

# **Spectacles of Prison: Masculinities, Punishment and Social Order in US Screen Prison Drama 1995-2005.**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

The United States has emerged at the head of an international trend in penal expansion and punitive crime control (Garland, 1990; 2001; Wacquant, 1999). A spate of screen prison dramas has emerged on US television and in the cinema during the period from 1995 to 2005. These dramas are the object of analysis in this dissertation.

The project takes popular culture as site of negotiation over meaning and performs textual analysis of six recent screen prison dramas, highlighting play of resistive and normative discourses. Foreground are articulations of race and gender identities, discourses on crime and criminality, framings of sexuality and images of the prison institution. The study contends that neo-liberal discourses associated with punitive shift in criminal policy are refracted through norm-contesting discourses on sexuality, race and the prison system in screen prison drama.

This perspective differs from research by criminology and sociology scholars (Mason, 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Nellis and Hale, 1982; Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, 2004; Cheatwood, 1998). Criminological analyses of screen prison drama suggest that media texts "affect" penal policy conservatively (Mason, 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Nellis and Hale, 1982). Communications- and cultural studies writers Yvonne Jewkes (2005), Brian Jarvis (2004), Elayne Rapping (2003), and Nicole Rafter (2000) are limited also (with the exception of Jewkes), in relation to their somewhat binary analysis of the resistive/hegemonic facets of screen prison drama. Writers Rapping, Jarvis and Rafter focus solely on the normative aspects of screen prison drama, whereas criminologists

Wilson and O'Sullivan (2004) are concerned to demonstrate resistive aspects of the genre.

With reference to a Foucauldian perspective on social construction, and critical race writing, the project examines instances of prison visibility for discourses on crime and punishment, as well as indications of how other types of social formation are negotiated. The project situates itself also with theoretical debates on how the issues of race and social cleavages are mapped. Concern over the formation of social hierarchy thus meets a more strictly socially constructionist perspective on the processes of culture.

**Keywords:** neo-liberalism, Michel Foucault, governmentality, prison, drama, television

## DEDICATION

*Sometimes the greatest act of courage is hanging up your gloves.*

*"Victory is reserved for those who are willing to pay its price. War is not about who is right, it is about who is left."*

*- Hsun Tzu*

*"Vive la mort, vive la guerre, vive le sacré mercenaire."*

To Mom and Dad :

This is what you get for teaching your teenager to argue ;) !

To little bobo and the guinea pigs :

My inspirations in life's opposite directions.

À mon Damien :

Pour un moment, mon étoile filant.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Giving away this thesis is, for me, like turning the page on years of fiddling with the little goblin—years of library and of coffee shop, and years of alone during the day, thinking, writing, and then running to stop thinking. It's been a beautiful and a steep climb. To the people who helped Mohammad go to the mountain: thanks.

Thanks to my senior supervisor, Zoe Druick, for taking me in, for picking things apart at the right time and for being both perceptive and tough. Thanks for being the coach that got me through with all limbs in the right place. Thanks to my second and third readers, Gary McCarron and Alison Beale, for taking the time and for being perceptive. Thanks to SFU's Department of Communications for funding the project and for giving me the opportunity to teach. On the same note, I'd like to thank SSHRC and FQRSC for providing the final two years of funding.

Mumsy: thanks for picking up the phone and for being the crisis ambulance... more than once. Twenty-eight years and I still reach for your hand. Sailing is easier if you know of a safe port. To the other half of that harbor—Pa—it's true that in life, you don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate. All we have is our honor. Thanks for the fatherly words, even before my ears were ready. Little Bobo—younger brother: I'm still trying to live up to the fact that "settling for" doesn't exist in your vocabulary. I work that some day these words dissolve from mine.

To Jim, thanks for knockin' me down and—in the immortal words of Christina Aguilera—for makin' me a fighter. Did you know bones get stronger from being

broken? Merci Damien, de m'avoir montré que la vie à deux peut être un jeu entre camarades de bord, et non pas un match qui fini en KO. Si un jour la mer nous jette, qu'est-ce qu'on fera de nous?

To Joe C and Big Daddy Ducharme, the voices of optimism and the reality-checks in my corner: thanks for playing the game that life can be solved through talking and through friendship. Thanks for lending me your shoulders. Comrade Peddle—the old household spirit of SJ—soon it'll be the first day of the rest of our lives. When the moment comes, I promise you we'll be laughin'.

The last shout out goes to my crews on Renfrew, Frontenac and St-Clair West. Thanks for teaching me to keep my hands up through the punches. Thanks for showing me that it don't matter how many times you go down—it's how many times you get up that counts. Anyway, who doesn't like the smell of canvas?

To all of you—true friends, family, *âmes soeurs*: “Sometimes our light goes out, but is blown into flame by another human being. I owe the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light.”

Success is a team sport. Thanks for being my team.

Dans mes rêves je ne suis ni fonctionnaire ni mercenaire, and so the new path opens.

Peace to all'a y'all—



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## PREFACE

Criminal justice, punishment, rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>, imprisonment and incarceration are at the present time at the heart of much popular and academic debate in the West. Debate over state policies for punishing and imprisoning has emerged in the limelight of late in relation to domestic and foreign policy issues. The events of 9/11 in the United States, as well as growing global fears about terrorism are but one facet of what has propelled images of and debates over justice and punishment into the public eye. An international re-evaluation of civilian criminal policy and approaches is underway in many places including the United States, France, England and Australia. Consensus in criminology departments appears to exist on the fact that criminal justice has extended further and further into American life in recent decades<sup>2</sup>. In Canada, the Harper government has

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<sup>1</sup> There are notable differences between the terms “punishment” and “rehabilitation”. The term “punishment” is defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as “an authorized imposition of deprivations—of freedom or privacy or other goods to which the person otherwise has a right, or the imposition of special burdens—because the person has been found guilty of some criminal violation, typically (though not invariably) involving harm to the innocent”. The current study is concerned with punishment as a tradition of social chastisement on the political level (i.e. not the punishment of children), which has a long history through which different techniques and rationales have animated systems for regulating society. Concerns in punishment have ranged historically and culturally from vengeance, to compensation, to deterrence and to rehabilitation. Whereas in mediaeval contexts punishment was exercised through dramatic public spectacles as an exercise in vengeance carried out in the name of the sovereign (Foucault, 1977), modern modes of punishment are somewhat different. The aim of rehabilitation in punishment is tuned more squarely on the reintegration, reform and preparation of the offender for return to society. This differs from deterrence, which is more concerned with preventing re-offence through intimidation or harsh punishment. Rehabilitation, on the other hand, is more a question of altering the predispositions of the offender so as to prevent further crimes. Although a mixture of the two modes has tended to exist in modern Western states, rehabilitation was one of the key modes of punishment practice carried out during the welfare era, whereas deterrence-oriented practices have of late gained in popularity in countries like the United States and France (Wacquant, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Changes in the American penal system began in earnest during the Reagan 80s. Cuts in social spending, combined with the advent of the “War on Drugs” and a move towards “Tough on Crime” policies conspired to set America on the path, which, today, has led the nation to incarcerate one percent of its citizens (Harrison and Beck, 2003). Yet, many of these policies took time to bear fruit, as it took time for

proposed several changes to Federal criminal laws, proposing more punitive measures such as mandatory minimum sentences for certain drug crimes. In Toronto and Montreal, also the past decade has born witness to “urban cleanup” initiatives in which zero-tolerance policing and militaristic tactics by police forces have gained in popularity. As American-style criminal justice techniques and practices have begun to be implemented by administrations in Paris and London, it is likely only a matter of time before

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narratives of penal expansion to make their way onto television and cinema screens. Additionally, inaugurating this study’s ten-year period, 1994 was a bumper year in the punitive ratcheting up of American criminal policies. In 1994, congress ratified the Clinton Crime Act, which added 100,000 new police officers to America’s forces (Reynolds, 2006). The Act also expanded the war on drugs through measures such as mandatory minimum sentences for possession, and validated the death penalty for sixty new offenses. Also in 1994, California—the nation’s most populous state with its populous prisons (Reynolds, 2006)—ratified a 3-strikes sentencing law. By 2004, twenty-five states had 3-strikes laws (Reynolds, 2006). These policy changes are but a smattering of the new tough-on-crime initiatives that were imposed in the mid-1990s.

Additionally, between the years 1995 and 2003, the US prison population grew at an average of 3.6% per year (Harrison and Beck, 2003). A 42% absolute increase in US inmate populations since 1994 meant that by 2005 approximately 2.4 million Americans were incarcerated (Narkum, 2005). What makes these facts more unusual is that for the first time since the early 20th century, US crime rates actually decreased in the 1990s (Ouimet, 2002; Platt, 2001). This means that crime and prison policy’s expansion of the carceral net took place in spite of an actual overall decrease in crime statistics. The decade in question, then, distinctly manifests intensifications both in criminal policy initiatives and in real prison statistics, just as crime rates were dropping. It is possible, then, that an increase in the number of prisoners which occurred between the years 1995 and 2005 reflects new modes of US government management of crime, rather than changes in crime rates.

In addition to an absolute expansion of America’s prisons, the decade from 1995 to 2005 was also one in which the nation’s rationality and techniques of punishment shifted. Beginning in the early 1990s, liberal practices of punishment began to undergo rapid change (Platt, 2001, p. 138). Neo-liberal economic policies and morally conservative reason in punishment pushed the nation’s prisons to adopt “no frills” policies, to prolong sentences, to militarize staff, and to privatize (Platt, 2001, p. 138, 142). As numerous carceral institutions came under corporate control, cost-cutting measures did away with everything from vocational training for inmates, to exercise facilities, to healthcare and counseling services (Platt, 2001, p. 142). Prison understaffing and over-crowding are increasingly endemic, as inmate populations have increased much faster than the state has built facilities (Platt, 2001). In the mid-1990s there has also been an increase in the number of “supermax” prisons, as well as the number of inmates consigned to such facilities (Riveland, 1999, p. 8). Designed to house the “worst of the worst” inmates, supermax prisons operate with:

the express purpose of incarcerating inmates under highly isolated conditions with severely limited access to programs, exercise, staff, or other inmates... The premise is that general population prisons will be more easily and safely managed if the troublemakers are completely removed (Riveland, 1999, p.8).

The mid-1990s, then, marked a moment of policy shift in American strategies and techniques of punishment.

governments in, for example, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto and Quebec City begin debating similar changes.

These debates around criminal justice and punishment have been highly mediatized. Media's interventions in the workings through of crime and punishment stretch far beyond the diffusion of political debates on matters of crime and justice. Non-fiction media such as news- and reality crime television, diffusion of images of torture, newspaper reporting and documentary film all circulate messages regarding crime and punishment. Many scholars have read popular culture as a site of struggle at which social structures meet the making of meaning in relation to crime and punishment (Hall 1978; 2004; Antonio 2002). While there is dissent regarding exactly what is the media's role in the process of working through crime control, there is widespread consensus to the effect that media play an important part in the structuring, critiquing and publicizing of crime control policy. A prime example of this process is available through quick reference to the mediated events leading up to the American torture debates, which came to the fore in 2004-2005. Media images of torture being carried out in military prisons in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, as well as evidence of secret American prisons on foreign soil, propelled the public discussion of torture, as well as exposing "secret" initiatives taken by the Bush Administration and the armed forces (Greenberg 2006). Media arguably helped spark and then disseminate the torture debates.

Within the broader scope of academic debate regarding the relationship of media and crime control in the United States, the current dissertation takes up a position in relation to one aspect: the politics of prison visibility. When one considers the operation of prisons in the United States, and indeed in many other nations as well, what strikes one

is the surprising lack of public and media access to these institutions. While the news may at certain times carry stories about prison unrest or conditions, rarely are non-fiction visual images of the inside of carceral institutions placed on public view. In part this stems from the tight control that government maintains on prisons. Press access to prisons is highly restricted in Canada and the United States. Contact with prisoners is also highly restricted, surveyed and controlled. Public debate over carceral institutions in the United States has largely taken place in a climate of restricted access to certain types of information.

While actual prisons and prisoners have been largely invisible in news reporting and non-fiction television<sup>3</sup>, the same cannot be said for fictional programming (Mason 1998; Jarvis 2004). During the 1990s and the early 2000s, fiction prison film and television enjoyed striking success. A spike in the production of prison film in the 1990s accompanied the emergence, on television, of at least two highly popular and long-running dramas, *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-1003) and *Prison Break* (creator Paul Scheuring, 2005-present). In recent history, then, a curious situation has come to exist. The overwhelming access, in public life, to images and narratives of carceral punishment takes place through fiction film and television. This presents a situation in which prison visibility is mediated through the lenses of popular culture, subjected to and moulded by the narrative conventions, production structures, and artistic imperatives of film and television drama. Because of political restrictions on access to real prisons, the politics of

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<sup>3</sup> While non-fiction television is often silent on the matter of incarceration, it should be noted that several excellent documentary prison films have of late been produced (e.g. Liz Garbus and Wilbert Rideau's *The Farm: Angola, USA* (1998)). I do not deal with the documentary tradition in this project, for reasons that shall become clearer in the methods section.

prison visibility have become tied in important ways to the politics of representation in popular screen fiction.

This is one reason why examination of fictional images of incarceration is relevant at the present time. Another related motivating factor has to do with what is taking place in crime control and prison policy in the United States, as well as in terms of the lobby for prison abolition. In 2002, the United States had incarcerated marginally under three million civil prisoners (Harrison and Beck 2002). Figures have risen since then (Davis 2003). In addition, it is estimated that at least an additional two million persons have either been released on parole or are under some other sort of government supervision (Davis 1998; 2003). Massive incarceration is thus currently underway in America. Imprisonment is highly raced and classed. Black<sup>4</sup> Americans, and other Americans of colour (for example Hispanics and Native Americans) are proportionally over represented among inmates (Mauer 2000). Poverty is also linked with a propensity to be incarcerated. Additionally, in the US context, race and class intersect with black Americans finding themselves disproportionately represented among the nation's poor (Davis 1998). In light of developments in criminal justice, prison abolitionists have mounted various arguments that problematize the racially disparate social ramifications

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<sup>4</sup> By using the term "black" I mean to refer to the raced identity produced by social, historical and representational mechanisms in the United States. I let "African American" or "black" refer to those Americans of African descent who arrived in the United States as slaves or, arriving later on, were of the same physical/racial type and thus integrated into established African American culture and communities. The OED's definition of "African American" includes the terms "Negro", "colored" and "Afro-American" as earlier alternatives to "African American", with the caveat that certain of these terms are now considered derogatory. "Black" and "African American" are both considered by the OED as free of derogatory connotations. The term "black" is older, originating—according to the OED—in Europe in the 1400s, whereas African American came into common usage in the 80, championed—among others—by Jesse Jackson. The essential difference between the two terms is that African American refers to ethnic and national identity, whereas "black" is more clearly a reference to physical appearance. I use both terms interchangeably here, since they denote the same population and since both are free of derogatory overtones. There are, however, slight differences in meaning, which it was important to signal at this point, although these are not the objects of examination here.

of America's current regime of punishment. Work by Marxist abolitionist Angela Davis (1998; 2003), for example, highlights the ways in which criminal justice and incarceration, in the American context, grew out of the one-time slave state and have continued since that time to serve as institutions that maintain the unequal status of Black Americans. Criminologist Marc Mauer, equally, suggests that the "racial dynamics of imprisonment" are in dire need of examination if "we are truly committed to reducing crime and achieving racial justice" (2000, p. 50). In his refutation of capital punishment, political writer Austin Sarat (2001) suggests also that aspects of criminal justice policy are in need of review if one is to maintain the rule of law and democracy in America. Sarat equally points out the racialized dynamics of death penalty sentences in the US.

The current paper situates itself politically within the scope of these abolitionist arguments. I concur in general terms with critics of the current configuration of the America penal and criminal justice system: too many Americans, largely Americans of colour, are currently incarcerated at dramatic social and financial cost. Not only is this mode of punishment inefficient in addressing the social problems that are often at the root of much drug- and petty crime, but return on investment takes place not in terms of reduced crime rates—which is often purported as the desired effect of punitive incarceration (Reiman 2004; Mauer 2000). No, indeed, as influential criminologist Jeffrey Reiman points out—recidivism, social problems, concentration of poverty, high financial cost, perpetuation of racialized class fractioning, political disenfranchisement and disaffection are the main returns of mass incarceration (2004). The current configuration of criminal justice in terms of punitive carceral punishment begets and supports racial divides adds an additional problematic aspect to an already deleterious set



of policies (Davis 1998). In the view of this study, then, it is important to rethink American criminal justice and to work away from the current trend of penal expansion. The current inquiry into prison visibility, then, is carried out with a view to understanding how popular culture works as a site of struggle at which the meaning of incarceration is at issue. How might popular representations of prison work either for or against an abolitionist agenda in punishment? Additionally, as race, class, masculinity/gender, and sexuality are mediated through narratives of crime and incarceration in popular screen prison drama<sup>5</sup>, the current study links representation of incarceration and the politics of social formation. Thus, if, as is the case, criminal justice is highly classed, raced and gendered, how does popular screen drama about prison represent these issues? What sorts of struggles over the meanings of race and class and masculinity are tied to the visibility of incarceration in American texts? These are some of the questions the dissertation seeks to respond to.

In addition, the current dissertation serves as a Canadian intervention into larger debates on the visibility of punishment and criminal justice. Given that American media as well as crime control policies have been known to drift, with influence, across national borders, understanding of conditions and debates in America has significance for Canadian scholars and citizens. Thus, this doctoral study, carried out by a Canadian scholar living and working in Quebec, undertakes to produce an intervention in academic

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<sup>5</sup> “Prison drama” and/or “prison film” are terms employed in the sub-field of screen prison drama studies by authors such as Paul Mason (1998; 2000; 2004), Elayne Rapping (2003), Nicole Rafter (2000), Brian Jarvis (2004) and Nellis and Hale (1982). The term is used to refer to popular screen representations of incarceration on television and in the cinema. The term itself—“prison drama”—might lead to confusion in that it could be read as including theatrical or literary representations as well. In the current study, I mean to refer only to film- and television representations. Thus, I have chosen instead to apply the term “screen prison drama” despite the fact that this goes against convention in the sub-field, as I feel it avoids potential confusion.

debate surrounding prison visibility in the American context, in part because of the salience of American popular culture and crime control for Canadian institutions and citizens. The precise relationship of American popular culture to the Canadian audiences and politics is not really at issue in this study, nor are debates regarding the influence of American models of criminal justice in the Canadian context. Yet, without getting into the finer points of these issues, it is worth stating at the outset that they frame—at least in part—the motivation for producing a Canadian study of one corner of American popular culture.

## INTRODUCTION

The dissertation engages in an inquiry into the politics of prison visibility in dramatic screen representations of incarceration released on American television and in the cinema between the years 1995 and 2005. Rather than a comprehensive review of material produced during this time period, I am concerned to engage in some depth with six texts in particular. In addition, I am concerned with demonstrating the polysemy of these texts, and indeed the multiplicity of discursive patterns that it is possible to read within them. That being said, the paper situates itself politically as basically critical of the high levels of incarceration in the United States, and indeed of the racialized and classed dynamics of imprisonment in the nation (Mauer, 2000). As a result, part of the dissertation's project is to be critical of how discourses articulated in the dramas surveyed might critique, reframe and/or support existing patterns in US crime control.

Accompanying this basically critical perspective on what I take as the "problems" with American penal policy and crime control is a central concern with keeping an eye on textual polysemy. That is, in the project's overall critical outlook on trends in American crime control, I am reticent to read a concurrent set of hegemonic patterns in recent screen prison drama. As will become evident over the course of the project, many recent screen prison dramas are complex texts, despite the fact that the genre has often been described as "formulaic" by critics (Mason, 1998; Jarvis, 2004). I shall demonstrate that it is possible to read in recent dramas both transformative articulations of male (homo)sexuality and critical perspectives on penal process, as well as discursive "othering" of African Americans, or support of neo-liberal and punitive crime control.

Cinema critic Yvonne Tasker's analysis of "musculinity" in 1980s action films identifies precisely the type of ambiguity to which I am referring. According to Tasker, action masculinity in the 1980s became identified with the "hyperbolic" displays of male body-builder physiques (1993). This excessive, hyperbolic masculinity she sees as bivalent. The likes of Stallone or Schwarzenegger, for Tasker, represent—both—a "parody" of masculinity or masculinity in crisis, just as they represent "masculinity triumphant" (1993, p. 9). Argues Tasker: it is unclear from the texts themselves whether hyperbolic masculinity expressed in the cinema during the 1980s is an indication of masculine identity becoming associated with violence, power and aggression, or whether the hulking physiques of Hollywood's actors were instead some sort of post-modern satire (Tasker, 1993, p. 74). Tasker's reading of the films of this period examines the ambiguity of these representations, precisely at a time where changes were taking place in American masculinity constructions.

My argument in this project is somewhat similar. There are elements of American screen prison drama of the past decade, which can be read as supportive of recent punitive and racially divisive reforms in criminal justice. Yet, at the same time, some of these representations either critique aspects of penal policy, re-frame homosexuality and masculine identities, or else articulate critique of crime control. As Tasker argues in the context of 1980s action cinema, I am reticent to characterize recent screen prison drama either as wholly conservative or preoccupied with resistance. My analysis remains keyed into the uneven texture of these representations, highlighting places of contest, struggle and/or problematization of aspects of social order and crime control.

The dissertation situates itself within a number of debates, and draws from a few methodological and theoretical traditions. Main inspirations are critical race theorists who have written on crime and the media (Hall et al, 1978; Reeves and Campbell, 1994), Michel Foucault (1977; 1991; 1997; 2000), Foucauldians working on neo-liberalism<sup>6</sup> (Gordon, 1991; Dean, 1999; Burchell, 2000; Rose, 1991; Lemke, 2000), existing screen prison drama critics (Mason, 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2003; Rapping, 2003; Rafter 2000; Jarvis, 2004; Wilson and O’Sullivan, 2004; Nellis and Hale, 1982) and film- and television writers who have set out textual reading strategies for examining screen representations (Neale, 1993; 2000; 2002; Tasker, 1993; Jeffords, 1994; Modleski, 1982; Goffman, 1978; etc.). The first chapter begins with a brief review of existing criminology literature on the topic of screen prison drama. Finding some of this work limited in regards to its modelling of media influence, I move beyond this research to look at how media scholars have mapped the interaction of media and society, specifically in relation to news reporting on issues of crime and criminal justice. I refer to work by influential critical race theorists Hall et al (1978) and Reeves and Campbell (1994), in order to

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<sup>6</sup> There is often some confusion about the usage of the terms “neo-liberal” and “neo-conservative”. In the dissertation, I refer to Mitchell Dean’s definition of the terms (1999, p. 162). According to Dean the confusion around neo-liberalism and conservatism stems from the fact that neo-liberalism is practiced differently in various states. Germany, England, Canada, and the United States, for example, are all engaged in some sense in the modeling of a neo-liberal state. Neo-liberalism designates a particular system of governmental rationality, which appeals to strategies of fiscal responsibility, entrepreneurialism, competitive individuality and so on. The term neo-conservative, according to Dean, refers more precisely to the way neo-liberalism is practiced in the United States. That is, America practices a variety of neo-liberalism in which conservative moral judgments are applied to issues such as poverty, crime, health, and social/family life. Neo-conservatism poses the problem of how to govern a “corrupt” citizenry, instituting “sovereign”, legal instruments to enforce a return to “virtue” (Dean 1999, p. 163). Of course, there is a whole debate here, which revolves around drawing a line between neo-conservative and neo-liberal government. Dean argues that one “should be careful not to draw too strict a line between the two”, because many parts of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative project are practically indistinguishable (Dean 1999, p. 163). Thus, to avoid getting too deeply into this debate, I apply the term “neo-liberal” to the system of government presently practiced in the United States. It is important to note, however, that neo-liberalism is practiced in different not necessarily neo-conservative states. Additionally, it is important to note that the same authors make a distinction between the two terms. For a more detailed explanation of these distinctions see Dean (1999, p. 162-164).

develop a model for thinking through how media constructions of crime interface with social formations like gender, class, and especially race.

Hall et al (1978) and Reeves and Campbell (1994) studies' set out methods for analysing and modelling the interaction of media, crime and social order in relation to news reporting. Chapter one takes the position that the instruments and readings strategies employed in these two studies are not entirely appropriate for examining screen prison drama, as there are important disparities between news programming and fiction film- and television drama. To develop a set of reading strategies that are more attuned to the material analysed in this project, I engage with film-, advertising- and television research (Neale, 1980; 1993; 2000; Modleski, 1982; Tasker, 1993; Jeffords, 1994; Williamson, 1978; Goffman, 1976), as their seminal studies have set out techniques for analysing the narrative, visual and generic aspects of fictional visual culture.

Chapter one concludes with a discussion of Foucauldian discourse analysis, as I see this methodological strategy broadly encompassing and organizing the reading strategies applied in the study. I frame film and television texts as discourse in order to coordinate and tie together the methods and reading strategies that I shall apply in the textual analysis portion of the study. In my strategic use of Foucault's concept of discourse, I mean also to imply aspects of his theoretical position on culture. That is, I carry out analysis within a (partially) social constructionist view of social order. Furthermore, I wish to engage with screen prison dramas as objects of culture that are historically situated. In chapter one, then, I set out tools for textual analysis. I deal with concerns regarding the mapping of media, crime and society. I also begin to articulate the

study's position on the tension between taking a political *prise de position* and research based on a social constructionist vision of culture.

Chapter two engages more critically with Foucault's work, in effect precisely around three matters. In keeping with the project's political position, which is that imprisonment is immensely socially costly to American society, and that current practices have mobilized crime control by applying the coercive powers of the state to black Americans, I am concerned to briefly understand trends in American carceral punishment. Here I discuss discourses that may sustain or undercut practices of neo-liberal crime control. I refer to *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977), as the work describes techniques and practices applied in classical- and/or reform liberal<sup>7</sup> regimes of punishment. For a more up-to-date understanding of the transitions to neo-liberal techniques of punishment in the US, I refer to the work of influential criminologist David Garland (1990; 2001). Next, in an effort to connect an understanding of crime control and punishment techniques to the larger discursive formation of neo-liberal government in

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<sup>7</sup> The term "liberal" is used in a number of different ways. In broad terms the notion of "classical liberalism" derives from the political project of the Enlightenment and denotes political thought according to which the individual and "freedom" are of primordial concern. Liberal democracy as a political system, as well as economic notions such as those expounded in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (2000), were the basic tenets of classical liberalism as articulated in 18<sup>th</sup> century thought. Social liberalism—which is also referred to as "new liberalism", "reform liberalism", or elsewhere as "welfare state" liberalism (Dean, 1999; Gordon, 1991)—developed through the work of political thinkers such as John Dewey, John Stuart Mill, and Milton Keynes. Western post-war programs of socialist reform introduced political projects such as progressive taxation, restrictions on economic competition and so on, and were inspired by Marxist theory and critiques of capitalism. During this period, the critiques that gave birth to the liberal welfare state became identified with a left-leaning project of socialist thought. Referring to a scholar or a work as "liberal", thus, can also denote a socialist critical position. Thus, the term "liberal" is actually fraught with definitional complexity. For this reason, I avoid using the term "liberal" in the current dissertation. In referring to social liberalism, I utilize the term "welfare state". And, where necessary, I use the term "classical liberalism" to denote the post-feudal and pre-welfare state period, in which a classical liberal political, cultural and economic project was articulated in the spirit of work by thinkers such as Adam Smith, David Hume and Emmanuel Kant.

American society, I refer to the work of governmentality<sup>8</sup> studies theorists (Gordon, 1991; Dean, 1999; Cruikshank, 1993; 1999; Lemke, 2000; Burchell, 1996; Rose et al, 1996) whose work has drawn inspiration from Foucault's work on government (1991; 1997). These studies are useful in their deep engagement with neo-liberal discourses.

I am concerned in chapter two with the limitation of these governmentality studies writings with respect to their theorizing of larger formations of social hierarchy. In particular, with respect to American crime control, this study takes the position that it is absolutely essential to be able to account for the way in which criminal justice operates as an institutional means of policing and excluding African Americans. Chapter two is thus concerned with addressing theoretically the discursive means through which constructions of race take place. The goal is to connect governmentality studies readings of the "social cleavages" instantiated by neo-liberal government, to tangible discursive processes such as stereotyping rites of inclusion/exclusion identified by critical race theorists (Reeves and Campbell, 1994; Hall et al, 1978). This completes the "toolbox" with which the dissertation's remaining three chapters carry out textual analysis of six recent screen prison dramas.

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<sup>8</sup> The term "governmentality" emerges from the later work of Michel Foucault (1991c; 1997). In this context it is defined as "1. The ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses... that allow the exercise of this very specific form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. 2. The tendency which, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily lead to the pre-eminence over all other forms... of this type of power which may be termed government... 3. The process, or rather result of the process, through which the state... gradually become 'governmentalized'" (1991c, p. 102). As the later work of Foucault was translated into English, a field of "governmentality theory" research appeared through the work of scholars such as Nikolas Rose (1996), Mitchell Dean (1999), Colin Gordon (1991), Graham Burchell (1996) and others. What unites the field are a set of definitions of the processes of government (through a vocabulary of terms such as rationality to technique), as well as a set of Foucauldian methodological concerns such as "value neutrality" and "history of the present". Each of these terms is defined a little later on in the dissertation.



Chapter two also draws out a tension that animates the study. In effect, by negotiating Foucauldian theory in relation to critical race work, the dissertation implicates a larger discussion regarding the construction of social order through discourse. I am concerned to chart a course between two perspectives. My vision of power remains one that wishes to engage deeply with the production of knowledge and constructing of subjects, as well as with techniques, practices and strategies of government and punishment. I do not wish to argue that certain systems of social ordering are predicated on “false consciousness” or ideological manipulation. I do, however, wish to highlight that certain systems of ordering and of understanding social life are more socially costly than others in terms of, for example, limits to agency, circumscribed life opportunities and inflictions of bodily and/or psychological harm on certain groups. Additionally, I argue here that some systems of government generate greater social cleavages, rigid social hierarchies and/or “closed” and coercive modes of policing and controlling people. Thus, I argue that it is possible to view society from a social constructionist perspective, while at the same time evaluating systems of order based on some of the social costs generated. In pointing out the ways in which current practices of crime control and incarceration in the United States are implicated in producing rigid and racialized hierarchies, I involve myself in a political *prise de position* that is concerned with how social/racial groups exercise power. At this point, then, the dissertation articulates a political agenda vis-à-vis prison abolition in terms that are hardly Foucauldian. Part of the tension that animates discussion, then, lies in how a critical race perspective on popular culture and crime control can work within a social constructionist framework.

In the three textual analysis chapters, these issues are played out in more textual depth. I am concerned in chapter three to examine two “white Angst” films, *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998) and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000), that articulate discourses on white downward mobility, black criminality, imprisonment and the processes of personal responsibility as “rite of (white) inclusion” versus black “exclusion”. Important discursive patterns here revolve around constructions of white masculinity in relation to American national identity. In addition, I place these two recent films in context with two reform liberal era prison film “classics” *Cool Hand Luke* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) and *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrik, 1971). Historical contextualization allows perspective on how screen prison drama discourses have shifted since the 1970s, especially in relation to articulations of the functioning of punishment. In essence, this chapter approaches two recent dramatic representations of incarceration that refract the prison through narratives of white male “angst”. These representations of social insecurity, white downward mobility and black criminality can be read, in a fairly straightforward manner, as supportive of recent punitive and racially divisive initiatives in criminal policy. *Animal Factory* in particular, however, reframes male homosexuality in a potentially very dynamic way.

Chapter four focuses on two made-for-television dramas that articulate prison as a site for “redemption”, specifically with reference to the experience of black characters. *Redemption* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004) and *First Time Felon* (dir. Charles Dutton, 1997) both construct narratives around black male convict-characters whose guilt is expiated through moral self-work. These dramas are open to a variety of readings from a political perspective. On the one hand, it is possible to see aspects of the dramas as

conservative in that they emphasize neo-liberal techniques of self (i.e. self-work, self-esteem building, entrepreneurial selfhood) at the expense of collective and socially grounded readings of black incarceration and criminality. Conversely, the dramas may also make sense as “rites of inclusion” in which black male “villains” are redeemed through narratives of self-work that are effectively similar symbolically to those articulated in the white “angst” films. The question becomes, then, what weight one interpretively accords to the symbolic possibility for “inclusion” and “redemption” from the category of criminal, when in actuality economic opportunities and criminal justice provide very different contexts for black and white male youth. Interestingly, criticism and mention of the “hows” and “whys” of black poverty and incarceration are not really dealt with in these films.

Chapter five focuses on two unusual dramas, *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001) and the television series *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003). While *Prison Song* is extremely critical of recent developments in American crime control and in the exercise of disciplinary power, especially from the perspective of black Americans, *OZ* is structured in many ways like a soap opera, refracting incarceration through different stylistic and narrative patterns. In the dissertation’s fifth chapter, I am concerned to examine two texts that are open to different readings with respect to their discursive articulation of prison visibility.

The dissertation’s conclusion integrates results of textual analysis into the theoretical debates regarding the media, crime and popular culture that were posed at the outset. Thus, having demonstrated the textual polysemy of recent screen prison drama, I am able to engage in a discussion of how power and resistance, in relation to discourses

on crime, punishment and the governance of social order, may currently be playing out in popular screen prison drama. From the perspective that is politically in favour of prison abolition/restructuring, I argue for a view of social order that is essentially socially constructionist. In part, I am concerned to reconcile such a view with a critical project in relation to current trends in American criminal justice. The dissertation concludes, thus, with a consideration of the politics of prison visibility in relation to questions of social construction, hierarchy and current (racialized) politics of imprisonment in the United States.

# **CHAPTER 1: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND METHODS**

## **Introduction: Chapter One**

The dissertation focuses on selected American screen dramas representing incarceration and released on television and in the cinema between the years 1995 and 2005. The current project is to think about how these screen dramas mediate prison visibility. This, the dissertation's first chapter, seeks to set up some of the groundwork that will be necessary to the inquiry and to the thesis' argument. There are three stages in the chapter. First, I engage with existing academic scholarship that has begun to theorize prison film and television. In broad strokes, screen prison drama scholarship falls into two disciplinary camps. One—and indeed the older of these two camps—has hailed from within criminology departments in the United States and especially in Britain. This group of British and American researchers has produced studies on recent screen prison drama. The interpretive sense thus far made of the genre from a criminology perspective is, in my view, limited. Much criminological inquiry into recent prison film and television has been preoccupied with direct causal linkages between media representation and penal policy (Mason, 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2003; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004; Nellis and Hale, 1982). From a communications studies perspective, such an agenda is risky, especially when textual analysis is the main research method used to substantiate claims about media "effects". This is precisely the point made by media scholar Yvonne Jewkes in her article criticizing existing criminological studies of screen prison drama (2005). Following an examination of criminology literature on screen prison drama, then, I

examine some of the budding media studies work that has focused on the genre. The work of researchers such as film scholars Nicole Rafter (2000) and Brian Jarvis (2004), and television critic Elayne Rapping (2003) is important here.

Moving outwards from the sub-field of screen prison drama research, the first chapter of the dissertation opens also onto some key cultural studies and critical race studies debates. I work out a theoretical framework for the project with reference to theories connecting media and society, especially around crime media. Methodological groundwork takes place through brief discussions of genre, narrative, subjectivity and visual imagery, as film- and television studies have applied these critical reading strategies to screen fiction. The final step in the chapter is a discussion of discourse analysis and methodology.

## **Criminology Literature Review**

Before discussing the issues presented above in more depth, I would like to first present and then discuss some key criminological research on prison film and television. Screen prison drama research has been dominated to date by criminologists, a disciplinary position affording researchers an excellent foundation in penal policy. Unfortunately, many prison film studies—such as those carried out by criminologists Paul Mason (1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2003; 2004), Wilson and O’Sullivan (2004), Mike Nellis and Christopher Hale (1982), map the connections between penal policy and mediated screen prison drama in ways that are somewhat limited, especially with respect to the sense made of the power of media to influence society. These criminologists, I argue here, have been somewhat preoccupied with the direct impacts of prison film and television on penal policy, which has conditioned their work to search for direct

connections—of lack thereof—between initiatives to reform prison and media texts that represent prison. The most commonly articulated position in criminology scholarship on screen prison drama is that film and television “images of incarceration”, if anything, support the current economy of penal expansion in the United States and Britain. Media scholar Yvonne Jewkes questions studies which attempt to establish fairly tight causal links between screen prison drama and policy (2005). “Claims about any television programme having the power to affect audience opinion of behaviour are highly contestable...” argues Jewkes (2005, p. 4). In relation to the field of prison film research, she quite rightly signals the risks of research that strongly states the “effects” of media texts on government policy (Jewkes, 2005).

Indeed, Jewkes’ criticism raises important concerns about claims made by prison film scholars Paul Mason (1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2003; 2004), Mike Nellis and Christopher Hale (1982), and David Wilson and Sean O’Sullivan (2004). For example, Nellis and Hale’s *The Prison Film* (1982) criticizes Hollywood prison cinema for failing to promote penal policy reform. According to Nellis and Hale, Hollywood’s spectacular depiction of (fictional) moments of incarceration, has the effect of dramatizing imprisonment for the purposes of “titillation”, and creates “cheap views of exploitation” (Nellis and Hale, 1982, p. 44). Thus, instead of precipitating social change, prison films “engage the psyche rather than the conscience” and entertain the public rather than intervening in meaningful critique of penal systems (Nellis and Hale, 1982, p. 48).

This is one limitation of their study. Nellis and Hale argue that prison film’s primary goal *should* be to incite reform of incarcerations policy, and *not* to entertain audiences. The theoretical inappropriateness of such a claim becomes clear when one

considers screen prison drama's status as entertainment commodity. After all, prison films are consumer products. Commercial cinema is created with the intention of drawing audiences to theatres, specialty television channels or video stores, via titillation or otherwise, in order to provide a return on investment. Nellis and Hale's charge that prison cinema lacks a social agenda because it sensationalizes prison for cheap thrills, thus misses the point. Failure to consider prison film's status as entertainment commodity actually obscures some of the political economic and cultural structures and patterns shaping its production, consumption and dissemination.

Indeed, while it may be the case that much screen prison drama does not wholeheartedly promote liberal (in the sense of left-leaning) criminal justice reform, the nature of this "promotion" or lack thereof, needs to be thought of in more than moral terms. Indeed, although it is not the goal of this study, a political economic perspective and audience reception concerns could be added to produce a more complete model with which to examine the production and consumption of these dramas. The criminology research dealt with here does not deal with either the complex cultural and meaning-related issues at work in the construction of screen prison drama, nor does it focus on the political economic or consumption aspects of these texts.

Echoing Nellis and Hale, criminologist Paul Mason's most recent article suggests something similar. He argues that prison films may highlight cruel or problematic aspects of incarceration and "one may well ask whether the prison film has done anything more than simply entertain..." (2004, p. 11). Hollywood, for Mason, has failed to promote prison reform because of its emotionality, its sensationalism and its proclivity to "base entertainment" (2004, p. 11). For Mason, prison film's failure to effect social change lies



in some films' reliance on "titillation and shock" (2004). The whole genre is thus effectively tarnished by a few bad apple films, until even "progressive and insightful" texts are dismissed as "crass" examples of a sensational group of films (Mason, 2004, p. 11). Prison film, then, is to be criticized for its emotionality and its sensationalism, both of which frustrate a reform agenda. Mason, like Nellis and Hale, posits a link between "base entertainment" and the process by which the citizenry is lulled into disregarding the torments taking place in prisons. If "the truth" about prison were to circulate, suggests Mason, and Nellis and Hale as well, liberal (in the sense of left-leaning) reform would surely follow.

Behind this essentially moral condemnation of prison cinema are a set of assumptions which are perhaps more difficult to identify and dispel. The first of these has to do with the political economic realities of Hollywood film production. As I mentioned earlier, Mason and Nellis and Hale seem to be morally critical of the ways in which entertainment imperative structures film. A stronger analysis of certain prison films' lack of a social agenda can, at least in part, make sense given the conditions and goals for which such representations are produced. Again, if there is a critique to be made here, it might be more effectively articulated from another standpoint. Namely, it might be more productive to theorize Hollywood's proclivity to produce "base entertainment" as stemming from an alignment of corporate interests that direct its production process (see here the work of political economists Vincent Mosco (1996), and Robert McChesney (1999)).

In addition, however, Mason implies that American prison film has done worse than simply fail to promote reform. He suggests that the genre may actually ideologically

manipulate by providing sensationalist gratifications that detract from more “serious” reform issues. This is an important argument in screen prison drama criticism, even beyond the criminology perspective. Media scholars like Elayne Rapping (2003) and Nicole Rafter (2000) have both asserted some version of the above thesis, namely, that emotionality and sensationalism in screen prison drama effectively sustain the “distorted” visions of crime and punishment upon which a neo-liberal turn in criminal policy is based. I return to complicate this assertion later on.

For the moment, however, I would like to deal with a more methodological issue in Mason’s, and Nellis and Hale’s research. All three writers seem to have a questionable view of the causal effects of prison film viewing. That is, Nellis and Hale seem to imply that prison film may actually have real power to promote reform through depiction of life in prison. Prolific criminology scholar Paul Mason also attempts to document causal connection between penal policy and prison cinema (1996; 1998a; 1998b; 2000; 2003; 2004). These authors’ claims that prison films may be able to promote or frustrate reform are virtually impossible to substantiate via textual analysis of the type carried out in their studies. Even George Gerbner’s cultivation theory studies, which have a broad base in empirical research, have not succeeded in uncovering firm and direct links between television consumption and levels of fear, at least not in isolation from variables such as audience background (1973; 1988; 2002). Mason and Nellis and Hale, however, attempt to demonstrate media “effects” with less appropriate research methods. Textual analysis of prison film, then, is a risky method for substantiating claims about the effects of representation on penal policy.

