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# Locked Up: The Prison Genre in American Cinema

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# Locked Up:
# The Prison Genre in American Cinema

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BA, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008

MA, University of Mississippi, 2010

Advisor: Allen Tullos, PhD

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts, 2015.

# Abstract

## Locked Up: The Prison Genre in American Cinema

By Alan Gilchrist Pike

*Locked Up: The Prison Genre in American Cinema* explores how the prison genre makes meaning in American film, and contributes to how Americans imagine prison. It investigates how the genre's style, major themes, conventions, characterization, and narrative elements are used by studios, critics, and audiences via case studies of particular historical moments. It also interrogates how the continuities and changes in the style of initiation sequences (a foundational generic convention) over time. It argues for a reinvigorated study of genre history that explores how style, narrative, and politics are connected in the creation of genre films and film genres.

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# Introduction

Prisons are everywhere in the twenty-first century, but nowhere more than in the USA. As scholars of criminal justice, mass incarceration, and the law will tell you: prisons, and the prison-industrial complex, are a bigger part of contemporary American life than ever before.[1] But, many Americans never have any interactions with or set foot inside of a prison. As Ray Surrette has argued, most of what Americans know about prisons and punishment in the United States comes from the media.[2] Outside of television news programs, the media most often dramatizing prisons and prison life in the United States are typically made in Hollywood. By the time that the prison genre made its debut on American television in 1997—with HBO's first original scripted show, *Oz* (1997–2003)—and long before the runaway success of prison-themed reality shows such as *Lockup* (2005–present) and other scripted programming like *Prison Break* (2005–

[1] For more on prisons and the prison industrial complex in the late 20th century, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010); Alexander C. Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York: Verso, 1996); David M. Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Glenn C. Loury, *Race, Incarceration, and American Values* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008); Rebecca M. McLennan, *The Crisis of Imprisonment: Protest, Politics, and the Making of the American Penal State, 1776-1941* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Vivien M. L. Miller, *Hard Labor and Hard Time: Florida's "Sunshine Prison" and Chain Gangs* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience : The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America*, 1st ed.. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980); Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 3 (2010): 703–34.

[2] Ray Surette, *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998).

2009) or *Orange is the New Black* (2013–present) hit the small screen and streaming services in the ensuing decades, audiences with no tangible experience with actual prisons "knew" a lot about them. Understanding the origins and development of this genre in Hollywood film—and the "knowledge" it has produced—as a result of historical and industrial conditions is the project of this dissertation.

Criminologists have been aware of the fact that media impacts our understandings of prisons and punishment for some time. As such, a great deal of work in that field, like Surrette's, has sought to investigate the impact of films, television, and other media on attitudes toward prisons and prisoners, and crime and punishment. In an effort to better understand these attitudes, scholars investigate media representations of prisons, most often in studies of prison films. In the last thirty years, social scientists—and to a lesser extent film scholars—have acknowledged that there is a coherent prison film genre worthy of study.[3] I categorize the body of work by these sociologists and criminologists as the social scientific approach to the prison film.

The social scientific approach to the prison film is concerned primarily with understanding the ways in which Hollywood films represent prisons and prisoners. This line of inquiry is based upon the assumption that Hollywood film is the primary media through which Americans encounter correctional institutions and convicts, even as late as the 1980s and 1990s when television news and other programs began to focus more

[3] Social scientists did not whole-heartedly agree on what made the genre coherent, as I will discuss below.

intently upon crime and punishment in the United States.[4] Implicit in this assumption is the notion that these mass-mediated representations both reflect and influence popular ideas about crime and punishment.[5] Accounts of the prison film genre by these scholars seek to answer such questions as: How have prison films "misrepresented" what life inside prison is like?[6]; How do prison films interpret current trends in penology?[7]; How do these films challenge and/or justify contemporary prison practices?[8]; How do prison films represent male and female convicts of different races?[9] In the discussion below, I will survey the field of scholarly works that exemplify the social scientific approach to the prison film genre in order to position the work of this dissertation.

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[4] For more on this shift, see Surette, *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities*; Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender, eds., *Entertaining Crime : Television Reality Programs* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998); Dawn K. Cecil, "Televised Images of Jail: Lessons in Controlling the Unruly," *Sociology of Crime Law and Deviance* 14 (August 4, 2010): 67–88; Elayne Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[5] Mike Nellis and Christopher Hale, *The Prison Film* (London: Radical Alternatives to Prison, 1982), 5.; Derral Cheatwood, "Prison Movies: Films About Adult, Male, Civilian Prisoners, 1929-1995," in *Popular Culture, Crime and Justice*, ed. Donna Hale and Frankie Bailey (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998), 209.; David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama* (Winchester, UK: Waterside Press, 2004), 14. These scholars generally suggest that actual prisons are shrouded in secrecy, and that *most* people are more likely to learn about prison via mass media than by visiting, or being incarcerated in, actual prisons. This argument is reasonable, and backed up by the research of scholars like Surrette, but the continuing veracity of this assumption is open for question, especially as incarceration rates increased dramatically in the last several decades of the twentieth century.

[6] Nellis and Hale, *The Prison Film*, 4.

[7] Cheatwood, "Prison Movies: Films About Adult, Male, Civilian Prisoners, 1929-1995," 210.

[8] Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Wilson and O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration*; David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, "Re-Theorizing the Penal Reform Functions of the Prison Film: Revelation, Humanization, Empathy and Benchmarking," *Theoretical Criminology* 9, no. 4 (November 1, 2005): 471–91.

[9] Karlene Faith, "Gendered Imaginations: Female Crime and Prison Movies," *The Justice Professional* 8, no. 1 (1993): 53–69; Dawn K. Cecil, "Looking Beyond Caged Heat Media Images of Women in Prison," *Feminist Criminology* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 304–26; Paul Mason, "Men, Machines And The Mincer: The Prison Movie," accessed June 12, 2012, http://usf.usfca.edu/pj//articles/Prison.htm.

Social scientists interested in prison films often debate the limits of the genre, and—after establishing what "counts" as a prison film (or what an "ideal" prison film is) and delineating its conventions—draw broad conclusions about how it has changed over time. This is the principal task at the heart of the works of Mike Nellis, Christopher Hale, Derral Cheatwood, and Nicole Rafter. Nellis, Hale, and Cheatwood are chiefly concerned with understanding the ways in which prison films reflect (and potentially shape) popular ideas about prisons in the context of contemporary penology. After defining prison films as only those pictures featuring adult, male, civilian prisoners, Nellis, Hale, and Cheatwood chronicle how prison films change over the course of the twentieth century, demonstrating how they were able to "teach" audiences about how prisons were administered in different decades. Cheatwood offers the most comprehensive overview of this "evolution," dividing the history of the genre into a number of different "eras" defined by their representation of prison management: the Depression Era (1929–1942), Rehabilitation Era (1943–1962), Confinement Era (1963–1980), and Administrative Era (1981–present).[10] By concentrating upon the characteristics that define the genre, these scholars conclude that the prison genre can indeed teach audiences something about prison life. These analyses are less clear about what exactly prison films teach those audiences outside of prison management practices.

