appearing to be either deep in thought or, as Cassidy-Welch argues, attempting to petition the guards. The four bars crossing St. Peter's body signify incarceration, since without them any notion of captivity is lost. We see a similar, if fleeting, first impression of presidential assassin Leon Czolgosz behind the barred door of his cell in Auburn Prison in Edison's 1901 reconstruction *The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Griffiths 2014). One important difference in the current era, however, is the fact that a prisoner would never be represented looking out from his cell door directly into the free world, since for security reasons, most modern penitentiaries have neither exterior windows in cells nor doors that lead outside, although Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia had two doors, one of which led to a private mini-exercise yard for each prisoner (see Johnston, 2010, 48–51). Notwithstanding these differences in prison architecture, the image of an individual standing behind bars is a powerful inscription of incarceration, and one that registers immediately with a viewer.

In *Stained Glass Window with Scenes from the Life of Saint Vincent* (Figure 2), one of a pair of windows devoted to St. Vincent of Saragossa made between 1245 and 1247 for the Lady Chapel at the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, there is a scene showing St. Vincent in prison as well as one of him being tortured by fire with his head and torso depicted in a tower-like structure built upon an arch. The saint's head is tilted to the right and right arm lifted defensively against his body, and his gaze is downward, signifying prayer, submission or resignation. This image proposes several attributes of imprisonment: it is an embodied experience, worsened by acts of torture such as the fire used by St. Vincent's torturers; it takes place in designated spaces, a tower in this instance, separated from domestic space and discursively linked to military exploits, and it requires a comportment of self, in this case, gestures of humility or fear, such as an averted gaze.

Prison as imagined in early cinema

We find traces of medieval prison iconography in a great many early prison films and it is impossible to analyze them without recourse to a medieval carceral aesthetic. Prison life is essentialized into a series of apotropaic signs in early cinema: dungeons, bars, chains, arrow slit or barred windows, lockstep march, recreation yards, striped uniforms, warden's offices and surrounding locales. Although not shown in the St. Vincent stained glass, chains were the great levelers in medieval culture, isomorphic with captivity and punishment and issued to captives from all social ranks whether they were kept in a tower or a dungeon (Dunbabin 2002, 121). Chains are isomorphic with captivity and punishment and are constants in the

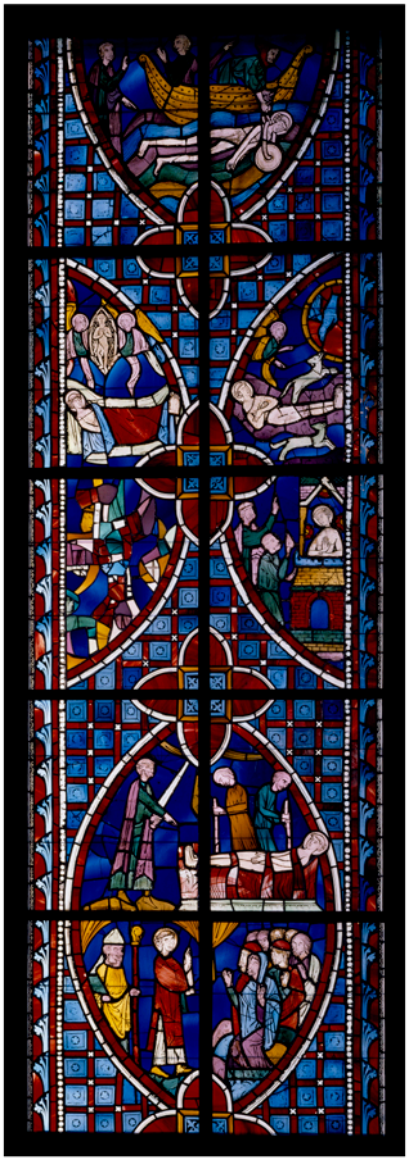

Figure 2. *Stained Glass Window with Scenes from the Life of Saint Vincent,* 1245–1247 for the Lady Chapel at the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. Wikimedia commons.

visual culture of medieval incarceration and early prison films. The 1903 American Mutoscope and Biograph (AM&B) film *A Convict's Punishment* (Figure 4), though not set in a medieval prison, has something of a medieval sensibility in terms of its *mise-en-scène* (a prisoner is chained to the brick wall) and its focus on corporal punishment. The film deviates little from the medieval iconography of the prison cell: a roughly constructed brick wall evocative of a dungeon in a Gothic castle (depicted by a painted backdrop), a man wearing prison stripes, a cot and wooden stool, and violent guards. The film is organized around four pieces of action:

guards enter the cell, the prisoner resists being restrained and his shirt is ripped, he is chained to the wall and he is whipped. *A Convict's Punishment* is close in form to *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (Edison 1899), a reconstruction of the Queen's beheading (see Griffiths 2014). In both films, social control is enacted through corporal punishment. The cell is a punitive rather than a rehabilitative space in *A Convict's Punishment*, closer in design to a medieval dungeon than the rehabilitative logic of the turn-of-the-last century reformatory. Structured around the spectacle of corporal punishment, the film re-enacts the visual excesses of public hangings, what Foucault calls 'the ceremonial of punishment' (1991, 8), transforming the cell into a parallel public sphere where the film spectators is virtual witness. While prisons are often represented as porous institutions in early cinema, subject at any moment to escape attempts, in reality medieval prisons were far more permeable than the modern penitentiary, where the medieval prison's walls operated as 'breathing membranes, not hermetic seals', according to medievalist Guy Geltner (2008, 4). Medieval prisons were also located in the centers of settlements, allowing for far greater interaction with civic society than the geographically and socially isolated contemporary super-max prison.

We can also trace the visual lexicon of the carceral aesthetic in the depiction of prison uniforms, clothes that physically and psychologically hurt. Ill-fitting and made of scratchy wool or prickly fibers, unwashed, and minimally customizable, prison clothing is how we identify convict peoples (see Ash 2010). Prison stripes were first introduced in the United States in the early nineteenth century (by the 1850s in the UK) and, as Michel Pastoureau argues, were part of the 'development of technological improvements as much as they were linked to the emergence of the modern prison' (2003, 54, cited in Ash 2010, 39). Until its abolition in favor of work-wear greys in 1899, which made prisoners appear little different to working men living on the outside, the New York State prison uniform of broad arrows or zebra stripes, indicated the prisoner's crime via the number of stripes. Along with the lock step, this signified, as Ash argues, 'not only that the clothing was the property of the prison authorities – and thus the Government – but also that the convict's body was similarly owned' (2010, 22).[6] The uniforms also contributed to an optic of surveillance and theatricality that defined a great deal of the prisoners' ritualized lives; even the nails in the soles of prison boots and shoes were hammered in an arrow shape that provided indexical proof that government property had passed this way, especially useful when prisoners were on the run (O'Donavan Rossa 1880, 50).