This is precisely the point made by media scholar Yvonne Jewkes in her 2005 article, *Creating A Stir*. In this piece, Jewkes catalogues the deficiencies of criminology research on prison film and television, arguing that, too often, such studies become preoccupied with addressing the effects of prison-representations. In the process, authors fail to account for

the subtleties of media meanings, the polysemy of media texts..., the unique characteristics and identity of the audience member, or the social and cultural context within which the encounter between media text and audience member occurs (Jewkes, 2005, p. 7).

This is very apt criticism. Media representations may reasonably be presumed to play a role in building understandings of modern incarceration. Yet the process of hammering out heterogeneous public opinions about penal policy is mediated by a multitude of complexities not dealt with by British criminologists Mason, and Nellis and Hale.

What is of central interest in the current study is precisely the polysemy of media texts depicting incarceration. Screen prison dramas are highly complex texts that appeal to many different aspects, conventions and discourses. It is thus somewhat limited to pronounce decisively that a given text is wholly conservative, for example. Or, at least, such strong and categorical assertions should be made with great care.

British scholars Wilson and O'Sullivan are perhaps guilty of some of the same moves. Criminologists Wilson and O'Sullivan's book, *Images of Incarceration* (2004), manifests Jewkes' concerns quite clearly. Yet, *Images* leaves aside the essentially moral question of what prison film *should* do. In fact, the authors distance themselves from Nellis and Hale's claim that prison film, if produced properly, may be capable of single-handedly influencing penal policy. Instead, *Images* mounts a more circumspect argument. Wilson and O'Sullivan suggest that some screen prison drama may cultivate attitudes

leading to penal reform. *Images*' conclusion states that modern "prisons have to conceal or deny their inhumanity and irrationality to maintain legitimacy" (2004, p. 185).

Increased prison visibility, in film, may nudge forward a liberal (in the sense of left-leaning) reform agenda "when it popularises critical accounts of the penal system, [and] when it translates the insights of first hand experience into a wider domain" (2004, p. 185). Here the authors are actually making a sort of truth-claim. This claim indicates that prison film, to the extent that it disseminates "the truth about prison", might bring about reform, because it places the public in contact with the "reality" of prison.

For Wilson and O'Sullivan, then, prison film drives a reform agenda to the extent that it popularises critical accounts of the prison system. The genre promotes penal change where it reveals inhumane prison conditions, benchmarks past injustices, preserves collective memories, or acts as an information source or inspires empathy for prisoners (Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 185). For the authors, then, fiction films about prison promote conditions for penal reform to the extent that they expose 'closed' carceral institutions. The implication is that prisons would no longer be able to function along current lines if citizens knew "what really happens inside".

Part of the problem with this claim has to do, once again, with the connection the researchers seek to establish between media and society. For while it is true that screen prison drama is a key site at which 'closed' carceral institutions are visible in public life in America, assertions to the effect that fiction film and television can directly expose the "irrationality and inhumanity" of prisons is questionable. Contained as these dramas are within the field of popular culture, I would suggest that a more complex vision of how television and film representations of incarceration are structured as media texts is

necessary. Here textual strategies for reading such as genre, narrative, and/or visual composition analysis are salient. In discerning both the polysemy of media texts and some of the complex meaning-related processes that take place through prison film and television, I would suggest an extension of the scope of inquiry into the conditions of prison visibility using a cultural studies- and a critical race framework to treat media texts as part of the process of meaning-making. Thus, I would propose here to move the discussion away from the direct impact of screen prison drama on penal policy, and to open instead onto questions of how these representations—one—signify prison, and—two—articulate surrounding cultural/social formations such as race, class and gender. Wilson and O’Sullivan’s view, then, is not especially useful in addressing these concerns.

In this respect, sociologist and criminal justice scholar Adrian Derral Cheatwood’s account of screen prison drama also merits consideration. Like British scholar Yvonne Jewkes, Cheatwood suggests that relationships between spectators and films are complicated.

People see pictures that [may] support their established and currently held views of the world, and films can only gradually reshape or crystallize amorphous visions, perceptions, or ideas that the viewing public [already] holds (Cheatwood, 1998, p. 209).

Thus, cinematic images of prison—according to Cheatwood—may gradually shape perceptions of institutions about which citizens know relatively little. He refrains from speculating about prison film’s precise effects. Cheatwood’s account is useful also in its theorizing of prison cinema as commercial product. For Cheatwood, representations of prison are created predominantly with a profit motive in mind. “As products in a competitive high-risk market, [the] goal of motion pictures is to make money—not to

educate, to deliver messages, or to present realistic portraits of prison life”, Cheatwood argues (1998, p. 208). Thus, for him, depictions of prison life in big budget cinema are produced *first* for commercial gain. His position in this regard is the one taken by this study. Big budget screen prison drama’s status as entertainment commodity shapes, at least in part, the institutional, social and financial patterns according to which these representations are consumed and produced.

Despite Cheatwood’s acknowledgement of screen prison drama’s status as entertainment commodity, his reading does not elaborate on how the political economy of television and Hollywood, for example, might influence the genre. Cheatwood’s project does not engage in detail with this type of critique. His focus is more historical and concerned with screen prison drama’s generic development. Thus, his study traces the history of the prison film, roughly periodizing moments in the genre’s life from the 1930s onwards. Although Cheatwood’s research catalogues valuable historical data, it offers little insight into the relation of contemporary screen prison drama to contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, the issue of prison visibility remains in the background in Cheatwood’s research. As a result, the current study refers only marginally to his work.

By way of conclusion, here it is possible to make a few more general comments with respect to criminology research carried out on screen prison drama. One point can be made in relation to the narrow focus that has often been applied to the study of popular culture representation of prison. For example, in focusing virtually exclusively on the effect of screen prison drama on penal policy, criminologists have often neglected textual polysemy and wider cultural significance. What I mean here is that issues such as, for instance, the framing of sexuality, class or race in screen prison drama have been eclipsed

by inquiries into the drama's abilities to promote prison reform. While questions of the political ramifications for criminal justice are certainly vital, screen prison drama is also part of the much wider spectrum of culture creation. As media texts are complex and speak to many different issues at once, it is perhaps a little reductive to see a given representation only in terms of its address of penal policy. It is possible, for example, that a given text could rework or complicate the imaging of sexuality while at the same time framing incarceration according to neo-liberal discourses that generally fit together with the agenda of penal expansion. In fact, I shall argue presently that this is precisely the case with the cult television series *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana 1997-2003).

Another aspect to consider has to do with the texts that these criminologists have chosen to analyse. By focusing mainly on big-budget Hollywood prison films, as Mason (1996; 1998; 2000; 2004), Nellis and Hale (1982) and Wilson and O'Sullivan (2004) have, criminology study findings reveal certain patterns that might well result from these texts' Hollywood births and not necessarily from the conditions of prison visibility alone. Television drama, for example, might frame prison visibility differently. This is an issue that I shall explore in the final chapter of the dissertation.

## **The Media and Society Connection**

One of the concerns of this study is that existing research, be it from a criminology or media studies perspective, manifests certain limitations. I have illustrated some of these blind spots in existing criminology research on screen prison drama. Since the main shortcoming I have identified exists in regards to the mapping of how media and society interact through representations of crime and punishment, I address influential

studies modelling the media-society connection in this section. Once some of these concepts have been discussed, I shall return again to the sub-field of screen prison drama research to evaluate writings by media scholars who have addressed the genre.

In this chapter I also address critical race work that theorizes American and British crime news. In influential studies on the media-society-and-crime connection, Stuart Hall et al. in *Policing the Crisis* (1978) and Reeves and Campbell in *Cracked Coverage* (1994), present findings on how crime news may be implicated in maintaining (unequal) race relations through the media representations of crime and criminal justice. I consider in this section these two models of understanding media representations of crime. The first of these—*Policing the Crisis* (1978)—utilizes a Gramscian model of hegemony and a Marxist analysis of the politics of race/class to understand news reporting on the “mugging” crisis in Britain in the 1970s. A more Foucauldian and/or Bahktinian theoretical model is applied in Reeves and Campbell’s *Cracked Coverage* (1994). I examine these approaches here with the aim of positioning my own study in relation to this influential work.

### Race and The Conflicted Nature of Culture

A landmark study of linking media and crime is Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher et al.’s *Policing the Crisis* (1978). Focusing on the mugging “crisis” in Britain in the 1970s, the authors suggest a model for the ideological/hegemonic influence of print news reporting in amplifying the “mugging” moral panic that, they suggest, resulted in the tightening of social controls imposed on a segment of the black community in Britain at the time. The goal of the British study was to ask questions about how and why mugging became an



“articulator of the crisis” in Britishness, at a time when social displacements, deindustrialization and other processes of late modernity wrought major shifts on the social structures in Britain (Hall et al., 1978, p. viii). In the wake of an economic recession, Hall et al. argue (1978) that black youth were especially vulnerable to exclusion from mainstream employment. With reference to a Marxist vision of the reproduction of class structure, they suggest that the racial dynamic of black exclusion had the effect of producing an “ethnically distinct class fraction” in which the race/class aspects of economic crisis lined up (Hall et al., 1978, p. 332). Their vision, then, is one in which articulations of crime make sense as “one of the factors that provides the material and social base on which “racism” as an ideology flourishes” (Hall, 1978, p. 347). In the context of the racist structure of class relations in Britain, “mugging” as a black crime, through its representation in the media, became a part of a ratcheting up of social control (e.g. policing) of black youth.

The authors suggest a model for the way in which news reporting participates in the hegemonic definition of mugging both as a moral panic and as “black crime”. In very broad terms, they argue that “social consensus” is worked out in part through the hegemonic “maps of meaning” laid out in news production (Hall et al., 1978, p. 55). The consensual vision of society, in which “major structural discrepancies between different groups, or between different maps of meaning in society” are denied, develops in part through how news is gathered, produced and structured, as well as in how stories are filtered and framed by journalistic practice (Hall et al., 1978, p. 55). Hall et al. describe a number of news-gathering and news-production processes that they see having ideological influence. For example, they argue that police departments and journalists

often have intimate professional ties, which end up shaping information regarding crime through a sort of “police filter”. Hall et al. refer to police experts as “primary definers” in crime news (1978, p. 68). As a result, the authors suggest that law enforcement perspectives are more closely identified with a journalistic point of view than, for example, the perspectives of the black community. Furthermore, in Britain in the 1970s, a similarity of cultures existed between law courts, police departments and journalistic contexts. Black immigrants or Britons were not only underrepresented in law enforcement and in the courts, but also among journalists. Additionally, the fact that news reporting was (and still is) structured according to a kind of entertainment imperative, had the effect of channelling journalistic inquiry in search of violent or sensational crime (Hall et al., 1978, p. 69). Thus, street crime, because of its visibility and its emotive component, was perhaps overrepresented in news reporting, relative to other crimes such as domestic disturbances or white-collar crime. The authors suggest that in Britain in the 1970s, journalistic practice, entertainment imperative, and connection of police agencies with journalists, for example, contributed to the articulation of an ideological definition of “mugging” as both potentially a very serious risk to public security and as essentially a black crime.

For Hall et al., then, the news media were instrumental in articulating a moral panic around “mugging”, as well as in defining “mugging” as a “black crime” (1978, p. 344). In the wake of this moral panic, the British state was then able to move to a configuration of “legitimate coercion” through repressive measures designed to police and control “unruly” segments of the population (Hall et al., 1978, p. 321). The state mobilized, in this case, against Black and West Indian communities in Britain. The

ideological operation of the news media, thus, was implicated in amplifying and channelling responses to the so-called “mugging crisis”.

Continuing in the vein of Hall et al.’s study, Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell’s 1994 book *Cracked Coverage* applies a similar focus of inquiry, but this time in the US context and with a slightly different theoretical underpinning. Their study zeroes in on the media-society connection in the “war on drugs” during the Reagan Era. The authors examine how television journalism participated in making the “war on drugs” into a political spectacle, which translated symptoms of economic transformation, de-industrialization, and conservative economic policy into moral panic around narcotics (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 3). *Cracked Coverage* examines news reporting of drug crime- and dependence as articulators of an American crisis.

Their examination of the “war on drugs”, and its articulation in news reporting, reposes on attention to the racialized, classed and gendered ways in which journalistic work framed the “crack crisis”. In news’ framing of cocaine use as a “moral disease” and a “criminal pathology” (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 15), the authors identify the very different ways in which black- (delinquents) and white- (offenders) were constructed in news coverage (1994, p. 38). According to their findings, news coverage in the 1980s constructed what they term as “rites of inclusion” and “exclusion” (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 39). One discourse—that of inclusion—was consistently applied in the construction of white “offenders” who were depicted as redeemable through medicotherapeutic rehabilitation and/or moral self-work. Conversely, poor urban black males were generally enfolded in discourses of exclusion. That is, in framing these men as pathological delinquents, journalistic coverage of the “crack crisis” helped create

justification for black exclusion through the criminal justice system. Thus, with a dual set of discourses—that of therapeutic inclusion and disciplinary exclusion—the drug “crisis” was framed on television news in racially divisive ways as a question of black crime and white disease and/or addiction.

Although the authors do not deal explicitly with the formations of class/race fractioning as do Hall et al. (1978) their research does make links between rising social anxiety, moral panic and the decline of the Fordist economy. Indeed, they suggest that many of the consequences of transition, from economic recession to unemployment and “threats” to bastions of white privilege, were whisked up in the moral panics surrounding the “war on drugs”. This moral panic had the effect of concentrating the focus of the state’s coercive prison-industrial complex on a “disposable” fraction of the urban black poor (i.e. black male youth). As a vulnerable and highly visible subset of the urban poor, black male youth were shown as the “chief transgressors” in news reporting of the “crisis” (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 64). At stake in news discourses of the Reagan Era, the authors suggest, were definitions of a white, male, middle-class and privileged “centre” to American identity which privileged a relationship to labour, state institutions, and symbolic power.

From a theoretical point of view, Reeves and Campbell proceed along different lines from Hall et al. (1978). Rather than utilizing a hegemony framework, these authors prefer instead to think through news coverage of the “war on drugs” via Foucault’s panoptic model and Bakhtin’s model of literary theory (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 8). For the authors, a mixed theoretical perspective allows focus both on structure/discipline and agency/freedom. For while they argue that Foucault’s thinking is

useful in framing the disciplinary function of television news, the authors suggest that the polysemic, narrative, resistive and contradictory aspects of network news are best highlighted in a Bakhtinian approach (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 8). While Foucault's work can be used to emphasize normative technology, a Bakhtinian perspective rather sees a "multiplicity of [social] realities" of "conflicting meanings" and competing "moral agendas and contrary definitions of the situation" (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 34). The authors are thus able to suggest that television news coverage of the war on drugs is neither a question of total domination nor of unbridled resistance.

Such a view is actually not that different from the vision of popular culture articulated elsewhere by Stuart Hall (2004). Writing on Black popular culture, Hall has argued:

Cultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that's not what the term means); it is never a zero-sum game; it is always a shifting balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, no getting out of [these configurations] (Hall, 2004, p. 257).

That being said, *Policing the Crisis* focuses perhaps more squarely on the question of domination by the elites through news production. Yet, Hall's later work (2004) and Reeves and Campbell (1994) as well articulate the need for research to be attentive to the play of discipline/dominance and resistance/agency which takes place through the (contested) terrain of popular culture. This attentiveness to the polysemy is something that the current study will introduce and apply into analysis of screen prison drama.

Existing research on prison drama has tended to focus fairly exclusively either on hegemonic (Mason 1998; 2000; 2003; Nellis and Hale, 1982; Rapping, 2003) or, less often, resistive aspects (Wilson and O’Sullivan, 2004) of screen prison drama. To this effect, in the later analytic chapters, narratives and semiotic patterns will be examined in an effort to highlight precisely this play of modes of potentially dominant/disciplinary and resistive/subversive discourses. This represents one original aspect of the dissertation. Screen prison drama literature reviewed earlier in this chapter, with the exception of Jewkes’ work (2004), also holds a limited account of the actually conflicted nature of popular culture.

### Masculinity and Prison

Prison, like the military and sporting events, is a key symbolic site at which masculinities are defined in American culture (Connell, 2000; Beynon, 2002). Criminologists Don Sabo, Terry Krupers and Willie London have documented the importance of military-, athletic- and penal institutions for defining an “aura of masculine meaning” (2001, p. 6). The scholars also note that

Men's prisons constitute a key site for the expression and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity<sup>9</sup>. It is not the only site. Hegemonic masculinity is apt to take shape in any homosocial setting typified by a high degree of sex segregation, male cultural lore, and hierarchical relations among men. The Marine Corps, for example, is another institution touted for "building men" who take orders from superiors, develop a capacity for aggression, suppress emotion, and identify chiefly with the male corps and against women (Sabo, Krupers and London, 2001, p. 6).

Thus, like the military, prison, as a privileged institution of punishment in American society, plays an important role in defining masculinities, as well as the hierarchies that exist between different modes for practicing masculinity. Indeed, it is the case, according to Sabo, Krupers and London (2001, p. 14) that inmates are often characterized as representing the "dark side" of masculinity. Thus, symbolically, hierarchies of masculinity are defined, in part, with reference to prisoners as the "extreme" variety of marginal masculinities that are possible.

Sabo, Krupers and London's study addresses the (actual) prison and the masculinities that are practiced and exercised within the walls of the institution. The central focus of this dissertation is the mediated representation of prisons in television and film drama. Yet, it strikes me that the findings of Sabo et al.'s study are still highly

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<sup>9</sup> Pioneered by masculinity studies writer Richard Connell, the term "hegemonic masculinity" implies that a stable and more-or-less unitary form of hegemonic masculinity will predominate in a society at any given point. For Connell, although individual men do not actually embody "hegemonic masculinity", a dominant form of masculinity is "constructed in relation both to subordinated masculinities and to women; [and] is the dominant form of masculinity to which other forms of masculinity are subordinated..." (Messerschmidt, 1993); hegemonic masculinity is "embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies, and so forth" (Connell, 1987). For Connell and Messerschmidt, then, hegemonic masculinity is an idealized form of masculinity according to which aspects of social life such as social privilege, state institutions, government policy, mass media and individual gender behavior are structured. The term "hegemonic masculinity" has come under fire in part because of its implication that one, unitary type of masculinity predominates, especially in late capitalist societies in which populations are segmented, culturally diverse and socially fractioned. For this reason, I do not employ the term in this dissertation, for I do not wish to enter into the (complex) debates surrounding the term. I do mean to invoke, however, that hierarchies between differing types of masculinities exist, often with respect to social formations of class, race, sexuality and ethnicity.

relevant in this context. Since the men's prison occupies a privileged position in the definition and hierarchical struggle of masculinities, traces of struggles around masculinities are manifest in screen prison drama. Actually, it is my contention in these pages that the spectacular and symbolically important representations of masculinity that take place in screen prison drama are a key source through which prison comes to signify in terms of masculinity. Prison becomes the symbolic "arena" in which masculinities are struggled over in part through its representation in screen drama; masculinity, as well as incarceration, is thus made visible in screen prison drama. As a result, screen prison drama becomes relevant in understanding the conditions of prison visibility, as well as the struggles around masculinity that are fought on the symbolic ground of the penitentiary.

### Discipline, Spectacle, Surveillance

Rather than working within a hegemony framework, Reeves and Campbell (1994) situate their study in relation to debates over spectacle/surveillance. Gramsci's hegemony model, for them, "has been used to explain almost everything, [and thus] it has lost much of its defamiliarizing and radicalising power" (1994, p. 8). Instead, these writers modify Foucault's disciplinary model in order to analyse news coverage. They are unsatisfied with the French theorist's treatment of surveillance and spectacle in modern society. Reeves and Campbell contend that Foucault's notions of a disciplinary society in which the "few see the many" applies quite effectively to institutional contexts such as the prison and the school, for example (1994, p. 53). In terms of mass media, however, the authors feel it is necessary to attend to how the normative technologies of spectacle and



surveillance work in tandem. For example, television news about crime, the authors suggest, serves to spectacularly legitimate authority of elites (politicians, police forces, experts) and to stigmatise deviance (in this case of the minority in the United States) (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 57). Of course, this type of spectacularity, that is, being marked out in public television as deviant, is also a form of surveillance (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 51). Populations defined as “deviant” and criminal fall under the scrutiny of both television reporters and police since the two often go together. And indeed, it is precisely the presence of television cameras that makes a surveillance-spectacle of the lives of certain groups (i.e. in this case, drug criminals, for example). The surveyors on television become the viewing public implicated in a process of normalization.

Media researcher Aaron Doyle also addresses surveillance, spectacle and discipline (2003). Doyle takes on the panoptic model of a surveillance society articulated by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). He suggests that the surveillance model alone is insufficient to explain the normative power of spectacle in modern society. This commentary in a way inherits the spectacle/surveillance debate between, among others, Foucault and Debord. In studying the disciplinary exercise of power, through prisons, scientific knowledge, surveillance and its associated techniques, Foucault makes a kind of argument against Debord’s society of the spectacle. For Foucault disciplinarity and surveillance were central organizing dynamics in the classical liberal or welfare state’s institutions for punishing, educating, healing, and so on. Debord’s opposing view, however, holds that the notion that spectacle, not discipline, forms the central axis for the exercise of power in modern Western society (1994). Debord advances the perspective

that spectacle, with its links to consumerism and media, is effectively the central principle of modern Western society. There has been a good deal of fallout from these opposing views, and in a way, both Reeves and Campbell (1994) and Doyle (2003) are inheritors of this schism. In the post-script to *Arresting Images* (2003), Doyle addresses, and attempts to bridge, two disparate theoretical models, one from spectacle and the other from studies of discipline and surveillance. He argues, however, for the continuing normative power of spectacle.

For Doyle modern American “spectacular power, rather than disappearing, has simply shifted form and location. Spectacle remains in contemporary modes of control, but much less focused on the formal administration of punishment” (Doyle, 2003, p. 150). Thus, it is possible to think of media spectacle as part of the contemporary apparatus of control, power or government, but spectacle is not actually embedded in the carcero-punishment portion of the process. Spectacle for Doyle is in some sense the preserve of the media, whereas the practice of punishment remains the preserve of the (closed) institutions designed for that purpose. Surveillance forms part of this process as well. For him, as for Reeves and Campbell (1994), the term “spectacle-surveillance” encapsulates the ways in which reality television programming turns on the combination of these two normalizing technologies. CCTV cameras capture crime footage, for example, which are diffused on the evening news. Thus, spectacle and surveillance as disciplinary modes, actually work in concert in certain media forms. In particular, he examines instances where surveillance footage is aired on news-TV, as well as moments

where policing is spectacularized (as in the television show *COPS*)<sup>10</sup>. Surveillance and spectacle, according to Doyle, are actually merged in the functioning of modern media.

Reeves and Campbell's (1994), and Doyle's perspective (2003) on the spectacle/surveillance debates develop through their analysis of reality-based media. The applicability of the surveillance model of normative power is questionable in relation to screen prison drama, however. It is effectively difficult to imagine what the surveillance qualities of fictional cinema- or television drama might be. Actually, it makes more sense to think of screen prison drama in terms of a spectacle of prison visibility.

If it makes more sense to think through screen prison drama as exercising spectacular normative power, a different set of questions emerges, especially around how this normative power might function, given that dramatic images of incarceration are fiction/fantasy texts. This presents a sort of methodological dilemma around how to read power in these representations. Television- and film studies provide a set of reading strategies, which have been used by various critics to make sense of spectacular instances of fictional screen drama. The methodological toolbox in these fields makes use of terms such as genre, narrative, iconography, imagery and so on. In thinking through the means by which fantastic representations may have normative or resistive impacts then, I shall refer to work carried out in film- and television studies.

### Conclusion: Media and Society Models

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<sup>10</sup> Doyle's inquiry leads him to research the overlapping of technologies of spectacle and surveillance. As a result, his focus is on instances where, for example, CCTV footage is broadcast on television, or where television programs like *COPS* or *America's Most Wanted* present "real" surveillance material for a mass audience. Doyle is thus able to argue that spectacle is now converging with surveillance.

Another issue remains. If Hall et al. (1978) opt for a hegemony model while Reeves and Campbell (1994), as well as Doyle (2002), prefer to refer to the work of Foucault and, in the former case, Bakhtin, what sort of theoretical perspective makes sense for the current study? I have a number of comments to make on this matter. First of all, the study will preserve a firm place for the possibility for textual polysemy. Hall's view here of popular culture as a war of positions is precisely the one I shall adopt in these pages. I do not wish to argue, as others have, that screen prison drama is a question either of cheap thrills, and "titillation and shock" which unilaterally confirms the status quo. Equally, I do not mean to suggest that the positions and discourses articulated in contemporary dramas are unchanging, or that a battle can be "won" once and for all on the ground of screen prison drama. Indeed, Hall's view here seems to point exactly at the complexity of popular culture itself. In the structure of analysis, then, I shall remain mindful of such a view of culture.

With respect to Foucault's work on surveillance/discipline, there are some aspects that will be more relevant than others to the current study. For example, the question of surveillance and disciplinary power seems somewhat moot to a discussion of the normative capacity of fiction film and television. Indeed, in referring to the ways in which the prison itself functions, concerns regarding discipline are, I believe, paramount, as they might also be in more reality-based programming. Where I refer to actual prison conditions, then, I shall refer to Foucault's commentary on disciplinary power. Chapter two outlines this connection more clearly. Additionally I would like to recuperate two aspects of Foucault's work. In terms of methodological grounding, I shall be employing a vision of popular culture as discourse, because such a view renders texts amenable to

various types of textual analysis. This connection is explained in more detail in the methods sections. Following from a view of screen prison drama as discourse, I shall address also the sense made of neo-liberal government through the field of governmentality studies. Please refer to chapter two for a more detailed account here.

Hall et al.'s vision of hegemony as articulated in *Policing the Crisis* (1978) is not, however, strictly applicable in the case of screen prison drama. This is because the study's focus on news couches a discussion of hegemonic power in terms of journalistic practice and the social construction of news. It strikes me that, if one were to make use of a hegemony/ideology perspective in the current case, this would have to happen through an account tailored to the conditions of production of fiction film and television. This is not really what I will do in this study. I am more interested in the symbolic processes through which meaning is articulated in screen prison drama, and not so much in how the political economy of film/television production influences content. Thus, the study makes use of textual reading strategies such as narrative analysis, and semiotic/visual analysis of construction of race and gender to highlight the emotive and fantastic discourses proffered by screen prison drama.

### Film and Television Drama : Social Function

Hall et al. and Reeves and Campbell, as I have indicated, are preoccupied with theorizing the social function of news programming, as well as its modes of exercising normative power. It makes sense, however, to think a little about the social function of film and television drama, as well as its normative mode of influence. Richard Sparks, influential criminologist who has written on crime drama, argues that one of the appeals

of crime drama both in the cinema and on television, is that it works to unite increasingly disparate and diverse populations, creating social cohesion out of conceptions of shared risk (2001). Thus, television and film dramas depicting crime, like those depicting terrorism, provide a touchstone through which community is created (Sparks, 2001, p. 209). For Sparks, indeed, on-screen crime drama acts also as a morality play, drawing lines, in imaged happenings, around what is and isn't considered "proper" moral behaviour.

For television scholars Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis, television drama is "a primary generator of... narratives in contemporary culture", and as "public narrative", television drama is concerned with "constructing, mediating and framing our social and individual identities" (2005, p. 28). For these authors, television drama is a site at which our society maps aspects of reality through imagined happenings. Questions of good and evil, of ideal gender roles, and of mainstream success are outlined and mulled over in television and film drama (Thornham and Purvis, 2005, p. 25).

For television drama researcher John Tulloch, television drama is a key site of production of stories, narratives, and myths, and so a site of struggle over meaning in culture. Dramas "resolve or dispose of social conflicts or contradictions in an ideologically acceptable manner" (Tulloch, 1990, p. 69). Popular dramas serve two ideological functions, additionally. One: they assuage anxieties over disturbing or subversive aspects of social life (Tulloch, 1990, p. 72). Two: television drama also maps the social world in ways that correspond to our dominant ideological perspectives, even if this "ideological operation" is also in contest. Sometimes anxieties are drawn up and not resolved, pointing to problems in social order (Thornham and Purvis, 2005, p. 25).

Additionally, new moments and strategies for achieving structures of social order are articulated as openings in social life where new meanings can come to the fore.

Fiction film- and television drama, then, performs its social function by relating narratives and stories regarding social conflicts and disturbing/contested aspects of social life. Struggle over meaning and social order take place, in part, through the ways in which these conflicts and disturbances are resolved or left open. Regardless, television and film drama are key sites at which social problems are mulled over through fiction.

## **Reading Strategies for Analysis of Screen Drama**

Crime news reporting has been thought of according either to the workings of ideology/hegemony or else according to a spectacle/surveillance paradigm - yet, what about screen prison drama or, for that matter, crime film? What reading strategies have been used to deal with the axes of normative operation and, indeed, subversive movements in screen prison drama? The operation of normativity in narrative cinema has been thought in different ways than has the ramifications of news production. I shall examine screen prison drama through the methodological frames of genre, narrative, and visual composition. I also briefly examine how these reading strategies have been tied to projects of examining the normative construction of gender and race. I refer to work by Laura Mulvey (1989) and Teresa De Lauretis (1984), who focus on the patriarchal aspects of narrative cinema. I also draw on Tasker (1993a) and Jeffords (1994), works that connect particular political moments with expressions of gender in the cinema.

## Narrative and Subjectivity

Writing on genre and narrative Hollywood cinema, Steve Neale has defined cinematic narrative as a:

process of transformation of [a] balance of elements that constitute its pretext; the interruption of an initial equilibrium and the tracing of the dispersal and refiguration of its components. The system of narrative cinema is one which orders that dispersal and refiguration in a particular way (Neale, 1980, p. 19).

Narrative, then, for Neale is the process of dialogic transformation in which a state of order is articulated, disturbed and then re-established or re-worked. I use the term “narrative” in the dissertation in accordance with this definition. Thus, where I refer to cinematic or televisual narrative, I mean to indicate the (in this case) dramaturgic process by which a tale of order-disorder-resolution is articulated.

Film studies have often tended to explore, more or less specifically, the normative and/or resistive potential of narrative cinema within a paradigm of closure. This is largely because Hollywood cinema generally operates within a paradigm of narrative resolution where the film’s end occurs when a new state of order, often in the form of the “happy ending”, has been reached. Writers such as Neale (2000) and Mulvey (1989) have speculated on the gender implications of this ordering of cinema. Mason (1998a) and Nellis and Hale (1982) have commented on the ways in which screen prison drama “sews up” potentially politically problematic aspects of incarceration in easy narrative resolution. Thus, “narrative resolution”, especially when hairy, problematic or contradictory issues are packaged in fantastically simple ways, is often seen as a key operator of (gender or political) normativity in cinema.



In this respect, Tania Modleski's research on soap opera reframed debates around narrative (1982). Focusing on television series instead of narrative cinema, Modleski's analysis of soap operas suggests that the "constant deferral of resolution" may in fact subvert the gendered order of more "masculine" forms such as narrative cinema (1982). For her, the "serial" form was able to resist the normative function of ideological/narrative closure often imposed in the cinema. Modleski's research also has ramifications for the way in which the connection between subjectivity and narrative had been thought through.

According to film- and television theorists, subjectivity is implicated in important ways in the processes of narrative. Neale has argued that the "production and structuration" which takes place through Hollywood narrative is always in relation to a *subject* (Neale, 1980, p. 25). Modes of address and of signification, which vary between types of narrative, condition different types of subject-coherence as conflict is resolved by articulating a single, privileged point of view (Neale, 2000, p. 25). Various attempts have been made to model the processes of subject-creation in narrative cinema, from Laura Mulvey (1989) to Kaja Silverman (1992). Generally, film theorists have identified the tendency of Hollywood cinema narratives to coalesce around one, heroic (often white and male) character. And, indeed, the ideological/hegemonic influence of narrative cinema, in terms of race and gender, has frequently been thought through in relation to how "dominant" identities or types of subjects (usually a white, heterosexual male subject) come to figure as central in film narrative. Film scholars who have applied psychoanalytic methods, for example, have focused in great detail on the operations through which normative patriarchal or white or heterosexual subjectivity is instantiated

in film (Mulvey, 1989; Silverman, 1992; Studlar, 1992; De Lauretis, 1984; Jarvis, 2004). Similar preoccupations, with the instantiation of subject position, have manifested themselves in the work of Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990; 1997). Ideological and/or normative purchase of the cinematic spectacle has thus often been thought in terms of the production of singular, dominant subjectivity, and the marginalization or objectification of other types of subjects.

It is worth a word of caution with respect to the potentially reductive assertion that the dominance of white, male, heterosexual subjects is hermetically performed in the cinema. Neale makes this point by critiquing Mulvey's assertion that narrative Hollywood cinema objectifies only women. He reminds his readers that masculinity and male bodies are indeed often displayed as objects of the camera's gaze (1993), albeit with different conventions. That is, female characters are often portrayed as passive, while Hollywood men are usually mediated in action, as this mitigates the camera's potentially homosexual gaze at male bodies. Kerry Mallan's study of female action heroes in cinema also complicates readings that would assert that white, male, heterosexual subjectivity is hermetically coded at the centre of Hollywood cinema (2003). Additionally, subsequent critiques have also re-introduced the question of the audience into these heavily textual studies. For example, Dyer (1993) and Jarvis (2004) have made the point that images of male bodies in action- or other types of cinema may, in fact, actualise either heterosexual female or homosexual viewing subjects through the spectacular pleasure of viewing masculinity. That being said, these studies have pointed out the potential normative or else resistive aspect of how the dominant subject position in narrative cinema is coded.

Modleski's work on soap opera somewhat reframes how the "dominant" or "unitary" subject that is presumed to occupy the centre of narrative cinema. She argues that soap opera is valuable and potentially resistive precisely because it articulates multiple points of identification (Modleski, 1982). Thus, because the soap opera revolves around a stable of characters, the tightly packaged, unitary resolution of a "hero quest" of the type articulated in much of Hollywood cinema, becomes impossible. Soap opera, thus, defers narrative resolution, just as it constructs multiple points of identification. Modleski considers how soap opera may reframe both of these facets of conventional Hollywood narrative, which are "disruptive", potentially resistive and subversive of patriarchal structures in cinema (Modleski, 1982). Resolution and the operation of subjectivity that are tied to particular types of narratives, then, have been studied as vehicles of normative or resistive discourse in television- and film drama. I shall refer to these concepts and discussions in the textual analysis in chapters three through five.

### Visual Imagery

Studies of the strictly visual construction of images have preoccupied film theorists and other analyses of visual culture. In fact, according to Tasker (1993, p. 7), the importance of narrative operation to an understanding of Hollywood action cinema may be at times overstated. Visual display, "the cinema as fantasy, as sensuous experience" (Tasker, 1993, p. 153), is elevated to a key generic component in action cinema, as the "images which an audience may take from the cinematic experience... cannot be summed up within the terms of narrative resolution" (Tasker, 1993, p. 153). In her book, *Spectacular Bodies* (1993), Tasker focuses in some detail on the spectacular visual

elements of 1980s action cinema, analysing images of male body-builders, action sequences and the stylistic, aesthetic composition of sequences of images. This choice, to privilege images and imagery, is reflected in the methods she applies in her analysis.

In film theory, where analysis of imagery has taken place explicitly, it has often played itself out in terms of discussions of iconography. Taken from Art History, the analytic concept of iconography has been tailored especially to examine images in relation to “image banks” and, thus, the inter-textual play of still images (Neale, 1980). For the purposes of the current study, I have found it more useful to refer to other work done on the normative power of images. Work on advertising done by scholars Erving Goffman (1976), Jean Kilbourne (2000) and Judith Williamson (1978), in particular, has spawned an analytic focus on the composition of images in terms of gender. Their method of close analysis of the visual components and composition of images has been applied to different types of films by masculinity studies scholars such Richard Dyer (1993) and pornography scholars Steve McNair (2002) and Linda Williams (1989). The contention made by both authors Goffman and Williamson is essentially that visual images, and not just narratives, have the power to position subjects, to instantiate different modes of address, and, in effect, to perform either normative/resistive functions. For Williamson this operation in advertising is essentially ideological, as it participates in producing a system of “taken for grantedness” that naturalizes the relative values of consumer goods. In Williamson’s reading of advertising she identifies a process of consumer-totemism in which values and identities are associated to consumer goods (1978). For her, this takes place in the visual elisions and associations that occur as goods are presented or identified with particular contexts, feelings or identities.

Kilbourne and Goffman are heavily concerned with the ways in which advertising constructs gender. This concern is the central focus also of Goffman's influential work *Gender Advertisements* (1976). His study reveals the ways patriarchy is coded into the visual composition of many advertisements. For Kilbourne and Goffman, indeed, the normative power of the image, especially in relation to gender, emerges from displays of dominant/submissive body language and gesture, or the sexualization and/or objectification of women. Similar arguments have been made with respect to racial stereotyping (Dyer, 1993; hooks, 1992; 1995). In this case, the comment is made that black men and women are represented in ways that symbolically degrade or "other" them. Masculinity oriented work such as Jackson Katz' film *Tough Guise* (1999) makes the point that men, black or white, are also visually stereotyped, albeit differently. If women are sexualized in images in popular culture, Katz suggests, men are either criminalized or made to appear tough, unfeeling and cold. Thus, it is possible also to analyse the visual composition of images for their normative symbolic power. I shall use the reading techniques applied in the studies of visual culture named above as method for examining screen prison drama.

### Genre

In addition to narrative, image composition and subjectivity, another reading strategy employed in film criticism is the notion of genre. Neale sees genre as a culturally relative set of conventions/categories of narrative, in which different modes of discourse predominate. Thus, genres are "modes of [Hollywood's] narrative system", through which order, dis-equilibrium, conflict, and resolution are articulated (1980, p. 19). Genres

carry with them different conventions that regulate and structure narrative process. For example, disorder takes on different shape in action cinema (e.g. violence) and in romantic comedy (e.g. misunderstanding and/or emotional disturbance). Genres can thus be thought of types of cultural codes or categories that, in the case of film production/consumption, structure both audience expectations and the codes according to which narrative cinema is produced. Genres are thus, in a sense, sets of expectations (Neale, 1980, p. 23).

Genre, and indeed the operation of narrative in the cinema have been thought of according to two broad paradigms: the ideological and the ritual (Neale, 2000, p. 220). While the ritual approach tends to take genres as collective fantasies or workings out of particular issues, the ideological approach tends to have more links to a Frankfurt School-type argument regarding the standardization and mass production of narrative cinema. For Neale, then, the ritual approach tends to downplay the coercive and homogeneity of genres, while the ideological approach tends to downplay the heterogeneity and audience interactivity that comes into play with consumption of genres; thus, one approach downplays agency, the other makes it hard to see the effects of standardization (Neale, 2000, p. 227). In terms of the current study, I am not especially interested in the broader debates regarding the functioning of genres as units of standardization or ideological typing. Thus, meta-questions on the issue of genre-formation I consider tangential here. In addition, I am not especially preoccupied with debates regarding the limits and definitions of particular genres, as is that case, for example, with writing by Wheeler Dixon (2000), or with discussions of, for example, the evolution and/or parameters of assigning particular films to the category of the Western or the Gangster film (Pye, 1986;

Neale, 2002). Such concerns have at various moments preoccupied prison film scholars Mason (1998a), Cheatwood (1998) and Querry (1982). Writing on the historic periodization of the prison film, as well as with its generic limits, these writers have concerned themselves with “defining” the genre in terms of its core films and indeed its periphery. Such concerns are not of central interest to the current inquiry.

### The Toolbox

The interpretive concepts for analysing fiction film- and television, narrative, subjectivity, genre and visual imagery, are employed by authors in these fields to make sense of the normative or subversive impacts of fictional screen texts. Because screen prison drama remains essentially fictional, I would suggest that it makes sense to “read” these texts utilizing the analytic tools described in this section. These tools are thus more appropriate than the methods applied in studies by Reeves and Campbell (1994), and Hall et al (1978). In what follows, then, I apply the methods for performing textual analysis elaborated above. Thus, I am able to make a comment on the politics of prison visibility as these are mediated through film- and television drama.

### **Film Studies on Screen Prison Drama**

The film studies of screen prison drama, which have emerged essentially in the last five years, have used some of the methods described in the previous section. Two such film studies were written by Brian Jarvis (2004) and Nicole Rafter (2000). True to their disciplinary heritage, themes preoccupying film scholars Brian Jarvis (2004) and

Nicole Rafter (2000) are “pleasures” afforded by the prison film as a genre, as well as its “libidinal economy”. Utilizing a combination of psychoanalytic methodology, a version of ideology critique, and, in Jarvis’ case, a smattering of Marxist political economy, these film scholars represent one important pole in recent writing on screen prison drama. While the arguments made by the two scholars are in some ways quite distinct, there are aspects of their research, specifically those stemming from a film studies heritage, that make it expedient to examine their work in parallel.

I begin with a critique of Nicole Rafter’s book *Shots in the Mirror* (2000), in which she examines different sub-genres of crime cinema with a view to highlight their “ideological messages” (p. 7). Rafter’s overall contention is that commercial crime and prison films offer what she calls “contradictory pleasures” (Rafter, 2000, p. 3). By this, she means that:

implicitly [crime films] make two arguments. On the one hand, they criticize some aspect of society—police brutality, prison violence... [etc.]; [while] on the other they typically offer us some solace or resolution by showing triumph over corruption and brutality... Thus crime films offer us contradictory sorts of satisfaction: the reality of what we fear to be true and the fantasy of overcoming that reality (Rafter, 2000, p. 3).