Nicole Rafter's work similarly hopes to draw broad conclusions about the genre, but she suggests that earlier scholars' periodization is unnecessary because all prison

[10] Nellis and Hale, *The Prison Film*; Cheatwood, "Prison Movies: Films About Adult, Male, Civilian Prisoners, 1929-1995."

films share a set of stock characters and definitive thematic elements. She suggests that prison films, with their narratives of (often innocent) individual convicts' battles with their oppressive (often corrupt or evil) guards and wardens, ultimately reassure audiences that "justice exists and lies within human reach," and that we need not question how it is administered by our government.[11] Rafter's thematic focus belies her concern with ideology, and whether or not the genre reveals hard truths about prison life. Rafter's work suggests that there is little "value" in prison films because they do not sufficiently critique contemporary penological practice. She finally suggests that there exists an "alternative tradition" of prison films that *do* criticize the administration of punishment in the United States, and that those films hold promise for the future of the genre and popular understandings about whether or not justice is served in American prisons.[12] This concern is also indicative of the conclusions reached by David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan, whose works deal almost entirely with the "penal reform functions of prison films;" they want to know how prison films can encourage audiences to challenge contemporary penal practice by educating them about prison life.[13] The reform functions they identify are revelation (revealing 'bad' prison practices); benchmarking (setting standards for decency in prison practice); defense of gains (combat backsliding in penal practice by establishing the first two functions); news/memory (identifying and memorializing major prison events); and humanizing/empathy (humanize prisoners for audiences). Wilson and O'Sullivan address questions at the heart of other studies, and

[11] Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror*, 121–123, 130.
[12] Ibid., 130–137.
[13] Wilson and O'Sullivan, "Re-Theorizing the Penal Reform Functions of the Prison Film: Revelation, Humanization, Empathy and Benchmarking"; Wilson and O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration*, 78.

seek to move beyond those debates, which are too narrowly concerned with defining the characteristics of the genre. This search for the "use-value" of prison films is one that allows their readings of various films to be situated in historical context, which makes their arguments about the presentation of, or challenge to, contemporary penology in prison films especially compelling.

Social scientific attempts to understand the prison film genre, and individual prison films, ultimately return to questions of ideology. These scholars are concerned with how the films' settings, characters, plots, and themes represent the major ideological debates among criminologists, sociologists, and penologists. They detail how films represent the purpose of prisons (rehabilitation or punishment), the nature of convicts (innocent victims or deserving criminals), and the justice system that oversees them (corrupt or morally upright). This attention to how prison films interact with the realities of prison life, and prison policy, is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this approach. These scholars see prison films as both reflecting and influencing how audiences view prisons. However, their concerns about ideology generally lead them to ignore how the realities of Hollywood film production, distribution, marketing, and censorship influence what ends up on the screen. Further, social scientists seem to be overly concerned with the makeup of the generic corpus. Debates between Rafter, Nellis, and Wilson and O'Sullivan bear out this concern for what "counts." Wilson and O'Sullivan offer a good overview of this debate, paying special attention to how the

corpus was defined by other authors in their volume *Images of Incarceration*.[14] Hollywood studios have produced prison films continuously since the 1930s with countless variations. Any attempt to delineate a "classic" or "ideal" generic text—as in the debates noted above—ignores more important analyses of how individual films, and the ways that they represent prisons, are products of complex, historically-specific production processes. These processes are influenced by perceived audience tastes, and how the films themselves are received is contingent upon the realities of the milieu in which they are distributed.

Although there are a number of problems with the social scientific approach to the study of prison films, film studies approaches to genre offer a potential way forward. However, the prison genre is underrepresented in the literature. While a number of film scholars have written about the "prison cycle" in the early 1930s that is the subject of the first chapter of this dissertation, it is often as part of a broader conversation about "social problem films" during the period, or of gangster or crime films.[15] In criminologist Nicole Rafter's book, prison films are assumed to fit within the larger crime genre, an assumption often made by film scholars as well. Or, as is more often the case, "prison films" are discussed as if they existed as a part of a distinct

[14] Wilson and O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration*, 64–70.
[15] Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System : Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

genre, even though there has been no systematic examination of the genre within the film studies literature.

This dissertation will offer an approach to the study of the prison genre in American cinema through the methodological and theoretical approaches of film studies in order to rectify this gap in the scholarship. The work of Rick Altman, specifically his 1999 book *Film/Genre*, informs my theoretical and methodological approach to studying the prison genre. Unlike the social scientific approach outlined above—with its concern over the makeup of the generic corpus—Altman argues that in order to understand film genres, scholars must move beyond discussions of what films belong in a generic corpus. Instead, according to Altman, genre should be understood as "a complex situation," as part of the overall circulation of meaning associated with a process in which a large number of texts are produced, marketed, and distributed widely to large audiences.[16] Understanding this broad, diffuse system of meaning is the project of Altman's "semantic/syntactic/ pragmatic" approach to genre criticism.

Altman's approach seeks to understand all of the elements of this "complex situation." The semantic aspect of genre enables critics to include a large number of films into a generic corpus (i.e. what 'counts' as a prison film) based solely upon semantic elements of individual titles: the common settings (prisons), characters (convicts), technical elements, etc. Defining the prison genre by its semantic elements seems rather straightforward: prison films are films that take place in prisons, are about

[16] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 84.

prisoners, or guards, or wardens, or even about institutions themselves. Such a definition allows a critic to include many films in the corpus, but in so doing, makes it difficult to explain the meaning-making aspects of the genre. In other words, such a definition would allow us to include many films in the prison genre, leaving only debates over whether or not "enough" of the film took place in prison for it to "count." This sort of debate is common among social scientists. The syntactic aspect, which deals with the meaning-making structures of films, emphasizes shared thematic and narrative elements of films in a corpus.[17] Defining the genre based upon the syntactic elements alone also seems undaunting: prison films are about justice (or the lack thereof), freedom versus oppression or control, and the horrors of prison life. Such a definition would sacrifice the broad applicability of the semantic approach for more explanatory power. Defining the genre based upon these characteristics would make it difficult to include films in the corpus that might otherwise "count" if the corpus were defined semantically. The pragmatic (or use-value) aspect of this approach stresses that genre films—and film genres—create meanings outside of the texts themselves which are used differently by various audience groups, producers, exhibitors, distributors, advertisers, critics, and so on. According to Altman, an approach that combines all three of these elements can move beyond the texts themselves and into an understanding of the "generic situation." This sort of analysis can "destabilize meaning by showing just how dependent it is on particular uses of a text or genre, at other times it succeeds in

[17] Ibid., 219–221.

revealing the meaning-grounding institutions that make meaning seem to arise directly out of semantics and syntax."[18]