We cannot talk about striped prison uniforms without delving deeper into the iconicity of the black-and-white stripe – specifically the choice of black, which John Harvey in *The Story of Black* argues, is the most problematic of (non-)colors, ambiguous and associated with extremes that are 'opposite and absolute' (2013, 7). The meanings of black have not been constant, as Harvey explains:

> The history of this colour is like the record of an invasion. Black used to mark, mainly, the terrifying realms that lay outside human life, but over time we have brought black close to us: we have searched it out within our bodies and even within our souls. (2013, 7–8)

The black-and-white prison stripe, while an inexorable sign of carcerality, is also a comic *trompe l'oeil* – is the zebra a white animal with black stripes, or the opposite? Prisoners garbed in striped convict uniforms leverage some of the same

discursive meanings of black-and-white stripes from the zebra, an animal that inscribes notions of the unlikely, the unmissable and mildly risible.

Cell walls are similarly over-determined signs in prison films. They confine but also offer limited opportunity for agency through windows (portals of escape), customization, such as marking off time on a calendar or hanging pictures and photographs, and, in the minds of reformers, triggering reflection and penance. English prison reformer Jonas Hanway, in his published letters *Distributive Justice and Mercy* (1781), saw, as prison theorist Caleb Smith argues, a corollary between 'prison architecture and the architecture of the mind', the idea that staring at the blank prison walls the inmate would 'discover the true resemblance of [his] mind, as it were a mirror' (Hanway 1781, 65 cited in Smith 2009, 96). The idea of the prison wall as a reflective surface for the soul goes back at least to the Middle Ages, when prisoners were encouraged to embark on 'pilgrimages of the mind', as seen in the 1499 German book *Aigenschafft, die ain pilgir an ijm haben sol* (*The Desirable Traits of a Pilgrim*). Prison overseers in the middle ages even released troublesome inmates on the pretext that they were embarking on a pilgrimage, although in truth it was to get rid of them. The idea of a pilgrimage of the mind and the detailed steps outlined in the text to assist the prisoner in its successful completion suggests that corporeal entombment was no impediment for a spiritual journey.[7] The trope of a cell wall as a metaphorical blank screen, but one that triggers a mental breakdown rather than a transcendental mystical experience, is brilliantly explored in *Il Due machinisti* (Cines 1913), a film about a train engineer wrongly imprisoned for causing a train accident at the depot. Alone in his cell, the man paces frantically, gesticulating wildly, at one point walking towards the camera with wide, manic eyes and hands tightly clenched in a fist (Figure 3). The source of his anger is soon revealed, as he imagines seeing via the technique of parallel

Figure 3. Frame enlargement from *Il Due machinisti* (Cines, 1913), Courtesy Library of Congress.

Figure 4. Frame enlargement from *The Lock-Step* (AM&B, 1899).

editing, the purportedly injured engineer drinking and laughing with friends in a bar. The man reacts violently to this hallucination in a display of histrionic acting, even turning his back to the audience and becoming an internal spectator to his own mind's eye that taunts him to the point of near hysteria. If the prison cell's white walls were designed to trigger a reflective penance, in *Il Due machinisti* the response is one of rage as a result of an overactive imagination.

The cell as a space where hallucinations occur is also seen in Pathé's *Le bagne de gosses (Children's Reformatory*, 1907), a film about a tenacious orphan who after his impecunious mother dies, steals a loaf of bread and when caught by the pursuing police, is sent to a children's reformatory (Abel 1998, 185). A parable of the deleterious effects of poverty and single parenthood, the failure of the penitentiary to either reform or contain its inmates and the theory of class uplift, the film is a rich meta-comment on the carceral system and its punitive practices. Three types of punishment are represented in *Le Bagne des gosses*: chain gang conscript labor (boys digging); restricted movement (boys kneeling or standing with outstretched arms); and pointless repetitive motion (boys running around in small circles).[8] Regulating the body through making it work, remain still, or move suggests the extreme (and darkly comic) lengths penal authorities go in order to discipline young offenders. When taken to his prison cell, our young protagonist has a vision of his dead mother, a narrative device thoroughly in keeping both with the Victorian fascination with ghosts and with prison reformers' theories of the retributive power of solitude. When the boy sees a vision of his mother, the cell is transformed into a phantasmagorical space of reflection, culminating with a guard entering into the cell and slipping the boy a piece of bread (as a potent symbol of Christian redemption, the bread is also an ironic reference to what landed the boy

in prison in the first place).[9] Christopher Hale compares the cell to that of a camera obscura, reflecting the 'glass and transparency of the Inspection House' upon its walls. But as *Le Bagne de gosses* suggests, the prisoner's imagination can usurp the fantasy of complete control by priming the walls of the cell for projecting images lifted from the prisoner's very own subjectivity (Hale 1982, 62).

The penal body in motion: Prison actualities

When not shown in monastic solitude, the prisoner in early cinema is often represented in motion, either parading, marching the lockstep, working, or, less frequently, engaged in physical activity in the exercise yard. Indeed, with their built-in movement, the lockstep and military-style marching were logical choices for early cinematographers since they demonstrated the medium's own kineticism. Early examples of prisoners paraded for the camera include *The Lock-Step* (Figure 4), *Male Prisoners Marching to Dinner* and *Female Prisoners: Detroit House of Corrections*, all from 1899. The motivation for making *The Lock-Step* is bound up with the fetish value of seeing convicts embody principles of penal control and submission through military-style marching. Ironically, 1899 was also the year that Sing Sing Prison, following the recommendation of the New York State Prison Commission, abolished lock stepping (for First Grade men, inmates who could perform skilled labor, lock-stepping was abolished in 1897) and Auburn Prison followed suit in 1901 (Lawes 1932, 100). This was therefore one of the last opportunities to record (as opposed to re-creating via staging) a punitive practice that was on the verge of extinction, making *The Lock-Step* the penal equivalent of salvage ethnography.

Male Prisoners Marching to Dinner, (Figure 5) shot in Detroit's House of Correction's interior courtyard, features about 35 men standing along the edge of a building before entering the mess hall for dinner. Two prison employees stand to the left of the inmates, one in the mid-ground frame left, the other immediately next to the men in the center of the frame. Grouped tightly together, most of the inmates cock their heads slightly in order to see the camera, and while it's hard to decipher individual faces, there's an unsettling quality to seeing so many convicts staring at the camera, not because of their status as prisoners (although we shouldn't disregard this) but because of the return gaze's triggering of a certain angst on the part of the onlooker, awareness perhaps, as Calvyn Pryluck argues, that the boundary between a 'society's right to know and the individual's right to be free of humiliation, shame, and indignity' is quite porous (Pryluck 1988, 260). The prisoners are examples of social control at work, yet in these early films they are constructed as attractions no differently from other early cinema subjects such as the Brooklyn Bridge, firefighter parades or other symbols of civic pride (or civic shame, in this instance). *Male Prisoners Marching to Dinner* has additional relevance for New York State audiences, since 1899 was also the year the New York State Commission of Prisons (NYSCP) explicitly recommended marching, 'two by two in military formation, with heads held high and no bodily contact between them' for movement between cells, mess halls, classrooms and workshops. Aside from its obvious regulatory function, prison administrators argued that such marching would mitigate against the feminizing effects of imprisonment tending instead to 'manly appearance and deportment' (New York State Commission on Prison 1899, 14–5, cited in McLennan 2008, 226).