According to Rafter, then, commercial prison film does at times critique “the (penal) system”, which it often portrays as abusive and corrupt. Yet, for Rafter social criticism in prison film is muted, because the actual focus in the films is narrative resolution and a host of other “pleasures”, from identification with an idealized screen hero to voyeuristic appreciation of homoerotic male bonding. Rafter contends that individual struggles of spectacular, heroic inmates take centre stage in prison film, papering over policy issues with “easy” catharsis (2000, p. 7). The normative power of prison film for Rafter, then, derives in part from the drive to narrative resolution that frames the complex and



problematic political issues of incarceration in terms of a “happy ending” (i.e. usually couched in terms of escape or revolt). Additionally, the construction of subjectivity in many prison films, for her, is both patriarchal and hetero-normative. Here she refers essentially to Laura Mulvey’s model for visual pleasure (1989), in which the privileged position of the white, male hero at the film’s diegetic centre implicates the construction of an idealized viewer in the image of the screen hero.

The lack of critique in commercial crime and prison film, for Rafter, stems from its narrative structure. In some ways echoing Laura Mulvey’s influential essays on visual pleasure (1989; 1992), Rafter argues that the imperative for narrative resolution effectively structures commercial crime cinema in conservative ways. Thus, because Hollywood prison films are preoccupied with the hero-quests of (male) inmates, they are unable to offer sincere critique. From this Mulvey-esque point follows Rafter’s list of pleasures offered by prison film: i.e. the possibility to identify with a perfect screen-hero-surrogate, the voyeuristic pleasure of S/M scenarios, and the draw of rebellion against authority structures. These elements of commercial/Hollywood prison film, for her, indicate the genre’s normative pull away from social change whether it be in terms of prison policy or the gender economy.

Based on her point regarding the “pleasures” of screen prison drama, Rafter sets up an opposition between commercial prison cinema, in which “easy catharsis” and narrative imperatives rule, and the films of what she calls the “alternative” tradition. She divides crime films into “one [track] for commercial entertainments and the other for political truth-telling” (2000, p. 137). In fact, Rafter suggests that an alternative tradition of films exist which refuse “to pander to popular taste [which] poses an ideological

challenge to crime film traditions...” (2000, p. 137). Rafter sees a kind of opposition between “base entertainment” films (i.e. those that celebrate narratives of heroic triumph in which the prison forms the backdrop)—and “alternative”<sup>11</sup> tradition films that are socially responsible. To the extent that “alterative” films refuse to narratively sew up stories of crime- and punishment, they can be thought of as subversive and potentially generative of social change.

I would question this move made by Rafter to divide films into “political truth-telling” and “commercial entertainment”. Not only does this categorization risk glossing over the polysemy of the texts themselves, but it also ties cinematic representations in disturbing ways to the traditional division between “high” and “low” culture or, in this case, art-house and commercial cinema.

Rafter makes an additional argument with respect to ideology in prison film. Unhealthy preoccupation with narrative resolution for Rafter has ideological implications, which can be traced back to the entertainment imperatives of commercial cinema. Rafter defines ideology as the “myths that a society lives by, as if these myths referred to some unproblematic reality” (2000, p. 7). Using a vision of ideology as something like culture, which she does explicitly, or as “the myths a society takes for granted”, Rafter argues that common-sense thought-patterns disseminated in cinema structure our understanding of crime in ways that legitimise the status quo. She goes on to argue in *Shots* that crime film has three main ideological impacts. First, commercial crime films ideologically imply that crime is explainable. Their construction of criminal “types” is ideologically relevant. Second, crime films ideologically structure our notions

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<sup>11</sup> The alternative films cited in Rafter’s study, interestingly, as commercial and produced in Hollywood nonetheless (e.g. *Natural Born Killers* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1994)).

of who is best equipped to control crime and deal with criminals (i.e. the courts, police, criminologists, psychologists, etc.). Finally, crime films define our idea of crime by offence type and severity, giving the impression, for example, that murder is more common than petty crime, or that street crime occurs more often than white-collar crime. Thus, according to Rafter, crime film's ideological function can be summed up as twofold. On the one hand, crime films legitimise existing crime-control mechanisms and structures, reifying the courts, the police, criminology experts and so on. This is a view generally supported by scholars who have written on crime film and television. Numerous writers have documented the fact that crime dramas act to legitimise dominant institutions (such as the police and the courts) as the appropriate venues for dealing with crime (Valverde, 2006; Doyle, 2003).

On the other hand, crime and prison films create an ideologically powerful and *distorted* vision of crime by offence type. Indeed, consensus appears to exist in the field that media represent some crimes more so than others (i.e. street crime over white collar crime, for example) (Rafter, 2000; Surette, 1994; Rapping, 2003). An ideological facet of crime film, thus, appears to be that these representations over-represent both violent crime and criminals. That such a vision of crime, as omnipresent, violent and street-based, might then form the basis for punitive and/or repressive political decision-making seems to follow logically from Rafter's research.

On the whole, I am inclined to agree with Rafter regarding the points she makes about some of the ideological facets crime- and prison film. Indeed, the narrative construction of much crime film around certain types of offences, and narrative resolution tied to the "work" of particular characters or institutions (i.e. policemen,

courts, lawyers, etc.) might be theorized as normatively reifying existing institutions in crime control. I agree with Rafter that these aspects of crime film might well work to legitimate existing crime-control institutions and to bolster support for punitive solutions to crime as an extreme social problem. I am less inclined to support her views regarding the ideological power of narrative resolution and normative subjectivity. Not only do many screen prison dramas place at their centre characters that are not easily qualified as purely rearticulating a normative version of white, American patriarchy. Some dramas give voice to unusual reframing of heterosexuality (e.g. *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000)). Narrative resolution in recent 1995-2005 screen prison drama is also not a given. At least, films that avoid narrative resolution (e.g. *American History X* or *OZ*) are not unilaterally subversive with respect to criminal justice, as Rafter suggests of her “alternative tradition” category. In fact, I shall argue in analysis of *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998) that the opposite is true. The film articulates a conservative set of discourses open to use by proponents of punitive justice precisely through its inconclusive ending.

Brian Jarvis, another film critic, has also written on screen prison drama (2004). Brian Jarvis’ examination of screen prison drama extends the psychoanalytic framework further than does Rafter. In *Cruel and Unusual* (2004), Jarvis sets about examining the erotic elements of “discipline and desire” in American representations of punishment, which he sees as lynchpins between libidinal- and political economies. Jarvis’ book examines modes and representational genres through which punishment has been made visible in the US since the colony’s outset. *Cruel and Unusual* thus includes analyses of recent prison films alongside readings of *The Scarlet Letter* and American slave

narratives. For the purposes of the current project, two aspects of Jarvis' work are salient. Jarvis' account shares ground with Nicole Rafter's work, perhaps because of both author's disciplinary affiliation with film studies departments. Somewhat like Rafter, Jarvis suggests that most attempts at social criticism made in prison film are sabotaged by its narrative structure and by the "pleasures" offered by the genre (2004). Thus, for Jarvis spectacular tales of heroism and villainy dominate the screen in prison film. To compelling and anaesthetic effect, these larger-than-life hero-quests offer resolution of complex political issues through narrative catharsis, sewing up tensions and contradictions in the process. For Jarvis, this ideological operation of narrative has the effect of dispelling audience energy that could be put to political ends (Jarvis, 2004). Indeed, for Jarvis, the hero-quest and the representation of the prison are structured around the inmate-hero's attainment of "freedom" from the repressive and totalitarian institution. Narrative resolution in the form of spectacular result and/or escape replaces critique that may engage audiences in reflecting on the problems with existing crime control techniques.

The similarities between Rafter and Jarvis' accounts do not end here. Like Rafter, Jarvis contends that the genre is highly formulaic—setting up stock plots, characters and image-banks, which have changed very little from prison film's beginnings in the 1930s (2004, p. 166). Prison film's lasting success, for both authors, has to do with the various pleasures afforded its viewers. The authors think through these pleasures according to a psychoanalytic model of subjectivity, in which scopophilia/voyeurism and identification engage subjects into supporting particular libidinal economies of desire. For Jarvis, and indeed for Rafter, the libidinal organization of prison film is conservative in the sense

that it secures desire in basically patriarchal ways. Although there may be homoerotic undercurrents to some prison films, often homo-eros works in tandem with a kind of overt “gay bashing” which, for Jarvis and Rafter, acts as an alibi for the erotic energy focused on male bodies (Jarvis, 2004, p. 175; Rafter, 2000, p.125). Additionally, for Jarvis, the popularity of prison film is tied to the psychic energy created by the conflict between an evil warden/Oedipal father character and an inmate-hero. Latent homoerotic dynamics, imagery of torture, voyeuristically shot scenes of pain and sexuality—all these, for Jarvis, come together to make prison film an engaging cocktail of S/M. The force and psychic energy emitted by prison film is thus instrumental in engaging audiences in dramas that are deeply individualizing. “Hollywood’s gaze is confined to loners, or small groups of risk-takers” (Jarvis, 2004, p.173). By enfolding audiences in dramas of individual heroism, and spectacular and exciting plays of S/M, the prison film effectively performs the mythic function of lulling audiences with ideological promises of “nebulous freedom” and spurious escape, sewn up in narrative resolution. Subjectivity is engaged through a libidinal play of voyeuristic and identificatory pleasure. Thus, for Jarvis, the ideological thrust of prison film serves a conservative role in the current economy of punishment. Penal expansion and the so-called return of punitive punishment for Jarvis are abetted by “the prison film [which has served] as diversion and compensatory fantasy within an increasingly carceral society” (2004, p. 173). Thus, in broad terms, both Jarvis and Rafter’s studies appear to support the view that narrative resolution and the psychodynamics of subjectivity and desire in screen prison drama hold essentially ideologically conservative functions.

In relation to this study, I am reticent to endorse such a view. While elements of Jarvis and Rafter's critique are doubtlessly at work in narrative resolution and in the conventional modes of subjectivity evoked in some films, I have some trouble with a tendency, especially in Rafter's work, to produce binary positive/negative categories for prison film depending on their (supposed) relationship purely to prison reform. While the current study does pay attention to some of the reading techniques employed by these authors (i.e. narrative and subjectivity analysis), it does so with a more open-ended mission in mind. My aim is neither to develop a stable and binary system for categorizing dramas as conservative or subversive, nor to suggest that screen prison drama as a genre is generally either one or the other.

## **Television Studies on Screen prison drama**

The previous section thus examines some film studies work on prison film, according to the methodological and theoretical frames that are often used in the field. Jarvis and Rafter examine the normative power of much screen prison drama with respect to narrative resolution and the psycho-dynamics of subjectivity. I would like to now examine one additional scholar's contribution to the study of screen prison drama. Writing on television, Elayne Rapping includes an analysis of the television screen prison drama *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) in a book that analyses televisual depictions of criminal justice. In *Law and Justice as Seen On TV* (2003), Rapping makes the case

that television's<sup>12</sup> portrayal of law and justice in the 1990s has been influential in justifying vengeful approaches to crime, as well as in bringing retributive neo-liberal "solutions" to hegemonic dominance (2003, p.7, 260). Rapping analyses television programming, from reality shows like *COPS*, to court TV and the cult screen prison drama *OZ*, to illustrate that the medium has ideologically encouraged the extension of increasingly punitive criminal justice into most social issues in American life (2003, p.18). For her, the "criminalization of American life" has been accompanied by, and perhaps sustained in part, by a conservative and "general ideological slant of recent [television] programming [that] is more or less visible across genres" (Rapping, 2003, p. 17). This is how Rapping theorizes the ideological repercussions of recent television programming.

As for the way in which the ideological operation of television screen prison drama takes place, Rapping argues that television's flirtation with emotionality and sensationalism is integral to promoting vengeful and punitive solutions to complex social problems (Rapping, 2003, p.14). Television, for Rapping, activates feelings of national community by uniting Americans behind melodramatic and exaggerated images of crime. As a result, the criminal justice system becomes empowered to "solve" issues once dealt with through other institutions such as the welfare state's social programs, the family or other institutions (2003, p.271).

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<sup>12</sup> Rapping argues that television plays a different role in American culture than does film (2003, p. 262). She contends: "It is television... [not Hollywood] that has taken on the task of making real arguments for the extension of government and law enforcement powers in the interest of national security..." (2003, p. 270). Television—not film—for her continues with its long-time mission, which has been to instantiate a community of "real Americans" defined against threatening and dangerous "outsiders" (Rapping, 2003, p. 270). Television, according to Rapping occupies a privileged ideological role in modern America, playing the part of neo-liberal vehicle, whereas Hollywood film is actually a more reform liberal medium (2003, p. 81).



To explore how exactly Rapping mounts this argument, it is necessary to examine in some detail her use of the terms “ideology” and “emotionality”, as well as her perception of television’s role and power. Unfortunately, *Law and Justice* does not define ideology, and thus leaves the reader to piece together what exactly the author’s use of the word implies. This task is made difficult by the fact that, at times, Rapping uses the word in different ways. For example, in the book’s introduction, Rapping seems to suggest that “ideology” is coextensive with sets of political beliefs or ideas, when she argues that the famous televised “Mendez trial was... a battle of competing ideologies: one on the rise [i.e. neo-liberalism], one in decline [i.e. liberal welfarism]” (2003, p. 9). This view is reiterated later, as Rapping asserts that despite changing “dominant ideological bent[s]” in 20<sup>th</sup> century punishment, “there [has] always [been] a mix of practices” carried out inside prison walls (2003, p. 79). In these and a few other instances (Rapping, 2003, pp. 59, 184, 247-8), the author appears to use the term “ideology” fairly neutrally to describe coherent sets of political ideas such as welfare liberalism, or neo-liberalism for example. Yet, at other times, Rapping attaches a connotation of manipulation to the term ideology. This becomes clear in her argument that television in its early stages “had an ideological bent, meant to send a message to a confused, disoriented population, adrift...” and to socialize Americans into “the brave new world of postindustrial democracy” (Rapping, 2003, p. 265). Yet, despite connotations of manipulation, Rapping’s argument regarding the political power of television is actually made in terms of sensationalism, melodrama and emotionality.

Rapping suggests that it is partly the emotive, sensational, dramatic and visually compelling aspects of television programming that perform an ideologically punitive and

conservative move (2003, p. 9). Rapping argues that narrative closure, offered in crime-TV as “the conviction and punishment of the evil offender”, plays an important role in promoting criminal justice as the “primary arbiter of important social and political policy issues” (2003, p. 10-11). According to Rapping, television produces decisive endings to emotionally intense tales of crime and social dysfunction, which have worked to extend the domain of criminal justice. On this view, television arouses viewers’ passions with shocking and disturbing images of crime. The television series *OZ*, in this case, is especially guilty of a melodramatic and sensationalist presentation of prison life. For Rapping, such presentation of the criminal justice system is conservative in so far as it emotionally arouses its public with disturbing images of violent crime, and then offers “easy” narrative closure in the form of either punitive and vengeful decisions by criminal justice, or, in the case of *OZ*, the sense that dangerous predator-criminals are safely incarcerated (2003). For Rapping, “the turn to more conservative ideological slants in entertainment programming... tends to produce a shift [across] genres towards more melodramatic, and often brutally violent and expressionistic styles and conventions...” (2003, p. 14). Unite sensationalism and a desire for plot-resolution in television Rapping suggests, and one arrives at a media climate in which criminal justice provides an easy, and punitive, sewing up of emotion through dramatic and decisive justice.

I would question this part of Rapping’s argument, in which she asserts a necessary connection between melodrama and sensationalism, and conservative ideological functioning of television. I would suggest, instead, that violence and melodrama, as generic conventions, do not necessary function in politically conservative ways. Indeed, it

is possible to imagine textual framing of violent and/or melodramatic events that operate in resistive/subversive ways<sup>13</sup>.

Rapping's account of *OZ* is more complex, however. She suggests also that the series' depiction of characters and its narrative framing of conflict between inmates and prison staff contributes to justifying and rationalizing rather than interrogating and exposing the stupidity and inhumanity of "current penal theories and policies" (Rapping, 2000, p. 9). To this end, *OZ* makes spectacular a new kind of criminal; a hardened and vicious inmate who is indeed incarcerated in the super-maximum prison for good reason. For Rapping, *OZ*'s inmates are violent, brutal, irrational and motivated to do evil by god-knows-what. And, this vision of the "worst of the worst" prisoners allows audiences to sympathize with individual characters or become intrigued in the narratives of their lives. At the same time, it garners support for a criminal justice system that keeps "predators" off the streets (Rapping, 2000, p. 86). She also suggests that the narrative opposition of well-meaning, rehabilitation-minded prison staff with irredeemable, violent criminals masks two aspects of the current penal system. First, this set up masks the erosion of rehabilitation-oriented initiatives in the American penal context. And, second, the set up of inmates as "bad guys" and prison staff as "weak-kneed liberals" may camouflage many of the institutional and individual abuses that characterize life in prison. With this narrative set-up of the prison institution and its criminal-inmates, Rapping contends that *OZ* very subtly undermines the liberal/left-leaning ideologies that once underpinned the prison system. The contrast between prison staff and inmates serves again and again to highlight the growing uselessness of rehabilitative punishment (Rapping, 2000, p. 93).

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<sup>13</sup> For an illustrative example, see the later discussions of prison films *Cool Hand Luke* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) and *Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971) in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

Thus, for Rapping, the set-up of a particular kind of narrative conflict between characters, and not necessarily narrative closure in and of itself, in *OZ* helps perform a neo-conservative ideological turn.

Rapping's account of screen prison drama on television thus offers two ways of thinking through the ideological work performed by *OZ*. Her argument regarding the narrative tension in *OZ* highlights the ways in which ideological framing can be encapsulated in the tensions and conflicts between characters. This is different from a film studies perspective on the matter. Indeed, film studies research, such as the studies by Rafter and Jarvis, and indeed, by Mason and Nellis and Hale also, discuss narrative closure as a key ideological operator in screen prison drama. For Rapping, who studies instead the "prison soap opera" *OZ*, it is clear that a similar point is more difficult to make. Because *OZ*, a television series, defers narrative closure, it becomes necessary to examine the workings of narrative more in terms of the set-up of opposing forces, and less in the optic of denouement. Rapping does not pursue this line of reasoning.

I would also question a few limitations of her study. For one, the implication that Hollywood film is "liberal" on matters of criminal justice is questionable. Her perspective on emotionalism and sensationalism demands further attention as well. I do not concur with her equation of conservative ideology with melodrama. *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2002) uses melodrama for just the opposite purpose (see chapter five for further detail). Indeed, in relation to Rapping's study, one can make a broader comment on the tendency of film and television scholars of screen prison drama to attempt to "peg" specific dramas either as conservative, or to divide representations into "negative" and "positive" categories with respect to the promotion of penal reforms (Rafter (2000) is

also to an extent guilty of this). As I have suggested earlier, such readings threaten to flatten textual polysemy, just as they “close” interpretation of specific dramas, attempting to fix the sense that audiences can make of representations. The current study carries out analysis that, to the greatest extent possible, avoids such categorical interpretation.

In part, my decision to highlight ambiguity in screen prison drama stems from a vision of the social construction of reality. That is, Rafter and Rapping are at some level concerned to demonstrate the ideological and, to a degree manipulative, power of screen prison drama. This betrays an understanding of truth as somehow accessible and ultimately of subjects as subject to manipulations of that truth. Such a view entails a notion of a subject that can have an existence outside of discourse. My view is more socially constructionist than this. Indeed, this is a point that I refine in the next section, especially in relation to the methodological decision to view screen prison drama as discourse in the Foucauldian sense.

## **Methodology**

### Discourse Analysis

My discussion of methods used to critically read fiction film and television has already framed some of the study’s methodological concerns. In choosing to use a blend of analytic strategies applied in textual analysis of advertising, film- and television studies, my project has already made a methodological choice in terms of how to approach screen prison drama. My approach needs additional clarification. I aim to collect these “reading strategies” and regroup them under what is, perhaps, a more coherent articulation of research method. I would like to say a few words on the subject of “discourse analysis”, as this perhaps best encapsulates the research method I have

applied in the study. The “reading strategies” I have discussed make sense under the broader umbrella of a project of analysing the “discourses” of film- and television representations of prison. The decision to read film- and television texts as discourse according to what amounts to a Foucauldian perspective has certain implications and, I shall argue, advantages with respect to the level of openness to the textual polysemy one can envision.

The overarching methodological approach used in carrying out this study, then, is best described as “discourse analysis”. In social science research, the term “discourse analysis” is very broad and it is often used to refer to quite different things. It is important at this point to say a few words about what, exactly, I mean by the term. Introducing an edited volume on discourse analysis, Margaret Wetherell has defined “discourse analysis” as the “study of language in use [or] the study of human meaning-making” (2001, p. 3). The method has, as Wetherell points out, grown from a post-modern and/or poststructuralist concern with the social construction of reality. Attention to “discourse” as establishing knowledge and constructions of subjectivity is part of a greater concern for how meaning is made in society (Wetherell, 2001, p. 3). That being said, traditions of “discourse analysis” have grown through the work of various different thinkers. Sociolinguists, Foucauldians, Bahktinian scholars and social interaction researchers, for example, have applied different analytic techniques under the umbrella of the term “discourse analysis”. The current study employs an essentially Foucauldian method of discourse analysis.

Foucault’s notion of discourse is social constructionist; on his view “discourses” can be defined as systems of representation from which meaning derives (Hall, 2001, p.

73). For Foucault, discourse has been defined as “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing the knowledge about—a particular topic at a particular historical moment... Discourse [for Foucault] is about the production of knowledge through language” (Hall, 2001, p. 72). The French theorist analysed as discourse social artefacts such as architectures (e.g. schools or the panoptic prison), practices (e.g. the practice of confession), and reservoirs of knowledge (e.g. the disciplinary *savoir* associated with psychology). These discursive artefacts on a Foucauldian vision are “readable” or interpretable to the extent that it is possible to discern certain “truth practices” or “regimes of truth” in them.

The paramount point within a methodological context is regarding the notion of truth, for Foucault’s notion of discourse implies a historicized idea about “truth”; for him “truths” are dependent on given historical moments and contexts. “[Only] in particular regimes of truth can objects mean certain things” (Hall, 2001, p. 74). This is an understanding of social truth as contingent on context. Such a vision of social reality differs from the one articulated by writers Rafter and Rapping, as their studies imply a more fixed notion of “truth”. Whereas the screen prison drama scholars have been concerned with identifying the conservative political impacts of recent representations, Foucault’s interests in the prison, the madhouse, and sexuality—for example—were grounded in a project of mapping the development of themes in knowledge, government and social order. Rather than illustrating how subjects might be manipulated through politicised speech, Foucault’s concern with discourse was to identify how subjects or figures such as prisoners, soldiers, and patients, for example, were positioned and created. Foucault was thus concerned with how discourse mapped, expressed and created

social order, and not expressly in how communication manipulated truth. This is a different project from one that seeks out the ideological workings of given texts.

Structuring analysis around discourse, or text, has the effect of moving focus away from a point of view that structures research around the human consciousness (i.e. in relation to canonical authors, or great leaders). Foucault interest proposes instead a text-centred way of analysing “the rules of formation through which groups of statements achieve a unity as a science, theory or a text” (Smart, 1985, p. 38). Thus, by focusing on the textual aspect of the production of knowledge and, indeed, of culture, Foucault inquires into the acts of speaking (i.e. discourse) which operate according to rules that are specific to a temporal, cultural context. In these “verbal traces left behind by history”, Foucault views discursive practices and/or objects as having a “materiality, density, thickness and consistency as objects in the world and just as economics has laws so does the arrangement of discourses” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 76). Discourse, then, can be viewed from a Foucauldian perspective as the materially observable and readable “trace” which history has left. And indeed, it becomes possible to identify changing patterns of force and constructions of thought through the study of discursive objects.

To sum up a discussion of discourse analysis, I hope to gain the following from framing my analysis of screen prison drama methodologically through discourse analysis. One point of advantage is the capacity to read across film- and television representations, whereas in the disciplines of film- and television studies, the two media are most often



analysed separately<sup>14</sup>. In reading these texts as visual, media discourse—and not either as *film* or *television* exclusively—it becomes possible to search for congruencies and/or disparities in how prison visibility is framed/mediated. Another benefit of a discourse analysis approach is a vision of communication in which social reality is constructed and not manipulated, through the symbolic work that takes place in television and cinema. Thus, it becomes possible to think in specific, textual terms, about how cinema and television representations of prison participate in creating a discursive context in which American punishment takes place in highly raced, classed and gendered ways. My research here is more preoccupied with the construction of prison visibility, not on how representations ‘manipulate’ the “truth” about the prison system.

#### Selection of Texts for Analysis

Before proceeding to textual analysis, I would like first to explain how the specific texts were chosen. The dissertation focuses on selected American prison film and television texts (1995-2005), examining these as discursive sites that mediate punishment’s visibility. The choice was made to focus on film and television drama representing incarceration. This decision represents a conscious choice to examine both film and television texts, despite the fact that these media are at times separated in academic analysis. In part, the decision to study screen prison drama in both film and television stems from the texts themselves. Of the visual, fictional media products released in the US media during the period from 1995 to 2005, the television series *OZ*

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<sup>14</sup> Herman Gray (1994) makes the case for examining television as “total ideological field”. This is his way of establishing a means for reading across television genres to examine the meanings that are activated intertextually. I undertake a similar cross-genre analysis here, albeit using the concept of media texts as “discourse”.

(creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) is perhaps one of the most influential. The series is also the only major and on-going television production released during the decade covered by the study<sup>15</sup>. The lack of more diverse televised programming makes a study focused on television texts difficult, yet excluding *OZ* from an analysis of screen prison drama makes little analytic sense. That being said, three screen prison drama productions released during the period from 1995 to 2005 were made-for-television films that were subsequently released to DVD. The category of the made-for-television film is notoriously difficult to classify either as film or television. This makes imposing distinctions between film and televised screen prison dramas difficult. In addition, a considerable number of prison films (twenty) were also released during the 1995 to 2005 period. The distribution of the dramas themselves, then, across media types makes it expedient to analyse mediated screen prison drama, and not to focus exclusively on either film or television representations.

Additionally, media discourses such as film and television programming are produced in certain contexts (through the feature-film industry, or by specialty television channels such as BET or HBO, etc.) and, since the advent of video and DVD, are consumed by audiences in completely different settings (in the cinema, at the bar, on the sofa at home). In this way, texts with totally different production histories, and of different generic type, can be consumed one next to the other in the living room (channel surfing between music TV, sitcoms and a televised movie). The increasing crossover potential of film, video/DVD and television drama, then, which are consumed in a variety of settings constitutes another reason for studying screen prison drama across genres. The

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<sup>15</sup> The television series *Prison Break* (creator Paul Scheuring, 2005-present) was aired just towards the end of the study's time period. As the dissertation was being completed (March 2007), the series was not yet commercially released on DVD.

final concern which motivated the decision to study drama, and not either exclusively film or television, stems from the discursive function of mediated social dramas about incarceration.

In terms of how texts were selected for analysis, the following criteria were applied. In addition to depicting the American context and being produced in the United States, the screen prison dramas researched in this study were chosen according to four considerations. First, to be selected, a drama had to fit the definition of prison cinema as a “genre” put forth by Paul Mason, which is generally accepted in the field of scholarship on screen prison drama. A prison film, according to Mason, is “a film which concerns civil imprisonment and which is mainly set within the walls of a prison or uses prison as a central theme” (Mason, 1998a). Referring to Steve Neale’s work on genre, Mason tempers his definition. He adds the caveat that, while the “centre” of a genre may be easy to recognize, its periphery can be harder to establish. A pragmatic definition, argues Mason, permits a foundation for discussion, but must not be taken as the definitive word on the boundaries of genre. For the purposes of this study, however, Mason’s pragmatic definition is quite adequate, as my goal is not to enter into debate on genre.

Popularity was another selection criterium. In this study, only big budget commercially distributed prison films with wide (domestic America) release and with high box office figures were examined. In the case of television programming, only shows released on nationally available channels and which received either public acclaim or press attention were examined. In this way, it is possible to reason that the dramas selected were widely viewed by audiences in the United States. Rather than imposing a

minimum box office gross threshold as firm selection criteria, popularity at the box office was weighed against relevance to the research agenda.

At the time of this study's publication, the "Prison Film Project" website which maintains a database of prison film and television programs and has been associated with the scholarly work of Wilson and O'Sullivan's *Images of Incarceration* (2004) had identified twenty films and made-for-television films fitting the above criteria. Of these, seven were execution films (including *Dead Man Walking* (dir. Tim Robbins, 1995), *Last Dance* (dir. Bruce Beresford, 1995), *The Chamber* (dir. James Foley, 1996) and *True Crime* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1999))<sup>16</sup>. In addition, one was a comedy (*Life* (dir. Ted Demme, 1999)), two were sci-fi/magical films (*The Green Mile* (dir. Frank Darabont 1999), *Escape From LA* (dir. John Carpenter, 1996)), and two were "women's prison"<sup>17</sup> films. In addition, four big budget Hollywood prison films *Murder in the First* (dir. Martin Rocco, 1995), *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998), *The Hurricane* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1999) and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000)) were released in these years. The independent film, *Slam* (dir. Marc Levin, 1998), was screened at the Sundance Festival, winning a number of awards. Furthermore, one television show (*OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003), and four made-for-television films (*Redemption* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004), *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001), *First Time Felon*

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<sup>16</sup> The decision was made not to focus on execution films. In part, this is because of the dissertation's focus on the broadening of punishment in the United States as carceral expansion. Indeed, it would have been possible to examine the neo-liberal undercurrents inherent in extending the death penalty, and in the media representation of (mostly) anti-death penalty films. This is simply on the focus of the project, however.

<sup>17</sup> In the latter chapters of the dissertation, I move to examine (black and white) masculinities in relation to neo-liberal rationalities and techniques in punishment and in self-management. In order to research the depiction of women as well it would have been necessary to reference more than a mere two films. Time constraints also factored into this decision. And, indeed, punishment in the United States is a highly, highly gendered process. Only 6% of the nation's prisoners are female (Harrison and Beck 2002). This fact was also taken into consideration in when delimiting the research agenda.

(dir. Charles Dutton, 1997), and *Convict Cowboy* (dir. Rod Holcomb, 1995) were released. Of these, I chose to exclude *Convict Cowboy* (dir. Rod Holcomb, 1995)—it takes place on a prison ranch—and *Murder in the First* (dir. Martin Rocco, 1995), which is set entirely in the 1930s. *The Hurricane* was also excluded for a similar reason—the bulk of this film takes place in the 1970s. Additional straight-to-video releases were *Doing Hard Time* (dir. Preston Whitmore II, 2004), *Lockdown* (dir. John Luessenhop, 2000), *Down Time* (dir. Sean Wilson, 2003), *Shackles* (dir. Charles Winkler, 2005), and *The Visit* (dir. Jordan Walker-Pearlman, 2000)<sup>18</sup>.

Texts selected for analysis were *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003), *Redemption* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004), *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001), *First Time Felon* (dir. Charles Dutton, 1997), *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998), and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000).

In choosing the post-1995 screen prison dramas on which to perform analysis in this project, the above concerns weighed heavily. Wide commercial release and adherence to Paul Mason’s definition of the “prison film/drama” were the “musts” for inclusion in the study. Otherwise, the six screen dramas were selected thematically from the sample of approximately twenty available screen dramas released during the 1995-2005 time period. *American History X* and *Animal Factory* were chosen because of the ways in which these films articulated narratives of white male Angst. In relation to neo-liberal discourse and the racing and classing of American masculinities, these films presented excellent material for analysis. Made-for-television dramas *Redemption* and

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to these ten films, a number of other essentially black films had prison sequences or dealt with prison as an important theme. Prison and criminal justice were not, however, their main object of focus, and this excluded them from the category of prison film as defined in the beginning of the study. Spike Lee’s *He Got Game* (1998) and Jim Sheridan’s *Get Rich or Die Trying* (2005) are examples.

*First Time Felon* were selected because they represented black masculinity and prison experience, offering additional insight into how the racing and classing of masculinities and of imprisonment is symbolized in American popular culture. Furthermore, thematically both dramas dealt in some depth with redemption. In relation to neo-liberal discourse and to rites of inclusion/exclusion, these screen dramas provided excellent sites at which to explore representations of morality, redemption and neo-liberal framings of self-work projects.

Finally, the television drama *OZ* and the made-for-television film *Prison Song* were selected to form the bulk of material for analysis in the dissertation's fifth and final chapter. These representations were selected because of their unusual framing of incarceration, as well as their polysemic complexity. Additionally, *OZ* and *Prison Song* actually formed interesting opposing examples of the discursive framing of incarceration. While *Prison Song* presents harsh critique of existing penal policy, *OZ* actually utilizes the prison as backdrop against which the series constructs an aesthetic vision of spectacular masculinities.

## **Conclusion : Chapter One**

The dissertation's first chapter has drawn out a number of key issues in relation to the politics of prison visibility in American in the past decade. In particular, I have carried out a literature review of existing research in the sub-field of screen prison drama studies. Additionally, I have explained the methodological decisions made in putting together the study. As part of this methodological discussion and indeed by way of theoretical framing, I examined some key studies on the media, crime-and society

connection. In addition, I also dealt with some reading strategies that have been employed in film- and television work. The main purpose of the opening chapter, thus, has been to lay theoretical and methodological groundwork, which will vehicle analysis of how popular film- and television dramas mediate prison visibility. I have thus begun my discussion of screen prison drama by positioning this study within the domain of (media) research that can be helpful in understanding the refraction of images of incarceration.

I have begun to develop two aspects of my argument in this chapter. First, I have suggested that popular cultural texts—like screen prison drama—must be analysed as contested sites. This implies attention to textual “openness”. Additionally, I have stated my preference for a social constructionist vision of culture, in the sense that I do not wish to deduce “ideological manipulation” through text. My decision to read screen prison drama as discourse is made precisely with this end in sight. Yet, as emerges in the following chapter, there are limiting qualities to a Foucauldian perspective on culture, namely, with respect to the workings of class, race and gender as formations of social hierarchy. In examining screen prison drama in the context of the racially exclusionist American criminal justice system, analytic orientation attuned to race, class and gender as hierarchical social formations is absolutely key. This connection is dealt with in chapter two.

## **CHAPTER 2 : DISCIPLINE, GOVERNMENT, PRISON VISIBILITY**

### **Introduction: Chapter Two**

Up to this point I have set up a theoretical and methodological framework via which to understand screen prison dramas as key sites of prison visibility in American culture. Chapter one looked at strategies used to examine film and television. It also focused on theorizing the media-crime-society connection. I arrived at the conclusion that the inscription of images of incarceration in film and television drama subjects prison visibility to the constraints and conventions of popular culture. Issues of race, gender, and class, thus, are constructed alongside and in relation to spectacular renditions of punishment. Additionally, the dissertation has taken up the position that popular culture is a site of struggle; that is, a place where power and resistance meet one another. In this vein, I have found it expedient to suggest that recent screen prison drama is neither a mouthpiece for conservative neo-liberal discourses on punishment, nor is it a place where resistance against the current regime of crime control is articulated unbounded. It is this thesis that shall guide the remainder of the dissertation.

This chapter sets up an additional part of this argument. Using the work of French theorist Michel Foucault as a jumping-off point, chapter two looks at the changes in disciplinary tactics in contemporary American crime control and penal policy. I examine discourses associated with neo-liberalism in an effort to pinpoint the foundation of changes in crime control in larger processes of social ordering. Constructions of social



formations such as gender, class and race are implicated in the process of neo-liberal government, and indeed, these formations are articulated in screen prison drama as well. Criminal justice as a grouping of institutions charged with maintaining social order refers to attendant constructions of masculinities, identities, and techniques of self. My study of screen prison drama aims to understand how these two discursive facets are woven together.

Integral to this project is knowledge of the changes in criminal justice discourse and practice. In highlighting the discourses underlying change in criminal justice, it is easier to make clear how constructions of social identities and formations interact with neo-liberal discourses of government. If neo-liberal crime control discourse relies on certain types of identity-construction or techniques of self, then I am interested in these elements as they are expressed in screen prison drama. It is to this end that I am concerned in this chapter with neo-liberal government's crime control tactics.

I refer to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) to draw a brief image of carceral practice under the welfare state. By way of updating Foucault's research and extending analysis of the carceral system through contemporary times, I cite the work of influential criminologist David Garland (1990; 2001). Garland maps some of the large-scale changes that have taken place in American criminal justice in recent decades, tying these changes with neo-liberal discourses on the practice of government.

To supplement such a view on discourses of neo-liberal government and crime control practice, I refer to Foucauldian governmentality studies, as the researchers writing in the field have extensively analysed the topic, albeit outside of the scope of criminal justice alone. I am interested in governmentality studies deep engagement with the

discursive practices of governance and subjectivity construction that are integral to neo-liberalism. Classical Marxist-inspired research on neo-liberalism, by contrast, has often been loath to engage deeply with neo-liberalism concerned as writers have been with maintaining a vision of neo-liberal ideology as a form of “false consciousness” (Lemke, 2000). Governmentality studies research, then, has the benefit of providing insight into the discursive functioning of neo-liberal government. That being said, I maintain some critical distance from work done in the field of governmentality studies. One such aspect is the field’s assertion of an agenda of “value neutrality”. Another has to do more generally with a Foucauldian reticence to engage with how social formations, such as class, race and gender, manifest the operation of power as group dynamics. Thus, while Foucauldian research on the matter of neo-liberalism has at times pointed out the social cleavages associated with this system of government, (Lemke, 2000; Rose et al., 1996), little work in the area has examined the racialized ways in which social structures implicate group hierarchy.

In summary, then, the current chapter aims to discern some of the institutional and discursive changes that underscore the transition to neo-liberal governance in the prison system and in general. I engage with this question in order to set the stage for an analysis of screen prison drama as point of struggle in which the transition to a new regime of punishment and crime control is at issue. I have found that it is expedient to think through these questions in relation to the work of Michel Foucault on prison in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and to Foucauldian work on neo-liberal government in governmentality studies. Throughout the chapter, I am concerned to update some of Foucault’s findings, as well as to be critical of his view, which is reticent to look at power as a group/class

phenomenon. In the present instance, I argue that a view of social formations is essential especially in relation to how racial inequalities are reproduced through criminal justice in the United States. This discussion sets up the final analytic tool—an account of neo-liberal discourses—that is integral to my analysis.

### ***L'Oeuvre de Michel Foucault***

As the dissertation draws substantially on the work of French poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, it seems expedient at this point to say a little regarding the body of his work and particularly to outline strategically its points of contact/conflict with relevant Marxist and critical race theory. This brief digression is important because it allows me to position my study in terms of what aspects of Foucault work I draw from, and which I am more sceptical about. I am more concerned here to provide a very brief and strategic overview of some of the key themes in Foucault's work (that is knowledge, power, truth and history). There are other aspects (i.e. government, archaeology, geneology, and subjectivity), which I either do not address or else leave for later discussion. The key point in this section is to outline the places where Marxist and/or critical race theory may be used to broaden a Foucauldian perspective on criminal justice.

I have already discussed in some detail Foucault's work on discourse in the first chapter, particularly as it relates to methodological questions. In this chapter, I am concerned to adapt and update work done on disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Additionally, I concern myself with governmentality studies work, a field that has developed out of some of Foucault's later writings.

Although the French writer's work attests to a number of changes in tack, with respect to vocabulary and methods used, as well as in subject matter, there are a few principles that run through his research. For one, Foucault's work was preoccupied with de-familiarizing social systems of ordering (O'Farrell, 2005; Smart, 1985). As a historian, part of Foucault's project was to utilize history to expose the contingency of relative means of ordering social institutions, knowledge, and systems of thought (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 61). A central point of contention animated his critiques of conventional historians and philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as Emmanuel Kant. This tension stems from how Foucault theorized the notion of "truth". Kant, and indeed Marx as well, seemed to imply that some sort of truth existed outside of a historical reference frame (O'Farrell, 2005). Foucault challenged this view. The poststructuralist referred instead to a "cultural table top" composed of discursive formations, which preconditions and delimits the totality of experience and knowledge, and provides the context in which people at a given historical moment express themselves (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 63). The use of historicity to illustrate the relativity of "truth", institutional practice and systems of ordering was a key aspect of Foucault's project.

Foucault's critique of Marxist theory is couched in relation to how he conceived of truth, but also in relation to his work on power as a "microphysics", diffused through individual interactions. This differs quite starkly from a Marxist conception of power as a matter of class conflict. Indeed, Foucault's work finds a point of difference with Marxist theory also in relation to how knowledge is construed. Foucault meant to contest the Enlightenment era proposition that knowledge and power are separable (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 96; Foucault, 1980). For the French theorist, power is generative of knowledge—a

point made in part in *History of Sexuality* vol. 1 (1978). In particular, this differs from Marxist notions of ideology. That is, the Marxist notion of ideology is at times articulated as presupposing a subject that has access to truth, but whose interface with reality is distorted through myths perpetuated by social institutions and political fractions (O'Farrell, 2005, p. 96). Classical Marxist theory, thus, presupposes a "truth" to which subjects may have access, once chains of ideology have been thrown off.

Foucault did not share this view. His ideas about knowledge preclude the idea that "truth" exists outside of given contexts. For him, "truth" and subjectivity are mutable and dependent on historical context. Making of meaning, which on a Marxist view is thought through as ideology, comes on a Foucauldian view to be configured as a question of constructing knowledge and/or discourse, which instantiates particular types of subjects. For Foucault, an underlying assumption of social constructivism animates a vision of social reality as composed not according to 'true' or 'false' principles. Social reality for classical Foucauldians is more a question of ordering particular kinds of subjects, with particular effects for the social field.