The works of social scientific scholars identified above are rooted in many of what Altman identifies as common misconceptions about the idea of genre. Much of this scholarship is general in nature, offering broad overviews that treat specific films from different eras in the supposedly linear development of the genre, ignoring the specific processes that led to the creation of individual films in different and somewhat arbitrarily defined eras. Altman would suggest that these works, which tend to define the genre by its syntax, completely remove historically situated representations from their contexts.[19] Other work dwells on semantics and defines the corpus too exclusively by placing limits on the gender of the protagonists or the purported location of the prison (e.g. excluding films about women's prisons or prisoner of war films).[20] This social scientific approach yields a sometimes-singular focus on whether or not prison films confirm or subvert dominant ideologies about prisons and punishment by examining their major thematic elements (syntax).[21] Others take this one step further to understand how Hollywood prison films contribute to penal reform (pragmatics or use-value).[22] While most of this work speaks to how prison films represent the milieu of their times, these analyses are based primarily in the texts, ignoring the details of their

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[18] Ibid., 210–211.
[19] Nellis and Hale, *The Prison Film*; Cheatwood, "Prison Movies: Films About Adult, Male, Civilian Prisoners, 1929-1995."
[20] Wilson and O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration*.
[21] Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror*, 121–23, 130.
[22] Wilson and O'Sullivan, "Re-Theorizing the Penal Reform Functions of the Prison Film: Revelation, Humanization, Empathy and Benchmarking."

production, marketing, and reception. In short, these works address on one or two, but never all three aspects of Altman's approach. In combining all three aspects of Altman's approach, this dissertation begins to unpack the "complex situation" that is the prison genre in American cinema.

When I began this project in 2010, I hoped to explore how Americans "imagine" prison in the twenty-first century, or what Alison Griffiths has called the "carceral imaginary."[23] This idea—which comes from the concept of the "social imaginary," as Charles Taylor calls it—concerns "the way people imagine their social existence," their relationship with their fellow man, the "moral order" which society is founded upon, and the undefined and inarticulate "background" which allows individuals to understand events and social structures as a result of their own personal experiences and exposure to discursive practices.[24] This imaginary is constructed by individuals in relation to their immediate social world, but also relative to the imaginative worlds of literature and popular culture, to discourses produced by media, politicians, and academics.

It is to this imaginary that the "generic situation" of the prison genre contributes. In fact, I feel that the prison genre is much larger than cinema itself; rather, we might think of it instead as a "cultural category," to borrow from Jason Mittell, and consider how it works across multiple media. Indeed, the narratives, visual style, tropes, and generic conventions of the prison genre in film are mimicked, adapted, and transformed

[23] Alison Griffiths, "The Carceral Aesthetic: Seeing Prison on Film During the Early Cinema Period," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 12, no. 2 (May 2014): 174–98.
[24] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–30.

in multiple media today. Reality television programs, scripted prison dramas, comedies, and dramadies are broadcast on television and streamed online in quantities that Hollywood studios couldn't have imagined in the 1930s, or even the 1990s. Thinking of genre as a cultural category as Mittell suggests could certainly help to improve "our understanding of how media are imbricated within their contexts of production and reception and how media work to constitute our vision of the world," so long as we avoid over-generalization and examine how genres work in specific instances, as I do here.[25] Understanding the prison genre in this way could point a way forward for collaboration between reform-minded scholars of the social scientific approach, and media scholars investigating representations of punishment in film, television, video games, and the web. The understanding of the foundational elements in the prison genre in film gained through this dissertation, I hope, will point toward a greater understanding of the relationship between the real and imagined prison today. My investigation of the prison genre unfolds in three chapters.

In the first chapter, "The Genrefication of the Prison Film," I argue that a cycle of prison films produced between 1930–1933 represents what Altman calls the "genrefication" process, whereby "shared textual material and structures lead audiences to interpret films not as separate entities but according to generic expectations and against generic norms."[26] Specifically, I will demonstrate that this cycle's two most important films, *The Big House* (MGM, 1930) and *I Am a Fugitive From*

[25] Jason Mittell, "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (April 1, 2001): 16.
[26] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 53, 62.

*a Chain Gang!* (Warner Bros., 1932), introduce the major themes, conventions, characterization, and narrative elements of the genre in the sound era that were codified through a process of repetition across many other entries in the cycle.

These films laid the narrative, stylistic, and thematic groundwork for the prison films of the sound era. In addition to establishing these aspects of the prison genre, this cycle introduced audiences to the genre's most important generic convention: the initiation sequence. Initiation sequences will be the subject of the second chapter. In a video essay, I will explore this generic convention in detail. If, as Leger Grindon argues, generic conventions "function like a vocabulary for addressing the genre's fundamental dramatic conflicts," then this exploration of the evolution of this convention will lead to a better understanding of the genre as a whole.[27] I explore the three phases of initiation sequences: processing, education, and acclimation. These phases are illustrated using clips from 18 different prison films, woven together into a poetic videographic essay. Such an arrangement, as Christian Keathley argues, "does not simply 'explicate' its theme, it seeks to perform it as well…like much conceptual art, which possesses a critical component that requires deciphering.[28] This juxtaposition of sound and image (and the accompanying text) illustrates the how, over the course of the twentieth- and twenty-first century, Hollywood studios imitated and adapted the narrative and stylistic elements established by the cycle of films in the first chapter.

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[27] Leger Grindon, *Knockout : The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 5–6.

[28] Christian Keathley, "La Caméra-Stylo: Notes on Video Criticism and Cinephilia," in *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, ed. Alex Clayton and Alex Klevan (London: Routledge, n.d.), 180–182.

In the third chapter, I will explore *Cool Hand Luke* (Warner Bros., 1967) to demonstrate how Warner Bros. adapted the semantics and syntax of the prison genre to fit with a pragmatic message the studio thought would be attractive to late-1960s audiences. Specifically, I will examine the intertextual relationship between the film and its source novel. I will demonstrate how Warner Bros. transformed the novel's specific critiques of southern racism and the United States military in the post-WWII period into a broader non-conformist challenge to authority in the film.[29] Finally, I will discuss the film's contributions to the genre as a whole, with emphasis on its innovations in narrative and style.

Finally, I will conclude with a discussion of the findings presented in the preceding chapters, and some thoughts about this project's contributions to the study of the prison film genre, and to genre studies more generally. It is my hope that this work adds depth and breadth to the discussions of prison films put forward by the social scientific literature. In addition, I discuss the ways in which this project might be expanded in order to offer a more complete exploration of the genre in other media. I will demonstrate how film genre influences televisual representations of prisons, and how this transmedial genre might impact the way American society imagines prisons at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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[29] My analysis is informed by Robert Stam's essay on adaptation, which suggests a move away from issues of fidelity and toward the "grammar of transformation." Stam suggests that film critics focus on "dialogical responses to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material." Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 68, 76.