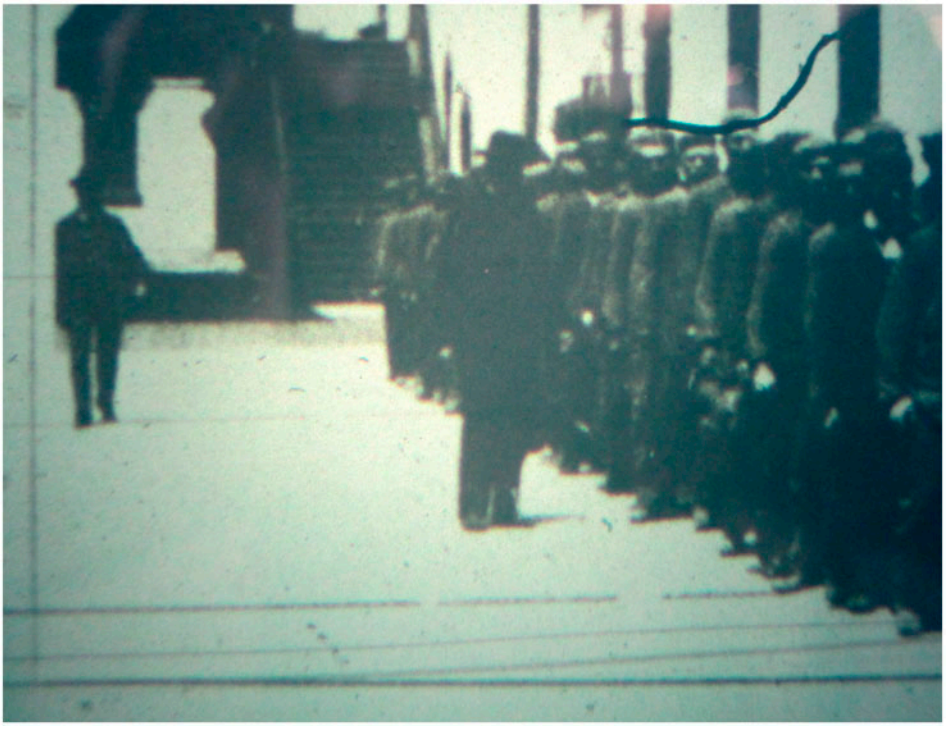

Figure 5. Frame enlargement from *Male Prisoners Marching to Dinner* (AM&B, 1899).

The film *Female Prisoners* (Figure 6) gave the thrill of seeing prisoners an added twist, since here were women who had been imprisoned most likely for socially deviant crimes such as prostitution, drunkenness, petty larceny or vagrancy (see Zedner 1995). Structurally and figuratively, *Female Prisoners* is virtually identical to *Male Prisoners*, save for the fact that the women do not appear to be dressed in a regulation uniform, but in clothes associated with the working class: blouse, long skirt and apron. It is only when we notice a female guard dressed all in black at the rear of the frame that the symbolic differences in attire become apparent. Unlike the men who are in tight formation, there is greater space between the women, and their bodies are less regimented as they walk diagonally across the frame toward the right hand corner. Except for the woman at the front, all the women clasp or hold their hands, and toward the end of the film the women stop and all fold their arms across their bodies in a gesture that, if not exactly defiant, reinforces a view of these women as not to be messed with.

Prisons and prisoners are sites of imaginary projection, catalysts for thinking the unthinkable – that of one's life, or portion of one's life, behind bars. As viewers we are implicated in a visualized carceral network, since images of imprisonment construct a viewing subject that becomes acutely aware of his or her status as a seer, a process intensified if the film is an actuality shot on location in a penitentiary.[10] In painting and in film alike, this sensation is heightened when our gaze is returned, as in Vincent van Gogh's *La Ronde des prisonniers* (1890, Figure 7), based on an engraving of Gustave Doré's sketch of prisoners exercising at London's Newgate Prison (*The Exercise Yard or the Convict Prison*). *The Exercise*

Figure 6. Frame enlargement from *Female Prisoners: Detroit House of Corrections* (AM&B, 1899).

Yard depicts 40 male prisoners walking in a tight circle in a space reminiscent of a medieval fortress (there is one arched window on the rear wall and three on the right hand one). The faces of two of the men are turned toward the viewer, including a man (the only prisoner not wearing a hat) presumed by most critics to represent van Gogh himself. The prisoners' return gaze breaks the circuitous monotony of the exercise, but more significantly, it imputes co-responsibility for the punishment to the viewer. We are surrogates for the state that incarcerates and the prisoners returning our gaze remind us that witnessing is never just about seeing, but bound up with questions of power, access, accountability, pleasure and guilt.[11]

Escape: Chaos, transcendence, return

Escape figures prominently in the repertory of films set in prisons during the early cinema period. Not surprisingly, cinematic escapes triggered chases.[12] When combined with crime, the chase was a successful narrative formula, sometimes comedic, as when mishaps happened along the way, and almost always bringing closure through capture (see Gartenberg 1984, 11–13). One of the simplest versions of the prison escape film is American Mutoscope & Biograph (AM&B)'s *A Break for Freedom* (1905), which drives home the object lesson that prisoners are inherently violent and opportunistic. The film shows a prison guard descending stairs carrying food on a tray. Prisoners' striped arms poke through the barred cells and as the guard puts down the tray to unlock the third cell and walks away (Figure 8), one of the prisoner's jumps him, grabs his gun, shoots him, and unlocks the remaining cells. The film ends when another guard walks down the stairs just as the men are