Classical Marxist research on culture also tends to hold that a superstructure of ideas and beliefs overlays an infrastructure of economic relations. For Foucault, such a view of culture was insufficient. Indeed, from a Foucauldian perspective, an economically focused reading of culture obscures the ways in which the constitution of knowledge itself, through institutions and the ordering of systems of thought, takes place in non-economic ways. This is related to Foucauldian research's reticence to view power as a question of group dominance. That is, for Foucault, power was a relationship between individuals, existing only when exercised and not "owned" by groups of

individuals or social classes. “Institutions and governments [for Foucault] are simply the ossification of highly complex sets of power relations which exist at every level of the social body” (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 99). Thus, Foucault visualizes the materialization of the effects of power neither as economically determined, nor as separable from the subjects and systems of thought generated. In fact, it is precisely in the constitution of systems of thought and of subjects that the effects of power are apparent.

The Marxist counter-argument here revolves around illustrating how economic dominance or the control of the means of production by elites shapes cultural production in the interests of (economic) elites. Feminist or critical race holds a similar perspective, albeit in relation to structures of racialized dominance or patriarchy. Indeed, Marxist-Feminist (Millet, 1969) or Marxist-Race scholarship (Davis, 1998; 2003) seeks to expose the ways in which structures of racial inequality or patriarchy are grounded in economics as well. There are, thus, two ways outlined here of thinking through how power functions in social ordering. The one focused on economics and grouped phenomena of hierarchy, the other attuned to the individual and discursive modes for exercising power.

These views have implications for a theory of resistance. Linked with a Marxist view of culture is that notion that (economic) class-formations are the basis for organizing resistance. Indeed, a classical Marxist program reposes on the notion that an end to class-domination (or racial- or gender domination) would spell that end of power relations (O’Farrell, 2005, p. 132). For Foucault, such a view is unrealistic. A society without power relations is impossible, according to Foucault. For Marxists, this sounds fatalistic and potentially politically apathetic. Foucauldians, however, have argued that their view doesn’t foreclose the possibility of resistance (O’Farrel, 2005; Lemke, 2000).

For Foucault-inspired researchers, measures taken up collectively or individually can have the effect of reorganizing power relations and of empowering different groups. Yet, this tension is always conceived as a question of “agonism” between power and resistance, not a final triumph or a throwing off of chains.

With respect to the current study, there are a number of points to note here. Notably, the Foucauldian vision has certain advantages. These are a vision of discursive activity/products as constructive both of subjects and of social reality. This differs from classical Marxist ideology theory, in which false consciousness permeates many popular cultural texts. Additionally, a Foucauldian perspective is strong with respect to historical contingency. Through a Foucauldian model, it becomes possible to examine given constellations of discursive artefacts, screen prison dramas in this case, within a research scheme that is attuned to the historical process of change in popular culture. As will become clear in the following section, a willingness to engage, in depth, with the practice of neo-liberal government (instead of dismissing neo-liberalism as premised on false knowledge) helps identify how such discourse structures, or is reframed, in screen prison drama.

With respect to the current project, a Foucauldian perspective is limited in a number of ways. For one, Foucault’s concern is not explicitly linked with a project to evaluate or pronounce politically, explicitly anyway, on given systems of social order. The current project is interested in engaging with prison visibility from the political position that the raced and classed imbalances presently existing in American criminal justice are immensely socially costly. While I do not want to assert that US neo-liberal government is founded on “false knowledge”, I do want to argue that neo-liberal crime

control as practiced in the United States is socially costly both financially, and in terms of its deepening of racialized and classed social cleavages. I do not mean to assert that a restructuring of criminal justice as political goal is tantamount to an “end of power relations”. That being said, it is the view of the current study that one can signal more and less socially costly systems of order.

Additionally, it seems important to the current inquiry to be able to investigate the racialised practices of criminal justice precisely as a group phenomenon, and not as an atomic question purely of individuals caught in microphysical power relations. American criminal justice currently acts on groups of individuals, according to race, gender and class (Davis, 1998; 2003; Kitwana, 2002; Mauer, 2000; Garland, 1990; 2001; Platt, 2001). Indeed, research has suggested that the criminal justice system is a key institutional means of reinforcing hierarchical racial groupings in the United States (Kitwana, 2002; Hamer, 2001; Mauer, 2000). For this reason, I am interested in how screen prison drama frames the dynamics of race, class and gender as the discursive conditions through which prison becomes visible. The tools for elaborating such an analysis are not readily available through a Foucauldian view.

Thus, the current chapter will refer to critical race studies such as those by Hall et al. (1978), Hall (2004), and Reeves and Campbell (1994). These writers have suggested that media discourses on crime articulate social formations in ways that help to propagate and/or re-work existing hierarchies. They demonstrate that race, class and gender function as grouped social formations through which power becomes actualised. As a result, I attempt a partial and conjectural reconciliation of these two traditionally opposed perspectives.



## Discipline, Power, Changing Justice

In order to be better able to decipher the discursive patterns visible in recent screen prison drama, this section maps what has taken place in the US practices of punishment in recent decades, and examines discourses aligned with these changes. I appeal first to work done by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). There are two reasons why I have chosen this point of departure. First, Foucault's mapping of the rise of disciplinary power has been an influential text in criminological analyses of prison systems and, indeed, in criminal justice (Garland, 1990; 2001). Second, in the sub-field of screen prison drama research, most writers have referred to *Discipline* (1977), in the main, to contest Foucault's argument that the spectacular plays little role in modern punishment (Jarvis, 2004; Rapping, 2003; Mason, 1998). That being said, Foucault's account of disciplinary power has been updated in the field of criminology in part by writers such as Platt (2001) and Garland (1990; 2001). These writers suggest that the institutional practices of rehabilitative, medico-scientific punishment applied in the welfare era are being reframed in the United States, with neo-liberal practices of punishment. I produce a brief historical account of these changes, which serves as background for discursive analysis of screen prison drama in the remaining three chapters.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault contends that the regime-change from a sovereign-Monarchic mode of government to the classical liberal state occurred in part through practices of punishment. Based on techniques of spectacular public torture, mediaeval punishment expiated the guilty party's transgression against the regent's

power (Foucault, 1977). In this economy of keeping order, criminality was defined as transgression against the supreme power of the sovereign. Extremes of scaffold punishment were thus precisely the point. In “the ‘excesses’ of torture, a whole economy of power [was] invested” (Foucault, 1977, p. 35). Punishment made sense as the sovereign’s publicly performed vengeance upon the transgressor—who effectively became a symbol of potential or actual mutiny (Foucault, 1977, p. 47). Crime, in this system, was enfolded in a discourse of treason against sovereign power. Thus, mediaeval punishment became the cruel and spectacular moment at which the traitor paid bodily for insubordination. This constellation of power—effectively held in place by the central lynch pin of an omniscient monarch—animated the attendant regime of punishment techniques based on scaffold torture. Public spectacle of punishment was one technique for practicing a particular form of political power.

According to Foucault, the spectacular exercise of power in punishment receded towards the end of the Monarchic era. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault locates the change in France midway through the 1800s, contending that at this point punishment “gradually ceased to be a spectacle” (1997, p. 9). Foucault is referring to the fact that public punishments and tortures such as hanging, flaying, whipping and so on were gradually displaced by more “closed” and invisible forms of punishment—i.e. incarceration. Punishment thus migrated into state institutions designed to “rehabilitate” through disciplinary techniques. And, although these disciplinary techniques were articulated and practiced most clearly in the penitentiary, they were actually spread across society’s institutions, from schools to factories to hospitals.

Although Foucault's charge that penal institutions do not perform a publicly spectacular representational function<sup>19</sup> deserves further consideration, I am inclined in the main to agree that contemporary American prisons are largely closed off from public view. Public "bearing witness", in fact, is not only unnecessary to the effective meting out of modern punishment, but, when improperly managed, can actually be disruptive of the state's disciplinary initiatives. One needs only think of the 'escape' of pictures and video footage from America's improvised terror-prisons.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), then, Foucault describes how the prison (and indeed other institutions of the "disciplinary society") became responsible for (re)training inmates through techniques of surveillance and medicalized norm enforcement. Referring to Bentham's panoptic model, Foucault suggests a metaphor of surveillance-based techniques of administering power, through which bodies, and indeed subjects, were rendered docile through the prospect of the (potentially) constant gaze of the warden. For Foucault, disciplinary subjects then even internalised the presence of the "watcher", and became preoccupied with surveying themselves. The disciplines, or the social sciences, Foucault saw as emerging in tandem with disciplinary power. Thus, the disciplinary society was created through organizations of space and time (i.e. the schedule). It was also brought about by a scientific attention to bodies (i.e. measuring normalcy), to matters like physical deportment and to behaviour in the psychological sense. The disciplines that studied man also established norms to which individuals were trained/encouraged to conform through surveillance. The prison, as perhaps the most coercive institution of the

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, knowledge of the existence of prisons is diffused by the state, and could be construed thus as representational. However, the actual carrying out of punishments in prisons is not generally mediated or otherwise diffused. (Note here the exceptional appeals made to have landmark executions diffused publicly (Lesser, 1993)).

disciplinary society, acted to enforce the norms of training and rehabilitation according to disciplinary techniques set out in the social sciences.

Along with this, of course, came a particular vision of the criminal, of society, and of crime. What in the Monarchic era was a question of treason against the body of the sovereign became in (classical and reform) liberal society a question of transgression against social norms. Deviance, disease, abnormality and criminality became connected, as the social sciences set about quantifying and mapping human “norms”. If crime was a matter of maladjustment or some sort of perversion, punishment became a question of rehabilitation. And so, for Foucault, science, psychology and the medico-disciplinary model extended through the disciplinary society, whose most “extreme” institutional forms was the penitentiary.

The transition to neo-liberal government in the United States in the 1980s precipitated a modification to the state of affairs described by Foucault. Influential criminologist David Garland describes recent changes in American criminal justice policy (1990; 2001). According to Garland, renowned expert on American crime control, neo-liberal strategies for managing crime are framed as “risk management” on the one hand, and “punitive punishment” on the other (2001). Thus, crime control and penal policy have increasingly become animated by twin discourses of “protection” and “neutralization”. These discursive principles are associated with neo-liberal techniques of government such as risk assessment and managerialism. Rather than focusing on the scientific rehabilitation of offenders, as was the case within the regime of punishment associated with the welfare state, today’s US crime control practices are more concerned with preventing crime by managing “at-risk” populations (Garland, 2001).

In practical terms, this has meant more prisons, longer jail terms, harsher sentences, 3-strikes laws, and tougher security measures in carceral institutions, which are designed to keep potentially dangerous felons “off the streets” (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 1999; Platt, 2001). The punitive flavour of recent criminal justice policy, then, has something to do with new approaches to crime as “risk”. Rather than inspire terror in the power of the sovereign, punitive neo-liberal American punishment techniques drive at the goal of “protecting of the public” through incapacitation of offenders. Additionally, neo-liberal discourses of fiscal responsibility and personal responsibility find expression in the technical administration of harsh consequences (Garland, 2001). It is thus that college equivalency programs, vocational training, counselling and other rehabilitative programming in US prisons are gradually, or not so gradually, being phased out (Platt, 2001). There has been a wave of prison privatisation as well (Jarvis, 2004; Platt, 2001). Privatisation and cutting of rehabilitation programs, then, is articulated in terms of a neo-liberal principle of “fiscal responsibility”<sup>20</sup>.

Yet, even as the neo-liberal discourse of “risk” has been articulated increasingly in crime control, so have punitive practices in lawbreaking increased apace (Garland, 2001). Changes in discourses of morality and personal responsibility are referred to in the implementation of harsh punishments as “consequences” of wrongdoing (Garland, 2001). More individualizing and moralistic sets of discourses have been applied to crime and

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, the cost of enlarging existing prisons or building new ones, as well as housing a growing number of inmates is astronomical (Jarvis, 2004; Garland, 2001). Fiscal responsibility is thus a principle applied selectively by neo-liberal reformers. Rehabilitative programs, and programs concerned with prisoner welfare are thus declining (Garland, 2001), while prison-building initiatives continue apace. Indeed, I shall contend somewhat later that such selective application of the principle of fiscal responsibility is one site at which neo-liberal discourse on crime control can be criticized, precisely because of its failure to adhere to its own logic. For example, it has been documented that investment in contemporary prisons fail to produce returns that are useful to society, at least in terms of recidivism rates (Reiman, 2004).

punishment (Garland, 2001). If the American welfare state's criminal justice system discursively constructed offenders as victims of social, psychological or economic traumas, then applied practices of educational rehabilitation and retraining were meant to "correct" these issues (Garland, 2001, p. 12). Integral to neo-liberal crime-control practice, however, is a different discursive construction of offenders as "wrong-doers". This construction of the offender is referred to in the technical applications of deterrence and tough punishment. Thus, as scientific and/or rehabilitative techniques of punishment have fallen into disuse, so have discourses of "tough justice", "fiscal responsibility" and "risk management" been applied in the restructuring of a "no frills" penal practice (Gordon, 1991).

This describes in brief some of the transitions that have taken place in American criminal justice in recent decades. Neo-liberal techniques of punishment have, in the American context, reframed aspects of how discipline is practiced in the penitentiary and in the institutions of crime control. Instead of functioning according to a classical- or reform liberal agenda of rehabilitation derived in part from the medico-social science disciplines, a different set of discourses is presently being applied. These new animating discourses can be tied to Old Testament Christian discourses of good versus evil and on moral wrongdoing, and on neo-liberal economic principles of managerialism (i.e. fiscal responsibility and risk management), instead of social scientific research. The effect of these transitions has been to displace the disciplinary techniques associated with medicalized, psychological rehabilitation. Instead, military techniques of control and containment have of late been applied in prisons, just as "retraining" has been framed perhaps more as redemption through application of harsh consequences (e.g. "hard time

for hard crime”). Thus, harsh neo-liberal prison conditions are meant to have a redeeming moral effect in that they are meant to properly “punish” offenders into taking responsibility for their criminal acts. Crime and punishment are being thought and, hence, administered differently under neo-liberal government.

The current section has thus given a brief account of what the transition to American neo-liberal modes of crime control/punishment has entailed, both discursively and in terms of practices in crime control. This account will be important in that it illustrates what some of the discursive articulations of neo-liberal punishment discourse in screen prison drama might be. I am not satisfied with the breadth of this account, however, in terms of the stock it takes of neo-liberal discourses. In fact, it is the position of this study that a wider set of neo-liberal discourses are involved in sustaining the current transition in regimes of punishment. Neo-liberal government, punishment included, hangs together through various discourses that animate social ordering in this type of government, from the instantiation of subjects to the management of the economy, for example. In later analysis of screen prison drama, I shall thus be concerned to identify discourses associated with neo-liberal government in this wider sense, for I contend, these are involved in creating conditions in which raced, classed and gendered neo-liberal punishment practices make sense.

## **Governmentality and An Account of Neo-Liberalism**

To engage with this broader discursive configuration of neo-liberal government beyond the sphere of punishment, this section refers to some work done by governmentality studies theorists who have mapped neo-liberal government. I invoke this

body of theory here for the following reason, and indeed with some important caveats. Governmentality studies work on neo-liberalism is useful because of the depth of its engagement with the discourses and practices associated with this mode of government. Writers such as Barbara Cruikshank (1993; 1999), Colin Gordon (1991), Thomas Lemke (2000), Nicolas Rose et al (1996), and Mitchell Dean (1999) have intimately and extensively investigated the functioning of neo-liberalism as a system of government, inquiring into the discourses, techniques and rationalities which accompany it. This level of analytic engagement is less clear in the work of Elayne Rapping (2003) and other writers who have been inspired by Marxist ideology critique. Lemke has suggested that ideology writers have at times suffered from a tendency to “write off” neo-liberalism as the product of “false knowledge” (i.e. ideology) or as an “irrational” system of ordering society (2000). For Lemke, then, a vision of neo-liberalism as “false consciousness” has actually often prevented true engagement with its techniques, discourses and practices (2000).

That being said, governmentality studies work has at times suffered from different limitations. This stems from a number of points. First of all, governmentality theorists engagement with neo-liberalism is often framed as “value neutral” (Gordon, 1991; Lemke, 2000). Such a position assumes that “value neutrality” in research is possible (which is a somewhat dubious move for a social constructionist). Second, a Foucauldian reticence to engage with the repercussions of how “group” power is exercised permeates the field. That is, questions of race- and/or class power do not figure in the writings of Dean (1999), Gordon (1991), Rose et al (1996) and Lemke (2000). Instead, these writers refer in more nebulous terms to “social cleavages” engendered by neo-liberal



government. They do not address the ways in which neo-liberal institutions administer society according to systems that entrench or reinforce patterned social hierarchies. In the practices associated with criminal justice this is particularly the case, from mandatory drug sentencing policy to policing mandates that assign higher “risk” levels to black inner city communities.

The transition to neo-liberal government in America, then, has been couched more broadly than just in techniques and institutions of criminal justice. Indeed, a very different discursive articulation of the individual and of society is at the basis of the disparate regimes of neo-liberal and reform liberal criminal justice practice. The transition to neo-liberal government from the welfare state in the United States has been anchored beyond criminal justice.

Governmentality theorist Colin Gordon contends that one of the main areas of this displacement has been with respect to the assumption—in classical liberal government—that individuals could be counted on to act as rational consumers (Gordon, 1991, p. 43). Fellow governmentality theorists Rose, et al. (1996, p. 10) affirm that market and state act as separate entities in classical liberalism, and indeed in the welfare state model of government as well. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s much quoted “death of society” speech marked a shift in discourse and indeed in the practice of government in the United States and Britain (Cruikshank, 1993; Dean, 1999). The neo-liberal state’s role, then, became increasingly to foster competitive, entrepreneurial activity in individuals and in markets. The state’s retreat from social policies (i.e. welfare, universal public healthcare or education) and from protecting its citizens from the vicissitudes of

global capital, thus, can be understood in light of this reframing of the state's role in administering society (Lemke, 2000, p. 6).

In addition, neo-liberal practices of government have been associated with certain modes of subjectivity-creation. Governmentality studies work has referred to neo-liberal "techniques/technologies of the self". "Technologies of the self" have been defined as practices of "self-governance" in which economics, ethics and consumption "converge in a relation of self to self, and by extension others" (Bratich, et al., 2003). Lemke, somewhat similarly, defines "technologies of self" as "forms of self-regulation" which are actually part of a grey-scale "continuum of government" which ranges from various techniques from "self governance" to more coercive, repressive or "technologies of domination" (2000, pp.4, 12). In governmentality theory, technologies of self are practices of self-regulation that are actually associated with the instantiation of modern subjects. The neo-liberal subject is thus called upon to take up self-governance in relation to the self, especially in terms of moral activity and personal responsibility.

Governmentality theory scholars have observed a number of key "technologies of self". For example, Barbara Cruikshank has studied practices of "self esteem" or "self help" as these have become preferred means for neo-liberal state intervention in issues once defined as collective. That is, neo-liberal practices of government have framed problems like addiction, abuse, poverty, crime and racial disadvantage discursively as solvable through personal self-esteem practice, rather than through state administered action, legislation or political struggle (Dean, 1999). Another example might be neo-liberal techniques of self, like cultures of dieting, fitness, and bodybuilding (Cruikshank, 1993; Dean, 1999). In effect, through practices associated with health and fitness or with

“self-help”, subjects are encouraged to “assume responsibility” for personal health, and addiction-management or criminal behaviour, for example (Cruikshank, 1993, p. 333). The exercise of freedom as “taking responsibility” thus becomes a condition of moral subjectivity on which the neo-liberal state’s practice of government depends (Cruikshank, 1993). In relation to criminal justice and crime control, it is possible to see links between neo-liberal discourses/techniques of personal responsibility and transitions in how punishment functions.

The links between moral self-work and criminal justice can be conceived along lines suggested by Reeves and Campbell (1994), in their study of the crack cocaine crisis. These writers identified practices of inclusion/exclusion based on how offenders/delinquents were integrated into the systems of drug rehabilitation and incarceration. For those “other” (read: black) delinquents who were deemed incapable of “taking responsibility” coercive exclusion through incarceration emerged as a solution to drug addiction and/or crime. For “included” (read: white) offenders, a myriad of medico-rehabilitative rituals of inclusion/redemption were made available.

What I have done in the current section, then, is to identify some of the techniques and discourses identified in governmentality studies work on neo-liberal government. Analysis of screen prison drama that is to come will take these discursive patterns into account, especially as they relate to how criminal justice is mapped in the texts. I have been careful to note, also, at the start of the section, that there are a few limitations to the governmentality studies work cited here. Indeed, the field, to an extent, manifests a lack of attention to how systemic patterns of social disadvantage tied to race, class and gender, for example, are structured into neo-liberal government as it is practiced in the United

States. The chapter's final section positions some of this work in relation to a critical race perspective.

## **Structural Hierarchies and Critique of a Governmentality Model**

Marxist-inspired analysis of the type carried out by Stuart Hall et al. (1978; 2004) is more effective in addressing how social formations such as race and class are implicated in the production of social stratification and cleavages that seem to accompany neo-liberal practice. In paying attention to how formations of class/race were articulated in media coverage, and refracted by economic/social processes, Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* effectively illustrated how the British history of colonialism was being reframed and rearticulated through the "mugging crisis". Various governmentality studies (Gordon, 1991; Bratich, 2003; Lemke, 2000; Rose et al, 1996) have given effective account of the discursive formations, from "self work" to personal responsibility and "just desserts" punishment, that underpin the functioning of neo-liberal government. Yet, these studies have had relatively little to say about how these discourses frame race/class and/or gender and sexuality in ways that may accentuate existing social cleavages.

If neo-liberal governmental techniques have been associated with increased social cleavages, what sort of sense can be made of this situation? In terms of discourse and practices, what aspects of neo-liberal government work to accentuate raced, gendered and classed exclusion? Reeves and Campbell have a number of suggestions to make in relation to the discursive construction of the crack-cocaine crisis (1994). For them, the "narco-carceral" complex encompasses a series of practices and institutions that

administer illegal drug use (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 46). They identify “soft” anti-drug discourses such as the “technologies of self that are deployed [as] part of the rehabilitation process” (Reeves and Campbell, 1994, p. 40) Taking place through the discipline and discourses of psychotherapy, discourses like the confession are practiced as a rite of inclusion. That is, for those individuals who are willing to engage in self-work, and to speak in the confessional mode, the reward of inclusion/normalcy acts as a means of securing redemption and inclusion. According to the authors, white “offenders” were most often enfolded in these discourses in television news reporting in the 1980s. Black “delinquents”, however, were more often enfolded in rites of exclusion. Refusing to- or denied the opportunity to speak in the confessional mode, blacks were most often depicting as unrepentant “others”. On television and in public life, the state’s coercive and repressive criminal justice institutions, and not the medico-therapeutic establishment, were thus mobilized to deal with blacks according to this paradigm.

Reeves and Campbell’s analysis thus illustrates the ways in which different discourses and practices of neo-liberal government have been applied selectively to various populations. In their study, rehabilitative/inclusive practices appeared reserved mostly for whites—as a rite of inclusion/redemption. By contrast, blacks were discursively excluded through their portrayal as remorseless delinquent others who were best contained through coercive means. In terms of replicating and extending the practices of exclusion of black Americans, the narco-carceral complex, and indeed news reporting as well, is an important aspect of neo-liberal government. Neo-liberal technologies of self and rationalities of punishment and government can thus construct classed and raced subjects, the consequence of which can be coercive and disciplinary

practices of exclusion. Social cleavages associated with neo-liberalism in the states, then, are possible sustained through the (selectively applied/articulated) technologies of self and modes of government.

In relation to the screen prison dramas in this study, I shall suggest that similar disparities in the raced construction of neo-liberal subjects might be at work. For example, I shall examine how, in the “white Angst” films *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998) and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000), whites are enfolded in discourses of redemption through self-work and entrepreneurialism, while blacks are depicted as (irrational and unpredictable) predator criminals. Such a construction is hardly uniform, however, in the dramas I examine. In “black redemption films” *First Time Felon* (dir. Charles Dutton, 1997) and *Redemption* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004), it is precisely black male ex-criminals who are constructed as redeemable through self-work. These findings confirm, in effect, the orientation adopted at the start of the dissertation, namely, that popular culture is a contested and uneven site at which discourses are articulated in far from uniform ways.

## **Conclusion: Chapter Two**

My interest in Foucault’s work in this chapter, as well as in recent trends in American crime control and in discourses associated with neo-liberal government, stems from a desire to map the discursive and political background into which contemporary screen prison drama fits. I have been preoccupied with understanding recent shifts in disciplinary power and neo-liberal punishment and crime control practices as these fit in with wider discourses that compose the neo-liberal mode of governance in the US. In this chapter I have referred to the work of Foucault, updating and modifying his research

where necessary. Perhaps the key point of modification stems from my mapping of the intersection of governmentality studies and a critical race perspective. At stake here is the potential limitation of governmentality work in addressing how neo-liberal practices are associated with increasing raced, classed and gendered social cleavages.

In the three chapters that follow, the theoretical, methodological and contextual concerns raised thus far play out through analysis of selected screen prison dramas. Chapter three focuses on “anxious” narratives regarding white, American masculinity. Part of what comes into focus in this chapter is the relationship of white masculinity to constructions of American national identity. Additionally, I also examine how (homo)sexuality and race are mapped in the dramas, especially in relation to the carceral context. My analysis reveals the articulation of a certain narrative of white masculine downward mobility, and associated discourses that appear reinforcing of a neo-liberal economy of punishment.

In chapter four, I examine two black “redemption” dramas. The dramas *Redemption* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004) and *First Time Felon* (dir. Charles Dutton, 1997) tell a different story: one of black redemption through “self work” that can be read as having links to Christian discourses of redemption. I argue in this chapter that these representations in ways articulate neo-liberal discourses, while at the same time showing a kind of rite of inclusion applied to black male criminals. Finally, in chapter five, I examine two unusual representations—*OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) and *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001)—the former highly polysemic and the latter quite critical of racism in American society and in criminal justice specifically.

## CHAPTER 3: STORIES OF WHITE MALE ANGST

### Introduction: Chapter Three

In this chapter, I examine two films, *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998) and *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000), as they articulate a narrative vision of “white Angst” and downward mobility. The representation of incarceration in these films is mediated also by discourses about white- and black masculinity, homosexuality and white class fractioning. Despite the films’ articulation of “white Angst” and an associated set of discourses that are open to interpretation as supportive of harsh and racialized transitions in criminal justice, I argue that the films are sites of negotiation. My analysis demonstrates the fractured and complex nature of these representations, in particular via their articulation of homosexuality and, on one level, a vision of race and class. Findings thus support the view that popular culture, and the prison dramas located within it, is contested terrain.

Historical developments are visible in these films too, as I read discursive articulations of gender, race, punishment and discipline in relation to earlier “classic” prison films representing white masculinity. I draw out historically visible discursive shifts by reading *History X* and *Animal Factory* in relation to two “classic” prison films from the late 1960s and early 1970s—*Cool Hand Luke* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) and *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971). A historical comparison provides insight into how constructions of masculinity, redemption, self-work, whiteness and blackness, social order and punishment have shifted in recent decades.



With a degree of historical perspective, the shifts in discourse from a late welfare era articulation of punishment, gender and social order to a more contemporary (neo-liberal) one become evident also. Shifting contests in popular culture are visible around race and class, for example, as earlier invisibility of black- and low-income Americans has been replaced with certain discursive framings of these groups. Contest and the changing social construction of crime and punishment are thus visible in relation to the representations read in chapter three.

## **Seeing the White Man**

Masculinity scholars Richard Dyer (1997; 2002), Robert Connell (1987; 1995; 2000), John Beynon (2002), Stephen Whitehead (2002), and Michael Kimmel (2006), and whiteness scholars Annalee Newitz (1997) and Doug Henwood (1997) have argued that focus on the construction of “dominant” groups in popular culture is performed through invisibility. For example, influential masculinity- and visual studies critic Richard Dyer, in his book *White* (1997), suggests that white privilege in America is performed, in part, by the positioning of whiteness at the centre of representation. That is, whiteness, and particularly white masculinity, is the central subject position of much visual culture in the United States (Dyer, 1997). This occurs through the symbolic definitions of Americanism, for which being white is synonymous with being “just people” (Dyer, 1997). Although white Americans are raced, whiteness is enfolded in a discourse of denial, which effaces it as racial or cultural identity.

Masculinity studies scholars, who have examined the Western “gender order”<sup>21</sup> with respect to how masculinities function, have come to some similar conclusions (Connell, 2000; Whitehead, 2002; Beynon, 2002). Without getting into specifics of the term “gender order” here, masculinity scholars generally concur that, in the United States, (white) masculinity tends to occupy a “dominant” position. In relation to representation, this means that white men often occupy the central subject positions and are represented as dominant. Additionally, white women, women of colour and minority male characters are traditionally marginalized or elided.

This state of affairs is somewhat complicated in recent prison drama generally, and in *History X* and *Animal Factory* specifically. Recent dramas have tended to focus on the racially fractioned nature of modern American prisons, placing issues of racial identity and conflict at the centre of representation. Despite the fact that whiteness remains coded at the centre of both recent “white Angst” films, racial identity is certainly made visible and discussed explicitly. The shape racial conflict takes in these films can be read as generally supportive of punitive and racially divisive penal policy, yet by the same token, race is both made explicitly visible and indeed problematized in the dramas.

Whiteness is refracted in *Animal Factory* and *History X* through class discourse.

Deviant, criminal and extreme whiteness is identified with what contributors to the

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<sup>21</sup> An advance upon the notion of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987; 2000), which was criticized—among other things—for its determinism (Whitehead, 2002), the notion of a gender order implies that relations of dominance and marginality exist between masculinities. Utilized in the early work of seminal masculinity studies scholar Richard Connell, “hegemonic masculinity” is meant to refer to practices and identities that are associated with “doing” the type of masculinity that is dominant in a particular culture at a particular time. In multicultural societies, multiple forms of masculinities co-exist, growing in relation to one another (Connell, 2000, p. 10). Definite social relations exist between these types of masculinity. “Hegemonic” masculinity, however, is coded as the dominant mode with reference to all sorts of practices, from sexuality to techniques of the body, to labor relations, and in relation to overlapping social structures such as race and class. Furthermore, the hegemonic form in a particular culture form is not always the most comfortable to inhabit—it can have great costs for adherents (Connell, 2000, p. 11). Indeed, hegemonic masculinity—for Connell—is more about “idealized” forms of masculinity, than about particular individual men who are able to practice all aspects of the hegemonic form of masculinity.

volume *White Trash* (eds. Newitz and Wray 1997) have identified as “white trash” identity. Newitz has suggested that whiteness becomes explicitly visible in US culture when associated with downward mobility, poverty, alcoholism, criminality, deviance, violence, extreme racism, and hyperbolic masculinity (Newitz, 1997). According to Newitz, this construction of “white trash” identity implies both marginalization of poor whites, while constructing a homogenous, normative middle-class vision of whiteness. In the films surveyed in this chapter, deviant, low-class whiteness is identified with criminality, violence and moral corruption. Constructions of white trash identity and deviant/criminal blackness are articulated against one another in the films as well, complicating depictions of class/race fractioning. Against white trash deviance, both *Animal Factory* and *History X* articulate a kind of normalized vision of mainstream middle-class white masculinity.

Making an additional comment on how whiteness and masculinity have been constructed in American popular culture, studies on television (Fiske, 1987), political discourse (Geis, 1987) and cinema (Tasker, 1993; Jeffords, 1994; 1993) have documented the inflections of the imaging of (dominant, white) masculinity in the 1980s. Tasker (1993) and Jeffords (1994), for instance, note the emergence of aestheticized muscular male bodies in action cinema of the period. Both authors connect images of “musculinity” (Tasker, 1993, p. 5)<sup>22</sup> with Reagan era political discourse and campaigning

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<sup>22</sup> “Musculinity”, for Tasker, denotes the way in which action film of the 1980s produced a type of masculinity as display, in which “masculine muscles” have become a standard, through actor-body-builders such as Stallone, and Schwarzenegger (1993, p. 5). For Tasker, the appearance (or rather the growing popularity) of muscularity in cinema was an inflection and a re-working of traditions of representing the male body that existed well before the 1980s.

and with economic transitions and the so-called social “crisis in masculinity”<sup>23</sup>. Geis’ “Cowboy myth” (1987) refers to the emergence of “Cowboy masculinity” in discursive forms such as political campaigning and action-cinema. These studies document how masculinity and whiteness changed in inflection in the United States in the 1980s. The prison films surveyed in the chapter, as inheritors of some of these transitions, continue to articulate, and indeed inflect, the aesthetic and gendered constructions of masculinity that emerged in 1980s action cinema and political discourse.

Adding a racial dynamic, cultural critic Susan Jeffords documents the ways in which bodies were symbolically divided into two categories in popular culture and political discourse during the Reagan years (1994, p. 25). On the one hand, the soft AIDS-infected, drug dependent, immoral and criminal body was identified with marginalized communities such as homosexuals, racial minorities, white women, and

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<sup>23</sup> According to masculinity studies research, the ‘crisis in masculinity’ effectively became a fixture of popular discourse in the 1980s (Beynon, 2002; Kimmel, 1996). The term ‘crisis’ denotes the uneasy effects of men’s changed relationships to family and work life in the post-industrial period. Effectively, use of the term ‘crisis’ implies that American masculinity as a whole is in disarray. This notion of a unified “crisis” experienced by all men is not actually supported by historical evidence. According to Beynon, American men have been affected by the ‘crisis’ in different ways, depending on a variety of factors, economic status, race, sexuality and geographic location, for example (2002). Yet, America has now undergone some decades of fairly major change in men’s roles in both labor and social life. Feminism and women’s growing inclusion in wage labor re-aligned not just job-markets and workplaces, but domestic labor and space. As a result, men have been increasingly called upon to share in the home-centered chores of childcare, emotional labor and domestic chores. Labor market pressures have also contributed to instability in male identities. Not only did men begin to compete with women for work but traditionally masculine manual labor jobs have largely disappeared due to de-industrialization (Kimmel, 1996). With the off shoring of smokestack industries, elaborate shop-floor subcultures and workers unions have slowly died away. Men have had to contend not only with women’s increased financial stability and participation in the labor market. As a result, there has much debate in masculinity studies as to whether there actually exists a “real world” crisis in masculinity, or whether crisis-talk is an epiphenomena with a cultural and mediated existence and little basis in economic or social reality (Beynon, 2002). This debate is complex, and I will not deal with it in depth here. My position on the matter is, however, that major shifts in labor markets, family structures, and American culture correspond roughly to what appears in popular discourse as a “crisis in masculinity”. Popular discourse explains these shifts as a “crisis in masculinity”. Whether the term “crisis” is apt is questionable. However, significant economic and social shifts in *some* men’s roles did take place over the past three decades. And, in popular media, these shifts have been explained and experienced as a “crisis” in men’s roles and position in America and in the UK.

effeminate men (Jeffords, 1994, p. 24). Conversely, the “hard” male body (laboring, disciplined, exercising, healthy, which usually belonged to a white man) came to stand as a metaphor for national identity (Jeffords, 1994, p. 25). In effect, the hard male (white) body became a symbol in all aspects of national symbolic life (Jeffords, 1994, p. 25). Tasker (1993) has suggested that hyperbolic masculinity in action cinema of the 1980s can be read ambiguously as both “masculinity triumphant” and as parody of “hard” masculinity. This is Tasker’s way of reading complexity and contest into cultural texts. For her, “hard bodies” excessive masculinity can play both a conservative and a parodic role.

The films surveyed in this chapter, I argue, are less open to this type of interpretation. Although *History X* particularly represents aestheticized male bodies and hyperbolic masculinity, this construction anchors spectacular masculinity to an articulation of white trash identity. I argue that by inflecting “masculinity” through a white trash identity, the film anchors downwardly mobile white masculinity more solidly to concerns of class fractioning and less to discourses of national identity. Although negotiations of masculinities, especially white masculinity, is never wholly innocent and devoid of nationalist overtones in US culture.

Depictions of whiteness and of masculinity in cinema and television have changed substantially in recent decades, with a major point of inflection towards “masculinity” taking place in the 1980s. Classed whiteness and blackness have also been implicated by these transitions. Indeed, from the representations surveyed in this chapter, it is apparent that while white masculinity is perhaps still “centralized” in terms of constructions of subjectivity and narrative, this centrality is modulated by the increased

visibility of racial minority characters, and through the “classing” of downwardly mobile whites in representation. White masculinity appears somewhat anxious, under threat or in crisis, in both *History X* and *Animal Factory*. The full extent of these transitions is demonstrable in comparison with two prison film classics from the era of the welfare state.

## Reform Liberalism : Two Examples

Prison/punishment dramas *Cool Hand Luke* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) and *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1971)<sup>24</sup> are two films that catalogue the classical liberal (in the case of *Cool Hand Luke*) and the welfare state (in the case of *Clockwork*) rehabilitative model of punishment, while simultaneously critiquing this model fairly harshly. Disciplinary techniques of punishment are visible in both texts, as are a welfare era construction of white masculinity and a prison eco-system (in *Luke*) that is devoid of racial minority characters. These two films provide historical context for comparison with present-day screen prison drama. Through comparative analysis with recent texts, it is possible to gain a sense for discourses associated with the disciplinary-rehabilitative model of punishment and its problematization at the end of the welfare state’s heyday in the US. Indeed, one discursive mode for explaining the social ordering of punishment is

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<sup>24</sup> The film *A Clockwork Orange* is based on a book by British writer Anthony Burgess, and is set in futuristic Britain, with a mostly-British cast. Famous American director Stanley Kubrick directed the film, and *Orange* was widely released in 1971 in both Britain and the United States. Thus, although the film was widely released and viewed in the United States, it is perhaps not a prime candidate for this study, because it depicts a futuristic British context, and not civil imprisonment. That being said, it typifies precisely critique of the liberal therapeutic model of punishment, as well as other aspects of “rebellion” against the liberal model. It is for this reason that I mention it here.

visible in these films, as are the constructions of race and masculinity that accompany this understanding.

*Clockwork Orange* catalogues the life of the violent and dangerous Alex de Large, a delinquent youth who over the course of the film is punished for his gratuitous and vicious criminal acts. De Large is caught and prosecuted early on in the film for a series of violent outbursts. Indeed, the film was censored and heavily criticized at the time of its release because its depiction of violence was, at the time, considered extreme. The narrative unwinds as De Large undergoes scientific behaviour modification, which renders him incapable of committing further crimes. Including forced consumption of images and drug-induced nausea, De Large's behaviour modification regime is portrayed as cruel. A reformed De Large is released from his treatment psychologically unable to re-offend. The former delinquent experiences nausea when thinking about committing crimes, just as he does when contemplating sexual relations and listening to Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony. De Large is no longer able to choose the life of a law-abiding citizen; conventional morality has been forced on him by scientific tinkering.

This reflects badly on the state apparatus itself, which in the film takes its citizens for laboratory rats<sup>25</sup>. *Clockwork* implies that free will is an essential part of the "human animal". Scientific tinkering and disciplinary modifications that tamper with the power of decision risk destroying the human spirit. And so, in *Clockwork*, De Large's training is undone by one of his victims—a scientist enraged by the state's refusal to allow the

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<sup>25</sup> Anthony Burgess is quoted as using the cockney expression "a clockwork orange" to refer to the fact that "by definition, a human being is endowed with free will. He can use this to choose between good and evil. If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange—meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State". Thus, *Clockwork Orange* the book—like the film—is intended as a sort of critique of the liberal welfare state and its techniques of punishment / norm-production through which individuals are manipulated like clockwork toys.

criminal his free will. The result: De Large regains his ability and his desire to commit crimes, and he returns swiftly and decisively to a life of violent crime. At the film's conclusion, De Large contemplates giving up delinquency and joining mainstream society. Yet, the problem of scientific disciplinary punishment is posed in *reductio* by *Clockwork*. Scientific punishment as behaviour modification appears de-humanizing because it robs its wards of free will. The dystopian part of *Clockwork*'s fantasy is speculation in the direction that behaviour modification techniques may one day have the power to do away with criminality, and with it free will.

Against this set-up of a bureaucratic and disciplinary state, De Large's character represents rebellious and anti-social masculinity. Violent, vicious, and promiscuous, he incarnates an incorrigible delinquent whose existence illustrates the limits of the scientific disciplinary regime of punishment. Rebellious, and in this case deviant, masculinity is posed discursively as an identity-position from which to resist the homogenizing and norm-inducing coercion of the state. Some of these ideas can be identified equally in rhetoric of the 1960s counter cultural revolution. Civil disobedience, the persona of the "rebel without a cause" and "fighting the man" were glorified through films like *Clockwork*, in popular discourse as strategies for resisting the disciplinary state. Anti-social behaviour and criminal masculinity, thus, were in a sense celebrated in the late welfare liberal era. *Clockwork*, indeed, like other popular films of the era (e.g. *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (dir. Milos Forman, 1975)) articulates very clearly a narrative of opposition between a rebellious and delinquent anti-hero and an oppressive, bureaucratic state. The state, of course, is armed in these films with scientific technology necessary to pacifying its subjects coercively. Criminality symbolizes in some texts a



romantic notion of resistive marginality that contests state institutions' pressures to encourage normative rule following.

From a narrative point of view, then, *Clockwork* situates as anti-heroic subject a deviant and rebellious British male. De Large is not portrayed as physically spectacular, however. The body-builder's muscles of the 1980s action-hero are not in evidence. Fully clothed during most of the film, De Large appears instead lanky and unspectacular. *Clockwork's* visual construction of (criminal) masculinity is anchored quite firmly in conventions of representations that predominated pre-1980s.