# The Genrefication of the Prison Film: A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach



**Figure 1. James Allen (Paul Muni) in the final scene of *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* (1932).**

In the final scene of Warner Bros. 1932 classic *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* the desperate fugitive James Allen, played superbly by Paul Muni, confronts his love interest (Helen Vinson) one night outside of a garage in Chicago after being on the run from a southern chain gang for over a year. Disheveled and paranoid, Allen explains his life on the lam to Helen, lamenting that he will always be a chased man, unable to put down roots or hold a steady job. Yet he confesses that he had to take a chance to tell her goodbye. Suddenly, a noise from off screen startles Allen; he panics and starts slowly backing away from Helen and into the shadows (Figure 1). In a medium close-up, she begs him to stay, to write her, to take some money from her, "But Jim you must! How will you live?" she shouts as she bursts into tears. His reply from the darkness—the shot

is completely blacked out—is an eerie and acrimonious whisper, "I STEAL!" The sound of Allen's footsteps as he runs away into the darkness cease, and the film is over.

In their influential study of Hollywood social problem films, Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy claim that this scene in *I Am A Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* is "Hollywood's angriest statement on the Depression."[1] For Roffman and Purdy *I Am A Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* offers a powerful "evocation of innocence living in subjugation and terror [that] clearly reflects the despair of a nation faced with incomprehensible social and economic upheaval." They remark that the cycle of prison films produced in Hollywood between 1930 and 1933 "began to make the important transition from mere topicality—the use of headlines and contemporary life as a backdrop for melodrama—to social criticism in which contemporary life is confronted and commented upon."[2] In addition to presenting what many at the time considered to be valuable social criticism, the films in this cycle represent the beginning of what Rick Altman calls the "genrefication" process of Hollywood prison films; that is, the process by which "shared textual material and structures lead audiences to interpret films not as separate entities but according to generic expectations and against generic norms."[3] In this chapter, I will explore how this cycle's two most important films, *The Big House* (MGM, 1930) and *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, introduce the major themes, conventions, characterization, and narrative elements of the genre that were codified through a process of repetition across many other entries in the cycle.

[1] Roffman and Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, 80. Thomas Schatz also considered this scene a compelling statement on the Depression. Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 147.
[2] Roffman and Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, 28, 30.
[3] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 53, 62.

This prison cycle was initiated by the critical and financial success of *The Big House* and was sustained by the success of *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* two years later, with each film inspiring several spin-offs or competing pictures in their wake. Other titles which are part of the cycle come from a variety of studios: Warner Bros. produced *Numbered Men* (1930) and *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932), Paramount produced *Shadow of the Law* (1930) and *Ladies of the Big House* (1931), Columbia produced *The Criminal Code* (1931), Fox produced *Up the River* (1930), K.B.S. Productions produced *The Last Mile* (1932), Raystone produced *The Convict's Code* (1930), RKO produced *Hell's Highway* (1932), Universal produced *Laughter in Hell* (1933).

I chose this particular cycle, which is one of many intrageneric cycles—defined by Amanda Ann Klein as, "one of several smaller cycles that exist within the larger…genre,"—for two reasons.[4] First, because, as Klein so cogently argues, studying intrageneric cycles "can facilitate a more detailed, nuanced understanding" of a larger genre. Further, "[w]hile the study of genres reveals the stories that audiences are drawn to over a period of decades, its intrageneric cycles can serve as a cross-section of one specific moment in time, accurately revealing the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends, and popular desires and anxieties."[5] That is, studying this cycle—rather than the entire history of the genre—enables us to get at the pragmatic questions which are so important to social science scholars, while also

[4] Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, & Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 9.
[5] Ibid.

keeping in mind the realities of production and reception they often ignore. Second, I will show how the realities of producing and distributing films about prison in pre-Code Hollywood (pragmatics) resulted in a coherent, stable set of semantic and syntactic elements for the prison film genre. In short, I employ Klein's methodology to uncover the theoretical process of genrefication identified by Altman in action, all to demonstrate how this cycle, and the resulting genre, were built upon a very specific set of pragmatic concerns—namely, prison reform. I begin by analyzing *The Big House*, then discuss *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, and conclude with a broader discussion of the prison film genre and the methodological implications of this study.

Although I am discussing this cycle of films as the progenitor of the prison film genre in the sound era, earlier creative works influenced it. Films about prisons and prisoners predate the arrival of talkies in Hollywood, and appear even as early as Thomas Edison's 1901 *Execution of Czolgosz, with panorama of Auburn Prison*. The film depicted the colossal exterior stone walls and buildings of New York state's Auburn Prison, and a reenactment of the execution of President McKinley's eponymous assassin. Indeed, plays and stage shows, novels and serials all influenced these early-1930s screen portrayals. *Numbered Men* (Warner Bros.) and *The Criminal Code* (Columbia) were adapted from successful Broadway or stage shows. *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* was adapted from Robert E. Burns's autobiography, and others were adapted from literary materials as well. All this is to say that, while I argue that this cycle set the standard for the genre in the sound era, it is beholden to earlier forms as well.

## The Big House

*The Big House* was written by Frances Marion and directed by George Hill. According to Marion's memoir, she wrote the original draft of the story when studio head Irving Thalberg challenged the writing staff at MGM to come up with original contributions in 1929. Marion's 'original' was an adaptation of a treatment written by George Hill entitled *The Reign of Terror: A Story of Crime and Punishment*.[6] According to Cari Beauchamp, Hill was inspired by prison riots in Auburn, New York and Canon City, Colorado in November of 1929. He suggested to Thalberg that the recent riots made the

[6] Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 254–258. The Big House focuses on three convicts. Kent Marlowe (Robert Montgomery) is sent to prison for manslaughter; after being stripped of his worldly possessions and clothed in prison garb, he meets the well-intentioned Warden (Lewis Stone). As Kent is sent out of the Warden's office to his cell, the audience learns that he is to bunk with two of the worst criminals in the prison: a murderer named Machine Gun Butch (Wallace Beery) and a thief named Morgan (Chester Morris). The Warden laments that a soft character like Kent should be placed with such hardened criminals, but the state refuses to expand the prison, which is at almost double capacity. As the film progresses, it becomes obvious that Morgan and Butch have a complicated relationship and both men have a great deal of authority among the convicts. Butch starts a protest in the mess hall because of the rotten food served to prisoners and receives solitary confinement as a punishment. Before the guards apprehend him, he passes his knife under the table and it eventually stops in Kent's hands. In the ensuing scene, we learn that Morgan is set to be paroled the following day. That night, when their cell is unexpectedly searched, Kent hides Butch's knife in Morgan's jacket. The guards find the knife, Morgan's parole is denied, and he is sent to solitary confinement knowing that Kent set him up.