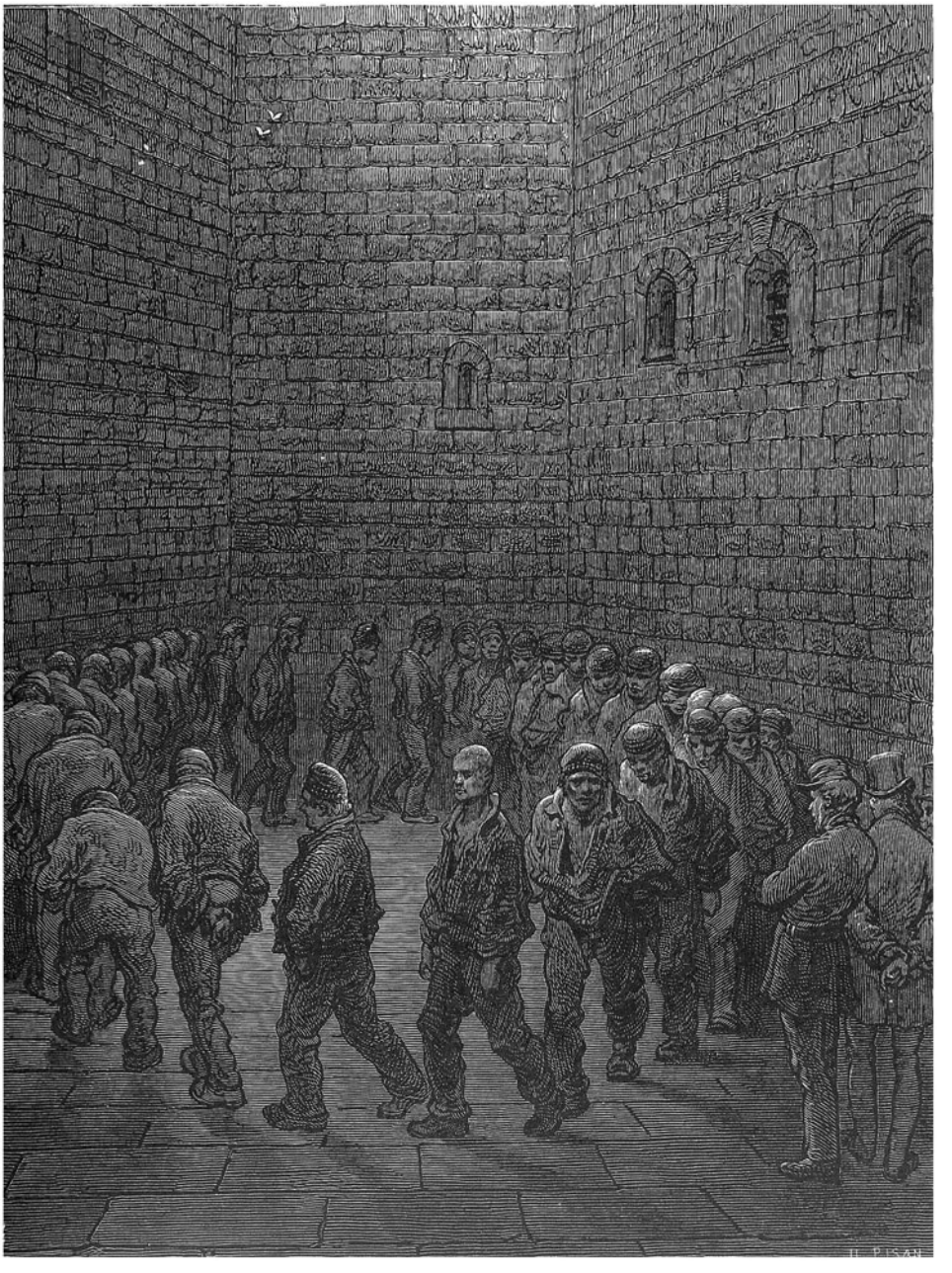

Figure 7. Vincent van Gogh's *La Ronde des prisonniers* (1890), based on an engraving of Gustave Doré's sketch of prisoners exercising at London's Newgate Prison, *The Exercise Yard or the Convict Prison*. Wikimedia commons.

about to escape; he, too, is shot as the convicts ascend the stairs. *A Break for Freedom* shares the modularized structure of a great many early films (see below for two French examples), hinting at a temporal before and after that would fill the

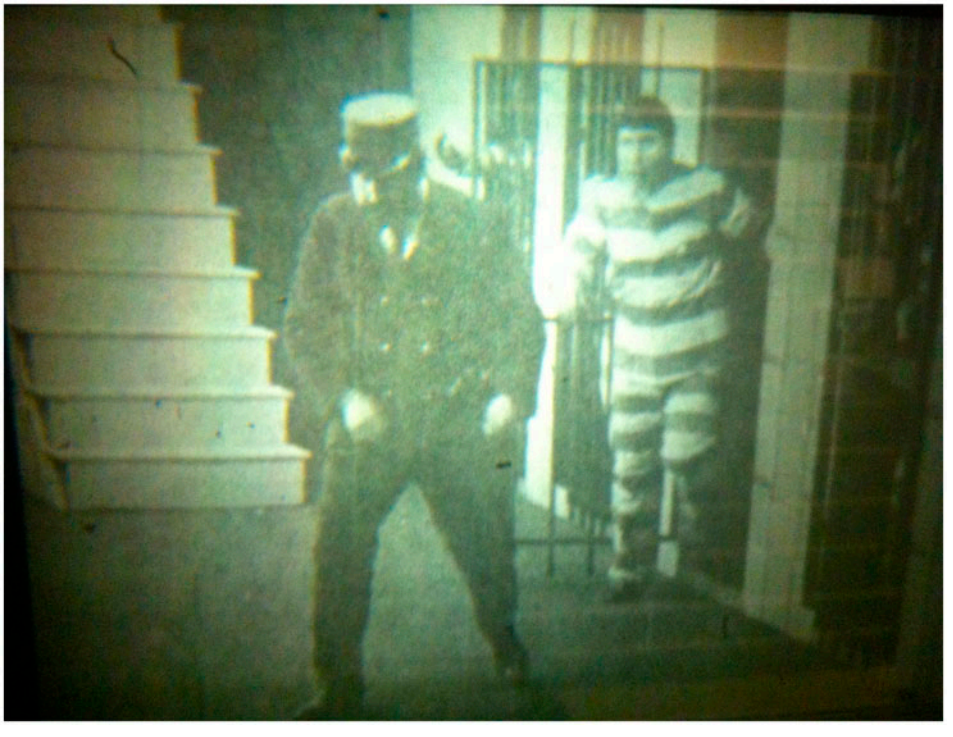

Figure 8. Frame enlargement from *A Break for Freedom* (AM&B, 1905).

audience in on missing narrative information. That a scene of violent escape resulting in two homicides was appealing to popular film audiences suggests the enduring ambivalence toward the figure of the incarcerated: the word 'freedom' in the film's title subtly justifies the prisoner's actions, although the gun violence might have complicated any straightforward identification with the escapees. The film strays little from the conventionalized belief in prison as a space of dramatic conflict, mythologizing the inept prison guard and the tenacious, violent felon.

Filming prison escapes on location during the early cinema period occasionally became newsworthy, especially when members of the public mistook the image of an actor dressed in regulation prison stripes being pursued by guards on location for a real escape. In 1907 *The Washington Post* reported the account of a New York film company shooting a prison escape chase scene that drew the attention of an armed police officer oblivious to the context: 'It was only due to the proverbial poor marksmanship that the pictures were procured without the "convict" being killed' (*Moving Picture World* 1907, 6). *Escape from Sing Sing* (Vitagraph 1905) also included a dramatic chase, even more dramatic when we consider that, according to historian Richard Kozarski, it was staged on the roof of Vitagraph's New York City Nassau Street office building and in Bronx Park (now the site of Bronx Zoo and Botanical Garden; Kozarski 2003, 399, 396). A narrative spin-off of a contemporaneous theatrical melodrama and a 1903 AM&B film with the same title, the making of *Escape from Sing Sing* was the subject of a long essay by Theodore Waters in the January 1906 issue of *Cosmopolitan* that strove to demystify the craft

of filmmaking and explain the audience's increasing demand for story films and verisimilitude (Olsson 2009, 43).[13] The film was innovative for several reasons, most notably, as Kozarski points out, for shooting the rooftop prison escape scenes with two cameras rather than the single-style favored by directors such as D.W. Griffith (Kozarski 2003, 396).