In terms of its discursive set-up of punishment and of rebellious masculinity, *Clockwork* presents a vision of struggle at one moment towards the end of the British welfare state. A reform liberal understanding of society (as ordered) and of state infrastructure (as responsible for the welfare of its citizens) is at the basis of the tension between rebellious criminality on the one hand, and the disciplinary punishment regime of the state on the other. Constructions of masculinity, criminality, social order, and resistance are bound up together in De Large's struggle with the disciplinary punishment regime. Criminality in this configuration appears as a kind of solution to oppressive normative institutional practice. Crime thus symbolizes heroic rebellion. And indeed issues of redemption are left unexpressed, as questions of criminal guilt are effectively elided in favour of a celebration of rebellious masculine identity.

Another classic prison film, *Cool Hand Luke* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1967) is in ways similar. Released in the United States in 1967, the film does not articulate scientific rehabilitation, but it certainly sets up narrative conflict between a heroic rebel, and the totalitarian and oppressive "system". The protagonist in *Cool Hand Luke* is the archetypal

individualist character. His status as rebel-without-a-cause is established from the start, where Luke (Paul Newman) is incarcerated for wilfully knocking the heads of parking meters without apparent motive (Rapping, 2003, p. 83). Thus, the film begins its cataloguing of Luke's (mostly symbolic) conflict with the work camp's head warden, and indeed with the prison "system". After a series of transgressions, Luke is finally shot to death for his insubordination—the system cannot deal with his rebellion.

From these two classic examples of late welfare era prison films it is possible to identify the central tension that is typical of this period. On the one hand, the welfare state's prison articulates penal institutions as totalitarian, oppressive, and inimical to the human spirit because of an enforced loss of individuality. On the other hand, a spectacular and heroic marginal-rebel stages symbolic (and often criminal) insubordination in the name of indomitable human individuality. Crime and delinquency are articulated as extreme forms of individualism in these films. In this scenario, then, the hero's criminal acts do not affect his ability to perform as a sympathetic character—in fact they enhance his ability to stand in for all those opposed to the homogenizing and normative power of the welfare state. Masculinity in *Clockwork* and *Luke* is organized accordingly. Rebellion of youth against authority, symbolic acts of insubordination, and crime are articulated as sympathetic and integral to the masculine identities of the protagonists. Transgression and compulsive individuality appear as the "natural" preserve of male youth.

Confirming this narrative set-up, secondary characters in *Cool Hand Luke* appear docile and obey the warden with child-like obedience. Feminized in another way, the film hints that some of the cons are virgins, while Luke's potency is underscored by his

supposed ability to meet and seduce women. In *Clockwork*, some of De Large's sexual exploits are violent and brutal, but they nonetheless underscore his masculinity. In any case, the important point is that masculinity in these two films is articulated as rebellion *against* the system. Delinquency and criminality, in this case, are articulated as legitimate rebellion against a bureaucratic and totalitarian state. On this view, then, youthful (male) transgressions against "the system", and by extension against society, appear heroic because of their ability to reinvest citizens with individuality and with vitality.

*Clockwork* and *Luke* indicate a particular moment in time when (white) masculinity, criminality, punishment and resistance against the welfare state's coercive apparatuses were configured around the persona of the hero-rebel. In comparison with recent representations of American incarceration, these two films indicate the historicity of discursive formation, as well as a particular discursive struggle that conditioned prison visibility in cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Prison visibility at this time, as well as criminality, were inflected through a pitting of rehabilitative-totalitarian punishment against rebellious, individualistic masculinity. It is noteworthy that white masculinity is quite central in these films. Racial minority characters are not in evidence and, in addition, the issues of race in the carceral context, of violence among inmates, of racialized social disorder, of spectacular masculinity and of anxious whiteness have yet to emerge in these representations of incarceration.

## Anxious White Masculinity

The film *American History X* (dir. Tony Kaye, 1998)<sup>26</sup> represents a different moment in the organization of punishment, delinquency and racialized social disorder. Not only does *History X* put a fractioned and conflicted image of America society on centre stage, it also constructs narrative tension around redemption, entrepreneurialism and morality, instead of rebellion. Imprisonment figures centrally in the film, yet the penal institution, and the protagonist's relationship to it, are configured unlike in *Clockwork* or in *Cool Hand Luke*. The central character in the film is not a heroic and rebellious anti-hero who represents struggle against a totalitarian state/penal institution. Instead, tension stems not from conflicts between individual and bureaucratic "system", but rather from racialized social disorder. White downward mobility, black criminality, the predatory prison and a conflicted, dangerous social world appear as insurmountable obstacles for the (lower class) protagonist.

On a narrative level the film sets up a tale where the framing of racial conflict, punishment and morality is conflicted. At one level, the film's narrative is explicitly anti-racist. At another level, however, the implications of *History X*'s narrative construction actually have some quite strongly classed and raced implications. *History X* features well-know actors Edward Norton and Edward Furlong as two brothers—Derek and Danny Vineyard—who negotiate and re-negotiate their relationship to white supremacy. Derek

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<sup>26</sup> A footnote on some of the release details associated with *History X*. The film received a mixed welcome from critics and the public. The film was released in 1998 on a 10 million dollar budget, grossing 6.7 million US at the domestic box office and 23.8 million internationally (BoxOfficeMojo, 2005). Edward Norton's performance was nominated for an Oscar, yet reviews were not all positive. The *New York Times* praised performances by Ed Norton and Ed Furlong, as well as the camera work, but held some reservations about a "slender story" and supporting characters as "thin [as] a straw man... [and] essentially passive products of their small-minded environment" (Maslin, 1998). *USA Today*'s critic Mike Clark gave the film a "B" rating, calling it "over-baked" (1998). The *Los Angeles Times* was even more critical, calling *History X* a "well-intentioned... [but] simplistic and unconvincing look at a serious problem" (Turan, 1998). Thus, *History X* received both positive and negative media attention.

Vineyard/Ed Norton's encounter with spectacular, racist crime begins early on in the film. Fanned by their father's racist diatribes, the two brothers' white supremacist leanings are reinforced when the older man, a fireman, is killed trying to save a black drug addict from a blaze. Feeling threatened, the crack addicted black man shoots and kills his attempted rescuer, the boys' father. What follows is a tale of white downward mobility. The film depicts the fate of a family with no male breadwinner in the home: the Vineyards move to a dingy and mouldy apartment and the health of both younger sister and mother begins to fail due to stress, too many cigarettes and poverty. Venice Beach explains younger brother Danny, has become a conflicted and dangerous place for white working class families. At school, on the streets, and in the playgrounds, black and Latino gangs threaten white youth. Poverty and crime are endemic in Venice Beach, as neighbourhoods have diversified ethnically. Racial conflict and competition for resources is a central theme.

In this climate of fractional racial conflict, Derek takes action to re-empower the white community. His answer to white poverty and ethnic conflict is skinhead extremism. The older Vineyard provokes physical and verbal contests with young black men. Derek's magnetic pull and leadership abilities are put to work taking back territory from ethnic minority gangs. Next, the young man leads a violent group of skinheads to brutalize local ethnic minority businesses. Finally, a black youth attempts to burgle the Vineyards' home. Derek storms outside in under-shorts, Swastika-tattooed chest on full display, and brutally murders the thief by placing his head on the curb and stomping on it. Derek is arrested and receives a two-year prison sentence for 2<sup>nd</sup> degree murder.

It is during his jail term that Derek is redeemed through a sort of moral awakening. On arrival in prison, Derek's paramount concern is to provide for his personal security to avoid being punked by "the niggers". On his first day incarcerated, Derek quickly takes up with a white supremacist gang. The group provides him with protection. Yet this soon backfires. Derek's extremist ideas put him at odds with the gang's leader. Following a conflict, members of Vineyard's own gang, rape the young skinhead in the showers. The act forces Derek to reconsider his allegiance. He renounces the white group, putting himself at risk from the prison's black predators. "In here," Vineyard's black workmate tells him. "You guys is the niggers, not us."

It is at this point that Derek's redemption begins in earnest. After his rape and subsequent isolation, Derek's prison workmate protects him secretly from black predatory elements. Additionally, Derek's high school history teacher, a black man, designs a reading program for the young skinhead. When Derek returns home, he has changed his violent ways and his skinhead beliefs.

Derek's re-education appears at first as an antidote to problems of racial tension posed in the film. Deciding to work hard at a "real job", and to move his family to a better location, Derek returns from prison full of hope. He goes to various job interviews, grows his hair longer and assumes the project of securing financial solvency for his family. Yet, Derek's renouncing of racist beliefs is insufficient protection in violent and fractioned environment. Derek's younger brother has become integrated into the skinhead community in the absence of his older sibling. In an all-night discussion, Derek manages to dissuade Danny from participating in gang activities. In an emotional scene, the young men symbolically dismantle the Nazi shrine in their room. This is not the moment of

denouement, however. Danny is shot dead at school the following day by a black classmate he'd antagonized earlier. The film ends with Derek cradling the bloodied body of his brother, the younger man killed by a bullet from a black man's gun.

At one level, then, the film presents a narrative that is explicitly anti-racist. Derek's skinhead extremism appears as the source of much violence and conflict in the film in that this violent and Nazi-like response to racial tension is constructed as inappropriate. Indeed, Derek is redeemed precisely as he renounces skinhead practices and beliefs. The film explicitly denounces racial extremism, suggesting that education, particularly history, is a way of overcoming racial conflicts.

At another level, the film's narrative articulates a far more conservative set of discourses. Newitz has suggested that "white trash" identity is frequently constructed as racist in the extreme, violent, unpredictable, predatory and threatening to other (middle class) whites (1997). Newitz refers to this construction as "primitive whiteness" (1997, p. 136). She argues that "whiteness emerges as a distinct and visible racial identity when it can be identified as somehow primitive or inhuman" (Newitz, 1997, p. 134). Additionally, "[when] middle-class whites encounter lower class whites, we find that often their class differences are represented as the difference between civilized folks and primitive ones" (Newitz, 1997, p. 134). In this way, lower-class whites are both raced and marginalized "because they fit into the primitive/civilized binary as primitives" (Newitz, 1997, p. 134). This configuration appears in *History X*. When Derek styles himself as a skinhead, his character symbolizes extreme "primitive whiteness". Violent, quick-tempered, ruthless, sexually potent and threatening, Derek dominates his environment

through intimidation and brute force. These strategies and indeed the extreme white supremacist racism he propounds<sup>27</sup> are depicted as destructive and primitive.

Derek's "moral" redemption is actually associated with the symbolism of a change in class status from primitive white trash to civilized middle-class, mainstream worker. Upon his release from prison, Derek renounces his violent and racist persona in favour of the more middle-class aspirations of upward social mobility through mainstream work. He encourages his brother to value achievement in the middle-class institutions of school and education. Indeed, the very fact that book learning and education are depicted as holding redemptive power in *History X* has class overtones. Derek's change in status from "white trash" primitive to law abiding (aspiring) middle-class worker, is identified with moral redemption. In the film, criminal deviance is associated on this level of narrative with white poverty.

The film's use of imagery and its visually spectacular construction of white masculinity lend support to the discursive separation of "white trash" identity from middle-class identity, albeit with differing impact. During the first half of the film, where Derek acts as a skinhead, the camera aestheticizes and spectacularizes his body. Shot in black and white, scenes focus on the skinhead's muscled body—Derek is often either naked or semi-naked. Slow motion photography with the camera tuned to a semi-naked Edward Norton, accompanied by Christian religious music adds to the visual effect. In addition, the skinhead is shown engaged in sports, physical violence or sexual activity

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<sup>27</sup> Newitz suggests, incidentally, that white supremacy is also often represented as the preserve of lower class whites in popular culture. In effect, one way of representing lower class whiteness as deviant is to associate poor whites with extremist racist beliefs that—in "civilized" (read: middle-class) society—would be considered unacceptable (Newitz, 1997).



with his girlfriend. The white-trash version of Derek, thus, is shot for maximum visual effect, just as his virility and potency is underscored by his pastimes.

In the post-transition to middle-class identity, the visual coding of Derek's character changes dramatically. Not only does the film switch to colour photography but slow motion scenes and musical accompaniment cease. Derek is shot fully clothed, and neither his sexual nor his physical "potency" is placed on display. The film thus constructs a contrast between virile, physically and visually spectacular lower-class white masculinity on the one hand, and a middle-class, almost emasculated version of the same character on the other. A transition to middle-class status, thus, is on one level associated with loss of a certain type of masculine potency.

The reader will recall that on a narrative level this transition in class status is represented more as a move from "primitive", racist and white trash identity to a "civilized" and mainstream version of middle-class masculinity. The conflicted nature of the representation in this regard is a testament to the complex ways in which identities, and indeed popular culture, are constructed. What at a narrative level appears a "positive" change from primitive to civilized, at another level is identified with a loss of attributes associated with aesthetic, virile masculinity.

In terms of discourse on criminality and criminal justice, Derek's characterization as white trash "primitive" is an indicator of certain associations—with poverty, violence, and predation—that are attached to lower class whites. In *History X*, then, it is possible also to read in the film's narrative a symbolic connection between white criminality and white-trash identity. On one level, lower class males like Derek represent a threat to mainstream society, while they are redeemable through education and/or the

administration of harsh consequences. Incarceration in the film has a positive narrative effect on the protagonist. Reasoning based on the association of threat with white poverty, one could speculate that *History X* might provide discursive support for initiatives aimed at coercive policing and aggressive treatment for poor whites. At any rate, the film does forge associations between lower class white masculinity, violence, anti-social behaviour and extreme racism.

In the film's construction of criminal justice, it is also possible to note significant transition with respect to how the prison as institution is portrayed. First of all, the story of Derek's criminality is not one of spectacular rebellion against a corrupt and norm-enforcing state. The prison is a predatory institution in *History X* and is not really run by state authorities. The inmates occupy central roles as protagonists, and narrative tension stems from conflict between them and not from persecution at the hands of cruel wardens. On this construction of prison, delinquency aimed to challenge or overthrow the prison "system" would be beside the point. The "enemy" in *History X* is no longer a corrupt "institution" or society that robs its wards of individuality. Instead, an economically hostile, violent and racially fractioned social climate is articulated as a conundrum without a solution. The welfare state as oppressor has receded from view. The issue in *History X* is the combined pressure on white Americans of black criminal gangs, affirmative "blacktion", immigration and economic stresses. Dystopic fears of a big brother state have been replaced by articulations of a predatory society: Derek's neighbourhood has become a vicious aquarium in which white Americans are economically marginalized and criminally victimized. While *History X*, on a narrative level, does not condone Derek's racist reaction, it certainly implies that social realities

and a racially fractioned context are problematic for white Americans. Not only does the film articulate a white subject-position as central, but it also articulates a vision of white Americans as the big losers and victims of post-industrial poverty.

*History X*'s set-up of the carceral context makes clear the about-face in the discursive construction of punishment, and indeed in the construction of society itself that has taken place in cinema with respect to representations of the 1970s. In *History X*, prison ceases to be a place where norm-enforcing rehabilitation drums individuality out of the inmates. The disciplinary prison, as a metaphor for a disciplinary society, is reframed instead according to a metaphor of predation. The predatory prison as context symbolically stands in for the racial and social conflict, which takes place outside of prison walls. In *History X*, the penitentiary, like society, is characterized by conflicted race relations, in which the "enemies" are other prisoners, economic pressure and predatory citizens. Note how this narrative framing of the prison impacts and alters the way in which crime control and social policy are articulated. If the main "risk" faced by citizens is that of predatory crime, not bureaucratic state coercion, this changes the way in which crime and punishment are articulated as well.

*History X*'s construction of punishment (as containment) and crime (as vicious and unpredictable acts motivated by poor morals and raced competition for resources) bears certain links to a neo-liberal understanding of the state and of crime control. Garland has suggested two main restructurings, which have moved criminal justice from penal welfarism to a neo-liberal configuration. He identifies a propensity to discourses of retribution, which draws from the angry sentiments of victims' families and results in making officials and politicians more comfortable with expressing punitive and vengeful

intentions in sentencing laws (Garland, 2001, p. 8). In addition, bolstered by increased fear of crime, Garland identifies “risk management” through containment as an important factor in how current penal policy works in the US. Integral to this configuration, of course, is a vision of criminals as predators (Garland, 2001, p. 12; Surette, 1994).

In comparison with the earlier films *Clockwork* and *Cool Hand Luke*, which frame crime according to the model of rebellion, where heroic young white men cause trouble to assert their independence from an over-dominant state, *History X* constructs narrative tension differently. *History X* presents its audience with a narrative in which the state has retreated from public life—ensuring neither safety (of whites) on the streets nor the safety of its (white) inmates. Poverty, crime and racial conflict are left to citizens who deal with them as best they can. White victimization at the hands of dangerous black criminals appears inevitable, both in prison and on the outside. On such an account of the social problems, rebellion is beside the point. In this sense, the prison appears not unjust but, instead, necessary. It serves—ineffectively since violence occurs on the outside—to contain predators. In this sense *History X* constructs a discursive account of crime, of society and of punishment that might be aligned with neo-liberal discourses on crime control.

Another facet of the film’s narrative development can also be read through the lens of governmentality theory as connected with neo-liberal modes of government. Cruikshank (1993; 1999), Lemke (2000), and Dean (1999), for instance, have discussed how specific “techniques of self” are implicated in neo-liberal government, in the sense that some practices engaged in by individual subjects are integral to producing the types of selves that are required for neo-liberal’s ordering of the social. Governmentality

studies writers have identified neo-liberal “techniques of self” as projects of self-work such as self-esteem building, image-management, taking responsibility, body-building, health and fitness practices and so on (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 1999). Masculinities are forged in relation to these techniques of self, as projects of self-work such as economic and moral entrepreneurial individualism and fitness, for examples, are associated with gender practice.

In this respect, *History X* connects class- and masculinity with self-work through Derek’s personal story. The film can be read in some respects as a tale of personal redemption. Derek performs self-work through self-directed and self-motivated education, reflection and assuming personal responsibility for his violent acts. By accepting guilt and engaging in a project of self-improvement, Derek emerges from the penitentiary a more peaceful and reflective man. Derek’s new battle is to be fought in the work world, not on the streets. By accepting that “the consequences of action are borne by the subject alone, who is solely responsible for them” (Lemke, 2000, p. 12), Derek accepts the idea of “life as [his own] an enterprise” (Gordon, 1991, p. 44). It is possible, thus, to identify neo-liberal discursive formation both in the film’s formulation of social problems and in the techniques of self, which are presented as positive. Additionally, it is important to note that the film’s narrative finds a modicum of catharsis through moral redemption, not rebellion or escape. This represents a significant departure from the narrative resolution articulated in the late welfare era screen prison dramas studied at the start of the chapter.

That being said, narrative resolution in *History X* is incomplete. The film ends with Danny, Derek’s younger brother, getting shot to death at school by a fellow (black)

student. *History X*'s final scene shows Derek cradling his younger brother's bloodied corpse. In this refusal of narrative resolution, it is possible to read two aspects of the film's construction of racialized social conflict. First, the spectacular murder that concludes the film brings the neo-liberal project of life-as-self-enterprise to its own point of frustration. Derek's moral redemption and indeed his project of self-work are frustrated (once again) by violent and senseless (black) crime. Articulated as an unpredictable, pressing issue for "law abiding" (white) Americans, (black) crime-as-predation appears susceptible to intrude on the lives of good (white) Americans at any time. This articulation of crime, in turn, interlocks with discourses of white social anxiety, connected to downward mobility and so on. And, indeed, in this sense the film fits tongue-in-groove with crime control discourse that presents a crackdown on black inner city crime as solution to problems associated with economic and social change.

One can also note a change in how white masculinity is represented in *History X* with respect to the patterns identified by Jeffords (1994) and Tasker (1993). Tasker and Jeffords both suggest that, in 1980s action cinema, muscular white bodies were associated with negotiations taking place in American national identity, particularly in relation to the remaking of (social) domestic- and foreign policy. The built musclemen who triumphed on screen through exercises of brute force were symbolic of a spectacular and excessive affirmation (according to Jeffords), or a parody (according to Tasker), of a white, male identity "in crisis". At the particular historical and discursive moment in which 1980s action cinema emerged, these images of heroic white musclemen were tied to a general preoccupation in American culture with the nation's national image.

The images of white masculinity in *History X*—ten years on—attest to developments in the framing of national identity through spectacular masculinity. Although *History X* definitely catalogues and aestheticizes built male physiques, its images of spectacular masculinity are inflected to a different end. Rather than acting as parodic or celebratory displays of national identity through triumph, *History X* expresses a conflicted and uncertain set of (white) anxieties. Class- and race contests frame a social situation in which downwardly mobile whites struggle to find their place, economically and otherwise. *History X* is definitely not a story of whiteness and/or masculinity triumphant. It is rather a tale of panic and anxiety around the (diminishing) place occupied by whites. The articulation of white masculinity as spectacular, muscular dominance that resonated heavily in action cinema of the 1980s, thus, no longer appears to ring true in the 1990s prison drama, *American History X*. Male muscles are still on display, yet their spectacular appearance does not symbolize the same, idealized potency and dominance—parodic or otherwise—that did “musculinity” of the 1980s.

*History X*, in its complex presentation of a tale of incarceration and white downward mobility brings together a number of disparate discursive threads. On one level, the film is critical of extreme white racism. Derek’s extremism is constructed as destructive to both his family and to the larger community. From another point of view, it is possible also to discern the film’s translation of white social anxiety around downward mobility, race conflict, social disorder and increasing economic competition into concerns regarding crime. Studies by Reeves and Campbell (1994) and Hall et al. (1978) have pointed out this connection at different historical moments. Both studies identified the fact that certain types of (black) crime were framed as articulators of “crisis” at points

in American and British history when social- and economic stresses were realigning class, race and gender formations. Indeed, in *History X* it is possible to read a similar framing of black crime and white victimization, as the film makes sense of the reduced status and circumstances of working-class whites in the 1990s. Additionally, this framework is refracted through class discourses that construct lower class white masculinity as primitive, marginal and potent, while middle-class masculinity appears civilized, unspectacular, morally superior and mainstream. This structuring of class identities is far from resolved, however, in the film. The fact that the “re-made”, somewhat emasculated Derek is powerless to prevent his brother’s murder certainly attests to a level of uncertainty with respect to “ideal” white masculinity in times of “crisis”. One wonders if the potent, skinhead Derek might have taken action to prevent the murder.

The issue of race and anti-black racism is also a complicated one in the film. While the white characters in the film are enfolded in discourses of inclusion, via techniques of moral self-work, *History X*’s black felons are squarely excluded from redemption. Black crime appears more unmotivated and unpredictable than do the film’s white crimes, which are framed as essentially reactionary. That being said, Derek’s redemption is due to the selfless acts of two “good” black characters. And, indeed, the film is explicitly meant as a critique of extreme white racism. At the historical moment at which it was produced, then, *History X* indicates a particular alignment and combination of discourses that frame crime, race, class and gender that are unstable and in conflict. The film’s refusal of narrative resolution and its uncertain, even anxious, construction of white masculinity indicate a level of instability and openness at the level of discursive



constructions of crime, gender, race, class and the larger social order. On the whole, however, the film remains perhaps more open to interpretation as aligned with the racially divisive and class-based practices predominating in neo-liberal criminal justice discourse.

## **Love, Escape, White Anxiety**

The film *Animal Factory* (dir. Steve Buscemi, 2000)<sup>28</sup> articulates another, related version of white anxiety in the face of racial conflict, social disorder and criminal justice. While the film basically narratively centralizes white, middle-class masculinity and frames middle class whites as threatened by both blacks and primitive white trash, this positioning is somewhat complicated by an unusual portrayal of homosexual romance. Thus, although the film in ways refracts its depiction of crime and criminal justice through marginalizing and/or demonising discourses of class and race, it is open to alternative readings as well.

Told from the perspective of young “rookie” convict Decker (played by Ed Furlong), *Animal Factory* recounts the story of a “soft” middle-class white youth who receives a prison sentence for selling marijuana. In the film’s first scenes, we see twenty-one-year-old middle-class inmate, Decker arriving at a rough medium security penitentiary. The first quarter of the film revolves around Decker’s avoidance of homosexual victimization. Violent, predatory and “hardened” older convicts make

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<sup>28</sup> Shot at Holmsburg State Penitentiary near Philadelphia, *Animal Factory* and was produced on a fairly small budget, and is generally credited for its “gritty” and “realistic” depiction of prison life. Low production costs did not prevent the film from grossing \$43 million USD at domestic box offices. *Animal Factory* was well received among critics, with director Steve Buscemi being nominated for a Bronze Horse Award.

various bids to rape the young man. The advances of one particular white trash<sup>29</sup> convict (played by Tom Arnold) are portrayed as arbitrary and power-motivated. Escalating in intensity, the conflict between the two men turns homicidal when Decker is obliged to kill the older man to avoid being sodomized.

Black predators also stalk the prison halls as well, although black inmates appear to leave the “white boys” to themselves sexually. Ethnic gang clashes are frequent and are usually predicated on conflict over power-related issues such as the narcotics trade. The film turns on a narrative including exclusively white characters. The prison’s minority characters serve an essentially background role.

*Animal Factory*, then, tells a narrative framed by white middle-class victimization at the hands of poor whites and ethnic minorities. Petty narcotics dealer Decker is definitely a target for aggression by other, abusive inmates. A sort of critique is made in the film that US drug policy may be responsible for excluding the “wrong” sorts of people. From the start of the film, there is no question that although Decker is guilty of selling marijuana, he does not belong in the institution where he has been placed. The film is at some level about the system’s *failure to protect* Decker from the predatory penitentiary in which he is imprisoned. Discursively the film frames the question of “risk” in relation to Decker and his lack of comfort with violence and the intimidation-politics necessary to survive in the prison. Effectively, the film suggests that the “risk” posed to society by a middle-class, white inmate who is (basically) non-violent is negligible. The thin and “soft” white youth is an easy target for victimization in jail, precisely because he is non-threatening. In effect, *Animal Factory* depicts how a system

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Arnold puts on a rural southern accent and appears irrational, predatory and primitive.

meant to protect “innocents” like Decker is actually guilty of putting the young man at risk. The problem, thus, in *Animal Factory* is not that incarceration performs incapacitation, but rather that improper assignment of guilt and risk status takes place. It is possible to read in *Animal Factory* the critique that American criminal justice is at the moment casting its net too widely. Middle-class, white and non-violent small-time drug dealer Decker should never have been incarcerated. As for the other inmates, many of who are guilty of violent crimes, criminal manipulation and trafficking, the appropriateness of prison as punishment does not come into question. Thus the film critiques the “wrong zoning” of small-time drug-crime, perpetrated by white middle-class kids.

Racial cleavages are narratively illustrated in *Animal Factory* as well. In fact, white middle-class victimization is constructed in relation to the racially fractioned space of the penitentiary. In *Animal Factory*, gangs are formed according to race and ethnicity. Whites stick together, just as black- and Hispanic- gangs jockey with them for influence. Rivalries quickly become homicidal. Racial fractioning joins homosexual violence as a central axis of tension and a symbol of social decay in the film. In ways this is similar to how racial conflict and white victimization is portrayed in *History X*. Both films essentially convey a carceral context in which warring ethnic factions, among which whites are a minority, compete violently for scarce resources.

Discursively, this reflects what governmentality theory scholar Graham Burchell has described as a generalized movement away from the concept of a “civil society”. Central to welfare era discourses on politics, the state and institutions, the notion of “civil society” was predicated on the idea that social cohesion existed, and that it was the state’s

role to preside over the social body, tweaking and tinkering where problems appeared (Burchell, 1996, p. 24). This mode of understanding society is linked with welfare era disciplinary-rehabilitative punishment techniques. *Animal Factory*'s discursive representation of society as a terrain divided by racialized and classed conflicts, fits with a more neo-liberal understanding of society as basically lacking cohesion. On such a view, the state's role becomes that of maintaining peace through "risk management", and of securing a "safe" environment for economic competition. This fits quite well with neo-liberal discourse on crime control. The current transition to neo-liberal modes of crime control has meant that, in the United States, management of social cleavages is administered through a criminal justice of social exclusion (Davis, 2003). In this sense, as *Animal Factory* and *History X* articulate predatory prison environments peopled by white trash and black individuals who are basically morally corrupt, criminal justice as exclusionary "risk management" appears an appropriate measure.

The way in which the penitentiary is narratively set up in *Animal Factory* also differs with respect to how the penal institution is constructed in the films of the 1970s. No cruel wardens stalk the halls, and the jail itself seems quite unconcerned with carrying out rehabilitation. The institution's program is not really rehabilitative. The prison regime doesn't administer its wards' lives very carefully. The inmates are left to their own devices, running drugs, distilling alcohol and playing out power games for control of the prison. The threat in *Animal Factory*'s penitentiary comes from the other prisoners, not the institution. The institution itself does very little oppressing. The man-against-system dynamic manifest in *Clockwork* or in *Cool Hand Luke* is thus absent. Instead, the penitentiary appears as a predatory institution "run" by the inmates. The prisoners

themselves carry out the major part of the punishment which in this case means homosexual rape, assault and punking. Thus, to avoid becoming another man's "bitch", Decker takes up with a gang of older lifer convicts for protection. Punishment in *Animal Factory*, thus, is already carried out according to neo-liberal and not welfare era specifications. The film presents no real critique of the penal institution in itself as a result. In fact, the institution is more of a backdrop than a key narrative obstacle; note the difference with respect to both *Luke* and *Clockwork*. Note also the similarity between *Animal Factory* and *History X* on this point. This represents an important change in how discourses associated with punishment are articulated in publicly visible ways. In these two recent films, the prison "system" no longer plays the role of lead villain.

*Animal Factory* utilizes the prison as backdrop for exploring homosexual relationships. Other typically masculine genres do not provide this space (Neale, 1993). As I have indicated earlier, most prison film tends resolutely to confine homosexuality by limiting representation to explorations of homosexual rape and punking. Depictions of prison-homosexuality often foreground non-consensual or sadistic acts, many of which are performed to establish power-relations and not affective ties. *Animal Factory* presents things otherwise. *Animal Factory*'s narrative focuses also on the relationship between, and escape plans of, Decker and Earl. Decker (played by Edward Furlong) is twenty-one. The young, middle-class inmate is attractive, thin, and somewhat effeminate. Earl is another kind of inmate: a 'lifer'. He controls a gang and is in many ways a hyper-masculine, hardened criminal. Played by Willem Dafoe, he is wiry, less attractive and older than Decker. His status as hardened criminal, his ruthlessness, violence, and

unpredictability can be interpreted as primitive and thus symbolic of white trash status identity.

Earl and Decker's proto-homosexual relationship begins early on. The two meet as Decker makes friends to avoid being raped. Their early interactions are coded according to conventions of heterosexual courtship. Earl glances at Decker from across the room. Decker makes eye contact. Earl quickly looks away. The plot develops as Decker and Earl become friends, although both Decker and the audience are left in suspense as to whether Earl will be satisfied with close, affective friendship or if his goal is to make Decker his 'punk'. The time they spend together is punctuated by intimate conversation, affective physical contact and 'playing' that echoes the mood one usually associates with dating. A scene ensues where Decker confronts Earl about his intentions. Earl confesses to finding the younger man physically attractive and to enjoying his company as a means of coping with loneliness. Earl implies he will keep his sexual impulses in check. From this point on, Earl and Decker's relationship seems negotiated. They interact as a couple affectively. When another man threatens to rape Decker, Earl steps in as his protector. Yet it is generally implied that their relationship is non-sexual.

The film thus explores the affective development of what is essentially a homosexual relationship. This can be interpreted as unconventional, and indeed, utilizes the prison context as a means for exploring a type of gendered identity that is often off-limits in "male" genres such as prison drama (Jarvis, 2004; Rafter, 2000). That the two men are "not gay" at the start of the film is precisely the point. Their relationship slides easily between courtship, affection, and the type of homo-social bonding that is standard in prison, war and action movies. There is no moment of crisis at which either man re-

frames his masculine identity or his sexuality. Thus the binary division often existing between male hetero- and homosexuality is rendered porous by this film.

In fact, *Animal Factory* turns the conventions for displaying masculinity in mainstream and action cinema somewhat on their heads in relation to those identified by Tasker (1993) and Neale (1993). According to Neale (1993), for example, gunfights, violence and sport are generally utilized in mainstream cinema to indulge the gaze at male bodies. In this way, the look of the male spectator has a sort of alibi for participating in erotic looks at the male as spectacle (Neale, 1993, p. 18). Otherwise, displays of male bodies can be heavily mediated by the looks of other characters and so mediated by aggression, fear, and/or hatred. For Neale, audiences are offered male bodies for erotic display, on the condition that they are already marked as objects of some other type of screen sentiment (intimidation, violence, style) (1993, p. 18). Furthermore, according to Jarvis, whose work is supported by the findings of both Neale and Tasker, male film genres (like prison film) resort “to queer bashing because [they have] trouble staying straight” (2004, p. 175). That is, in their depiction of idealized “buddy” relationships, in their focus on eroticised male physiques and in scenes of S/M torture, mainstream film typically avoids explicitly representing homosexuality among men, preferring instead attenuated homoerotic scenes. *Animal Factory* does just the opposite by drawing a homosexual romance into its narrative centre. Furthermore, the lack of anxiety with which this aspect of the story is handled articulates an understanding of gender and sexuality that is far from conventional and conservative.

*Animal Factory*, then, somewhat like *History X*, articulates complex and conflicted discursive representations of gender, class, sexuality, and crime control.

Depicting a fractioned and predatory penitentiary in which white, middle-class inmate Decker is repeatedly victimized, the film implies a level of risk and threat to “civilized” white society from lower class whites and indeed ethnic minority criminals. This narrative of white victimization is readily open to extrapolation outside of the narrow prison context depicted in the film. The regime of punishment depicted in the film also represents neo-liberal practices: that is, conflict is essentially between inmates, and not between the institution-as-villain and a rebellious hero. Decker’s contest is essentially framed in relation to the predatory prison context in which he tries to survive, and eventually to escape from. In these respects, it is possible to read *Animal Factory* as a discursive moment in which white anxiety over crime and victimization is translated into a legitimation of neo-liberal practices of punishment as social exclusion of “at risk” individuals. That the film is concerned to problematize the American criminal justice system’s incarceration of small-time white middle-class drug offenders can be read precisely as a narrative act of division between “us” (middle class whites) and them (predatory others).

On another level, the film presents an unusual and potentially innovative reframing of prison homosexuality. In the prison film and indeed in other types of “male” genre films, homosexuality rarely appears explicitly (Jarvis, 2004; Neale, 1993; Dyer, 2002). That the film explores the affective relationship between its two protagonists in a positive light is exceptional, and demonstrates the uneven struggles that can take place in popular culture.



## Conclusion: Chapter Three

This chapter has set out to examine two recent prison films that mediate the visibility of incarceration through narratives of “white Angst” and downward mobility. In relation to two films of the 1970s, the later dramas are constructed around different articulations of white masculinities, just as the framing of crime and punishment manifests itself in another form. There are a number of significant changes in the discursive formation of white masculinity identifiable in *History X* and *Animal Factory* on the one hand, and in *Cool Hand Luke* and *Clockwork*, on the other. Class fractioning, that is, the division of white trash and middle class masculinities, appears in the films of the 1990s, while in the earlier dramas evidence of class fractioning is scarce. Indeed, in the 1990s dramas, the representation of class fractioning is associated with the discursive representations of criminality, violence, spectacular physicality and primitivism, in the case of white trash identity, whereas middle class masculinity is represented as civilized, and yet somewhat emasculated.

This representation of white class fractioning takes place alongside a temporal disparity in the representation of black masculinity. In the earlier films, black (Americans and/or Brits) are altogether absent. This is even more notable in *Luke*, as the film is meant to reflect a southern penal work camp—an institution that historically would have housed a good proportion of black American inmates. In *Animal Factory* and in *History X*, part of what is at stake is the negotiation of classed white male identities in relation to black masculinity. In the context of the penal institution in these two dramas, race and class relations are represented as highly conflicted. The penal institution in both films is represented as a site where whites are victimized at the hands of predatory black

criminals. In this way, as the prison stands in for a predatory society, the films represent a social context in which whites, especially downwardly mobile ones, are threatened by black predation.

In relation to the representation of crime and punishment, the two films examined in this chapter articulate discourses that have been identified, by governmentality studies theorists, with neo-liberal government and with neo-liberal strategies of crime control. One example can be noted in the films' mappings of society and, by extension, in their articulation of the role of the penal institution within the social context. Consider the welfare era conception of social space. On a welfare era mapping, government's role was that of administering a "civil society", into which offenders could be re-socialized through rehabilitative punishment (Lemke, 2000). If, instead, as is the neo-liberal understanding, society is riddled by class- and race fractions and these conflicted groups compete for scarce resources, then the role of criminal justice changes. Neo-liberal criminal justice makes sense as "risk management", containment and as institutional administration of "harsh consequences" (Garland, 2001).

*History X* and *Animal Factory* map the role of the penal institution as that of containing potentially dangerous criminals, either indefinitely, or else until they have arrived at their own redemption through projects of "self work". This disparate understanding of society and of punishment is reflected in the disparate narrative tensions that animate the 1990s films versus the 1970s films. The earlier dramas structure narrative tension that revolves around conflict between totalitarian institution and heroic rebel-inmate. In the latter dramas, the penal institution is rather a backdrop for conflicts between raced- and classed groups of individuals who, for whatever reason, have been

caged inside. The penal institution performs the role of containment, but the redemption of the criminal-hero-inmate and indeed the conflicts between inmates, are the central narrative points of interest. One can read in these transitions a shift in the associated textual articulation of discourses of crime, punishment and masculinities.

While the transitions described above are perhaps more open to interpretation as conservative discourses on social order, the two films analysed in this chapter also manifest discursive formations that can be read as challenging contemporary norms. For example, *Animal Factory* explores a homosexual relationship that challenges more traditional articulations of homosexuality in prison drama and in popular culture. In this film, the prison context becomes a convenient site for exploring how homosexual romance and affect might develop between two men. In *History X*, the framing of race and racism is far from uniform. On one narrative level, the film marginalizes African Americans, while it also articulates black crime as threatening to whites. Yet, on another level, the film is critical of extreme white racism, suggesting that interracial friendships and greater contact and familiarity between blacks and whites might lead to more productive race relations.

What is noteworthy, then, is that these films are open to a number of different readings, at differing narrative and visual levels. While to some extent they articulate discourses that might be read as supportive of conservative and racially divisive neo-liberal criminal policy discourse, they also, in different ways, produce an account of social life that is challenging to, for example, articulations of male sexuality. Indeed, the films analysed in this chapter—then—support the conception of popular culture as contested terrain, in which struggles over meaning, identity and social order occur.

## CHAPTER 4: REDEMPTION DRAMAS

### Introduction: Chapter Four

Redemption is defined by the OED as (1) “deliverance from sin and its consequences by the atonement of Jesus Christ”, (2) “The action of freeing a prisoner, captive, or slave by payment; ransom” or (3) “The action of redeeming oneself from punishment; atonement made for a crime or offence”. In describing the two dramas analysed in this chapter as “redemption dramas”, each of these definitions is salient. *First Time Felon* (dir. Charles Dutton, 1997) and *Redemption: The Stan “Tookie” Williams Story* (dir. Curtis Vondie-Hall, 2004) recount the stories of two black male inmates who undergo journeys of personal atonement and transformation during stints in prison. Referencing religious symbolism of redemption, slave narratives and modern carceral imprisonment, these two dramas construct a vision of black masculinity, which inflects the American carceral institution. As was the case with the “white Angst” dramas surveyed in the previous chapter, these representations are conflicted and complex, melding “rites of inclusion” with neo-liberal articulations that are open to interpretation as supportive of racialized crime control discourses targeting African Americans. Textual polysemy, or struggle and negotiation between conservative and resistive discourses, is thus evident in the “redemption” dramas also.

The chapter locates the “redemption” dramas historically in relation to black cinema of the 1970s (blaxploitation) and of the early 1990s (the ghetto action cycle). In so doing, it becomes possible to investigate how these more recent prison dramas inflect

black masculinity and crime, with respect to patterns of representation that have been established in what scholars have called “black cinema” (Antonio, 2002). Through this comparative analysis, one can chart some of the discursive movements around blackness, masculinity and crime, which the redemption dramas in part carry out.

Part of this discussion involves mapping an approach to what scholars have called “black popular culture” (Kitwana, 2003) without essentialising around questions of directorship or with respect to the identities invoked in representing black youth. This is a complex question especially in relation to two matters. The first issue, identified by cinema critic Sheril Antonio (2002), is the tendency in much scholarship to divide “black texts” into negative and positive representations. Here, I offer the same argument that I apply throughout the dissertation: namely—one—that texts are rarely either totally conservative or resistive—and two—that cultural texts operate within a changing mediascape that shifts historically. Thus, narratives and imageries can be interpreted based on the discursive/temporal context in which they are produced. As “black cinema” has gone through various cycles—from blaxploitation to the ghetto action cycle—the location of narrative constructions shifts, necessarily, depending on what has and continues to take place both in popular culture and in domestic (criminal and social) policy.

In dealing with the second essentialist complication implicated in studying “black popular culture”, I quote Stuart Hall’s 2004 influential study. Hall suggests that: “the very thing that has to be refuted is the “Black or mainstream/white” dichotomy that is imposed on culture and people’s position in it” (2004, p. 260). Hall means to illustrate that there are risks associated with setting up a binary opposition between “black”

culture, on the one hand, and “white/mainstream” culture on the other. One problem with this formulation is the implication that there is of necessity some sort of resistive authenticity located in “black” culture. Of course, the assertion that a thing like “black culture” exists in a way that is radically separable from “white” US culture runs the risk of reductionism. In carrying out research on texts representing black and white masculinity, I have addressed this concern by structuring chapters three and four around particular narrative constructions that construct, on one hand, stories of black redemption and, on the other, tales of “white Angst”. In so doing, my aim has been to structure analysis based on the narrative construction of the dramas, and in this way zero in on specific identity constructions of black and white masculinities. I am concerned not to reason in the other direction, so to speak, by qualifying texts either as “black” or “white”. I thus focus on the narrative and visual constructions of black- and white masculinities that these films produce, without asserting their status as “black” or “white” texts.