When his run in solitary is completed, Morgan feigns sickness and escapes in place of a dead prisoner on the truck to the morgue. While on the lam, he falls in love with Kent's sister Anne (Leila Hyams). He finds a job and decides to go straight, but a suspicious detective recognizes and arrests him before he is able to leave the country. When he returns to prison, Morgan learns that Butch has organized a plan to break out in dramatic fashion. Morgan wants no part of it and the audience—but not the prisoners—learn that Kent has informed the Warden and the guards of the plan in hopes of reducing his sentence. When the escape plan is foiled, the convicts are forced to hole up in the cellblock and take the guards therein hostage while the Warden and the rest of the guards train machine guns on their only escape route. An elaborate shootout ensues in which many convicts and a few guards are killed. Morgan locks the guards in a secured cell to protect them from Butch and the others, and Kent cowers in fear that Morgan or Butch will kill him for squealing on them. However, Butch assumes that Morgan squealed, and tries to kill him. Morgan confronts Kent, who then runs away and is killed in the crossfire. Butch then confronts Morgan, and after the two men have shot each other, one of the remaining guards tells Butch that Kent was the rat. Their friendship restored, Butch dies and Morgan gets credit for stopping the riot and saving the guards. His heroism earns him a pardon and he leaves the prison to join Kent's sister Anne before the credits roll.

timing right for a "thrilling, dramatic and enlightening story based on prison reform." Beauchamp suggests that Hill was "passionate about the subject," and wrote his 27-page story treatment and submitted it to the Hays Office on November 8, 1929. Thalberg then assigned Frances Marion to work with Hill on an outline that they turned in together entitled *The Big House.* The story, which had concerned two brothers on the inside and in love with the same girl in Hill's original treatment, was transformed into what eventually made the screen, a story of "a young boy thrown into prison on a minor charge forced to associate with degenerate criminals," who becomes one himself. Without the complication of the sibling rivalry that clouded Hill's first draft, the story moved on to the research phase.[7] Though he liked Marion's story, Thalberg told her to table it for a while "to see what catches the public's eye" before eventually sending her to San Quentin Prison in California to research prison life. Marion suggests that her visit to San Quentin inspired some of the casting decisions for the film—an inmate butcher reminded her of Wallace Beery (hence the name "Butch")—as well as many of the warden's lines, which she picked up from San Quentin warden James Holohan.[8]

When Thalberg proposed the idea for the film to Jason Joy of the Studio Relations Committee (SRC)—a division of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) responsible for getting films past state censor boards—in

[7] Ibid., 254–257.

[8] Frances Marion, *Off with Their Heads: A Serio-Comic Tale of Hollywood.* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 191, 199–204.; Mark A. Vieira, *Irving Thalberg: Boy Wonder to Producer Prince.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 113. Marion's story is corroborated in Thalberg's biography. In her autobiography, Marion suggests that James Holohan reminded her of Lewis Stone (202), who was cast to play the Warden. Cari Beauchamp offers the most detailed record of the script's origins in Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood*, 254–258.

November of 1929, his line of questioning suggests that he hoped *The Big House* would "help the general prison situation;" further, he hoped to consult with members of prominent national prison reform organizations while refining the vague story "which has to do with a general them [sic] of prison reform" he presented at the time.[9] Carl Milliken, Secretary of the MPPDA, then connected Thalberg with P.W. Garrett, the Executive Secretary of the National Society of Penal Information, who was willing to consult on the film.[10] Garrett was the editor of the National Society of Penal Information's annual reports and studies of correctional institutions across the country, including the *Handbook of American Prisons and Reformatories*. The pragmatic need for bypassing censors was a central concern in development of the picture before shooting ever began.

[9] Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter MPPDA), "History of Cinema. Selected Files from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America, Production Code Administration Collection, Microfilm Reel 1. The Big House File.," n.d. "Colonel Joy's telephone conversation: 11/7/29" Lea Jacobs offers an excellent account of the SRC in the second chapter of her book. Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Roland Flamini asserts that Thalberg decided to make the film "partly to show that Warner Brothers did not have a monopoly on stories about the seamy side of society." Roland Flamini, *Thalberg: The Last Tycoon and the World of MGM* (New York: Crown, 1994), 125.

[10] MPPDA, "History of Cinema. Selected Files from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America, Production Code Administration Collection." (Microfilm, Woodbridge, CT, 2006), Reel 1. "Col Joy's Resume 1/6/30." "Carl Milliken to Jason Joy, November 12, 1929." Milliken described Garrett as follows: "Garrett is Executive Secretary of National Society for Penal Information, entirely nonpartisan and nonsectarian and founded by wealthy philanthropist as memorial to late Thomas Mott Osborne. Garrett himself occupies position unquestioned standing with penal authorities and has personally visited in recent years every important prison in United States." Garrett toured prisons across the country while working on the National Society for Penal Information's publication *Handbook of American Prisons and Reformatories, 1929*. Paul W. Garrett and Austin H. MacCormick, eds. (New York: National Society of Penal Information, Inc., 1929).

Joy and Milliken initially expressed a great deal of concern over the making of the film as a result of the Cecil B. DeMille silent picture *The Godless Girl* (1929).[11] The film, about atheist youth in a brutal reformatory school, infuriated prison officials. Maurice McKenzie and Carl Milliken mentioned this fact in memos regarding *The Big House*. McKenzie was the most insistent, writing that Dr. Hastings Hart of the New York Crime Commission was still "furious" about *The Godless Girl* and found "it hard to believe that any motion picture company will do a serious piece of work after the experience they had with that picture." Apparently, DeMille consulted with Hart and other prison officials, heard and acknowledged their recommendations for how to depict the reformatory, and abruptly ignored all of them.[12] Garrett consulted on the script of *The Big House* and the final product met with his approval, thus avoiding the principal censorship concerns held by the studio and the SRC.

Semantically, *The Big House* presents a bleak picture of prison life. The prison itself is a cold, mechanical, concrete world of boredom and mischief. Prisoners march to the sound of a whistle in lock step in army-style regiments on the prison yard. Behavioral problems are punished by solitary confinement in the dark bowels of the prison. Although there is camaraderie among the prisoners, friends can quickly become enemies. The Warden's (Lewis Stone) didactic speeches about the sad state of prisons serve both as dramatic foreshadowing ("Someday we will pay for this sad state of affairs") and as open criticism of contemporary prison management. He blames the

[11] Thalberg mentioned that the picture would not be like DeMille's in his initial conversation with Joy. Ibid. "Col Joy's Resume 1/6/30"
[12] Ibid. "Memorandum, November 7, 1929," "Interoffice Memo: Carl E. Milliken to Maurice McKenzie, November 8, 1929."

problems of the prison on a failure to act by the legislature, causing overcrowding and putting “bad” criminals in close contact with minor offenders. Overcrowding and idleness make convicts difficult to manage and cause criminals to come out of prison worse than they came in, or to instigate riots and commit crimes while on the inside. The warden seems to want to run a good prison that helps reform men, but he is hamstrung.

Convicts come across as unquestionably deserving of their sentences, yet they are also good-hearted. This ambivalence is best illustrated in the relationship between Butch (Wallace Beery) and Morgan (Chester Morris). The two men are alternatively friends and enemies throughout the film with Butch threatening or trying to kill Morgan on two separate occasions. Morgan is a voice of morality and reason, often keeping Butch out of trouble and giving advice to Kent (Robert Montgomery) about how to make it in prison. Butch is an unapologetic murderer, self-proclaimed womanizer, and relentless troublemaker. Ultimately, the film’s syntax suggests that prison does not work as an institution of reformation. In fact, it seems to suggest that convicts are more likely to be corrupted than corrected, despite the best efforts of prison administrators. These various prison roles are foundational semantic characterizations for the genre. The film introduces paternalistic wardens, hardened criminals, cowardly snitches, good-hearted crooks, and a number of other characters that reappear in later titles.