Escape from Sing Sing was significant in other ways, most notably its use of violence; 'nearly all of [it] directed against police, innocent bystanders, and even a small child'. Indeed, Kozarski argues, 'the constant beatings, robberies, and episodes of 'pumping lead' […] seem to prefigure the violent narrative of a first-person short video game' (Kozarski 2003, 397). Writer Waters was invited to play the role of one of the convicts escaping from Sing Sing in the film, clad in stripes and a witness to the violent assault on the warden that led to freedom (later in the film a guard is beaten into 'feigned insensibility'; Waters 1906, 399).[14] Mitigating the need to shoot on location, Waters described the rooftop prison set, in which 'the cells had neither fronts nor sides, but that fact did not appear on the moving picture [… and] the arrangement could be adapted to make a jail courtyard scene'. Waters seem to relish playing the convict as a convict: 'Slowly, stealthily, as convicts might, we raised the iron cover and with the machine recording every moment, every expression, we crept along the roof and peered over the edge' (Kozarski 2003, 397). The cell's minimalism was conducive to economic set design and construction in the fledgling motion picture industry – Waters commented on how the cells were quickly transformed between shoots – and any industrial looking rooftop could easily have doubled up as Sing Sing's roof. After the rooftop scenes, the convicts were photographed in the Bronx Park where they shot at pursuing warders, ambushed a picnicking family, held up a car by firing guns at its occupants and became embroiled in a shoot-out with the guards, before finally arriving at the home of the ringleader. During the final shoot-out of the three escaped convicts, a stray bullet kills the ringleader's young daughter, leading her grief-stricken father, the only prisoner still alive, to surrender. Despite the trail of carnage, when the keeper finally enters the cottage and realizes the convict's daughter is dead, he respectfully waives his men back and 'gently lay[s] a hand upon [the prisoner's] shoulder' (Waters 1906, 42). The melodramatic ending confirms Walters's theory of the ideological pull of the 'bad guy/escaped convict' – the fact that the prison keeper (and by extension the audience) can look sympathetically upon a prisoner whose escape was not without the loss of innocent life, including that of his own daughter.

Another early prison film, *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* (1909), depicts a fanciful prisoner escape rich in metaphorical meaning for prison's 'structures of feeling'. After being processed in the warden's office, the prisoner is led handcuffed to his cell, where his feet are shackled and, still wearing his pinstriped suit, whose narrow stripes gently mock the prison uniform, he is left to his own devices.[15] Somewhat unexpectedly, the film's next shot is a close-up of the prisoner's hands with fingers pointing toward the camera. We see chains looped twice around each wrist and around his neck. Using stop-motion, his fingers morph into a lump of clay (Figure 9), which then transforms into an elongated fin-like object that draws in toward the prisoner's body, slips behind the chains, and quickly releases his arms. A similar unfettering occurs with the man's feet. Following a close-up of each lower leg and shoes, each foot twists 360°, detaches from the body, and moves to the side of the pants leg, thus freeing the man's legs from the

Figure 9. Frame enlargement showing hands transformed to clay from *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* (1909).

shackles (Figure 10). Once freed, the prisoner smokes a cigarette, but is soon discovered by the guards, who return with a wooden trunk to contain him (from which he quickly escapes) before tying him up, throwing him in a sack and dumping him at sea. The second half of the film is one long chase sequence in which objects anthropomorphize, morph, disassemble and reassemble: a bicycle frame becomes a whole bike, a policeman cut in half in a collision with the bicycle is glued back together by a billboard man; and after two policemen are tossed out the window as folded pieces of paper, they are unfolded by a tramp and return to human form. *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* ends with the prisoner slithering, like an unfurled fireman's hose, back into the warden's office (inadvertently, one assumes), becoming human again, only to escape leaving the two prison guards in his place.

When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless is indebted to the visual logic of the trick film, a popular early cinema genre that used physical metamorphosis, stop motion animation, editing, and other special effects. The film also exemplifies early cinema's intermediality, since Harry Houdini's prison escapology is an obvious intertext. In light of Houdini's frequent performances in penitentiaries – convicts nailed him into a packing case at Sing Sing during one show – we see that *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* extends the skill of prison escapology to ordinary felons, but in this instance replaces bodily contortion with metamorphosis (Kellock and Houdini 1931, 344). Houdini's nonchalance after a prison break – his biographer Harold Kellock once described how he 'walked jauntily out of the

Figure 10. Frame enlargement showing foot dislodged from the body to expedite escape from fetters from *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* (1909).

stoutest jail door in a few minutes' time, fully clothed and looking as if the whole affair had cost him no particular exertion' – is also suggested in *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* when the inmate smokes a cigarette immediately after escaping from his handcuffs and fetters (Kellock and Houdini 1931, 344; see also 13–121, 188–197). Governed by the same suspension of physical laws as magic, the trick film takes cinema's already slippery ontological status as absent presence and magnifies it into a moment of anarchic plenitude.[16] Films with criminal themes are dreams come true for makers of early trick films. The prison as location is rife with all manner of possibilities for tricks, and the trick film leveraged spectators' ambivalent, if not sympathetic, predisposition toward prisoners. The plasticity of the prisoner's body can be read as a metaphor for the cinematic medium in the transitional era, what Maggie Hennefeld calls a 'rhetoric of metamorphosis – of ushering figures spontaneously from one form to the next' in which tricks perform their own 'historiographic meta-narratives' (Hennefeld 2013, 4).

In *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless* the convict's body not only escapes human form, but also becomes superhuman, able to change shape, survive in water and ride a bicycle in the sky. Escape as a visual rhetoric is all about defying borders. The borders between spatial units that hold prisoners captive are not only heavily policed but also governed by complex rituals enacted upon the body, including the search of visitors' bodies and possessions upon entry and the innumerable security checks of inmates and visitors alike. The border is a powerful metaphor for the prison's place within the public sphere, a salient reminder of the

penitentiary's structure comprising borders between cells, cell blocks, interior and exterior space, and external walls or razor wire topped fences. Moreover, the prison as a porous space, as discussed above, also suggests the anarchic, surrealist quality of some of the early prison trick films.

The conceit of the incarcerated body performing feats of magic is found in many places beyond the early trick film; contemporary prison researchers Edward Zamble and Frank J. Porporino observe that inmates often construct scenarios in which mind and body are temporarily divorced. One participant in their 1988 prison study reported: 'sometimes I imagine that my mind could go to sleep for a year or two, while my body stayed here. When I'd awake nothing would be different, maybe nobody would even notice' (Zambie and Porporino 1988, 114). In this scenario, however, the mind goes dormant, while the escape trick films' ingenuity evokes a mind capable of thinking one step ahead of the pursuing authorities.