Chapter four, then, analyzes two dramas relating narratives of black redemption. The goal is to identify inflections of black masculinity, constructions of criminality, morality and the carceral institution that are associated here with black masculinity. In addition, I am interested also in examining discourses that can be associated with neo-liberal crime control, and with constructions of social order and techniques of self that might discursively buttress current practices of punishment by raced social exclusion.

## **Blackness, Essentialism, Pop Culture**

Studies of “black popular culture” are fraught with a number of theoretical complications, particularly around issues of essentialism (Hall, 2004). The two dramas

analysed in this chapter are directed by black men, and focus centrally on black male prison experience. Yet, to qualify these representations as 'black' and to treat them accordingly is associated with a number of risks and perils. I am concerned to avoid taking an essentialist perspective on the screen prison dramas discussed in this chapter and, thus, in this section I locate my analysis of constructions of black masculinity and prison experience with respect to debates on what has been called "black popular culture".

In particular, there are two sorts of essentialist arguments that I am concerned to avoid. Sheril Antonio identifies the first of in her critique of black cinema (2002); Stuart Hall, incidentally, also points out a similar problem in studies of black popular culture (2004). Both writers suggest that black popular culture, cinema in Antonio's case, is often either celebrated or else chided for diffusing either negative or positive images of African Americans (Antonio, 2002, p. 58; Hall, 2004). Antonio critiques arguments like those advanced by television scholar Hermen Gray, who has read media portrayals of black Americans as presenting either demonising images or else an unnaturally rosy and middle-class version of African American life. Gray suggests, for example, that *The Cosby Show* (dir. Bill Cosby, 1984-1992) presents a "sanitized, middle-class" version of blackness, while the television news depicts a black "underclass" of criminals, drug addicts and welfare abusers (Gray, 1994; 1995). On such a reading, ghetto action films such as *Juice* (dirs. Gordon Brown and E. R. Dickerson, 1992), *Menace II Society* (dirs. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 1993), and *Boyz in the Hood* (dir. John Singleton, 1991), can be read as equally "guilty" of diffusing criminal and deviant images of black youth. The implication of Gray's argument is, effectively, that African Americans on

television are presented in a dualistic manner, resulting in the racist perception that the black community is split into middle-class success stories and underclass deviants. The upshot, for Gray, is that political scapegoating is facilitated by the myth that African Americans can transcend poverty and disadvantage through hard work, a construction that plays into discourses of American meritocracy.

For Antonio, such a reading is too simple. Part of her project is precisely to demonstrate how African American cinema of the 1990s is historically grounded in cinematic traditions of representing blacks (e.g. growing out of blaxploitation cinema), as well as inflected by Hollywood's industrial machinery and current socio-political trends (2002, p. 7). The ghetto action cycle of the 1990s, for Antonio, is framed both by historical baggage of, for example, blaxploitation, and also by innovation and change in the field of popular culture. In examining the representations of black prison experience in this chapter, then, I am concerned to avoid polarizing by qualifying texts as negative or positive, just as I am preoccupied with maintaining a sense of historical contingency.

On the subject of historical contingency Hall (2004), Antonio (2002) and black cinema critic Ed Guerrero (1993) point out an additional concern. All three authors appear to concur that what is resistive and what is conservative in representation is historically contingent. All three authors are concerned to maintain a complex view of culture that precludes polarizing texts into negative and positive categories. One way of maintaining a nuanced perspective on popular culture is precisely to situate representations in relation to developments in popular culture. Thus, Antonio, for example, arrives at a historically located understanding of *The Cosby Show*. She suggests that American television and film representations of black Americans in the early 1980s



were such that wealthy, middle-class characters and contexts were a rarity. The very fact, then, that *The Cosby Show* represented a well to do black family could be interpreted as resistive at the time of the show's initial creation (Antonio, 2002, p. 58). By 1992, when the show went off the air, that representations of idealized black middle-class life no longer packed the same resistive punch, is precisely the point. Antonio illustrates how the changing mediascape, and indeed, evolving social positioning of minority Americans precludes a once-and-for-all reading of a given text as either resistive or conservative. At best, such readings can interpret texts in a particular historical moment, and against the intertextual mediascape.

Issac Julien, contributor to *Black Popular Culture* (1992), articulates an additional concern with respect to reading "black popular culture". Focusing specifically on the depiction of queer black masculinity in American popular culture, or precisely the absence of queer male blackness on the screen, Julien suggests that representations of blackness and black cultural critics must develop a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to power struggles *within* black culture. Julien argues that it is vital to draw out how dominant modes for representing blackness (e.g. the rise of rap and the ghetto gangster as dominant personification of heterosexual masculinity) risks marginalizing or demonising other communities, such as queer black males. Of course, similar arguments with respect to the dominance of patriarchal and homophobic black male youth identity in American screen and music culture (Julien, 1992, p. 260; Jamila, 2002) have been made with respect to the marginalization and demeaning of black women. The need for nuanced analysis of power struggles within "black culture" is acknowledged by a variety of critics.

Such views offer additional support for a project, which heeds the polysemy of media texts. That is, as this project examines “redemption” dramas depicting black male prison experience, I shall necessarily attend also to how constructions of black heterosexual masculinity create or shut down spaces for other groups, such as black women or queer men of colour.

Finally, there is another, perhaps broader, and related concern with studying “black popular culture”, as if a uniform category existed somehow in pure opposition to what is taking place in white/mainstream culture. Hall makes this point (2004). He suggests that it is not the case that “opposing forces that are somehow hermetically sealed against one another”; “American Black culture”, to the extent that such a thing exists, is porous and influences American mainstream popular culture, while growing out of it at other places (Hall, 2004, p, 260). Hip Hop slang and urban ghetto dress and gesture have entered into the popular vernaculars of fashion and speech. It is thus perhaps risky to embark on an analytic project seeking to trace black directorship, for example, or the ghetto action cycle for that matter, to categories of representation that are either truly authentic (i.e. “black”) or uniformly resistive/conservative. Such a project would gloss over how differing identities practiced and exercised by certain groups have a way of influencing what else surrounds them e.g. the way a certain part of black culture revolves around a counter-identity that is macho, homophobic and “hard”, as well as predicated on the exploitation of the vulnerabilities of black women (Hall, 2004, p. 262).

Furthermore, in terms of black directorship and/or production of media content, preoccupation with auteurship alone as an indicator of “authenticity” is risky also. Such a view may elide the ways in which Hollywood and/or the music industry establishment

structures privilege black male directorship (Antonio, 2002) or music production (Boyd, 2002). Additionally, it may also obfuscate the fact that, as Spike Lee has often complained, black directorship alone is often insufficient to secure artistic licence; production companies, investors and distributors all have a say in what types of representations are produced and marketed.

Debates over what constitutes a “black” film in black cinema studies are a testament to some of these complications. Film research on “black cinema”, covering blaxploitation to New Black Cinema, has tended (often implicitly) to define as “black” film productions with black directors (Guerrero, 1993; Antonio, 2002). A complex media environment makes the process of defining what is now called “black cinema” difficult, however. In a moment where black popular culture is a hot commodity, instances of white directors “speaking black” are becoming more widespread. From the consumer’s perspective, films representing a particular community or culture can be deceptive to the extent that many cinemagoers are unaware of the race and/or ethnicity of the men and women who direct the films they see. Although exceptions exist with respect to celebrity directors i.e. most North American audiences know that Stephen Spielberg is white, American and Jewish, and that Spike Lee is black—film consumers do not always know a lot about the men and women who direct the movies they watch. Thus, from an audience perspective, films that deal with black contexts may be interpreted as black films because they represent black characters and black themes. Gangster Rapper 50 Cent’s recently released film *Get Rich or Die Trying* (2005) is a good example of the confusion that may be associated with racing cinema productions. *Get Rich* was shot by white and Irish director Jim Sheridan, whose previous work had consisted of Irish-

identity pics like *In the Name of the Father* (1993) and *In America* (2002). *Get Rich*, however, uses a virtually all black cast, depicts black inner city life in America, and is meant to recount Rapper 50 Cent's coming of age in the ghetto. The film is shot in ghetto action style. Unless audiences are aware of the director's identity, they may well assume that *Get Rich* is a "black" production. And yet, considering that rapper 50 Cent collaborated with Sheridan on directing and writing the film, is it really so simple to call *Get Rich* a "white" film?

The upshot of this example is precisely to echo points made earlier on. It is risky and difficult to draw a line around "black popular culture" and to reason, in analysing particular representations, that a factor like directorship, for example, either qualifies texts for inclusion or exclusion from the category. As a result, and to avoid a binary analysis of "black/minority"- and "white/mainstream" representations, I have chosen to read the prison dramas in this chapter as "redemption" dramas depicting black male prison experience. My decision to group the dramas this way is in line, also, with examining "'white Angst'" dramas in the previous chapter. Rather than categorizing the dramas based on race, I have chosen instead to categorize based on a (narrative) discursive homology manifest in the texts themselves—namely, their construction of a certain vision of redemption.

## **Priors For Screen Prison Drama About Black Incarceration**

In an effort to avoid essentialising the representations I discuss in this chapter, I shall discuss two historically precedent cinematic cycles through which African American masculinity has been represented. This analysis establishes some of the generic

and narrative precedents through which black masculinity has been refracted in the cinema. To this effect I discuss the blaxploitation- and the ghetto action cycles of films. Historical background of this nature provides comparative material which is useful in identifying changes in the construction of black masculinities, especially in relation to constructions of crime, white oppression and state power. Black Hollywood films of the 1970s and 1990s have articulated influential iconographies of blackness (Guerrero, 1993; Jones, 1996; Watkins, 1998; Antonio, 2002).

The blaxploitation cycle of films, produced in the early 1970s, was especially influential (Guerrero, 1993). The blaxploitation genre developed a 'black' aesthetic style and dealt with black themes and settings, and constructed a view of the social and economic experiences of many black communities (Guerrero, 1993, p. 81). Some critics describe the cycle of films as a significant departure from more white and etic<sup>30</sup> representations of black Americans in the cinema (Guerrero, 1993). Key early blaxploitation films were director Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971) and director Gordon Parks' film, *Shaft* (1971). These and other blaxploitation films were shot in inner city streets, documenting dilapidated houses, and dimly lit, underground clubs filled with smoke. Characters spoke in the black argot of the period. Thus, together with other cult texts like Iceberg Slim's book *Pimp* (Slim, 1969), blaxploitation popularized archetypal ghetto characters such as the pimp, the hustler, the

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<sup>30</sup> The terms emic and etic are antonyms applied in the discipline of cultural anthropology. An emic understanding or representation of a culture involves "accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the members of the culture under study", whereas etic "constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories that are regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers" (Lett, 2005). What I am getting at here, then, is the fact that blaxploitation cinema represents a more etic representation directed by black Americans than did mainstream Hollywood cinema prior to the 1970s, because it is structured by black culture and is associated with its conceptual structures.

young stud/buck, and the 'ho' (ghetto sex-worker). Blaxploitation's heroes, like director Van Peebles' character Sweet Sweetback, tended to be 'bad-ass' black bucks. That is, they were hyper-masculine, unemotional male characters that embodied ghetto styles, and were criminals or hustlers. Crime and an outlaw lifestyle, articulated according to a uniquely black aesthetic style, constituted a kind of rebellious practice of self, carried out against an oppressive and racist state. In many of these films, white/mainstream society, in addition to the state, are figured as oppressive to black Americans. Rebellion against the white state and society as technique of self are constructed through blaxploitation characters' acts of violence, criminality, lifestyle, culture, aesthetic style and enactment of "ghetto cool".

Note how in ways this is similar to reform liberal era white screen prison dramas *Luke* and *Clockwork*, whose narrative tension grew from an opposition of oppressive bureaucracy with rebellious individuals. Against such oppressive regimes, in addition, the rebellious hero-criminal engaged in acts of spectacular (and criminal) subversion. Thus, criminal acts as rebellious moments of insubordination came to appear, in late liberal reform culture, as a way of contesting oppressive state coercion. This narrative set-up took different forms in blaxploitation films and screen prison dramas such as *Clockwork* and *Luke*. Yet, the central tension between oppressive society and/or institution, and anti-social hero-criminal was similar. Both sets of texts articulated criminality as metaphor for celebrating individualism and rebellion against "the system" or "the man". In both genres, criminality, thus, was a metaphor for laudable resistance based on anti-social individualism.

So influential were blaxploitation films, that when Hollywood's production of the genre ceased, the genre's images and tropes survived. Archetypal characters and the "ghetto aesthetic" popularized in the 1970s reappeared in Hip Hop music and music videos of the 1980s. Pimps, big cars, guns, violent ghetto "bucks", "hos", gold chains and anti-law-enforcement themes surfaced in the lyrics and on the newly invented MTV. Thus, blaxploitation films articulated a black aesthetic style, established character-archetypes, and popularized the urban ghetto setting, all of which have been remembered and incorporated into contemporary popular culture.

For a time following the blaxploitation cycle Hollywood films directed by African Americans declined, to re-emerge in the early 1990s. It was also at this time that the post-industrial ghetto became an object of media focus (Guerrero, 1993, p. 159). To the current project, one pole of the New Black Cinema is of particular interest, namely, the ghetto action cycle of films. Spike Lee<sup>31</sup>-style social issues film, of course, were also highly influential in characterizing black cinema of the 1990s, but I do not deal with them in depth here as they are less relevant to the current study. The ghetto action cycle of films, then—such as director John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), Albert Hughes'

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<sup>31</sup> Spike Lee is perhaps the most famous, popular and prolific of the black directors from this period. His films—*She's Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989)—were key in defining the New Black Cinema. Produced on fairly small budgets, and depicting black themes, settings and characters, Lee's films did not really fall into the ghetto-action category. They tended, instead, to revolve around complex love, career and life issues, and to foreground themes drawn from life in the post-civil rights, post/late-Reagan era. Race issues figured centrally in Lee's productions. His films often showcased overt incidents of racism, as well as complex situations in which bigoted attitudes surfaced to impact the protagonists. Although his work incurred criticism for its presentation of sexist or "negative" images of black Americans, film critics Guerrero (1993; 1994), Antonio (2002) and Watkins (1998) concur that his imaging of black life resists the polar "positive/negative" dichotomy that exists in many media representations of black Americans. Lee's films tend to present complex characters in difficult situations. The result are cinematic productions which often avoids narrative resolution and clear-cut messages. His later films *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Malcolm X* (1992) are considered by critics as central to the New Black Cinema wave.

*Menace II Society* (1993) and *Juice* (dir. Ernest Dickerson, 1992)—rearticulate some of blaxploitation's imageries and themes.

According to black cinema critic Craig Watkins, the ghetto action film cycle painted a picture of black ghetto life as structured by crime, violence, economic deprivation, dysfunctional family patterns and welfare dependency (Watkins, 1998, p. 213). Films such as *Menace* and *Juice* certainly articulate black male youth's exclusion from mainstream American life. Isolated from positive (male) influences and disappointed by dysfunctional schools, the films tell stories in which young male protagonists are mostly unable to escape webs of crime and violence. While in *Juice* lethal violence stems from an attempted robbery gone wrong, *Menace* goes further in illustrating the effects of incarceration, crime and violence on inner city communities.

Black film critic Sheril Antonio (2002) suggests that the ghetto action cycle can be read as an important development in how American popular culture articulates race, to the extent that the cycle made marginalized inner city (male) youth visible to mainstream viewers. Other critics, such as Kitwana (2002) and Watkins (1998), have suggested that mass media imaging of criminal black male subcultures re-articulates the urban black male as violent predator. Regardless, the ghetto action cycle marked the moment at which the post-industrial ghetto appeared in popular mass media discourse. It also established an image bank and narrative precedent for construction of urban black youth masculinity.

Additionally, films of the ghetto action cycle are a moment at which representation of black urban youth experience is inflected. The youth in the films appear led astray by the impossible conditions in which they come of age (Antonio, 2002). The films suggest that poverty, lack of opportunity and the availability of drugs and guns



transform coming-of-age dramas into struggles of life and death. Unlike films of the blaxploitation cycle, the state and/or mainstream/white society are rarely figured as responsible for the conditions in which black youth grow up. Solutions to problems of gun- and drug crime appear elusive and individualistic. Parental support, or lack of it, is articulated as key to black youth attainment (see here the film *Boyz*). Crime, violence and drug-use in the ghetto action cycle are thus no longer articulated as revolts against “the man”, or an oppressive white state and society. Instead, crime and violence is constructed as an unfortunate consequence of a fractioned and dysfunctional community. Note the similarity of this construction of social (dis)order with neo-liberal discourses of social disharmony discussed in the previous chapter.

Cinema critic Craig Watkins identifies discourses that are central to the ghetto action cycle of films’ framing of the issues facing black youth (1998, p. 213). Watkins suggests that the ghetto action cycle articulates black family pathology, drug dependence, crime, and youth’s weakness to “bad influences” as preventing black (male) youth from succeeding in mainstream life (1998, p. 219). The reader will note that these articulations of black under-privilege are either individualistic or resolutely framed away from the state or social body. While Watkins notes that racist (white) law enforcement does figure in the ghetto action cycle (1998, p. 215), this aspect of government intervention is tangential to narrative resolution in the films. The ghetto action cycle, then, articulates social problems as stemming from individual or (black) community deficiencies. These films, in their imaging of a predatory and fractioned black community, articulate a neo-liberal discourse that is not unlike that of Charles Murray, a neo-liberal sociologist who

sees a “culture of poverty”, family dysfunction<sup>32</sup> and welfare dependence at the root of the “underclass’s” social problems (1999).

The ghetto action cycle of films, which depicts essentially the experience of urban black male youth, emerged in the decade following the 1980s action-“masculinity” cycle of films. Yet, the type of masculinity put on display in these films is quite different. The “masculinity” films of the 1980s presented (white) hyper-masculine characters that triumphed over fantastic obstacles through force; critics such as Jeffords (1994) and Tasker (1993) have linked the symbolism in these films to negotiations of dominant masculine identity in the United States. Masculine muscles, violence and hyperbolic contests between larger-than-life figures representing good and evil make sense as articulations of dominant masculinity. The ghetto action cycle, however, can be interpreted in ways as a critique of American life. In placing on display the experiences of impoverished ghetto youth, this cycle of films construct a fractured, raced and classed image of America in the 1990s. The genre also articulates a vision of black (youth) masculinity that differs from the larger-than-life and idealized characters such as Rocky Balboa and Rambo.

## **Resistance, Rags-to-Riches, Stereotypes**

In addition to some of the background formed by black cinema, there are a number of other associated popular discourses, narratives and discursive formations that

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<sup>32</sup> Note that “family dysfunction” is often framed in terms of single motherhood, and in relation to the nuclear family model which. Hamer (2001) and Carnoy (1994), however, have argued that this is an axis of racist family policy, in that the nuclear family model is actually associated with white/European culture, and not African American family traditions.

are worth mentioning as background to the “redemption” dramas surveyed in this chapter. Brian Jarvis, for example, identifies prison writing, spirituals and black slave narratives as popular genres that have signified black experiences of punishment in America (2004). According to Jarvis’ research, black slave writing and music catalogued plantation punishments and the deprivation of liberty that framed black experience at the outset of the American colony. Publicizing tales of rape, torture, arbitrary imprisonment and punishment, these slave experiences are one form of “resistance” narrative through which black American experience has been represented. For Jarvis, it was in part through these forms that “America” became associated with prison or slave ship in African American culture.

Prison writings describing African American experiences of incarceration in the 1970s, such as the autobiography of *Malcolm X*, extended this metaphor. As the jailing of black militants became more common practice during this time period, prison was often represented as an “[overt] instrument of political repression” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 107). Writers such as Malcolm X established a link in their works between the repressive institution of slavery and the more modern mobilization of the state’s coercive forces against its black minority. For Jarvis, these writings, indeed, slave narratives and later prison writings on black experience, have been some of the central cultural forms of articulating black resistance.

One of the discourses developed in the writings of Malcolm X’s autobiography was an understanding of prison as a politically formative experience for black Americans. Jailed for (mostly) political reasons, Malcolm X’s writings reflected a political awakening that took place largely behind bars. A number of films representing African

American prison experience have articulated a similar connection between political awakening, racist crime control and prison time (see here *Malcolm X* (dir. Spike Lee, 1992), *The Hurricane* (dir. Norman Jewison, 1999)).

Digby Baltzell and Howard Schneiderman document another discourse implicated in the representation of black- and lower class Americans (1991). Derived from the writings of nineteenth century dime novelist Horatio Alger, the “Horatio Alger myth” refers to a rags-to-riches narrative ending not in extreme wealth for the lower-class protagonist, but rather in middle-class attainment (Baltzell and Schneiderman, 1991). Horatio Alger’s novels recounted tales of protagonists who, through hard work, were able to secure middle-class stability. In the contemporary context, the “Horatio Alger myth” is used to refer to narratives of black/lower-class success in which down-and-out individuals are able to climb socially into the middle-classes. Cited as proof of American meritocracy, these narratives of inclusion suggest that middle-class attainment is a question of hard work, and that class status and financial security are available to all Americans. Although he does not explicitly refer to the Horatio Alger myth, television critic Herman Gray cites *The Cosbys* as popular articulation of middle-class success underscoring American meritocracy (1995).

bell hooks has identified very general and yet powerful stereotypes of black males, which she suggests have been articulated for some time in American culture. According to hooks American popular culture and discourse has long constructed black men as having voracious sexual appetites, and predilections for rape, especially of white women (hooks, 1981, p. 60). Propensity for violence and subhuman intelligence also register on hooks’ list of stereotypes. She suggests furthermore that in contemporary

popular culture, these stereotypes have shifted somewhat. For hooks, there now exists a kind of dichotomy between the black male represented as black-beast (or gangster-criminal), and the ‘good’ black who has given up all connection to black community and culture—and replaced authentic community connections with an unrequited desire for the approbation of the white male, and the consumable rewards of cooperation with white America (hooks, 1995, p. 106). Another scholar of representations of black Americans, Robin Coleman, supports hooks’ claims. Coleman identifies a variety of stereotypes associated with black masculinity dating back to the plantation era, which he suggests have survived into the present day (1998). A few are the brutal buck, a violent predator and rebellious slave with insatiable sexual appetites and a hatred of the white man; the “Uncle Tom” type, a contented and compliant negro; the Sambo-type, a comic, stupid and subservient “house” negro; and the Jim Crow-type, characterized as mischievous and/or crippled negro, who uses humour and trickery to better his lot (Coleman, 1998, p. 48). Some of these old and deep-seated stereotypes continue to structure popular representations of black experience in the United States, according to hooks and Coleman.

Across popular culture, then, there are a variety of ways of constructing black masculinity, which stem from different historical traditions of representation (e.g. black cinema, slave narratives and/or white planter discourses on slaves). Contemporary texts, like the “redemption” dramas analysed in this chapter, are located in a discursive context structured by the modes of representation that have traditionally framed black masculinity. In the analysis that follows, I am concerned to identify the ways in which

these dramas position themselves as either re-framings or re-articulations of these existing discourses on black masculinity, crime and punishment.

## **Schwartzky and “Tookie”**

Made-for-TV movie *Redemption: The Stan “Tookie” Williams Story* (dir. Vondie Curtis-Hall, 2004) is adapted from the autobiography of the (late) California death-row inmate, Stan “Tookie” Williams. *Redemption* explores themes of guilt, maturity and spiritual enlightenment, as well as reasons for black criminality from the perspective of celebrity inmate “Tookie” Williams, infamous founder of the Los Angeles street gang, the Crips. The real Mr. Williams spent twenty-three years on death row at San Quentin penitentiary, before being executed by the State of California (on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005) after Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger refused a clemency appeal. Governor Schwarzenegger’s decision to refuse clemency was highly unpopular, in part because of “Tookie” Williams’ “redemption” while on death row. Not only did the ex-gangster broker a peace pact between the Bloods and the Crips—LA’s most notorious and homicidal gangs. While on death row, “Tookie” also wrote anti-gang children’s books, which were nominated for both the Nobel Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize in Literature. “Tookie”’s case received much media attention, through several court appeals, as did Governor Schwarzenegger’s final refusal of clemency.

“Tookie” Williams published the autobiographical books *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* (2004), and *Redemption: from Original Gangster to Nobel Prize Nominee* (2004), on which the film *Redemption* is based. Screenwriter J. T. Allen adapted “Tookie” Williams’ book for television production, receiving a Writer’s Guild award for

his work. *Redemption* (the made-for-TV film) was directed by Vondie Curtis-Hall<sup>33</sup> and aired on FOX in January 2004. *Redemption* was subsequently released on video after being nominated for nineteen awards, including a Golden Globe. The film won eleven of these. Jamie Foxx<sup>34</sup> starred in the production as protagonist “Tookie” Williams. Not all reviewers were happy with *Redemption*, however. Criticisms turned on the film’s tone (“heavy-handed”) and focus (not enough emphasis on “Tookie”’s early life) rather than on liberties taken with the facts of “Tookie”’s case (Laurence, 2004; Mast, 2004).

The television-film *Redemption* tells “Tookie” Williams’ story from the perspective of Barbara Becnel, a black journalist who encourages the ex-gangster to publish children’s books. Ms. Becnel is researching a book on gang members when she meets Williams’, who is a death row inmate. At the time of their meeting, Williams’ has already given up violence and his gangster identity. Yet, it is through his relationship with Ms. Becnel that “Tookie” truly changes. Over the course of their interactions, Williams becomes convinced that it is his responsibility to promote peace on the streets through writing and through working with gang leaders to stop gang violence. The development of Becnel and Williams’ relationship is one of the narrative’s focal points.

Another is “Tookie”’s acceptance of personal responsibility for his life as a gangster. To this effect, Ms. Becnel and “Tookie” have numerous discussions over what led the ex-gangster to a life of organized crime. Near the start of the film, Ms. Becnel asks “Tookie” how he could: “Justify killing a man who looks just like you?” (read:

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<sup>33</sup> Director Curtis-Hall began a career in media as an actor in television series ER; he also directed a number of later episodes. Previous directorial work includes the Mariah Carey star-vehicle film *Glitter* (2001), which received highly unfavorable reviews, and *Gridlock’d* (1997) a film about recovering heroin addicts starring Tupac Shakur.

<sup>34</sup> Mr. Foxx later received an Academy Award nomination for his performance as Ray Charles in the movie *Ray* (2004).

another black man). Williams answers that his murders resulted from internalising American society's denigrating image of black men. Growing up, "Tookie" explains, he absorbed negative stereotypes of what his role, as a black male, must be. And, in killing other black men, "Tookie" claims to have been acting out some sort of subconscious self-hatred. Ms. Becnel is highly critical of "Tookie"'s analysis and, indeed, within the scope of the film, it does ring somewhat false. In particular, Williams' words which point to a symbolic (and not economic or social) cause for black-on-black violence and are in direct conflict with the film's main theme: that is, of redemption through acceptance of personal responsibility.

In terms of background context on the lives and experiences of urban black males, the film provides very little information which could lead its audience to understand "Tookie"'s gang affiliations as anything other than "wrongdoing". *Redemption* does very briefly make reference to the fact that Williams moved from the rural south to L.A., and that the young man's new urban environment provided access to criminal connections. The film also illustrates the young Williams' victimization at the hands of other, older boys in LA. The audience is given to understand that Williams founded a gang in part for protection. Yet, the gangster's personal motivation for carrying out the quadruple murder for which he is on death row is left hanging, with only ambiguous comments on black male self-hatred to justify the crime. *Redemption* makes no mention of poor mainstream labour and educational opportunities and other social and economic obstacles besetting many poorer black urban neighbourhoods in L.A.

The film's discursive articulation of crime is both cultural and individualistic, implying that individuals choose crime, and that culture, that is, white media culture, can



push black men into crime because it erodes their self-esteem. *Redemption* thus opens onto the interpretation that black men kill each other, in part because of failed self-esteem promoted by a racist white culture, and in part because they fail to accept responsibility for their lives. It is within this schema that “Tookie”’s redemption is cast both as an individual moral decision and as a bid for self-esteem. Slowly, and through his willingness to accept responsibility for his crimes, as well as engaging in righting the wrongs of his past life, “Tookie” Williams moves to become a moral creature. Individual moral redemption, then, represents narrative catharsis in the film.

Becnel also undergoes a kind of personal transformation over the course of the film just as her relationships with black male characters are portrayed as stressed. Becnel (played by Lynn Whitfield) experiences tension in her relationships both with “Tookie” Williams and with her teenage son. Stress stems from divides in generations and social classes. Curtis-Hall underlines the class differences between Becnel and Williams in no uncertain terms. The director shoots the journalist at posh restaurants drinking wine with her (white) agent, dialoguing with her teenage son in a large, luxurious house, and even driving to San Quentin prison, for her first meeting with Williams, in a convertible Mercedes. Class difference spells conflict between Williams and Becnel. When the two meet one another, in an interview at San Quentin, Williams criticizes the journalist for being “bourgie”, and for trying to appear white (by straightening her hair and wearing business suits).

The film catalogues two conflicts in which Becnel refuses to be intimidated by the ex-gangster. After one intense disagreement Becnel stops visiting Williams. The two eventually overcome their differences to collaborate on “Tookie”’s book projects.

Following these conflicts, Becnel's personal style undergoes a significant transition. At the start of *Redemption*, she wears sombre grey or black formal business suits, and her hair is always pulled back in a chignon. In later scenes, Becnel is pictured with her hair down and curled, and her clothes become less formal, and more colourful. In this way, Becnel's contact with the ex-gangster is symbolized as having a transformational effect—moving her character from middle class towards a more relaxed and “black” persona.

Class tension in the black community manifests itself, in *Redemption*, as a question of “passing” for white. Indeed, in one scene, “Tookie” accuses Barbara Becnel of associating with, and dressing and talking like “white folks”. Becnel resists “Tookie”'s attempts to portray her personal success as a question of “acting white”. She cites her family's lower-class background and her own struggle to succeed as a black woman. Thus, although Becnel undergoes her own transition in identity and self-esteem, the film ultimately endorses her (middle-class) vision of life as a personal enterprise.

*Redemption* makes an additional argument with respect to the power of media and black youth culture to push young black men into problematic social spaces and identities. Tension coheres in the film around the divorced Becnel's relationship with her teenage son. In this case, stresses are generational. In one scene, Becnel yells at her son for playing loud Gangster Rap music, which she “hates”. She chastises the boy for “talking ghetto” and for wearing “gangster” clothes. Another time, the journalist finds a handgun in her son's clothes drawer. She eventually confiscates the weapon and confronts her son, but the boy reacts by verbally attacking his mother and then leaving the house. The tensions in their relationship are never resolved in the film. There is one scene, however, where we are given to understand that the boy is moving to live with his

father—Becnel discovers her sons’ packed suitcases in the hall. In *Redemption*, even the “successful” journalist’s son has been seduced by what appears as “poisonous” black youth culture. Acceptance of personal responsibility and the path to black male maturity appears blocked by cultural forces. Becnel’s success and “Tookie”’s criminality are set against one another as outcomes of two different life-projects—the one entrepreneurial and personally chosen, and the other dependent on peer pressure and “the media”. And thus, although the film tells a story that is resolutely anti the death penalty<sup>35</sup>, its vision of crime and morality articulates neo-liberal discourses of morality, redemption and self-work. Critique of black disadvantage and criminality, equally, is materialized away from economic, social and political causes, as the film focuses on cultural and individual causes.

With respect to prison and punishment techniques, “Tookie” Williams, in a soliloquy, calls prison “no place”. The penitentiary appears neither as a site of scientific retraining, nor a zone of persecution by guards or prisoners. Lack of friction between prisoners may be a question of “Tookie”’s confinement on death row, or with his status as gang leader. Yet, it is significant that inmate-conflict, as well as power- and escape bids, are entirely absent in *Redemption*. The film instead frames the ex-gangster’s story as that of a guilty man in the process of atoning for his sins. And so, the role of the penitentiary in American life is not held up for critique. The ex-gangster has been placed in custody for crimes he committed. Williams’ guilt is unquestionable. Indeed, in

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<sup>35</sup> By the end of the film, the narrative expresses the view that “Tookie”—with two nominations for the Nobel prizes—certainly does not deserve to be executed by the state of California. This is especially the case because “Tookie” is able to continue doing good within the black community by calming gang conflict.

*Redemption*, the prison serves its role by confining the guilty man for the duration of his journey toward redemption.

That being said, the imagery with which the prison is portrayed is far from celebratory. The institution appears a grey and confining place. At one point Becnel brings Williams a rose, which the gangster eats because he is so starved for color and for the smell of the flower. "I haven't seen a flower in twenty years," says the ex-gang-banger. "And I want to take its essence back in with me." The combination of this imagery, with Williams' soliloquy at the start and end of the film, is meant to provide a counter-point to media discourse which may paint prison as a journey on the path to black manhood. Williams' explicitly says, in his speech to the audience: "Prison will not make you a man". He is referring here to the numerous narratives, from various Hip Hop lyrics to the biography of Malcolm X, that have at times articulated prison as a testing ground and a rite of passage for black men. *Redemption* seeks explicitly to speak out against these narratives.

That being said, the prison is in ways articulated as a useful institution in relation to street crime in *Redemption*. Williams' guilt and his status as gang leader justify incarceration in his case. At any rate, confinement enables Williams to reflect, educate himself and ultimately to forsake the gangster's life. Yet, unlike the biography of Malcolm X, Williams' prison time is articulated in the film as a struggle for personal redemption, not a quest for political knowledge. Narrative catharsis is aligned with a neo-liberal mode of personal enterprise i.e. of "moral" growth in which the criminal accepts personal responsibility for his crimes through moral self-work.

In this sense, *Redemption* operates a kind of discourse of inclusion. Casting the ex-gangster as a man who is capable of moral reflection and indeed redemption promotes the (Christian) idea that atonement for sins and moral conscience is available to those who would make the spiritual journey and sacrifices to attain such a position. In this way, “Tookie” Williams is represented not as an inhuman primitive or an evil deviant, but rather as a misled individual capable of moral redemption. The film frames criminal black masculinity through a discourse of inclusion, mediated by the penitentiary. In fact, the prison makes sense on such as reading, as providing the context for redemption that would not have been possible on the streets. The penitentiary in *Redemption* is thus not a predatory and spectacular place in which larger-than-life gangsters struggle to establish masculine dominance. It is, instead, a sort of sensory deprivation tank where the protagonist has time to reflect on the status of his soul.

Herein lies the (Christian) religious dimension of the film. Although a Christian discourse is not explicitly articulated in the film, there are numerous ways in which *Redemption* refers to Christian symbolism and writings. “Tookie” Williams, for example, is open to interpretation as a kind of Christ-like figure. His sacrifices, of eventually even his own life, are presented in ways as providing atonement for the sins of gang-involved youth, as well as opening a space for peace on the streets. The film’s imagery underscores such a reading. Frequently, Williams is shot silhouetted by diffuse white light, which can be read as connoting a halo or spiritual enlightenment. Furthermore, the ex-gangster is frequently paraded through the prison halls hand-cuffed and with head bowed, marching to his own execution as if to the cross. The fact that white troopers and prison guards constantly flank him is in ways reminiscent of the Roman soldiers that

were present at Christ's execution. Of course, Williams' status as ex-murderer makes such a reading conflicted; it is difficult for a criminal who must atone for his own sins to represent the saviour. Yet, an aura of spiritual enlightenment with Christian overtones is definitely invoked in *Redemption*. This aspect of the film, also, works as a kind of rite of inclusion; for as "Tookie" Williams' journey is represented as spiritual enlightenment he emerges, at the end of the film, as a kind of wise figure, who is indeed worthy of social inclusion.

*Redemption's* narrative displays political similarities with neo-liberal discourses, in relation to its framing of the role of the penitentiary. *Redemption* implies that "Tookie" Williams effectively reaches emotional and spiritual maturity while in prison. And thus, it seems as if in *Redemption* prison experience is a step, for black men, on a path to moral and spiritual, not political, maturity. And the penitentiary occupies neither the predatory nor the spectacular place it does within the white prison films surveyed earlier. It is, instead, the site of their assumption of personal moral responsibility. Again, compare this narrative with the biographies of black political activists and one can see significant evidence of a neo-liberal articulation of personal, not political, action. In *Redemption*, culture may corrupt black youth—and action, cultural action—must be taken to redress this situation<sup>36</sup>. Implicitly, incarceration makes sense as an agent of containment for the misguided and morally immature youth bent on hurting one another.

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<sup>36</sup> The film also articulates gang trouble in America as a cultural problem. The strategies to end gang warfare that the film addresses are resolutely cultural: "Tookie" publishes books, talks to school kids and makes television appearances. The economic, educational and social pressures facilitating gang formation are left aside entirely. Crime and gangs, then, are articulated as issues stemming from cultural sources, and from corrupt individual choices. Political economic realities such as, for example, the impacts of poverty, poor educational opportunities and housing, are altogether absent as well.

In keeping with its critique of the role of the media in imaging black youth, *Redemption* does not make use of Hip Hop music, nor does it refer to the visual lexicon established within film- and television representations of the black urban context. Director Curtis-Hall opted for a soundtrack free of popular Hip Hop tunes. There is subtle background music in the film of the type that is meant to create tension or indicate emotion, but there is no prominent Rap or Hip Hop soundtrack. This is exceptional for a black film about crime and prison; a Hip Hop soundtrack has become virtually compulsory for films of the ghetto action cycle, as well as the recent black prison films such as *Life* (dir. Ted Demme, 1999), *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001), *Lockdown* (dir. Preston Whitmore, 2000), *Doing Hard Time* (dir. Preston Whitmore, 2004), and *Slam* (dir. Marc Levin, 1998). This decision on the part of the director is consistent with the film and “Tookie” Williams’ message: a gangster’s lifestyle is a dangerous, violent and unproductive path.

In relation to the films of the ghetto action cycle, *Redemption* is notably different in other ways. Aesthetically the film does not appear to borrow from the ghetto action cycle, nor does its visual composition refer to the blaxploitation era. It does, however, recreate what Paul Mason has defined as the “prison film aesthetic” (1998a). Lighting in the prison cells is poor. Shots of the ex-gangster in his cell are often taken through the bars. Images of the interior of the prison are claustrophobic as the camera concentrates on dark, closed-in spaces in which armed guards with riot gear and rifles patrol the gangways. Additionally, *Redemption* refers to, but does not belabour the tedium of prison life. A few scenes show Mr. Williams lying on his bare mattress, looking up at the ceiling, or gazing out of the cell’s bars. Workout scenes, hustling scenes, and moments at

which prisoners are jockeying for control of the prison are altogether absent. This marks a significant difference from the prison film aesthetic discussed in the previous chapter. The ex-leader of The Crips has very little contact with the other prisoners. The film explicitly declares its message at the outset: *Redemption*'s first scene is a monologue in which Mr. Williams speaks directly into the camera and says: "Prison will not make you a man. You do not want to be here." Thus, the film tells the quiet journey of a man struggling to right some of the wrongs he has committed and, in the process, to experience redemption in the eyes of the world, of God and of himself. Herein, precisely herein, lies the main knot of neo-liberal discursive tension in *Redemption*. When personal moral enterprise replaces a collectivist political critique of black incarceration and poverty, neo-liberal discourse articulates subjectivity as personalized moral endeavour.

There is an additional dimension to the articulation of neo-liberal subjectivity in *Redemption*. Whereas blaxploitation cinema, like prison films *Luke* and *Clockwork*, framed narrative struggle of protagonists in relation to a corrupt and oppressive system<sup>37</sup>, narrative struggle in *Redemption* is a question of self-versus-self. Indeed, the protagonist's journey is one of personal struggle, as "Tookie" battles his personal demons in an effort to reach spiritual enlightenment through an acceptance of responsibility. It is possible to read, in this discursive transition, a movement from the framing of narratives as social struggle, to a set of circumstances in which the central conflict in the film stems from the character's internal quest of self-work. The narrative construction centring on a heroic, rebellious criminal is no longer possible in a tale such as *Redemption*.

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<sup>37</sup> In the case of *Luke* and *Clockwork*, the reader will recall that that corrupt system is represented by "evil" warden and bureaucratic penal institution, whereas in blaxploitation cinema the villain is constructed as "the (white) man", represented by policemen, authority figures and white people generally.



*Redemption* presents a vision of black masculinity, prison, and personal struggle that refracts these constructions through neo-liberal discourse and through rites of inclusion. *Redemption* narrates the spiritual and moral enlightenment of Crips' gang founder "Tookie" Williams, in which the protagonist undergoes a journey of personal redemption through reflection, education and through his relationship with female character Barbara Becnel. As this transition takes place according to a program of self-work, "Tookie"'s redemption can be interpreted as articulating a neo-liberal technique of self i.e. moral self-work. That the narrative turns on this type of redemption and not political struggle or rebellion against injustice, is precisely the point of contrast between this film and earlier representations of the blaxploitation era. Additionally, the film styles itself as a kind of critique of American popular culture, which, according to *Redemption's* dialogue and supported in its musical and visual composition, stereotypes black males as predatory criminals. The film constructs a vision of black masculinity as centred, non-violent, and unconcerned with material possessions and masculine attainment through intimidation, financial success or sexual exploit<sup>38</sup>. In ways, this constitutes a reframing of the representation of black masculinity, which has predominated in blaxploitation, the ghetto action cycle and in popular Hip Hop.

Again, then, like the other representations analysed so far in the dissertation, *Redemption* is open to a various interpretations. What is clearly visible in a comparative reading of the film, however, is a set of discursive movements in terms of how imprisonment, black masculinity, and narrative struggles in prison dramas are articulated.

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<sup>38</sup> From blaxploitation to the ghetto action cycle to Hip Hop, black masculinity is oftentimes refracted in American popular culture through an anxious concern with social status and dominance, performed through violence, financial success and/or sexual promiscuity (Antonio, 2002; Guerrero, 1994; Gray, 1995; hooks, 1995; and see films such as *Juice*, *Sweet Sweetback*, *Menace* and *Get Rich*).