Technical elements of the semantics such as the visual style and sound design of *The Big House* emphasize the harsh conditions of convicts’ lives and the nature of prison management in the 1930s. This is most evident in the opening sequence of the film,

which constitutes what I call an "initiation sequence." Initiation sequences, like many genre conventions, "function like a vocabulary for addressing the genre's fundamental dramatic conflicts."[13] As common a convention in the genre as wardens, guards, and convict toughs, these sequences document the process by which civilian characters are transformed into inmates and learn the rules and realities of prison life. I will discuss how this sequence works in *The Big House* as a narrative and discursive device, as well as the ways in which it is representative of the visual style and sound design of the film as a whole. This sequence, which *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall called "an insight into life in a jail that has never before been essayed on the screen," begins with the opening credits and continues for almost 15 minutes.[14]




**Figure 2. Opening title, *The Big House* (1930).**

[13] Leger Grindon, *Knockout*, 5–6.
[14] Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen: A Jail-Break.," *New York Times*, June 25, 1930.

The opening credits roll over a tracking shot of men marching in lock step in prison garb from the waist down (Figure 2). Accompanied by the diegetic sound of marching feet roughly in time with a foreboding nondiegetic audio track of martial music, the opening credits illustrate the drab, routinized nature of prison life where faceless men are herded from place to place, all wearing the same clothing and shoes. The credits fade out and the film opens with an establishing shot of the colossal stone prison as a paddy wagon approaches its barred gates. This establishing shot—an obvious matte painting replete with turrets, water towers, and smokestacks—suggests that the prison is both fortress and factory. Its high stone walls and pristine grounds visually reinforce the obsession with order and security on display during the opening credits. Only the diegetic sounds of the prison van approaching the gates remain. This silence aurally reinforces the cold, barrenness of the prison's outward appearance. These and later expository shots painstakingly reveal the semantic elements of the prison genre established by the film.



**Figure 3. Establishing shot of the penitentiary in *The Big House* (1930).**

A dissolve brings us just outside of the gates as Kent is escorted into the prison. On the way inside, we see the layers of security built into the penitentiary. Inside the outer gate is another large, steel gate with guards posted in between. Inside the prison, one of the guards reads Kent's charges (manslaughter), his sentence (10 years), and asks him, "First time in prison?" "Yes," Kent responds. "Sir to me," the guard replies, intent upon establishing the hierarchical relationship between guards and the guarded. The guard asks Kent about his background, whether he uses tobacco or drugs, and has another guard frisk him. A clock bell tolls as Kent is searched, and he is given his inmate number. Then, Kent is given "the works," in a series of documentary-style scenes that progress in near silence; only sound effects and guards' voices accompany medium shots of a visibly emotionless Kent having his photo and fingerprints taken, receiving his prison issue clothes, and having his shirtless body measured (Figures 4–6). Finally, outfitted in his numbered prison uniform, Kent's physical transformation from civilian to convict is indicated by a shot of his legs reminiscent of the opening credits as he is marched to the Warden's office. The camera position throughout this sequence presents Kent in two-shots with guards, or from over the shoulder of guards, putting audiences in a position of judgment or observation of him, rather than sympathy with him. The sequence's quick pace and shot construction emphasize the impersonal nature of this process, and is typical of the convention throughout the genre.




**Figure 4. Kent getting "the works," in *The Big House* (1930).**



**Figure 5. Kent being fingerprinted in *The Big House* (1930).**

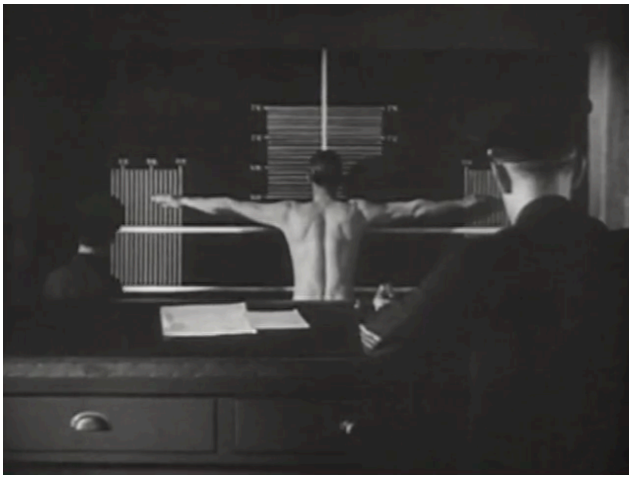


**Figure 6. Kent being measured in *The Big House* (1930).**

The fact that this style is observational, or even educational, is reinforced as Kent visits the Warden and is taken to his cell. In these two expository scenes, Kent and the audience learn all about prison life, and the problems of prison management in 1930s America. The scene is captured primarily with a two-shot of the Warden and Kent, with cuts to medium shots of the Warden during dramatic moments of his monologue. The Warden informs Kent that he can have his sentence shortened with good behavior. He also warns Kent to be careful of his conduct and associations, and that prison can bring out a man's "yellow streak," if he has one. When Kent exits the Warden's office, the audience is privy to a conversation between the Warden and captain of the guards, Pop (George F. Marion). Pop laments that Kent will be sharing a cell with two of the worst criminals in the prison; the Warden agrees, recalling his complaint to the governor's council that the prison was filled at nearly twice its capacity. "They all want to throw people into prison, but they don't want to provide for them once they are in. You mark my words Pop, one of these days we are going to pay for this shortsightedness," exclaims the Warden. Pop responds, "Sure, the whole prison system is cockeyed!" The Warden's moralistic speech syntactically frames the rest of the film's action, indicating an inevitable conflict arising from overcrowding and poor conditions in the prison.

Next, a guard escorts Kent to the massive cellblock. In a long crane shot, the camera follows him into the block, up a spiral staircase, and tracks down the row while he walks to his cell (Figure 7). The cell is tiny and cramped, and the camera is positioned on its back wall facing the barred door. The three-high bunk takes up most of the space in the room. Butch brags about his violent and murderous exploits and tells Kent that

the convicts will “learn you a lot of things before you’re through here.” Kent complains to the guards when Butch steals his cigarettes, but receives only the threat of a night in the dungeon in reply. When the guard leaves, Butch knocks Kent out after informing him that he “can’t squeal in here!” Morgan talks Butch into returning Kent’s cigarettes before stealing them himself. The scene comes to a close as the lights go out and taps plays in the background, presumably mourning the death of a convict—an event that doesn’t seem to faze Morgan as he smokes one of Kent’s cigarettes in his bunk in a close-up shot. As a calendar dissolves from November to February, the scene ends.



**Figure 7. Crane shot of Kent in *The Big House* (1930).**



**Figure 8. Beery, Morris, and Montgomery in their cell, from *The Big House* (1930).**

The close-up and medium close-up shots that frame the scene visually reinforce the worries of the captain of the guard and Warden in the previous one, as the apparent evil of Butch and Morgan are substantiated by their actions, and inescapable for Kent in the cramped cell (Figure 8). This type of exposition makes clear the critique of the prison system that the rest of the film will elaborate upon via melodrama, and outlines some of the foundational semantic and syntactic elements of the genre. The film's pragmatic message of reform is clearly expressed for the benefit of audiences, reformers, and censors before the photoplay's more dramatic sequences unfold.