Prison as an anarchic and surreal space where time is experienced differently than in the real world, is showcased in the trick comedy *The Impossible Convicts*, directed by Billy Bitzer in 1905. The film opens with a guard marching backwards down a flight of stairs, followed by four other convicts all wearing prison stripes who also hop backwards into their open cells. Other guards enter and walk backwards down the stairs, including a guard carrying a food tray who is suddenly attacked by one of the prisoners who grabs the guard's keys and releases his fellow inmates. The prisoners run facing forward up the stairs, but upon seeing another guard, rush back down and jump backwards into their cells. The guard whose keys were stolen suddenly revives and, when joined by another guard, walks backwards into one of the cells. The convicts repeat this backward-and-forward motion, hopping in and out of their cells like demented rabbits. They are even joined by the guards, who mimic the prisoners' repetitive movements in and out of their cells. The film ends abruptly with one of the prisoners making one last-ditch attempt to escape by wrestling with a guard at the top of the stairs.

The narrative simplicity of *The Impossible Convicts*, featuring prisoners attempting to escape, is over-determined by the visual logic of repetitive motion, temporal reversal, and of time-warped bodies malfunctioning. As one of early cinema's foremost special effects, reverse motion was easy to accomplish (reversing the film in the projector) and delivered a dose of unadulterated and often surprising pleasure to spectators who saw divers jumping out of the water, walls reassembled and dismembered victims of traffic accidents rendered whole. Reverse motion in *The Impossible Convicts* offers a metaphor for the psychological recalibration of time in prison; it also suggests the co-existence of mind-numbing routine, such as the multiple daily head counts when inmates return to their cells, and the grotesque physical fact of incarceration itself. Returning to a space for no reason other than to be counted is on one level a waste of time (although vital for maintaining an accurate head count) – a point underscored by its depiction in reverse, with prisoners and guards bizarrely hopping in and out of the cells. The word *impossible* in the title points to the convict's difficult behavior, reverse motion, and on a more abstract level, the plight of a prisoner hermetically sealed from the world, a metaphor for the dictionary definition of 'impossible' as being that which is 'incapable of having existence'.[17] Even perceptions of aging can be skewed by imprisonment, as Yvonne Jewkes discovered in her research on media use by British prisoners; one inmate told her that 'I haven't got [*sic*] a day older since being in prison. I'm still thirty. I forget I'm really sixty-odd' (Jewkes 2002, 82). Rather than accelerating aging

(which prison very well might do through poor access to medical care, proper diet, and mental health services), prison metaphorically deep-freezes its long-term residents or at the very minimum stultifies their awareness of the normal passage of time.

As the semantic glue binding several early prison films, impossibility is never far from either the visual grammar of escapes (prisoners removing bars from their windows) or the syntagmatic chains of cause and effect. In *The Escaped Lunatic* (Wallace McCutcheon 1904) impossibility defines the prisoner's delusional state, since he imagines he is none other than the Emperor Napoleon. Although technically confined in a mental asylum rather than a penitentiary, his cell is virtually identical to that of a prison, with barred windows and Spartan furnishings. The guards wear white suits and hats, however, rather than the more typical military-style uniform worn by corrections officers, flagging the fact that this is an institution for the mentally ill. The film begins with a fight with the keepers over the terrible food; they beat the inmate unconscious, and when he wakes up, he uses the leg of his table to smash through the window and escape, thus triggering the long chase where he encounters obstacles such as roofs, water and hills. The film ends virtually where it began, with the escaped patient jumping through the window of a prison cell, putting on his Napoleon hat and sitting down at the table to read the paper. The madcap chase in *The Escaped Lunatic* is replayed in *The Escaped Convict*, made the same year, and, barring a few plot differences, adhering closely to the circular structure of the escape–capture–return model. *The Escaped Convict* reinforces the visual carceral logic of the prison uniform as a moniker of captivity; climbing into the bedroom window of a vicar's house, the prisoner steals the civilian's clothes, thus shedding his convict identity. Resorting to wearing the prisoner's clothes in order to pursue the burglar, the vicar is wrongly arrested and soon after the prisoner is discovered hiding behind a haystack. The film ends with both men at the police station. As in *The Escaped Lunatic*, a dispute, violent in both cases (an escaping prisoner is shot, presumed dead at the start of *The Escaped Convict*), precedes each escape, leading to a protracted chase and the restoration of order. Neither film engenders sympathy for the prisoner, its novelty value residing squarely in the coupling of the chase, an industry staple around 1903, and the prison setting.

'Lulled into lassitude': Final thoughts on the early prison film[18]

The early cinema prison film constructed a speculative gaze about penitential life, since an image of a prisoner wearing a striped uniform told only half the story. Cinema told enough of a story, however, to make the prison film a safe commercial bet, since the prison break, chase and capture formula fit perfectly with Hollywood's emerging classical style. Actualities were promoted as a series of sensational moving vignettes, including an ad for *Life in a Western Penitentiary* (Citagraph Co. 1914) from *Moving Picture World*, which likened the film to a walk through the midway at a world's fair: 'See the place, 645 Convicts in real life, the Prison Records, Bertillon System, Snake Hole Dungeon, Life Termers, Ball and Chain Men, Cells of Death Watch, Cell Houses, Condemned Prisoners, Death Trap and Black Cap, Convict Burial, Prison Grave Yard, *everything boiling with intense interest*, a true moral lesson but not overlooking the drawing power' (*Moving Picture World* 1913, 1587, cited in Brownlow 1990, 241, emphasis added). Prison

gave ordinary people, who were not privileged either via politics or celebrity, virtual access to the spaces of corrections.[19] Melodramatic storylines, scenes of corporal punishment, histrionic acting, and, in some instances, the eschewal of verisimilitude make it difficult to generalize what these films meant for either historical or contemporary audiences. But as Claire Valier reminds us, there's a lot more at stake in watching films in which individuals are punished than simply becoming a voyeur: our subjectivity is also implicated (2000, 379). While space precludes detailed analysis of the kinds of psychic investments elicited by these films, several factors, including the camera's presence in the cell during a beating, prisoners' or guards' return gaze, and the intersubjective toll of shifting allegiances from guard to prisoners, call out for theorizing.

Several of the films discussed remind us of prison's permeability and liminality. These films locate prisoners on the borders between captivity and liberty, a space we all technically reside in until circumstance or a lapse in judgment changes everything. Prison interiors were conventionalized during the early cinema period, influenced by a custodial (medieval) architectonics that spawned a Gothic romanticism that was especially influential for nineteenth-century writers, whose classic tales of imprisonment and escape 'deepened and enlarged the basic prison metaphor and its associated paradoxes' (Nellis 1982, 46).[20] The cell's prescriptive iconography is a metaphor for a highly regimented and homogeneous existence; yet prisoners, like all human beings, are highly adaptable, as Zamble and Porprino argue in their study of the various coping mechanisms utilized by Canadian prisoners (1988, 76–77, 83). We become proxy viewers to carcerality and acts of corporal punishment in these films, technologies of correction that read as anachronistic, although were likely still practiced in many US prisons. And if these films share a blind spot, it's a total disregard for reform measures such as prisoner education or recreation.[21] In many respects, these films are anachronistic, hyperbolic lightning sketches of an imagined carceral life, in which inmates are hell bent on escaping, inciting riots or breaking prison rules. They project audience fantasies about what life inside must be like, as well as serving as prescient reminders of the approaching end of penal progressivism. Did inmates enjoy seeing prison- or crime-themed films? There's scant discussion of this topic, although when questioned on it, Warden Lewis E. Lawes of Sing Sing noted that prisoners liked crime films 'but only to a limited extent' and found stereotypical representations of a hoodlum, with a 'twisted nose, large ears, and wear[ing] a cap tightly pulled over his head' amusing to say the least (Lawes, 8–9). Despite being debunked by British criminologist Charles Goring in the mid-1910s, Cesare Lombros's theory of criminal atavism, in which the criminal's body purportedly bore telltale signs of degeneracy through physical anomalies such as sloping foreheads, large ears, and asymmetrical faces, was (and still is) an easy way to stereotype and criminally code deviant characters in popular media (Goring 1913). Lawes also acknowledged that it was 'impossible to state with any degree of accuracy to what extent such pictures check the tendencies of prisoners to commit crime' (Lawes, 8–9).