## Boot Camp and Bootstraps

Directed by Charles Dutton, made-for-television film *First Time Felon* was released on HBO in 1997. *First Time Felon* was nominated for two awards<sup>39</sup> and was later released directly to video. Already possessing a good deal of film and television acting experience, Charles Dutton went on to direct the boxing film *Against the Ropes* (2004). *First Time Felon* was Dutton's directorial debut. Dutton also served seven years in prison for his involvement in a nightclub stabbing. During his time incarcerated, Dutton became interested in acting, and went on, upon his release, to attend drama school at Yale. The actor-director is quoted as having coined the phrase "From jail to Yale".

*First Time Felon* is based on a true story, and was adapted for television by screenwriter Daniel Therriault. Relatively well-known actor Omar Epps<sup>40</sup> stars as protagonist Greg Yance, a small time drug dealer charged with peddling narcotics on a street corner in the ghetto. Arrested in the film's first scenes, Yance is incarcerated in county jail awaiting trial. As this is the young man's first non-violent felony conviction, the judge offers Yance a choice: accept the state's 5-year minimum sentence for peddling heroin or volunteer for a pilot "boot camp" program which lasts only four months. Yance picks boot camp.

The young black man quickly finds himself on a bus headed for the countryside boot camp, along with several other first time offenders. Upon arriving at the camp, the

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<sup>39</sup> Supporting female actress Rachel Ticotin was nominated for a 1998 ALMA Award for her role in the film. *First Time Felon* was also nominated for an Image Award for as Outstanding TV-movie in 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Omar Epps has starred, among others, in the ghetto action class *Juice* (dir. Ernst Dickerson 1992), football film *Any Given Sunday* (dir. Oliver Stone 1999) and boxing film *Against the Ropes* (dir. Charles Dutton 2004).

inmates are quickly subjected to military-style discipline. Constant physical activity, physical labour and corporeal punishments are meted out by zealot warden-come-drill-sergeants. The drill-officers utilize classical military tactics of yelling, intimidation, push-ups, insults and other forms of “motivational” punishments such as forcing two feuding inmates to carry a log together for 24 hours. The boot camp’s aim is to give first time offenders a chance to “straighten up” by instilling Protestant work ethic in them. This mission, of the boot camp, is revealed in multiple conversations among warden-sergeants: they discuss the fact that the young men’s lack of discipline and motivation, something which “real world” success requires of them.

*First Time Felon*’s boot camp appears on the surface like a liberal reform-style retraining facility; wardens enter into intense conflicts with inmates and the institution occupies a central narrative function, in the sense that it is constructed as a key operator in the transition undergone by the first time felons. Yet, there are important differences between the construction of the disciplinary institution in *First Time Felon*, and the representation of the disciplinary “system” in films *Clockwork* and *Luke*. Indeed, rather than representing a totalitarian and corrupt arm of the state, *First Time Felon*’s boot camp is represented as a useful and legitimate institution.

The positive associations attached to the boot camp begin early on in the film. When the newly convicted first time felons arrive at the camp, the head warden gives what is meant to be an inspirational speech. He tells the young men: “It’s not our job to straighten you out. It’s your job.” Equally, the men are enlisted as voluntary participants in the process of their own retraining: they are permitted to quit at any time and serve their time in the penitentiary instead. The boot camp is neither scientific, nor does it carry

out a liberal reform agenda of education, reflection and psychological retraining. The boot camp is styled instead as a “tough”, masculine, militaristic context designed to instill confidence/self-esteem and to produce the kinds of entrepreneurial subjects that will engage in “hard work” and morally correct ways of living once released. The “positive” effects, on Yance, of the boot camp’s disciplinary training are highlighted throughout the film.

Additionally, the effects of the boot camp’s disciplinary regime are framed in personal terms. Yance is encouraged to see himself as personally responsible for his involvement in crime and in the street thug life. “Taking responsibility”, in *Felon*, is identified with adopting a more mainstream value system by investing oneself in wage labour. Additionally, the young thug’s redemption is represented as personal, not political. Rather than raise Yance’s awareness of the political and structural injustices facing black communities in the United States, the boot camp is billed as a space in which the young men are given resources and self-esteem that will allow them to act as “productive” citizens upon release. This has the effect of identifying redemption with a project of self-work—that is, a kind of struggle of self against self. Rather than framing a narrative struggle in relation to collective or institutional forces, *Felon* recounts a struggle of a highly personal nature. The disciplinary institution in the film, then, is a site of personal and not political awakening, just as the institution does not serve as the narrative villain, but, if anything, as a site of positive transformation.

There are class overtones to the fact that mainstream wage labour is identified with redemption from criminality. Indeed, Yance’s acceptance of middle-class and mainstream morals, as well as career aspirations, is portrayed as redemptive. Thus *Felon*

articulates a version of the Horatio Alger myth. That is, through hard physical and mental labour, Yance is able to muddle through and achieve middle-class employment by the end of the film. The transition the protagonist undergoes is precisely with respect to the American dream, but not any version of the American dream. *Felon*, and indeed the Horatio Alger myth, is based on the attainment, by a down-and-out character, of a place in middle-class society, symbolized through some combination of financial stability, good reputation, and security (Baltzell and Schneiderman, 1991). This is precisely the transition Yance undergoes in the film. *First Time Felon*, in this way, articulates a meritocratic understanding of American society, especially in relation to young black men. That is, despite the (racialized and classed) obstacles the young black man faces, Yance is able to achieve the middle-class American dream through hard work and perseverance. *Felon*, in this sense, recounts a narrative in which Puritan work ethic and self-esteem training enable a young black street thug to overcome economic and social barriers associated with his race and class status.

The framing of the Horatio Alger myth takes on a racialized dynamic in *First Time Felon*. Consider Yance's moments of redemption at boot camp. An incident occurs when warden Calhoun (played by Delroy Lindo) takes the young thug aside and gives him a talk about "excuses" and "the war between black people and niggers". The warden implies that many young black men rely on "excuses" for their bad behaviour. Absent fathers, drug addicted mothers, or abuse during childhood, says the warden, are excuses which many young felons cite as causes for their actions. The goal of the boot camp, and indeed of the film, is to make it appear as if black youth are "fully responsible for their own lives". To this effect, warden Calhoun also makes a speech regarding the so-called

“war” between whites and blacks in America. For Calhoun, the real conflict takes place not between white America and a black community “held down by the system”.

“Niggers”, according to the warden, are those black people who refuse to take responsibility for their lives and lead law-abiding existences. “Niggers”, says Calhoun, prey on other blacks by selling drugs, committing crimes or pimping black women.

“Niggers”, for Calhoun, are the ones really responsible for “keeping black folks down”.

In producing such a story, *First Time Felon* makes reference to the position of economic and social disadvantage in which many young African American males find themselves. *First Time Felon* also catalogues numerous incidents of discrimination against black men. Yet these economic and social obstacles are explicitly framed as “excuses” for personal failure. The film thus bolsters discursive construction of racial disadvantage as a matter to be resolved on a personal basis. Within this context, boot camp is articulated as an instrument of punishment that tailors an individualized solution to criminal involvement. Thus, the complex social problems facing black (male) youth in the urban context are articulated as resolvable not through political action, but through a neo-liberal regime of punishment and through particular techniques of self.

Furthermore, in *First Time Felon* the state steps in to promote self-esteem building through military discipline. *First Time Felon* is in this sense a long way from the civil rights era discourse promoting affirmative action or collective political solutions. The film documents the poverty, emotional trials, and lack of opportunity faced by black youth, but inequalities are framed as surmountable through personal and entrepreneurial strategies. Neo-liberal entrepreneurial subjectivity and militarized, coercive punishment

techniques are articulated in *First Time Felon* as solutions to the un-level playing field much of the black American community faces.

Whereas civil rights era discourse might have emphasized community ties and the need to push against “the (white) system”, the more neo-liberal discourse articulated in *First Time Felon* places emphasis squarely on the individual. On one level, then, the film implies that individual black people bear the responsibility to either work personally towards a better life, or else they continue to sabotage their own community with “excuses” of a social nature.

The emphasis on individual self-esteem building continues through Yancey’s boot camp experience. At one point, inmates are called upon to help sandbag a Midwest town against flooding. A busload of black, urban “trainees” is trucked to an all-white town, where they proceed to work harder than the army reservists already on site. In the film’s least plausible moment, the white, mid-western townspeople quickly accept the inmates, giving them food and thanking them profusely for attempting to save the town. The sandbag barrier, however, is washed away in the flooding. At this point, Yancey has already had an epiphany in which he learns that “Life is tough, but you must never give up”. The one-time drug dealer graduates from boot camp with the photos of smiling white mid-westerners and a thank you note from the townspeople in his pocket. Thanks to the redemptive power of the contact between (real) heartland (white) Americans, the urban black gangster is able to make the decision to “go straight”. Again, note here the celebration of personal entrepreneurial selfhood and the racial positioning of poor whites as the saviours of black urban male youth. Not only does this narrative set-up replace a collective political consciousness of black American’s social and political marginality

with a resolutely personal set of concerns. It additionally positions (poor) whites at the centre of American moral goodness.

Conversely, it is possible also to read the boot camp process as a symbolic rite of inclusion for the black gangster, however. Yance is not portrayed as an unredeemable, predatory criminal delinquent. Indeed, the military disciplinary regime of the boot camp is billed as precisely the institutional context in which misguided young men can be socialized into moral behaviour. Thus, while *First Time Felon* does, in more ways than one, “resolve” the disadvantaged position of black male Americans through a discourse of Puritan hard work and entrepreneurial selfhood, this resolution can be read also as a rite of inclusion. Young black felons, in the film, are capable of redemption.

The obstacles faced by Yance on his return to his old neighbourhood after boot camp further develop an image of the challenges facing black male youth who seek to enter the mainstream economy. Upon arriving back in his urban neighbourhood, Yance has trouble actualising his project of self-work. The ex-drug dealer returns to find his girlfriend with another, richer “gang-banger”. Yance moves to live with his single mother, whose resources he is forced to live off. For eight months he struggles to find work, any work, at minimum wage. Because of his criminal record and because he is a black ex-drug dealer, employment services systematically refuse him any opportunity. His mother advises him to be honest about his past and lack of job experience, but this honesty only closes doors. In a particularly poignant scene, a young white employment counsellor refuses the young man a temporary entry-level position, after Yance has told her the story of his experience at boot camp and his resolve to work his way up the “hard but honest” way. All around in his neighbourhood, Yance sees his friends getting rich by



dealing drugs, dying of AIDS and/or overdoses, and/or being shot as a result of vendettas or gang-feuds.

After five months of unemployment, and after his best friend Pookie is killed by gunshots, Yance contemplates suicide. He buys a gun and some alcohol and rents a hotel room in which he plans to kill himself. He also brings the photos of the Midwest town and his boot camp diploma. It is these mementos that finally prevent his suicide. Note here that Yance is in ways “saved” for a second time by the wholesome white characters he encounters.<sup>41</sup> Yance walks away from the hotel, firm in his resolve to work towards a better life. The film ends here. Before the final credits, text informs the viewer that Yance finally came by a job, and after years of hard work was able to begin his dream job as an inner city youth counsellor. The Horatio Alger myth is complete.

In its construction of crime, *First Time Felon* differs with respect to the discursive set-up of both the blaxploitation and the 1970s liberal reform punishment films *Luke* and *Clockwork*. Unlike in *Sweet Sweetback*, *First Time Felon* does not portray crime as a heroic mode of rebellion to be employed against the “white” system. Instead, through the speeches made by the sergeant-wardens, it articulates a vision of (black) street crime as a means of sabotage, through which some young black males victimize members of their own community and collaborate with the white oppressors to tarnish the reputation of all African Americans. From rebellious, heroic act to a version of race traitorship, the construction of crime has definitely changed in relation to the films of the 1970s. Indeed, even with respect to the ghetto action cycle, *First Time Felon*’s depiction of crime is

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<sup>41</sup> This is a pattern in popular cultural discourse on black masculinity that is identified elsewhere by bell hooks (1995). She identifies depictions in which black male characters are portrayed as “good blacks” with “eyes only for the master”, in which—she suggests—black men appear a-sexual and infantile (1995, p. 102).

perhaps more damning of the individual criminal. *Juice* and *Menace*, for example, construct nihilistic images of ghetto youth who become involved in criminal activities because of their environment and poverty. While crime is presented as destructive in these films, there is no discursive articulation of crime as a means of entrenching the disadvantaged position of blacks in the United States. *First Time Felon*'s construction of crime as part of the root of the problems facing the black community represents a discursive shift, as does the film's charge that individuals are fully responsible for their criminal involvement.

In this sense, *First Time Felon* is more aligned with neo-liberal discourses on crime. Garland has suggested that neo-liberal crime control discourses have a tendency to construct crime as *the cause*, and not the result, of urban decay and concentration of poverty (see here, for example, the work of Charles Murray (1999) or Renford Reese (2004)). That is, on a neo-liberal understanding (black) street crime emerges as the scapegoat or indeed "the articulator of crisis" (to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall et al. (1978)) according to which urban poverty is framed partially as a moral issue. Such an understanding of crime, and indeed of urban decay, is integral to the framing of black community disadvantage in turn as a question of morals, unrelated to economic pressures; for if crime is a question of choice, not economic disadvantage or social pressure, then youth street crime is a direct facet of moral decay, central to community disadvantage and the victimization of "good honest black folks". Of course, on such an understanding, as articulated by warden Calhoun, black youth's decision to commit street crimes is also entrenches the negative stereotypes of black Americans in mainstream/white circles.

*First Time Felon* additionally articulates a new model of discipline: the militaristic. *First Time Felon*'s portrayal of a boot camp program constructs a change in punishment strategies in the United States, in relation to the scientific and rehabilitative techniques of the 1970s. Since the opening of the first "boot camp" institution in 1983 in, the United States has experimented with boot camps as alternative punishment programs designed to meet a number of needs (Begin, 1996). Neo-liberal discourses of fiscal responsibility and attempts to reduce prison over-crowding, meet the move towards "just desserts" punishment in boot camp (Begin, 1996). Over forty such institutions existed in twenty-seven American states in 1996. Indeed, boot camp's

Tough penalties for criminal law violations while reducing prison overcrowding, costs to taxpayers and recidivism - explain their appeal as a sentencing option. Indeed, the considerable public support in the U.S. for boot camps continues to grow, in large part because their quasi-military environment, emphasizing strict discipline, hard physical labour, exercise, drill and ceremony, is perceived to be a tough, appropriate punishment for those who have breached the criminal law (Begin, 1996).

Boot camps, then, are an increasingly popular in America as an alternative to penitentiary punishment. They also represent a change in punishment practice, moving from the disciplinary-scientific, welfare era model of rehabilitation and retraining, towards more militarised and neo-liberal techniques of punishment (Begin, 1996). Thus, as punishment techniques shift in a disciplinary/coercive direction, boot camp programs are an increasingly popular "solution" to first time offences. The reader will note that boot camp programs have had mixed results. While some programs have demonstrated reduced recidivism rates, others show little change or higher rates of recidivism (Begin, 1996). According to Begin's 1996 study, this is due in part to variation among boot camp

programs, some of which supplement militarised time schedules with, for example, educational programs or addiction counselling for drug offenders.

As a sidebar, it is also worth mentioning that boot camps, as punishment, fall squarely within Foucault's account of classical liberal-disciplinary punishment at its outset as described in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). In the 1800s, the penitentiary, according to Foucault, partially instituted techniques from a military context, along with strict timetables, supervision and imposition of hierarchy, to retrain offenders away from sloth and lack of discipline (1977). Posture, strict supervision, and management of inmates' every activity were integral to these early classical liberal punishment programs. These are precisely the techniques used in boot camp. Thus, although boot camp remains associated with a neo-liberal program of punishment, it fits quite squarely into a disciplinary tradition of punishment techniques, which extends back to the classical liberal era.

In terms of the representation of punishment in *First Time Felon*, then, one can interpret a kind of laudatory exploration of boot camp as mode of punishment for non-violent offenders. The film, through a sort of rite of disciplinary inclusion (e.g. the boot camp), implies that the young black street thugs can be redeemed through stringent disciplinary retraining, not "soft" rehabilitation such as educational programs of counselling. Thus, while *First Time Felon* articulates a kind of rite of inclusion for black male youth in relation to militarised punishment, it also constructs a discursive support for "harsh" punishment.

*First Time Felon*, then, articulates a number of discursive threads, some of which can be interpreted as conservative and/or neo-liberal, underscoring either a meritocratic

vision of American society, or else associated with contemporary constructions of criminal justice as a science of harsh consequences. The emphasis, as well, on techniques of self-esteem building, military discipline and individualism are associated with an entrepreneurial vision of selfhood that has been identified with the practice of neo-liberal government (Dean, 1999; Garland, 2001). On the other hand, the film also images some of the obstacles and challenges facing black youth, which on one level constitutes a critique of America's positioning of black Americans. Furthermore, the film also constructs boot camp as a rite/site of inclusion. That Yance's redemption becomes possible under the disciplinary regime of the state-run boot camp, symbolizes to some extent the fact that black male "first time felons" can be socialized into mainstream society. As I have argued, this construction can also be interpreted as somewhat conservative, however, as it can be read through the Horatio Alger myth. To the extent that hard work and discipline are billed as necessary ingredients for a down-and-out black youth to gain access to middle-class status, *First Time Felon* represents a vision of the American dream that is democratic and available, with some obstacles, to African Americans also.

Like the three films already addressed in the project, *First Time Felon* articulates a complex and conflicted view of masculinity, disadvantage and criminal involvement. While the film certainly does not enact a rite of exclusion via-à-vis black "delinquents", its constructions of crime and subjectivity are open to interpretation as confirming a neo-liberal discursive project. Through comparison with older films depicting black masculinities in relation to crime, it is certainly the case that *First Time Felon* attests to discursive movement. Historically, then, as the political- and cultural landscapes have

changed, this film positions black Americans in new ways, shifting the discursive struggle over the meanings of crime, punishment and blackness.

## **Conclusion: Chapter Four**

The two “redemption” prison dramas surveyed in this chapter present a complex vision of black masculinity, and refract images of incarceration through raced discourses, which, at times, refer to neo-liberal framings of subjectivity and crime control. On the one hand, the films surveyed in chapter four construct a black male (criminal) protagonist capable of moral redemption through either hard work or self-reflection. Set up as rites of inclusion, the processes transformations both “Tookie” Williams and Yance undergo frame black masculinity as malleable and redeemable in the sense that both characters are transformed into non-violent, civilized individuals. Black super-predators are absent entirely in the dramas. The black men in the films are able, after their moral redemptions, to be un-intimidating, non-violent and capable of rational action. That being said, the “redemption” of the two lead characters is framed through discourses of class.

Interpretable according to the Horatio Alger myth, *First Time Felon* particularly recounts Yance’s transition from ghetto thug to middle-class mainstream status. Additionally, the two films frame solutions to the struggles of the black community, against racialized disadvantage, in resolutely individualist terms. Although especially *First Time Felon* refers to the disadvantaged position of black (men) in economic and social terms, these obstacles are resolved in the film through “hard work” and discipline. Rather than articulating collective political critique, both films narratively establish redemption as a question of self-work, individual struggle and self-esteem building. Thus, an individual moral quest, in both films, is the path for catharsis.

*First Time Felon* and *Redemption* present a vision of criminal justice and of black masculinity that reframes the representations of the 1990s and 1970s. The “redemption” dramas do not present a nihilistic vision of criminal involvement, black family pathology and self-destruction (as in the ghetto action cycle), nor do they recount narrative struggles in which heroic anti-social characters fight “the man” through subversive criminal acts (as in blaxploitation). Rather, the “redemption” dramas are focused on representing the moral and personal “awakenings” of their protagonists, and in the process they construct crime and criminal behaviour as anti-social and ultimately destructive to the black community.

The prison is framed in these dramas as a sort of useful institution. In *First Time Felon*, Yance is redeemed due to the strict regime of discipline and self-esteem building that he is subjected to in the boot camp program. In *Redemption* the prison is also the site of gangster “Tookie” Williams’ redemption, although civilian journalist Barbara Becnel plays an important role in the thug’s moral awakening as well. While the 2004 drama is perhaps more critical of the death penalty itself, the prison as institution is not held up for critique, as the audience is given to understand that “Tookie” was incarcerated with good reason. Indeed, while the prison appears grey and unpleasant, the film does not complicate the basic assumption, in neo-liberal crime control discourse, that prison exists to contain predators guilty of having victimized others.

In terms of the films’ framings of black masculinities and incarceration, it is noteworthy that issues of homosexuality are entirely absent. While the “white Angst” dramas surveyed in the previous chapter placed negotiations around (white) male sexuality as centre stage, the “redemption” dramas elided the issue entirely. This elision

of male homosexuality fits with the pattern identified by scholar Isaac Julien (1992): namely, that the representation of black male homosexuality remains somewhat taboo in popular culture. In the context of prison drama, this absence is perhaps more noticeable given the fact that the depiction of male homosexuality is a conventional trope of the genre.

In summary, then, the two “redemption” film visited in chapter hour attest to discursive movement in articulations of black masculinity and crime and punishment. It is also evident from this analysis that the ways of framing resistance/inclusion and conservative/marginalizing discourses has changed with respect to blaxploitation and the ghetto action cycle of films. Aspects of the “redemption” films are somewhat conservative, while struggle, movement and re-framing/inclusion of black masculinity is also evident. Chapter five addresses two additional prison dramas that continue to follow this pattern of contest and polysemy.



## CHAPTER 5: VISIBLE CRITIQUE OR AN AESTHETICS OF PENAL CRISIS

### Introduction: Chapter Five

Chapter five discusses two additional prison dramas whose narrative construction is different from that of the “redemption” dramas, and the “white Angst” films. Both *OZ* (creator Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) and *Prison Song* (dir. Darnell Martin, 2001) can be read for textual polysemy, just as they manifest conflicted representations of social order, class and race in relation to criminal justice. Masculinity and criminality are also pulled through the dramatic representation of prison in these dramas. In the case of *OZ*, there are a number of conflicting discursive threads that make it possible to interpret the series as, by turns, resistive and conservative. On the one hand, *OZ* presents an unusual and potentially innovative treatment of homosexuality. In addition, the series has a narrative structure, which operates according to Modleski’s soap opera paradigm, orienting both subjectivity and narrative closure in ways that differ with respect to the conventional modes of representing incarceration. Conversely, the series articulates neo-liberal discourses and, indeed, a vision of social order that is in line with neo-liberal logic on criminal justice. *Prison Song*, on the other hand, articulates a melodramatic and nihilistic critique of American state institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals and prisons), illustrating how these are located within a generally racist social order. The film constructs an intense and unmitigated indictment of US crime control.

These texts, then, construct very different views of the American carceral institution, as well as of its position within the larger social order. In *OZ*, the penitentiary serves essentially as a spectacular backdrop, a kind of viewing gallery, in which predatory and hyper-masculine inmates engage in aestheticized struggles over sex and power. *Prison Song*, on the other hand, articulates a wider and more damning critique of the (white) American state and its system of policing and criminal justice, which, according to the drama, is responsible for the continuing marginalization and oppression of African Americans.

## **Follow the Yellow Brick Road**

The highly influential screen prison drama, *OZ* was created by Tom Fontana and aired on HBO from 1997-2003. *OZ* was and remains extremely popular with television audiences. Although perhaps not as widely viewed as *Sex and the City* (creator Darren Star, 1998-2004) or *The Sopranos* (creator David Chase, 1999-2007), Amazon.com's website refers to HBO's longest running drama as "one of the most popular" in the channel's history, with cult followings both in the US and internationally.

*OZ* is also a defining moment in American media representation of incarceration. Renowned for scenes of violence, drug-use, sexual explicitness and brief frontal male nudity, screen prison drama critics Elayne Rapping (2003), Brian Jarvis (2004), and David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan (2004) have critiqued the highly popular series. The critics have tended to point to the ways in which *OZ* articulates neo-liberal discourses around crime and punishment, while underscoring the homicidal and predatory nature of the inmates, as well as graphically constructing prisons as a site of extreme violence. For Brian Jarvis, the series discredits the rehabilitative agenda in punishment, and is

otherwise “unable to offer solutions” resorting instead “to the aestheticization of penal crisis” (2004, p. 232). Elayne Rapping, additionally, sees the series as a “sign” of the neo-liberal times, in which melodrama constructs prison as container for super-predators, whose violent antics are played out in graphic detail on television (2003, p. 72 and 74).

By contrast, a view attuned to textual polysemy of *OZ* has rarely been articulated in prison drama scholarship. The point that *OZ* offers an innovative perspective on homosexuality, and indeed on narrative closure and multiple points of identification has yet to be made decisively in the field of prison drama research (with the exception of Schauer (2004)). My analysis here interprets both of these currents, examining the more conservative and neo-liberal readings drawn out by critics Rapping and Jarvis. Equally, I suggest also that *OZ* might offer critique and meaningfully resistive articulations of, for example, male homosexuality.

For prison drama critic Jarvis, then, *OZ* is a reservoir of screen prison drama clichés, whose attractiveness to viewers is a result of “graphic depictions of sexuality and violence” (2004, p. 232). Jarvis’ reflections are echoed in part by Elayne Rapping (2003), probably *OZ*’s most vocal critic in the field of screen prison drama scholarship. Rapping argues that the show’s violence and expressivity, combined with its characterization of inmates as vicious criminals, discursively reinforces punitive neo-liberal penal policy ideologically (2003, p. 95). Rapping’s reading of *OZ* draws out the aspects of the series that, for her, are tied to a neo-liberal turn in American television, and in American society, especially with respect to questions of criminal justice. For Rapping, an important ingredient of neo-liberal times in America is precisely the “criminalization” of

American life: that is, she identifies a tendency in American television to cast virtually all social problems as matters resolvable through criminal justice (2003, p. 252).

There are a number of discursive elements in *OZ* that, for Rapping, might participate in sustaining a punitive turn in criminal justice in the nation (2003). The first discursive element she identifies is the show's depiction of inmates. Tom Fontana's characters, argues Rapping, are constantly engaged in a-moral scheming, violent conflicts and manipulation for personal gain. She argues that *OZ* constructs inmates as basically violent, brutal, lacking human empathy, and basically unfit for society (Rapping, 2003, p. 86). In addition, Rapping suggests that no context is provided for the prisoners' outbursts of violence (i.e. such as confinement, abuse, etc.), nor are their reasons for committing crimes investigated by the show. Economic and social factors in criminality are never dealt with. Consequently, criminality and violent behaviour are presented in *OZ* as character-traits, not as social, psychological or economic issues (Rapping, 2003, p. 93). For Rapping, this ideologically validates punitive imprisonment as the solution to crime. Thus, she suggests that *OZ* informs its viewers that criminals are best kept locked away, as their immoral and predatory proclivities threaten society.

The show's ideological underpinning of punitive penal policy is wider, Rapping argues. *OZ* also justifies vengeful and punitive criminal justice by ridiculing liberal (in this case both welfare era and left-leaning) approaches to punishment (Rapping, 2003, p. 93). This has everything to do with the show's depiction of its inmates as well. Because *OZ*' incarcerated criminals are incapable of moral judgment or rehabilitation, the (reform) liberal prison staff's efforts at rehabilitation are frustrated from the get-go (Rapping, 2003, p. 86). Every painstaking effort carried out by the prison staff is met with disaster.

For example, consider the prison staff's initiative to have one of the black inmates, Poet, a talented writer, released on good behaviour. Within a matter of days, Poet begins abusing drugs, and is returned to prison for having spectacularly breached his parole requirements by committing additional crimes. *OZ* is full of such examples.

In another plot twist, inmate Keller tries to seduce the prison psychologist and nun, Sister Peter Marie. While Peter Marie's goal is to rehabilitate Keller by helping him confront psychological demons, she inevitably becomes emotionally involved with the inmate, who uses this tie to manipulate her. The liberal reform agenda, thus, is again frustrated in this plot twist.

Another example of how the series ridicules the liberal reform agenda is through its depiction of the white technocrat in charge of *OZ*, Vince McManus. Constantly handcuffed by the prison's bureaucracy and his own desire to rehabilitate gently, McManus is powerless to prevent the brutal and Machiavellian schemes of the inmates. Various plot twists only highlight McManus' ineffectiveness. Any manipulation the technocrat attempts is immediately laid to waste by outbreaks of violence among the inmates. Equally, McManus' efforts to win the prisoners' respect, for example in a basketball game he loses pitifully, are constructed as misplaced and pathetic. Thus, the show explicitly sets up oppositions between the liberal reform staff and *OZ*' predatory and irredeemable inmates. Rapping's point that the efforts to redeem prisoners turn *OZ*' well-meaning prison staff into victims, is well made. Although most of the prison staff do try to do the right thing, their attempts are useless because their old-fashioned belief in rehabilitation is essentially misplaced (Rapping, 2003, p. 91). *OZ*' inmates are beyond

redemption. Rapping thus identifies the ways *OZ* explicitly ridicules the liberal reform model of punishment.

This aspect of Rapping's argument is to the point. *OZ*' liberal reform minded prison staff seems woefully ill equipped to deal with the violent vicissitudes of inmate-behaviour. The show pits super-predators against "weak kneed" liberal reformers, setting up narrative conflict in such a way as make the rehabilitative punishment-system fall short. In this way, *OZ* indeed articulates a neo-liberal critique of liberal reform era practices of punishment.

*OZ* also sets up neo-liberal discourses on punishment and criminality through its articulation of a predatory prison/society. For example, like in *History X*, *OZ* tells the story of a penitentiary fractured and divided according to racial conflict. The series catalogues the feuds of ethnic gangs. Various groups jockey for control of the drug trade, the kitchens or the prison hospital. The skinny Irish live by their wits and their gift of the gab; built blacks, in the image of ghetto gangsters, control drug trade by using physical size, aggression and street smarts. White trash neo-Nazis bandy about terms like "nigger" and "jungle bunny". Italian-American inmates have slicked back, oily hair, wear track pants and "wife-beaters", and rely on Mafia connections on the outside for power. There are, of course, also Muslim converts (mostly black) and Hispanics who are physically able, but who maintain social status through religion and codes of honour. *OZ*' diverse inmate population is thus divided into racially categorized gangs, implying an underlying reality of race-conflict, both in prison and on the "outside". *OZ* thus articulates an image of America as a racially divided and predatory place. Note the similarity of this vision with the one articulated in *History X*. As I have argued earlier, articulations of a predatory

social field characterized by conflict-generating racial cleavages is associated with a neo-liberal definition of social space. *OZ* articulates a neo-liberal vision of social space, much as does *History X*.

Again, like in *History X*, inmate-on-inmate, or inmate-on-staff aggression and conflict are key sources of narrative tension in *OZ*. Emerald City contains and constrains the dangerous men that inhabit the penitentiary, but it does not rehabilitate them, nor does it interfere with their spirit or humanity. The prison regime is thus a setting, not a character in the show. Plot twists do not grow from spectacular confrontations between inmates and the technologies of scientific punishment and discipline, which represent a Big Brother state. Conflict stems, instead, from a racially fractured and violent prison environment.

In this narrative set-up one can read the extent of shift in discourse with respect to the films *Cool Hand Luke* and *Clockwork*. Punishment, risk and delinquency are articulated differently. In *OZ*, society appears conflicted and dangerous, not over-regulated, and this, by extension, frames criminality as predation or as refusal to accept moral responsibility. The inmates' inability to undertake journeys of personal moral redemption only underscores the degree to which criminals, in *OZ*, appear primitive and uncivilized predators.

To this effect, the viewer will note that discourses of redemption and moral self-work are basically absent from *OZ*. While characters do, at times, show signs of engaging in "work" designed to effect moral self-rehabilitation, each such attempt results in abortion. The inmate in question invariably gives up or fails to go through with true redemptive work. For instance, inmates Tobias Beecher and Vern Schillinger maintain an

ongoing feud, which results in numerous inmate deaths and injuries to both men and others. At times, the two embark on reconciliation attempts either alone or through the prison authorities. Invariably, such initiatives founder on the men's appetites for revenge. Because neither is able to forgive the other, reconciliation turns into a golden opportunity for further manipulation and violence. Redemption and acceptance of guilt thus remain, in *OZ*, elusive. The show's inmates are portrayed as morally incapable of embarking on true journeys of redemption. Rapping might suggest that this absence bespeaks an understanding of criminals as "alien", immoral creatures incapable of change. To borrow again the term from Reeves and Campbell's work, *OZ* in this sense enacts a "rite of exclusion". Reeves and Campbell's study leads one to suggest that as the inmates in *OZ* are incapable of growth or reintegration into "civilized" society, so the show performs a discursive act of exclusion (1994).

Although redemption as a neo-liberal program of self-work is not articulated in *OZ*, one can observe a different program in the series. Governmentality theory writers Dean (1999, p. 13) and Cruikshank (1999) have argued that neo-liberal government works partially through techniques of self, that is, self-work projects, such as dieting, bodybuilding, personal style and sport. Neo-liberal state government, according to Dean, interfaces with enterprise-focused, consumerist and health-oriented programs of self-work, because in effect, these techniques of self allow the state to devolve responsibility to individuals for, for example, issues such as healthcare or physical education (1999, p. 13). Technologies of fitness, dieting and self-presentation, additionally, interlock with other aspects of the neo-liberal system of government, such as coercive crime control practices. Cruikshank (1993) and Dean (1999) have argued that the "cult" of fitness is



identified in neo-liberalism with a market secured by consumer demand for goods and services used in cultivating personal style, morphology and health.

Technologies of fitness, health and bodywork are manifested in *OZ*' aesthetic focus on built male bodies<sup>42</sup>. Muscular male bodies, and personal style are the objects of significant camera attention in the show. *OZ* has a particular predilection for hulking, muscular male physiques, especially when engaged in sport, violence or sexual activity. To this effect, the show's camera pays intense visual attention to inmates' bodies. Be it the Irish gang, led by O'Reilly (and later with his brother Cyril his right-hand man), the African-American faction led by the literally enormous Adebese and right-hand man Kenny, the Mexicans, led by Alvaraz Jr., the Aryans, the Italians, or the Nation of Islam—every “masculine” inmate with a sizeable role is athletic, muscled, tough and violent. Some, like the ghetto gang-banger Kenny or the Nigerian, Adebese, seem excessively and unnaturally large. Frontal male nudity, as well as workout scenes and lingering shots of bodies weave an erotic field around the program's inmates. Even if *OZ* characters seem uninvolved in a program of moral redemption through self-work, their interest in performing masculine identity through sport, style and gesture certainly open the series to a reading of various techniques of self associated with neo-liberal discourses of selfhood (e.g. body-building and sport).

This too represents a point of divergence with respect to earlier screen prison dramas such as *Luke* and *Clockwork*. While *Clockwork* really doesn't focus aesthetic attention on the male physique, *Luke*'s depiction of its protagonist (played by Paul

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<sup>42</sup> Of course, such articulations of neo-liberal discourses of masculinity are not limited to screen prison drama. Consider television programs such as *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* (creators Collins David Metzler, 2003-2006), or *Monster Garage* (creators Beers and James, 2002-2006), two television programs that construct masculinity as attainable through self-image, personal style and/or acquisition of the “right” types of possessions.

Newman) is perhaps more focused on his physique. Newman is shot shirtless and drenched in sweat at various points. Yet Newman's physique, unlike the heavily built bodies of *OZ*, appears "natural". While *OZ*' inmates spend hours in the gym, or acquiring tattoos and modifying clothing, evidence of such self-work is absent in the earlier two prison films. *OZ*, then, like *History X*, attests to a change in the technologies and practices associated with the production of masculinities. Frank Mort, scholar of British masculinity, has suggested that while a variety of masculine "styles" have come to exist in recent years, including the "metro sexual", a homogenisation of masculinity has taken place with respect to the location of men as consumers of fashion (1996). Mort suggests that a visual lexicon of diverse masculine identities have been called upon to sell (the same) consumer products to men of "different social types" (1996, p. 150). Thus, although there are different ways of creating masculinity through self-work (e.g. through different clothing styles, body-building, etc.), the unifying factor, according to Mort, is the notion that masculinity can be practiced or constructed through techniques and technologies associated with body-work and/or consumption. *OZ* certainly puts practiced masculinity on display, be it through the carefully trained bodies of the inmates, or the fashionable modifications done to prison uniforms by different groups. In this way, the series finds itself located within a larger trend towards construction of masculinity as project of self-image creation.

Masculinity in *OZ* is produced as an object of self-work. *History X* is similar in this regard. Not only is main character Derek figured often working out, half-naked or engaged in sport, his body is clearly the object of much aesthetic camera attention. Scenes of Derek/Ed Norton's body are shot in slow motion and accompanied by religious

music. The aesthetics of built masculinity, thus, is central to these two screen prison dramas. Both dramas frame masculinity as attainable through self-work.

In relation to film scholar Yvonne Tasker's workings through of the concept of "musculinity" in action films of the 80s, *OZ* certainly manifests symbolism based on masculine muscles. For Tasker, of course, "musculinity" is a bivalent concept, signalling the instability of American masculinity in the 1980s, and refracting men's bodies and roles in ways that are open to interpretation both as "masculinity triumphant" and "masculinity in crisis" (1993). Additionally, the film scholar reads musculinity-through-muscles as bespeaking performance of male identity in the face of eroding privilege in the economy and in social life (Tasker, 1993).

Read in relation to neo-liberal discourses, there may be another facet to the type of "musculinity" displayed in *OZ*. Bodybuilding cultures, as well as the notion that masculinity could be attainable through self-work came about in the 1980s (Dyer, 2002; Tasker, 1993), at the very moment that neo-liberal political discourse penetrated public life in America. In this sense, "musculinity" might actually be located at the overlap of two converging trends. Tasker is correct in pointing to men's changing roles due to reconfiguration of the economy, the gender order and the nation's social fabric. In relation to these factors, then, the "built body" emerged as symbol of physical strength and beauty, independent of its diminishing economic value. That this physique could become attainable through self-work may be precisely the point. For through body-culture techniques, consumerism meets neo-liberal self-work as a project for assuaging masculinity's "crisis". One type of masculine attainment project in the US life is identified with a project to acquire a built body, sustained through careful training and

diet. Screen prison dramas like *OZ* and *History X* in their aesthetic focus on the built male physique actively corroborate the techniques of self involved in producing the built body as paragon of masculinity.

There are ties between the articulation of classed masculinity and “musculinity” as invoked in *OZ*. In *History X*, as in *OZ*, there is a discursive association of elements constructing a threatening, yet “musculine” aesthetic of lower class white masculinity. Sexualized in both programs are the massive physiques of lower class white supremacist characters. These threatening white males are also some of the penitentiary’s most violent and ruthless criminals. Such a conflicted construction of white lower class masculinity is set against white middle-class males depicted as impotent and ineffectual. In *History X*, Derek Vineyard transforms into a (defenceless) middle-class man after being raped. An asexual Derek is powerless to save his younger brother at *History X*’s conclusion. In *OZ*, the white, middle-class liberal (McManus) who runs *OZ* is handcuffed by the prison’s bureaucracy, and, anyway, is powerless to control the Machiavellian schemes of the inmates. He is portrayed in the series as physically small, balding, and un-muscular. Furthermore, the series most graphic depiction of “punking” involves the persecution of middle-class lawyer Tobias Beecher, by spectacular and hyper-masculine white trash character Vern Schillinger. Thus, these recent prison dramas have explicitly set up an opposition between classed white masculinities. Lower class men appear more potent and muscular, but are characterized as dangerous and primitive, while middle-class characters are depicted as civilized, but at the expense of their potency (sexual and otherwise).

With respect to the discursive “rites of exclusion” presented in *OZ*, it is thus possible to note a class- and race dynamic. As is the case in *History X*, white trash status

is associated with primitivism, extreme racism (e.g. white supremacy) and criminal deviance. The characterization of neo-Nazi white trash character, Verne Schillinger, demonstrates this connection. In *OZ*' first season (1999), violent, unpredictable, sadistic, manipulative and studied abuser Schillinger, sexually manipulates and "punks" the middle-class, rookie inmate Tobias Beecher. Not only is Schillinger totally devoid of any moral conscience, his *raison d'être* appears tied to the sadistic persecution of other inmates. In later episodes, Schillinger's class status is underscored by the impoverished nature of his family (his boys sell drugs to make money and apparently live in a trailer park), and his lack of education. That the main object of Schillinger's persecution is the "soft", middle-class Beecher who sustains the class-based narrative of middle-class victimization, impotence and morality, versus that of white trash physical power, primitivism and sadism. White characters are thus classed in *OZ*.

The same is true of the ethnic minority characters in the series, as they are constructed in ways similar to the series' white trash primitives. From black "gang-banger" Adebisi, to the Muslim brotherhood's leader Said, the African American characters in *OZ* are certainly depicted as violent, unpredictable and primitive. Characterized as lower-class predators, the black gang-banger inmates are constructed as violent street thugs who have largely been educated in the urban ghetto. *OZ* houses no middle-class black inmates. Whenever the black inmates speak of their lives on the "outside", they refer to the poor urban contexts in which they were raised. Characters Poet and Augustus Hill, for example, were street crack addicts at the time of their arrests.

The head warden of the prison, Leo Glynn, is perhaps the series' one middle-class black character. While he does not behave primitively or in an uncivilized way as do the

inmates, warden Glynn's moral corruption is signalled at various points by his willingness to cover up disasters in the prison, and indeed by his self-seeking desire to pander to the irresponsible state governor's whims regarding the abusive treatment of the prisoners. Warden Glynn is a long way from Bill Cosby, then.