Studio officials, Jason Joy, and prison officials had high hopes for the reform possibilities associated with *The Big House*. Garret proclaimed, "in addition to presenting an authentic picture of prison life, it makes for a better understanding of prisons and their urgent needs, and of prisoners en masse and as individuals."[15] In a memo, Joy proposed the film would "attempt to present the psychological reasons for jailbreaks and how they may be avoided by intelligent treatment of prisoners."[16] He later suggested that the film had a good enough story to be a box office success and "serve as indirect propaganda for those who might otherwise seriously object to the discussion of such a subject."[17] SRC member W.F. Willis thought the film's "important contribution to current thought" would allow it to pass censors more easily.[18] In order to "avoid possible mutilation of his jailbreak picture," Thalberg sent Garrett and the studio's Director of Advertising and Publicity Howard Dietz ahead of the picture to

[15] MPPDA, "The Big House File, Microfilm." "Memorandum for Col. Joy from P.W. Garrett, nd."
[16] Ibid. "Jason S. Joy to Carl E. Milliken, January 20, 1930."
[17] Ibid. "Jason S. Joy to George Kenn, February 17, 1930."
[18] Ibid. Willis, W.F. "Censorship Comments, February 24, 1930."

"secure its reception not only by the censor boards of the country, but by various prominent people and civic organizations that are interested in prison problems."[19]

Prison reformers like Justin Miller, dean of the law school at the University of Southern California, privately expressed to the SRC that the film accomplished something that could only be done through cinema: "All the lectures in the world, all the newspaper editorializing and the other usual means of publicity, could not get over to the people the essential fallacy of our present disposition to attempt a solution to the crime problem by 'capturing more criminals, putting them in jail, and keeping them there for life.'" Miller suggested the film had "great educational value" and it would positively affect prison reform.[20] The Boy Scouts of America wrote that *The Big House* will "impress upon the minds of the people in this country the true conditions of their prisons, and cause them to bring about a change which will be valuable beyond estimation."[21] The hard work of P. W. Garrett, Jason Joy, and MGM officials like Howard Dietz paid off when, after a brief ban in Ohio, the film successfully played in all fifty states.

Advertisements and reviews of *The Big House* focused on the film's stars and praised its realistic portrayals of prison life and riots.[22] Wallace Beery, whose successful career in silent pictures created much anticipation for his first role in a sound picture for

[19] Ibid. "Col. Joy's Resume 3/29/30." "Col. Joy's Resume 4/9/30."
[20] Ibid. "Justin Miller to Jason S. Joy, June 12, 1930."
[21] Ibid. "Memorandum re: The Big House, March 9, 1931."
[22] Hall, "The Screen"; "'The Big House,' Cinema Leader at the State," *Daily Boston Globe*, June 29, 1930; J. F. Brady, "Columbia," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1930; "The Theatre," *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 1930; "A Story of Prison Life: 'The Big House,' to Be Shown This Month, Pictures How Riots Come About," *New York Times*, June 22, 1930.

MGM, was most often the focus of such advertisements.[23] The *New York Times* excitedly announced, "that champion of comedy and villainy, Wallace Beery, will gnash his teeth before the microphone," in *The Big House*.[24] The film represented a big role for Chester Morris and Robert Montgomery, young actors who made their names on the New York stage.[25] Pieces on the film often noted the "replica of an entire penitentiary" built on MGM's Culver City lot, and the length to which the studio went to obtain real prison accouterment.[26] Mordaunt Hall wrote "The settings and prison scenes are as realistic as the voices of the players. There are the cold, gray walls, the concrete yards, the hosts of convicts—literally hundreds of them—and the impressive glimpses of the unlocking of cells and the tramping of feet."[27] Images of the prison riot, the tank that broke it up (Figure 9), prisoners with guns, and Butch and Morgan in a cell together filled the advertisements for the film. Ads almost unanimously focused on the grim realism of the film, noting that it may give "some inkling" about what life is like in prison before focusing on thrilling action sequences and images of the riot and prisoners with machine

[23] Muriel Babcock, "Whispers in the Wings," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1930; Philip K. Scheuer, "Scar Proves of Aid in Make-Up," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1930; Muriel Babcock, "Beery Put In 'Big House': Penitentiary Gates Clang Shut Behind Huge Actor in New Film; Good Lesson Taught, He Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1930; Edwin Schallert, "Prison Riot Film Climax: 'The Big House,'" *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1930. This anticipation was fed by the fact that Beery had not appeared on screen in over a year. "'Big House' Actress Praised: Director Hill Also Lauds Wallace Beery for Screen Performance," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1930.

[24] "Projection Jottings," *New York Times*, January 12, 1930.

[25] Grace Kingsley, "Chester Morris to Play in 'Big House,'" *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 1930; John Scott, "Screen 'Bugaboo' Upset: Actors No Longer Fear to Play Unsympathetic Roles," *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1930.

[26] "Movie Facts and Fancies," *Daily Boston Globe*, March 16, 1930; "Even Film Coin Can't Buy All: Picture Company Compelled to Rent Prison Lock When Maker Won't Sell," *Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 1930.

[27] Mordaunt Hall, "'The Big House.' Rowdy Fun.," *New York Times*, June 29, 1930.

guns.[28] Perhaps unsurprisingly, ad copy reflected Joy's statements to the studio about "intelligent treatment of prisoners" and "the psychological reasons behind prison riots."[29]




**Figure 9. Typical advertisement for *The Big House* (1930).**

Reviews often highlighted the value of the film's social criticism. Ralph Jones of the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed that *The Big House* might "do more toward reforming conditions in America's penitentiaries than all the commissions that President

[28] "Oh! For the Wings of an Angel!," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1930; "Display Ad 8 -- No Title," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 23, 1930; "Display Ad 59 -- No Title," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 7, 1930; "Display Ad 74 -- No Title," *New York Times*, June 23, 1930; ibid., 74; Sam Cox, "Prison Riots Theme For 'The Big House,'" *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1930; Mae Tinee, "'Big House' Stark Drama of Prison Life: With Noah Beery as Real 20 Minute Egg.," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 3, 1930; "'The Big House' Film at the State: Thrilling Picture of Human Appeal and Vivid Scenes of Riot Behind Prison Walls," *Daily Boston Globe*, July 1, 1930.

[29] "A Story of Prison Life: 'The Big House,' to Be Shown This Month, Pictures How Riots Come About"; "Display Ad 59 -- No Title."