The grim realities of prison are only hinted at in these films, and suffering is suggested through the iconography of walls, chains and bars. Slop buckets, poorly ventilated cells, vermin and overcrowding are present by omission only, but the evocation of human suffering is pervasive. The olfactory and auditory landscapes of prison are occluded, and while the arrival of sound in Hollywood would address the latter, the smell of prison could only ever be hinted at through reaction shots

and abject imagery. When asked in a 2003 BBC radio interview what was missing in media representations of prisons, British poet and playwright Benjamin Zepheniah said: 'The smell of the place […] We used to slop out […] you've got the smell of four to six people's urine, the smell of masturbation, in one little room' (Jewkes 2006, 140–141). Seeing incarceration is an oxymoron – how can such a psychological experience be represented through a visual register? The prison film engenders an ambiguous response in viewers, triggering both contempt and fascination. Janus-faced, we are punisher and punished, weighing up a prison film's success and appeal like any other entertainment. Analogous to a journey into the world of the ethnographic other, virtual encounters with prisoners enshrine what Auli Elk calls the "low' – in terms of social, moral, and sexual deviance – morphed and fetishized through the narrative focus on dirt, bodily functions, violence, and sexual perversion' (Elk 2005, 7). Yet few of these themes could be graphically represented in films regulated by emerging industrial norms and discursive regimes policing cinema and culture at the dawn of the twentieth century (see Grieveson 2004). Early prison films are enigmas in many respects, conforming only partially to the 'prison film as morality play' thesis (see Cheatwood 1998, 217). They institutionalize the iconography of the carceral aesthetic while simultaneously offering bizarre, oneiric encounters with a prison system that few, at the turn of the twentieth century, imagined would transform into the industrialized complex of mass incarceration that it has become. Even though we see emerging typologies of the wrongly convicted or sympathetic prisoner, benevolent warden and corrupt guards in some of these films (D.W. Griffith's 1909 *A Convict's Sacrifice* is one example), the trick films analyzed here are more effective at evoking prison's discombobulating effect than the classic prison films of the 1920s and 1930s that single out individuals who prevail over the system rather than the nameless masses who people the penitentiaries.

The penitentiary has remained an enduring, if paradoxically elusive image in Western visual practice. As literary theorist John Bender argues: 'The very nature of the penitentiary as a representation of a representation works to explain both its practical failure and its ideological persistence' (Bender 1987, 226). While we might be co-creators of this mythical image of the prison, picturing ourselves 'at once as the objects of supervision and as impartial spectators enforcing reformation of character on the isolated other', I would wager that we are also resisters, border dwellers who can never quite decide which side of the law we reside. These films offer us vital clues as to why we adore and abhor confinement and punishment, watching, as prison film theorist Mike Nellis argues, in a state of 'tense bewildered neutrality, identifying one moment, repelled at the next' (1998, 44; also see 2009, 129–146). Cinema's utility as a governing, disciplinary apparatus that reinforces normative values about how society deals with its miscreants is definitely on show here, but with several important caveats: there's a barely concealed libidinous desire in many of these films, one that can be traced to sensational images of punishment pre-dating cinema, such as the 1860 lithograph in Figure 11 of a woman being whipped at Auburn Prison. The image disturbs in multiple senses, troubling or agitating us emotionally and intruding upon the prisoner's space and body. Thomas Hardy was similarly troubled (and, it would seem, aroused) when he saw convicted murderer Elizabeth Martha Brown executed outside Dorchester Gaol at roughly the same time the Auburn image was created: 'What a fine figure she showed against the sky, as she hung in the misty rain, and how the tight, black, silk gown set off

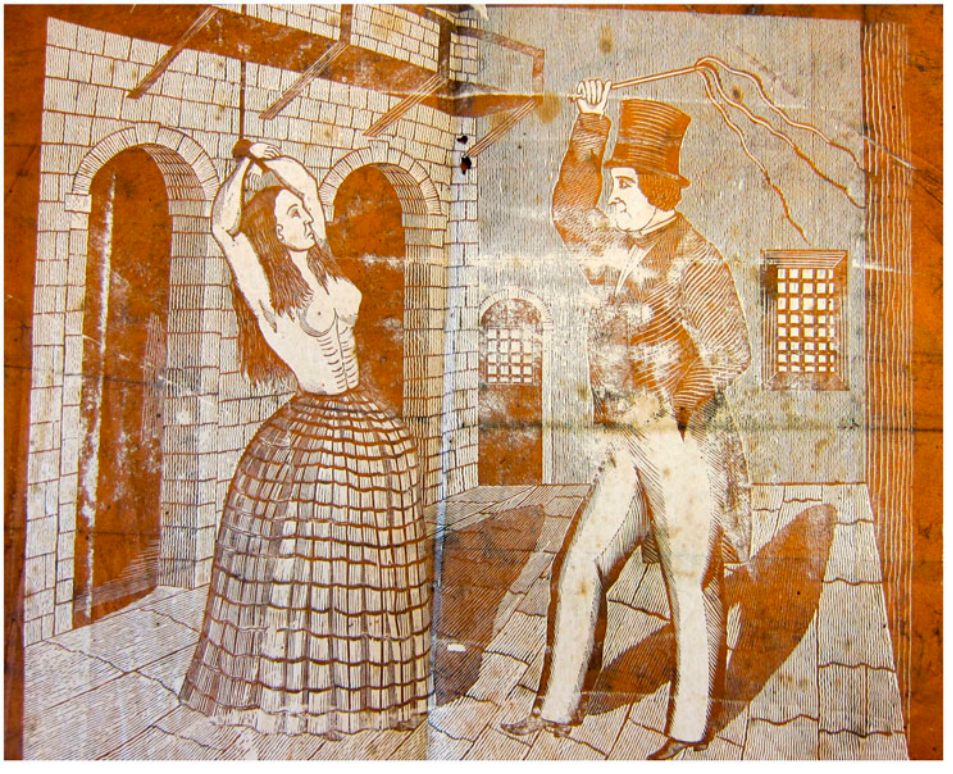

Figure 11. Lithograph of a woman being whipped at Auburn Prison, 1838. The prison opened in 1817, housing mostly male and some female inmates. Osborne Family Papers, Special Collections, Syracuse University. Image from Folder Auburn Prison, NY Misc. 1908–23 in Box 268.