On the whole, inmates in *OZ*, be they Hispanic, Irish and Italian American, are all cast as primitive, violent and treacherous. In effect, the ethnic minority characters are identified also as lower class, partially through the references the series makes to the lives the men had prior to incarceration. The upshot of this portrayal of the inmates, whether they are white or of colour, is to associate criminality and, indeed, criminal violence with lower class status and primitivism. The divide created between the prison staff (such as the middle-class McManus and warden Glynn), and the inmates, rearticulates class stereotypes. Additionally, through its imaging of middle-class victimization (recounted via Tobias Beecher's punking at the hands of Vern Schillinger), *OZ* constructs an image of criminal behaviour tied to lower-class class background. White middle-class victimization is also integrated, thus, into the series. Plot twists of middle-class persecution underscore a neo-liberal view of the conflicted social order in which middle-class white Americans are menaced by the constant risk of criminal victimization. In this way, then, *OZ* may sustain discourses associated with neo-liberal government and crime control.

### Multiple Personalities

*OZ* constructs a prison drama that is in ways innovative, in addition to elements of the series that are, perhaps, more traditionally conservative, or at least aligned with the

recent neo-liberal current in crime control and social organization. One axis along which this takes place is precisely the resistance of narrative closure and the multiple points of subject identification indicated by Tania Modleski in her analysis of soap opera (1982). Whereas the other prison dramas surveyed in this study adhered to a cinema/film format and narrative structure, and were organized around the perspective of one, central protagonist, *OZ* is structured according to the narrative conventions of television soap opera. As the series continues from week to week without breaks in the story, episodes cannot end with the hero's triumph, with narrative resolution or with a "happily ever after". To the extent that *OZ* is structured in this way, it also disrupts representational conventions in prison drama.

Television critics John Fiske notes that "masculine" television programs like *The A-Team* (creators Frank Lupo and Stephen Cannell, 1983-1987) prefer to structure episodes as self-contained vignettes. The series *The A-Team* structures each show through a goal-driven quest that is resolved by the final credits (Fiske, 1987, p.). Fiske argues that characters' relationships in *The A-Team* are essentially goal-directed; that is, they are not experienced for their own sake, but rather arise in the interest of resolving some problem (Fiske, 1987, p. 213). This neatly functions to write any "feminine" need for intimacy, as well as homosexuality out of the action; and consequently, the close relationships of convenience do not impinge on masculine independence in *The A-Team*.

*OZ* is totally unlike *The A-Team* in this respect; the series has a narrative structure that much more closely resembles that of a soap opera. Indeed, *Amazon.com* has called the show "an addictive, testosterone-driven soap opera for guys" (Axmaker, p.). In soap opera-like style, characters develop psychologically from episode to episode, plot twists

thicken and, as one set of intrigues is resolved, another set appears. Fontana's prisoners jockey for power, scheme and do battle using whichever skills they possess. No one character or group is able to stay on top for long, thus making goal-directed narrative triumph and resolution impossible. *OZ* does not engage in narrative closure because the series depicts no clear-cut winners and losers.

Interestingly, this produces a narrative structure much like that identified by Janice Radway (1984) in her study of "feminine" romance novels, and by Tania Modleski (1982) in her study of soap opera. Their works note the lack of narrative closure that characterizes "feminine" popular culture. Both hypothesize that a relationship-centred focus, which minimizes the necessity of attaining a clear goal forecloses a need for narrative closure. Fiske, however, notes that masculine texts like *The A-Team* hinge, in no uncertain terms, on plot resolutions entailing "success" in the form of attaining a goal (Fiske, 1987, p. 215). *OZ* in this way corresponds more closely to the narrative structure of "feminine" popular cultural texts. It is noteworthy that, despite prison drama's status as a characteristically "masculine" genre, *OZ* integrates "feminine" narrative structure with imageries and contexts that are traditionally coded as "masculine".

*OZ*' similarity with soap opera does not end here. Modleski has identified soap opera as a visual narrative woven around multiple points of identification (i.e. where the soap opera presents events from the perspective of different characters) (1982). She suggests that this technique of representation further resists the closure of subject position imposed by more masculine genres. Modleski also suggests that soap opera privileges character development over narrative resolution. *OZ* does exactly this. Each show



provides insight into the lives of a number of individual characters. It is quite common for a character presented as a cold, calculating villain in one episode to be rendered sympathetic by events that transpire in the next.

The multiple characters in *OZ* structure race and ethnicity according to the scriptwriters' tendency to organize prisoners into ethnic and racial types. Despite the fact that the show constructs various groups of inmates, no one group attains dominance. However, *OZ* does make comments about race and, I would argue, generates stereotyped masculinities.

To illustrate how *OZ*' construction of ethnic types might feed into racial stereotyping, one need only look at the character development and pigeonholing of Adebese, the hugely muscular Nigerian whose accent connotes foreignness. Initially, he is portrayed as unpredictable, intimidating, and highly aggressive. A number of episodes catalogue his addiction to heroin. This sub-plot comes to a head in the first season in a "de-tox" scene where Adebese loses control, begins to convulse and becomes highly aggressive. His redemption is ultimately precipitated by an apprenticeship to an older Nigerian inmate. The newly arrived witchdoctor encourages Adebese to disassociate himself from the African-American cohort. Scenes ensue where the young Nigerian has visions of Africa, dances in what is presented as a trance and acts like a wild animal. Thus, even though we are provided with insight into Adebese's character, this is done in a way that creates an exotic and orientalist view of what it means to be African. Hence, although *OZ* may provide multiple points of identification, operationally some of these are closed to the audience, as certain characters are depicted as marginalized "Others" or

as primitives. I have given the example here of Adebisi. One could make a similar case based on the depiction of Said (*OZ*' Muslim spiritual leader).

*OZ*, then, provides an interesting case-in-point of how a prison drama might reconfigure the narrative resolution and unitary subjectivity that is associated with men's cinema and television generally, and prison drama more specifically, albeit in a way that, at times, invokes racial stereotypes. In terms of discourses associated with crime control, I have noted earlier that primitivism, when associated with race or class, may act as a sort of "rite of exclusion", which symbolically defines criminals as irredeemable. To the extent that *OZ* "others" its lower-class white- and ethnic minority characters, the series may be aligned with racialized discourses on crime. Yet, in terms of its more "feminine" narrative mode, *OZ* marries traditionally masculine subject matter and genre (prison drama) with a relationship focused plot structure and multiple points of identification.

### Compulsory Heterosexuality

Like *Animal Factory*, *OZ* articulates an intriguing investigation of male homosexuality. It should be noted that *OZ* does include "traditional" instances of non-consensual homosexual prison sex (e.g. the Beecher-Schillinger duo, and the rape of Mafia boss, Schibetta at the hands of another gang), which constructs male homosexuality as deviant. Yet, the series second season develops a plotline similar to that articulated in *Animal Factory*. Beecher, a middle class lawyer who was raped repeatedly in the first season, falls in love. Following his punking at the hands of neo-nazi ringleader, Vern Schillinger, Beecher is able to win status by adopting a more working class masculine identity. He becomes muscular and learns how to wrestle. He grows a

biker beard. To conform to the regime of violence and honour that exists in *OZ*, he learns to stand up for himself verbally and physically.

Once this process has taken hold, Beecher meets his new cellmate and eventual lover, Keller. The two men begin to spend time together, with Keller teaching Beecher wrestling moves and the two men ogling one another in the showers. Their relationship progresses physically and emotionally, and the camera captures intimacy including a sexually intense man-on-man kiss between the couple. Ultimately, Keller, Beecher's roommate and lover, betrays him. But this isn't the point. Beecher's feelings are portrayed in a sympathetic light. His relationship with the traitorous Keller is punctuated by loving sentiments and play. The show even presents a passionate kiss between the two men. This is especially unusual because Beecher's homosexual relationship develops as his Oz-shaped masculine identity does. As he becomes more masculine, his character becomes more "attractive" to other inmates, and he is able to express love and emotion for another man. Beecher does have a moment of crisis where he asks the prison psychologist if it is 'natural' for a man to love another man. Note that he does not ask: "Am I gay now?" Indeed, his crisis of sexual identity does not culminate in a transition to homosexual identity. Thus *OZ*' treatment of homosexuality renegotiates the conventional separation imposed on male homo- and hetero- sexuality. The series' inclusion of intense physical intimacy scenes, also, is somewhat groundbreaking in American popular culture.

### Em' City

In summary, then, *OZ* articulates a neo-liberal critique of the liberal reform era's rehabilitative punishment regime through its portrayal of super-predatory inmates. The

series also classes and races its characters in somewhat stereotypical ways. Furthermore, *OZ* performs a sort of “rite of exclusion” by foreclosing the possibility of the inmates’ moral redemptions. These are the series’ conservative elements. *OZ*, conversely, presents a number of innovative elements as well. The program re-frames male homosexuality in a way that is, at times, disruptive of the traditional modes through which American popular culture handles the matter. Additionally, the series challenges the conventionally “masculine” narrative structure of prison drama as a genre, marrying multiple points of identification, a narrative focus on relationships and lack of a clear point of closure in each episode with subject matter and imagery that is often coded as “masculine”.

Thus, what is especially interesting to note in relation to *OZ* is that prison visibility (like the visibility of the military, for example) tends to be refracted through masculine narrative structure in drama. This is not the case with *OZ*. In combination with the show’s unusual perspective on male homosexuality, I would like to suggest that perhaps *OZ* uses the context of the prison to reformulate some of the dominant modes of representing masculinity in American culture (as does *Animal Factory*). These two prison dramas, then, are sites of movement in relation to the discourses of dominant masculinities.

That being said, the show really does not articulate substantial political critique with respect to recent criminal policy. In fact, *OZ* is actually rather supportive of discourses associated with neo-liberal understandings of social order and of crime control; I am inclined to share Jarvis and Rapping’s views on this matter.

## Prison Opera

Black female director Darnell Martin's film, *Prison Song* (2001), articulates quite a different perspective on neo-liberal practices in criminal justice. The film pronounces a strong critique of what it depicts as anti-black prejudice and racist institutional practice in America. The made-for-television film focuses especially on criminal justice, refracting a construction of black youth experience through the systemic racist abuses and incompetence in America's institutions, from hospitals, to schools, to prisons. In addition, *Prison Song* articulates a vision of difficult conditions in which black male youth come of age. The made-for-TV film was released on the Black Entertainment Television (BET) channel in April 2001. Audiences gave *Prison Song* the most favourable rating for a film in the station's history. Critics, however, appeared less certain. Apollo Movie Guide's critic David Nasair says *Prison Song*'s script "wallows in clichés and simplistic storytelling" (2004). And indeed, criticism of American institutional practice, racism and penal policy flavours a film that is highly politically charged.

*Prison Song* did not receive much media attention, nor did it win any awards. In fact, the film received most attention from academic and black culture critics, most likely because of black female director Darnell Martin's involvement in the project. The film was Darnell Martin's second directorial film project, following *I Like It Like That* (1994)<sup>43</sup>. Having worked with influential black director Spike Lee, Martin's *Prison Song* appears at times flavored by Lee's visual style. The opening scenes, for example, are shot in a style reminiscent of Spike Lee's films such as *Crooklyn* (1994), *Summer of Sam* (1999), and *He Got Game* (1998). Long tracking shots follow characters through inner

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<sup>43</sup> Martin began her career in commercial film as second camera assistant on Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* (1989). Prior to directing *Prison Song*, she also directed a few episodes of HBO's screen prison drama *OZ*.

city streets, and use of bright colours and slightly yellowish film give the images a 'retro' feel. *Prison Song* was co-written and produced by rap artist Q-Tip, lead rapper in *A Tribe Called Quest*. Q-Tip also starred in the film, alongside co-star and Hip Hop artist Mary J. Blige.

*Prison Song* was initially intended as a Rap Opera, which Martin wanted to use to illustrate the tragedy of the inner city. In the final edits, however, most of the musical numbers were dropped from the production, as decision-makers at BET were sceptical of the commercial viability of a prison-musical.

*Prison Song* is very critical of America's treatment of its black minority, suggesting that systemic racism and coercion, coupled with funding cuts, have produced a context of abuse and neglect across state institutions. The result: the film articulates an image of American society in which mainstream life has become impenetrable for young black Americans at all levels. In *Prison Song*, black youth are barred from educational and career opportunities and relegated to custody in state prisons, reform schools, group homes and mental hospitals. Whereas *First Time Felon* and *Redemption* tell of individual quests for moral enlightenment and/or entry into mainstream life through hard work, *Prison Song* articulates the mass incarceration of young black men as a systemic problem. Not only does *Prison Song* criticize the American criminal justice for its racism, it also depicts poor economic and educational opportunities afforded inner city black youth. Family breakdown figures in the film as well. Yet, if strained family situations appear like black family pathology in the ghetto action cycle, in *Prison Song* family breakdown is articulated as the a result of racist injustice, lack of opportunity, and emotional and financial strain linked to criminal mismanagement on the part of the state.

*Prison Song*'s critique of the American criminal justice system begins even before the film's narrative action. *Prison Song* begins with inter-titles and a child's voice reading the following quote:

7 million children [in American] have a parent in prison or jail or recently released on probation or parole... Black children are 45 times more likely than whites to be sentenced to juvenile prison... 4.6 million black men out of a voting population of 10.4 million have lost their right to vote due to felony convictions... Newborn black males have a greater than 1 in 4 chance of going to prison in the lifetimes...

From the very start, then, *Prison Song* articulates a political statement about the racialized nature of incarceration in America.

Similarly, the narrative catalogues the criminal justice system's destruction of the lives of most of the film's major and minor characters. For example, Elijah, *Prison Song*'s hero, and all of his family members are confined, to their extreme detriment, in institutions in the state of New Jersey. Early scenes portray ten-year-old Elijah living happily with his mother and stepfather. Yet the boys' school is a miasma of surveillance and neglect. Ten-year-old black children pass through metal detectors in the morning, police officers are stationed in the halls, and teachers are totally incompetent at controlling their pupils. Water drips from the classroom ceiling. Despite this, Elijah is a happy and intelligent child. The teacher tells him: "You're different; you're going to make it."

Elijah's stepfather (Uncle C), however, soon commits a felony, his third, as he resists arrest after being badgered by a police officer. The State of New Jersey enforces a "three strikes" policy. Uncle C's third felony means life in prison. This leaves Elijah's mother alone with her young son, both must survive on one income and make do without

the emotional support of Elijah's surrogate father. Elijah's mother abandons plans to become a paralegal and returns to working full-time at a fast food restaurant.

Shortly afterward, Elijah and a friend are arrested for playing a prank on police officers; the ten-year-old boys shine a laser pen at a patrol car. The officers discharge six bullets at the children, finally apprehending them. When Elijah's mother discovers her son in juvenile jail, she has a nervous breakdown. The film's next scene depicts the boy's mother heavily sedated in a state institution for the mentally ill.

Ten-year-old Elijah is then shuffled off to a series of crowded, dysfunctional and predatory state group homes. He will spend the next nine years of his life there. These houses are dilapidated, noisy and crammed with emotionally unstable youngsters who prey on one another. Darnell Martin's film includes many group-home scenes, the visual impact of which is forceful. Teens strike younger children for touching their food. Young black kids are crowded three to four in a room with single beds almost touching. In one home, there are even beds in a narrow hallway. Each time Elijah changes homes, and this happens a lot, he leaves with only a plastic shopping bag full of clothes. He has nothing else. Conditions for studying and doing homework are deplorable; the kids do not even have desks. Elijah must hide in the closet when he wants to assemble his photography assignments. Thus, director Darnell Martin drives home the point that criminal justice, state intervention, and disastrous mistreatment of minors of colour produces abusive and de-humanizing situations. The condition of the state of New Jersey's group homes is also visually criticized in graphic detail.

The narrative appears to reach a turning point at young Elijah's eighteenth birthday. A quiet young man dedicated to escaping his difficult situation, Elijah has a



girlfriend and a scholarship to a posh art school to practice photography. This is not to be his fate, though. The state revokes Elijah's scholarship following budget cuts in education. Desperate, the young man tries selling drugs to pay tuition. This isn't what lands Elijah in jail, though. An older, bigger boy from the group home attacks Elijah on the subway. Elijah retaliates, and a scuffle ensues in which Elijah accidentally pushes the other boy onto the tracks, where he dies, electrocuted. The incompetent public defender is unable to build a decent case, and finally, a mere act of self-defence lands Elijah in prison for fifteen years. Unfit for prison life, the remainder of the film depicts the young man's self-destruction under impossible conditions. The first half of the film, then, articulates how black male youth become vulnerable to incarceration. Factors identified by *Prison Song* include militaristic and over-eager policing, poverty, lack of educational and employment opportunities, unreasonably punitive jail terms, institutional mismanagement, disastrous family policy, and state laws that criminalize black youth and the mentally ill. Government mismanagement of institutions and racism in the job market and in social life are objects of intense criticism as well.

Martin's visual and narrative articulation of racist and punitive crime control, as well as the deleterious effects of government spending cuts, continues into the film's second half. Elijah is sentenced to a medium security, private prison. Here young, mainly black men are confined to glass and concrete cell-cages for most of the day. In this, a private prison, budgetary considerations are of the highest order. Prisoners have fifteen minutes to eat. They are allowed to work construction jobs for one dollar a day in buildings contaminated with asbestos. Toilet paper is rationed. School programs, weight training equipment and even running water are cut at various times in order to save

money. In one scene, a group of white shareholders visits the prison while the chief warden discusses various cost-cutting methods. Concern for the prisoners' welfare is nil. Elijah's only outlets are art and weight training. As the prison education and recreation programs are cut, the young man sinks deeper and deeper into despair.

The jail resembles the group homes in which Elijah spent his youth. Claustrophobic and institutional, both spaces are overcrowded with young men who have suffered lifetimes of neglect, emotional isolation and who have no hope for the future. The hopelessness and helplessness of these young men in the face of state power is underscored over and over by Martin's depiction of the prison. Elijah's cellmate masturbates at night and, eventually, makes homosexual overtures. There are open toilets in the cells where the men must defecate in plain view of one another. The film's criticism of the neo-liberal prison system remains firm.

This critique is underscored by the ways in which Elijah degenerates over the course of his incarceration. The young man is unable to adjust to prison life. After a stint in solitary confinement, he conceives an escape plan with other inmates. In a last-minute fumble, Elijah is left behind. The young man is then shot dead by one of the prison guards. Martin's critique of American criminal justice and society is thus sewn up tightly.

*Prison Song's* critique refers to ghetto action film. Two themes, for example, link *Prison Song* to the ghetto action cycle, although Martin's film spins them differently. For one, black cinema critic Craig Watkins has identified what he calls the "entrapment" theme in ghetto action cinema (1998, p. 212). According to Watkins, ghetto action films portray an inner city social life that entraps black youth by lack of education, proximity to criminal associations, family strife, easy access to drugs, isolation from employment

opportunities, and, of course, predatory law enforcement (Watkins, 1998, p. 215). *Prison Song* articulates the devastating effect of crime control and institutional neglect more substantially, although each of the above elements figures in the film.

In addition, *Prison Song* articulates the theme of black family breakdown, a stock theme of the ghetto action cycle. Family breakdown, in Darnell Martin's film, is framed unlike in ghetto action films *Juice*, *Menace* and *Boyz*. While Watkins argues that the ghetto action cycle shares in public discourse that pathologizes African American families (1998, p. 219), this is not the case in *Prison Song*. According to Watkins, films *Juice* or *Menace II Society* highlight black family "pathology" by framing dysfunction as the consequence of single-parent homes, teen pregnancy, and reconstituted families. On Watkins' view, black families often appear in the ghetto action cycle as pathogenic for youth (Watkins, 1998, p. 219). This, for the author, adds credence to politicking that black communities are "failing" at family values.

Darnell Martin's film frames the issues differently. *Prison Song* articulates a view of incarceration and state intervention as destructive of families and bonds between black people. Elijah, for example, enjoys a stable family environment early on in the film. First his stepfather and then his mother are taken away by coercive state action. With both parents locked away, Elijah has nowhere to go except a string of group homes. These places are depicted in the film as destructive, dysfunctional, and, like jails, essentially concerned with making profit by cutting all basic life-necessities. *Prison Song* paints an image of the emotional isolation and lack of stability such a life imposes on youth. The lethal violence that finally sends Elijah to prison appears, in the film, directly related to the social stresses associated with living in a group home. Reconstituted and single-

parent families do not appear as a source of dysfunction. Rather, family breakdown, when it occurs, is articulated as the result of racialized state intervention.

Additionally, the film very strongly critiques and articulates state repression and surveillance. Scenes show ten-year-old black boys dressed in bright orange prison coveralls and locked in glass and concrete cells. Hidden cameras survey the streets and white prison guards and policemen search, handcuff and shoot at young black men on the streets and in prison. Technologies of discipline also figure centrally; grey concrete cellblocks, solitary confinement cells, locks, bullet-proof glass, metal detectors, handcuffs, and surveillance cameras replace the bright colourful inner city neighbourhood in which Elijah grew up. Technologies of surveillance and moments of state coercion perpetrated against black youth appear at every turn in the film. *Prison Song* articulates the omnipresence of architectures and modes of social control, and suggests that these technologies are applied in raced ways to coercively govern black Americans.

This differs with respect to films *First Time Felon* and *Redemption*. Both “redemption” films articulate the carceral institution as a place where young black men are able to gain spiritual and political insight. Maturing in carceral custody, Greg Yance and “Tookie” Williams are positively transformed by their time behind bars. While *First Time Felon* and *Redemption* operate discourses of individual responsibility by suggesting that angry black men are best served by taking personal moral ownership of their criminal actions, *Prison Song* tells the story of a system which crushes young black men. *Prison Song*, then, is quite different from both *Redemption* and *First Time Felon*. With respect to its orientation towards issues of criminal justice and American society, *Prison Song* is

much more critical of America's institutions, just as it points directly to police officers, social workers, judges, juries, employers, educators and prison officials as the authors of racialized oppression. There are no individual villains in *Prison Song*, aside, perhaps, from the private prison's head warden. Otherwise, institutions and white Americans, in the film, make decisions that systemically ruin the lives of Elijah and his family.

What can be made of this film in relation to neo-liberal discourses, then? First, *Prison Song* articulates an image of systemic oppression, abuse and under-privilege that renders individual projects of self-realization impossible for black Americans. Both Elijah and his mother embark on such individual projects; Elijah works to become a photographer, while his mother trains as a paralegal aide. Racism and social discrimination (against single mothers) prevents the young woman from obtaining work. Elijah, on the other hand, sees his dreams frustrated by lack of funding, mangled justice and coercive state interference in his life. In *Prison Song*, then, meritocracy appears as a fiction; just as self-work is an utterly inappropriate strategy for resisting what amounts to racist state domination. In *Prison Song* individual programs of self-work are inappropriate and unable to offer black youth a path to mainstream success. The film articulates an image of a racist state and social and economic contexts, which systematically frustrate the lives of black youth as a group. Personal entrepreneurship seems a futile strategy in *Prison Song*. *Prison Song* articulates the thwarting of the individual efforts and personal projects of its African American cast by a coercive neo-liberal state.

### Sexuality

In relation to its depiction of prison homosexuality, *Prison Song* is actually fairly conservative, something that is, according to Julien (1992), not unusual for a text that depicts African American experience. In one plot twist, Elijah's cellmate makes homosexual advances, which are constructed as somewhat deviant in the film. That is, the other young black man explains himself, apologizes for the overtures, which he feels were "wrong" by saying he has spent his life isolated from women. Afterwards his one-time friend becomes repulsive to Elijah, and their relationship suffers as a result of unreciprocated homosexual desire. In this way, *Prison Song* marginalizes homosexuality, and effectively turns down an opportunity to explore the issue further. Again, it might be appropriate to note, as does Julien (1992), that with the rise to prominence of "dominant" Hip Hop masculinity in texts depicting black youth culture, queer (male) blackness continues to suffer from obscurity. It is noteworthy that a film as critical—politically—as *Prison Song* should adhere to a very conventional treatment of the issues of sexuality.

### A Not-So-Happy Ending

*Prison Song* is perhaps unusual in terms of its refusal of strict narrative closure, while its construction of subjectivity is perhaps more characteristic of screen prison drama, as a genre and of narrative Hollywood cinema more generally. The film is structured around the life of central protagonist Elijah, whose subjective experience of incarceration holds the narrative together. Yet, *Prison Song* has a somewhat nihilistic ending and, in its conclusion with the shooting-death of its protagonist, the film presents the destruction of black youth as its narrative endpoint. Thus, director Martin articulates a critique of American crime control for which she has no solution. The surveillance,

incarceration and lack of opportunity facing black youth in the film prove insurmountable for *Prison Song*'s main characters.

*Prison Song*'s nihilistic and destructive unhappy ending is not unlike the narrative conclusions of ghetto action films *Juice* and *Menace*. In all three films, central protagonists end up dead as a result of violence in their final scenes. The similarity ends here, however. The two 1990s films culminate in incidents of homicidal violence that is a direct result of gang related conflict and/or individual actions of the characters. As a result, the films do not articulate a strong critique of the political situation in which black Americans find themselves. *Prison Song*, however, constructs its protagonist's death as a direct result of the impossible conditions in which the youth grows up. The film's central villain, thus, is the (carceral and racist) American social order. In the end it is the corrupt state and its institutions that triumph over the best efforts of the drama's characters. Refusal of happy narrative resolution in this case, thus, buttresses critique of American crime control tactics.

There are additional consequences to the construction of prison-as-central-villain for the narrative set-up of *Prison Song*. That is, unlike *OZ*, *History X*, and *Animal Factory*, the prison is not a predatory place in *Prison Song*. The film constructs perhaps only one minor instances of inmate-victimization at the hands of other inmates; the conflict results from the rationing of toilet paper. Indeed, the prisoners are constructed in the film as generally moral and civilized victims of an oppressive and racist criminal justice system. To the extent that they act out of violence, their behaviour is motivated by the impossible circumstances state coercion forces them into. There are thus no super-predators in *Prison Song*.

Even though the film's central villain remains the state and its institution, *Prison Song* does not construct rebellion and escape as narrative endpoints as do 1970s films *Luke* and *Clockwork*. Furthermore, crime does not serve the same resistive and celebratory function as in blaxploitation films. Rather, the state appears all-powerful in its coercive power. Rebellion is impossible. Mainstream white society, likewise, appears hermetically sealed against African Americans. Rebellion or an alternate mode of life like that articulated in blaxploitation is not apparent. *Prison Song* thus manifests a movement in critical discourse with respect to the films of the 1970s, which opened discursively onto critique of the structures of the welfare state. Faced with the coercive apparatuses of the neo-liberal state, the characters in *Prison Song* are, by contrast, utterly powerless. Discursive movement is visible in a number of respects in this BET drama, then.

#### Elijah's Revenge

Of the dramas surveyed in this study, *Prison Song* is the only one that articulates unmitigated and decisive political critique of crime control and the American prison system. Additionally, it is the only drama that highlights, uncompromisingly, the racism of American social life and institutions, as well as the social repercussions of criminal policy for many black urban communities. As well, *Prison Song* remains also the only drama in which criminality is not constructed as "wrong-doing" or moral corruption, but rather is structured as resulting from the poor circumstances in which (black) inner city youth come of age. In this way, the drama stands out among its peers as an instance of intense political critique. The film certainly articulates different sets of discourses than do the other representations analysed in this study.



## Conclusion: Chapter Five

This study, then, has taken the political position that the existing configuration of criminal justice and high levels of African American incarceration are immensely socially costly. It is clear that the prison drama *OZ* and *Prison Song* hold different orientations towards the current state of affairs in American crime control and penal policy. *Prison Song* is intensely critical of American society and of the practices of crime control that have been implemented, to a large degree, by police and constrain inner city urban (black) communities. *OZ*, on the other hand, presents a vision of spectacular masculinity, that, according to Brian Jarvis, “[aestheticizes] penal crisis” in the absence of any constructive solution (2004, p. 232).

That being said, this project has also noted some of the difficulties associated with too narrowly reading particular texts as either “resistive” or “conservative”, and thus closing down the interpretation of the polysemy of popular cultural objects such as screen prison dramas. In this case, the difficulty with condemning *OZ* for its political perspective is that the series produces a reformulation of dominant masculinity, both in terms of its take on male homosexuality, and in terms of its narrative structure, and its structuring of subjectivity. *OZ* is thus more innovative and perhaps even more resistive than existing screen prison drama scholarship has indicated. There are risks associated, thus, with pronouncing decisively on the series, as Rapping and Jarvis have done.

The same is true for *Prison Song*. While the drama is indeed very politically critical of existing crime control practices, its take on homosexuality, for example, can be

read as corroborating the (marginalizing) representation that predominates in American popular culture. From these two texts, with very different political orientations, it is possible to arrive once more at the conclusion that attention to textual polysemy is paramount.

## CONCLUSION

Four years on from the airing of *OZ*' last episode, FOX Television's series *Prison Break* (creator Paul Scheuring, 2005-present) has inherited the mantle of the moment's most popular prison drama on prime-time television. Like many of the other texts examined in this study, *Prison Break* refracts incarceration by maintaining images of the inside of the penitentiary in the spotlight and by pulling these images through the cultural lenses of masculinity, race, class and criminal justice. In relation to the series, it is possible to comment on patterns documented elsewhere in this study. *Prison Break*, like *OZ*, *History X*, and *Animal Factory*, plays the prison as staging ground and backdrop for explorations of other themes: affective family ties, racial cleavages, conflict resolution, criminality, and redemption. Although the drama's setting may be visually realistic in its representation of the inside of a prison (the first season was shot at Joliet Prison in Illinois), it is difficult to demonstrate a real political agenda to *Prison Break*. The political economic and/or social dimensions of incarceration and criminal policy are largely absent as considerations in the series.

This overall "absence" of political critique in screen prison drama as a genre is noted by prison drama scholars across the board (Rapping, 2003; Rafter, 2000; Jarvis, 2004; Mason, 1998a; 1998b; 2004; Cheatwood, 1998; Nellis and Hale, 1982; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004) and continues in *Prison Break*. With the exception of *Prison Song* (which offers strong political critique), the findings of this study confirm the results documented elsewhere by screen prison drama scholars. The question may be posed in

relation to war movies as well: to what extent do we consume war movies that are critical of war, and to what extent are we engaging in negotiations of national identity and masculinity? To what extent do these and other discourses articulated in American popular culture through war dramas act as symbolic currency in which “war” as a setting defines what it means to “be a man”? Prison, I believe, occupies a similar symbolic place in the American popular cultural psyche, as a site at which “being a man” comes into focus. That screen prison drama thus activates discourses on race, class and masculinity is precisely the point: images of incarceration are symbolically important in relation to prison visibility, but also in relation to the social formation of gender.

There is another comment to be made in relation to the representation of crime, punishment and criminal justice in popular culture and it has to do with what crime and prison represents in terms of what takes place at the margins of society. Negotiations regarding morality (and who is capable of moral action), over “good” and “evil”, and over inclusion and exclusion meet—in crime and prison drama—other symbolic systems by which the politics of coercion and policing are explained. That screen prison drama at the present time highlights race- and class- conflicts, and articulates discursive frictions along these axes is perhaps to be expected, as marginality is filtered, in part, through definitions of deviance, and inclusion/exclusion. The struggles over what constitute deviant and/or mainstream masculinities—which as this study shows take place in part through screen prison drama—are packaged and sold along with understandings of crime and crime control. In fact, it seems clear that integration of social formations (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.), with social marginality and deviance are articulated through discourses of criminal justice precisely because of the fact that crime and punishment

indicate the “margins” of “normal” social life. Thus, the representation of crime, deviance and punishment is not radically separable from identity and social hierarchy struggles taking place around issues of race and class, for example.

The next question, then, becomes how to associate these points with the (political) agenda articulated at the outset of the dissertation: namely to question to what degree and how screen prison drama works either for or against an abolitionist agenda, and for or against the classed and racialized dynamics of imprisonment (Mauer, 2000) in the United States. The study’s findings, based on a limited number of texts, permit a sort of answer to this question. The screen prison dramas examined here articulate a number of representational and discursive patterns and themes that give a sense of the meanings circulating regarding race, crime, class, masculinity and punishment. For example, in the “redemption” dramas, black criminality and economic lack of opportunity are framed through discourses of individual moral enterprise and assertions of the meritocratic nature of American society. That such discourse effaces the economic and social dynamics of black poverty and incarceration is precisely the point. If crime appears a question of individual morality, then the larger scale social patterns associated with policing and criminal justice come uncoupled from an understanding that accounts for the racialized dynamics of crime control (Mauer, 2000). This uncoupling, it is possible, may continue to obscure racial disparities in criminal justice, which ultimately plays into the continuance of these patterns.

These texts are not so simple, however, for it is also possible to read narratives that turn on (black) redemption as a sort of “rite of inclusion”. That is, to the extent that black street thugs are constructed as “capable” of integration into mainstream American

society in the “redemption” dramas, a sort of inclusive dialogue is opened. Yet, this inclusion is defined through the assertion of meritocracy and the “American Dream”, that is, supposedly, accessible to those who are strong-willed and morally engaged in a very specific way. Black under-privilege and criminality, on such a view, can be redressed through individual “hard work” and morality-boosting techniques of self. These discourses of inclusive, thus, are packaged in a sense with a construction that frames “resistance” away from political struggle. Herein lies the discursive complexity—and bivalence—of the construction of “rites of inclusion”.

In the “white Angst” dramas and indeed in *OZ* as well, middle-class and white victimization, at the hands of black predators or white trash abusers, is underscored as a reality in prison. By extension, the dramas also make a comment regarding the unpredictability and perniciousness of “risk” in the larger social field of American society. As primitivism, unpredictability, and criminality are associated with blackness, and/or lower class status, these dramas contribute to the already raced- and classed knowledge regarding risk. To the extent that policing and law-making decisions are shaped by *a priori* definitions of risk defined elsewhere in public life (that is, not directly in the courts), popular culture has a hand in conditioning stereotypes about and/or fears of crime. Some of the screen prison dramas surveyed here, then, may continue to orient discourse to support the current racialised and classed dynamics of imprisonment.

Based on the findings of this study, it is possible also to comment on how the transition to neo-liberal government in the United States has been accompanied by a concomitant movement in some popular screen representations of incarceration. According to governmentality theory scholars (Dean, 1999; Rose et al., 1996) and to

influential criminologist David Garland (2001), the transition to neo-liberal government in the realm of crime control is contingent on a number of discursive transitions, such as the framing of crime control in terms of risk and neutralization discourses. Equally, the welfare state's theory of social deprivation has been replaced with a discourse far more focused on "individual responsibility". Of course, in terms of punishment, these transitions have been reflected in punitive "harsh consequences" and containment, which have come to replace scientific rehabilitation as guiding principles in the American prison system. These transitions are articulated to varying degrees in the screen dramas *American History X*, *Animal Factory*, *Redemption* and *First Time Felon*. And, as I have argued in relation to the dramas of the 1970s, transitions in punishment-discourse as well as mappings of social order have changed significantly. They reflect, as I have suggested, more neo-liberal understandings of crime control and of social order.

In terms of Michel's Foucault's work on discipline, surveillance and punishment, it is possible also to make the final point that the once spectacular components of punishment have moved under control of the "private" realm of media enterprise. This means that new and largely private groupings manage the dispersion and indeed the visibility of (fictional) punishment. The state, so to speak, has been largely excluded from the construction of representations of punishment. Of course, as I have pointed out earlier, the fact that the prison is largely visible only through fiction film and television largely, has to do with the tight government controls on access to carceral institutions. Nonetheless, while discipline, punishment and surveillance are largely located in other institutions, the screen prison drama fulfills largely a spectacular function. Thus screen prison drama symbolically maps subjects' interaction with self-government and with

crime control. Prison visibility, then, is at the present time intimately tied to the spectacular politics of popular culture.

Rather than ending on a prescriptive note specifically aimed at media representations of crime and imprisonment, I would like to open onto a broader discussion regarding the cultural shaping of crime and punishment more generally. Definitions of “risks”, of crime and of (legitimate) punishments are among some of the most powerful modes for detailing the lines of social exclusion and inclusion. Crime, thus, becomes a point at which lines of class and colour are drawn *into culture*, before and after being inscribed into the legal frameworks of coercion. Argues Angela Davis: “Black, Latino, Native American, and many Asian youth are portrayed as the purveyors of violence, traffickers of drugs, and as envious of commodities that they have no right to possess... Criminality and deviance are racialised” (Davis, 1998). For criminal justice critic Jeffrey Reiman, class is a more relevant factor in the construction of a crime control system that enriches the rich and impoverishes the poor:

[all] the mechanisms by which the criminal justice system comes down more frequently and more harshly on the poor criminal than on the well-off criminal take place after most of the dangerous acts of the well-to-do have been excluded from the definition of crime itself. The bias against the poor within the criminal justice system is all the more striking when we recognize that the door to that system is shaped in a way that excludes in advance the most dangerous acts of the well-to-do (Reiman, 2004, p. 91).

Yet, popular culture, and indeed the legal and political spheres as well as the apparatuses of crime control and of punishment are places at which struggles occur. It is difficult to contest the inequities and disparities in American criminal justice at the present time.

That being said, in the cultural reflection of these institutions—on television and in the cinema—“[cultural] hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination (that’s not



what the term means)... it is always a shifting balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power, not getting out if it" (Hall, 2004, p. 257).

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## Filmography

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- Buscemi, S. (Director), and S. Buscemi (Writer) (2000). *Animal Factory*.
- Carpenter, J. (Director), and J. Carpenter and N. Castle (Writers) (1996). *Escape From LA*.
- Casey, P. and M. Armstrong (Directors) (2002-present). *Dr. Phil*.
- Chase, D. (Director) (1999-2007). *The Sopranos*.
- Collins, D. and D. Metzler (Creators) (2003-2006). *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*.
- Cosby, B. (Director and Creator) (1983-1992). *The Cosby Show*.
- Darabont, F. (Director), and F. Darabont (Writer) (1994). *The Shawshank Redemption*.
- Darabont, F. (Director), and S. King and F. Darabont (Writers) (1999). *The Green Mile*.
- Darren, J. (Director), and F. Lupo, and S. Cannell (Writers) (1983-1987). *The A-Team*.
- Demme, T. (Director and Writer) (1999). *Life*.
- Dickerson, E. R. (Director), and E. R. Dickerson and G. Brown (Writers) (1992). *Juice*.
- Dutton, C. (Director), and D. Therriault (Writer) (1997). *First Time Felon*.
- Eastwood, C. (Director), and A. Klavan (Writer) (1999). *True Crime*.
- Foley, J. (Director) (1996). *The Chamber*.
- Fontana, T. (Creator) (1997-2003). *Oz: Seasons 1-6*.
- Forman, M. (Director), and K. Kesey and B. Goldman (Writers) (1975). *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.
- Glimcher, A. (Director) (1995). *Just Cause*.
- Garbus, L. and W. Rideau (Directors), and W. Harris (Writer) (1998). *The Farm: Angola, USA*.
- Hall, V. C. (Director), and J. T. Allen (Writer) (2004). *Redemption—The Stan "Tookie" Williams Story*.
- Holcomb, R. (Director) (1995). *Convict Cowboy*.

Hughes, A., and Hughes, A. (Directors), and A. Hughes and A. Hughes (Writers) (1993). *Menace II Society*.

Jewison, N. (Director) and A. Bernstein and D. Gordon (Writer) (1999). *The Hurricane*.

Kaye, T. (Director), and D. McKenna (Writer) (1998). *American History X*.

Kubrick, S. (Director) and S. Kubrick and A. Burgess (Writers) (1971). *A Clockwork Orange*.

Lee, S. (Director), and A. Haley (Writer) (1992). *Malcolm X*.

Lee, S. (Director), and S. Lee (Writer) (1998). *He Got Game*.

Lee, S. (Director), and S. Lee (Writer) (1999). *Summer of Sam*.

Levin, M. (Director), and S. Williams, S. Sohn and M. Levin (Writers) (1998). *Slam*.

Luessenhop, J. (Director), and P. Whitmore (II) (Writer) (2000). *Lockdown*.

Lurie, L. (Director) and D. Scarpa (Writer) (2001). *The Last Castle*.

Martin, D. (Director), and D. Martin and Q-Tip (Writers) (2001). *Prison Song*.

Olmos, E. J. (Director), and E. J. Olmos (Writer) (1992). *American Me*.

Parker, A. (Director), and C. Randolph (Writer) (2003). *The Life of David Gale*.

Parks, G. (Director), and G. Parks (Writer) (1971). *Shaft*.

Peebles, M. V. (Director), and M. V. Peebles (Writer) (1971). *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

Robbins, T. (Director), and H. Prejean (Writer) (1995). *Dead man walking*.

Rocco, M. (Director), and D. Gordon (Writer) (1995). *Murder in the First*.

Rosenberg, S. (Director), and D. Pearce, D. (Writer), (1967). *Cool Hand Luke*.

Scheuring, P. (Writer) (2005-present). *Prison Break*.

Schumacher, J. (Director), and E. R. Smith (Writer) (1993). *Falling Down*.

Sheridan, J. (Director) (1993). *In the Name of the Father*.

Sheridan, J. (Director), and T. Winter (Writer) (2005). *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*.

Singleton, J. (Director), and J. Singleton (Writer) (1991). *Boyz in the Hood*.

Skogland, K. (Director), and D. Foon (Writer) (1998). *White Lies*.

Star, D. (Director) (1998-2004). *Sex and The City*.

Stone, O. (Director), Q. Tarantino, and D. Veloz (Writers) (1994). *Natural Born Killers*.

West, S. (Director), and S. Rosenberg. (Writer) (1997). *Con Air*.

Whitmore (II), P. (Director), and P. Whitmore (II) (Writer) (2004). *Doing Hard Time*.

Wilson, S. (Director), and S. Wilson (Writer) (2003). *Down Time*.

Woo, J. (Director) (1997). *Face/Off*.