her shape as she wheeled half round and back'.[22] Even though a cloth had been placed over Brown's face, as it began to rain 'her features came through it', an image he described as 'extraordinary' and could never get out of his mind for the rest of his life (Tess's hanging in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* recreates the scene). Like a photograph developing in sensitized chemicals, Brown's image also evokes the death mask, although it's hard not to read the rain's effect on the fact as a symbolic snub to the authorities that tried to conceal (or afford Brown some dignity) in her final moments on earth. Brown's humanity seems to bleed to the surface of the cloth, a point not lost on Hardy. Early prison films also access these traces of humanity, in eclectic, oft-forgotten films. As Sergei Eisenstein wrote: 'People must […] feel their humanity, they must be human, become human' – a narrative drive in a great many prison films made at the height of the genre's popularity in the 1930s and 1940s (Eisenstein 1988, 75 cited in Goodwin 1993, 60–61).

Notes

1. Prison clothing casts an influence on fashion trends, as in the low-slung 'sagging' jeans look from hip-hop and black youth culture that originated from the ban on belts in prisons, although jumpsuits obviate the need for belts (Ash 2010, 6). For an example

of designers integrating prison motifs into fashion lines see the Keyhole collection (1994) designed by Red or Dead founders Wayne and Geraldine Hemingway (http://www.hemingwaydesign.co.uk/about/history).

2. Press interest in Sing Sing increased exponentially during prison reformer Thomas Mott Osborne's two-year stint as its warden. Denis Brian notes that there was more press coverage of penal reform during this period than at any other time in the country's history. The press relished the scandal surrounding the investigation into inappropriate conduct by Osborne, including the carnival atmosphere surrounding his reinstatement. Osborne retired three months after his reinstatement (*New York Times* 1916, cited in Brian 2005, 103, 109).
3. Space precludes detailed analysis of how masculinity and male subjectivity play out in the films discussed here. For more on this issue see Davis 1997; Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001; Elk 2005, 17–46; Caster 2008.
4. These films complicate the flattening effect of Foucault's contributions to critical prison studies, an effect Peter Caster argues can result in a glare that 'shine[s] so brightly' on the projections of the cultural meanings of prisons on page, screen, and stage as to 'obscure the representations themselves' (2008, 3–4).
5. Imprisoned by Herod, St. Peter was 'chained between two guards before being freed from his prison cell by the appearance and intervention of an angel' (Cassidy-Welch 2009, 373).
6. Many federal prisons abolished striped uniforms in 1914. The broad arrow stripe worn by British prisoners, despite being legally abolished in 1920, was worn well into the 1930s in the UK (Ash 2010, 60).
7. The book was on display in the 2011 exhibit 'Pilgrims' at St. Catherine Convent Museum, Utrecht, The Netherlands.
8. The Auburn system of congregant labor by day and isolation in the single cell by night is in effect in the French 'maison de correction', although there's an obvious comic element to seeing 8 to 14-year-old boys rather than adult men dressed in prison stripes performing hard labor.
9. The image of children being subjected to punishments that hardly match their crimes raises the question of the potential bad taste of a film like *Le Bagne des gosses*. For a discussion of Pathé's reception in the US, and the censorship problems it ran into see Abel 1995, 299–313.
10. Some early prison actualities not discussed in this chapter include *Convict Life in the Ohio Penitentiary* (America's Feature Film Co., 1912), made with the special permission of Warden T.H.B. Jones and showing the night school, post office and modern cell contrasted with the 1861 cell block; *Life in a Western Penitentiary* (1913), shot in Arizona State Prison; and *Convict No. 796* (Vitagraph, 1910).
11. We are also implicated as taxpayers in the business of corrections. As sociologist Derral Cheatwood argues: 'The motion picture audience forms the constituency of the elected legislatures of the states, and the legislature is the direct source of the funding necessary for any change or improvement in the correctional system' (Cheatwood 1998, 209–210).
12. Another early prison escape film not discussed here is *The Prisoner's Escape* (Gaumont 1907) in which a prisoner jumps through a window and is pursued by guards (*Moving Picture World* 1907, 314).
13. As Jan Olsson notes, *Escape from Sing Sing*'s long run in the market meant it was singled out among a group of sensational titles in the 1907 crusade against motion pictures in Chicago (2009, 43). The film is a lost title.
14. The page numbers are not from the original essay, but the essay as reproduced in *Film History*.
15. Pathé made several versions of *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless*, one called *Slippery Jim* that does not include the hands escapology, which only appears in *When Prison Bars and Fetters are Useless*. For *Slippery Jim*, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MJoBAZ-E3Q. Like the prisoner's transformation into a hose in *Slippery Jim*, Vitagraph's *Distintegrated Convict* (1907) also includes the prisoner wearing a striped uniform metamorphosing into a rope that the guards chase through the countryside. The *Billboard* review (21 September 1907) describes the film as follows:

'Convict in his cell being disciplined: bound, strung up by thumbs; prisoner's body drops to the floor in pieces; fragments fly together and quickly he becomes whole and sound; cell being unlocked. He escapes to yard, swings from rope, crashes through window, lands on dining table. Makes his escape as keepers come through the floor and climbs into rain barrel; discovered; emerges through bung-hole in the form of a snake and eludes pursuers; almost captured again; body breaks into small black and white blocks; wardens gather blocks, return to cell, build them into shape of man; figure turns into the live convict' *The Billboard,* (1907), 32.

16. See Solomon 2010, for an analysis of cinema's relationship to magic during the early cinema period.
17. See http://www.thefreedictionary.com/impossible.
18. The phrase 'lulled into lassitude' riffs on an argument about the consequences of boredom and monotony on the prisoner population in a Canadian prison study conducted by Edward Zamble and Frank J. Porporino (1988, 114).
19. Prisons were high on the list of must-see places for dignitaries, celebrities and Hollywood executives. D.W. Griffith visited Sing Sing in 1928 (Blumenthal 2004, 158).
20. Jan Alber traces the ideological valences of twentieth-century prison films to Charles Dickens's novels, in which prisons proliferate. Dickens's novels normalized the image of incarceration for mass audiences in the nineteenth century, in similar ways to motion pictures (Alber 2009, 133).
21. According to Jamie Bennett, even in reform-minded prison films from the 1990s to 2000s, the commercial imperative of popular entertainment makes it hard to critically engage with the idea (Bennett 2008, 364).
22. Christopher Hale discusses this famous image from Hardy's memory (1982, 90). As Ralph Pite argues, this description ties in with the 'persistent impression […] that looking was for Hardy a highly erotic activity. Women are gazed at, with an eye that is almost voracious. The female body is regarded, anatomized, and appreciated – it is visually consumed' (2007, 238).

Notes on contributor

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