Hoover can appoint. If ever a story, without setting out deliberately to be propaganda, pointed a lesson, it is this, driving home the evil result of over crowding in our prisons [sic]."[30] David Strauss of *Billboard* reported, "the idea behind [*The Big House*] evidently was a desire to prove our present system of dealing with criminals is inadequate."[31] Harry Evans of *Life* went further, calling *The Big House* "MGM's answer to 'what's wrong with the prison system,' and a very intelligent treatment it is, you can be sure…." He called it "the most comprehensive picture of prison routine and conditions that has ever been brought to the screen."[32] E. C. Sherburne of the *Christian Science Monitor* elaborated on the specific issues highlighted in *The Big House*, noting its "forceful criticisms of the brutalizing effect on [convicts] of overcrowding, harsh treatment and bad food."[33] Mayme Peak of the *Boston Globe* was perhaps most excited by the film's reform potential in her review of the film:

> Officials go so far as to prophesy that this grim drama of prison life and riots will be as powerful an argument against inhuman prison methods which have been the cause of recent prison riots as "All Quiet on the Western Front" [sic] is an argument against war.

Reviewers keenly pointed out that recent prison riots in Ohio—the lone state to ban the film—and Colorado inspired the film's creators (as mentioned above, Beauchamp also credits the Colorado prison riots as inspiration for the film).[34] The Catholic League

[30] Ralph T. Jones, "At the Capitol," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 17, 1930; "A Story of Prison Life: 'The Big House,' to Be Shown This Month, Pictures How Riots Come About."
[31] H. David Strauss, "Reviews of the Latest: 'The Big House,'" *The Billboard*, July 5, 1930.
[32] Harry Evans, "Movies.: 'With Byrd at the South Pole,'" *Life*, July 11, 1930.
[33] E. C. Sherburne, "Of Many Things: The Big House"," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 5, 1930.
[34] "Story of Prison Riot Is Capitol Screen Feature: Thrilling Convict Battle Is Climax of 'The Big House' Talkie.," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 15, 1930; "Ohio Censors Bar 'The Big House' Film; Democrat, Citing

suggested that the film would publicize recent riots in Chicago, and the Ohio Board of Censors banned the film because its content would presumably have influenced a contentious gubernatorial election whose candidates were sparring over a recent prison riot and fire that killed nearly 300 men. As a result of Cosmopolitan Productions' collaboration on the film, William Randolph Hearst's publications in Ohio proclaimed the excellence of the film and excoriated the three-member censor board for banning it.[35] Regardless of the supposed "inspiration," trade papers and reviews suggested that there was "not the slightest doubt that this fine if grim spectacular picture of American prison life has been inspired by the recent fatal riots in penitentiaries in the United States."[36] By suggesting parallels between the film and actual prison riots as well as potential reforms, critics connected the semantics and syntax of the film to its pragmatic message.

Whether the film's success was a product of excellent filmmaking or the fact that it captured popular sentiment about prisons, it was clear that *The Big House* signaled the beginning of a trend. The *Los Angeles Times*'s "Innocent Bystander" predicted penitentiary films as the latest in a number of Hollywood trends saying, "Half a dozen of the big producing firms are in the throes of springing upon the public an 'epic of the

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Prison Fire, Cries 'Politics!,'" *New York Times*, September 21, 1930; "Ohio Film Censors Ban 'The Big House,'" *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 21, 1930; Jones, "At the Capitol."

[35] Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, 158–159; "Hearst v. Ohio," *Time* 16, no. 13 (September 29, 1930): 22. MPPDA, "The Big House File, Microfilm." "Maurice Mackenzie to Jason S. Joy, August 7, 1930." "Confidentially, the Hearst Organization is handling the matter in Ohio…" "Inter-Office Memo, Carl Milliken to Jason S. Joy, October 21, 1930." Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood*, 261.

[36] "Film News," *The Stage*, October 2, 1930.

electric chair' or something of that kind."[37] The *Washington Post*'s Nelson B. Bell remarked, upon the opening in a single week of *The Big House* and *Numbered Men*, that censors would be up in arms about these and other pictures coming soon which dealt with a subject "the producers have just discovered is a fruitful source of pungent drama."[38] Bell wrote just a week earlier that "*The Big House* is the first one of its kind and may unfailingly be relied upon to set a fashion in grim drama that will find itself perpetuated by a long line of similar productions."[39] The film was financially successful, breaking box office records—and the theater's doors—at the Criterion in Los Angeles on opening day.[40] The film was critically successful as well, and it garnered Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Actor (Wallace Beery) and winning for Best Sound (Douglas Shearer) and Best Writing (Frances Marion).

The other films in the cycle that followed *The Big House*, but preceded *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, can all be considered penitentiary films. These titles presented stories of life inside colossal stone-walled penitentiaries, often featuring many of the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements that defined *The Big House*. Scenes featuring leagues of convicts marching in army-style regiments, the cramped interiors of tiny cells, and inmates plotting escapes were prominent in all. Especially notable is the opening sequence of *20,000 Year in Sing Sing*'s depiction of inmates

[37] The Innocent Bystander, "'Stars and Stripes' May Well Be Latest Theme Song: Jailbird Steals High Lights of Film Trend," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1930.
[38] Nelson B. Bell, "Behind the Screens With Nelson B. Bell," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 1930.
[39] Nelson B. Bell, "Behind the Screens," *The Washington Post*, June 26, 1930.
[40] Elena Boland, "'Big House' Dispels Fears: Uneasy Studio Officials Relieved by Reception Given Strictly He-Man Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 1930; Jacob Cooper, "Criterion Given New Name for Run of Picture," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1930.

marching about the prison with the length of their sentences hovering over their heads (Figure 10). Lewis Lawes, warden of the real Sing Sing prison in New York, was a constant collaborator on these titles as part of his national campaign for prison reform.




**Figure 10. Opening title sequence of *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932).**

The semantic elements of penitentiary films like *The Big House*—such as the rigid penitentiary, the well-meaning warden, and the criminal protagonists—suggested a consistent syntax, mainly that the prison system in America was a general failure. Reviewers recognized this fact as well, noting "a picture of this sort is classified as propaganda, exposing truthfully, as it does, the ineffectualness of the prison system in America."[41] It seems that this syntactic element was in fact the key to the creation of the films. The conditions under which such films were produced necessitated the cooperation of prison reform officials like Garrett, whose assistance increased the likelihood that the films—due to their educational and propagandistic value—could pass censor boards. The support of reformers, and the powerful depiction of prison life,

[41] "BIG HOUSE" DISPELS FEARS: Uneasy Studio Officials Relieved by Reception" Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Jun 29, 1930;ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1988)pg. B13

makes clear *The Big House*'s pragmatic use-value. Although the film ends with the reformation of Morgan, it depicts the failure of an otherwise morally upright system. Reviews suggest that its message was as important to its 1930 audiences as its dramatic appeal, and the California Crime Commission screened it for the governor and the state legislature at an event focused on prison administration because of its realistic illustration of prison life.[42] The prison in *The Big House* failed its convicts, setting up a dichotomous syntactic relationship between the institution and the incarcerated, pitting the individual against the state.

## I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!

The success of *The Big House* and of its spinoff penitentiary counterparts in 1930 and 1931 laid the foundation that made the second part of this cycle possible in 1932 and 1933. These later titles, primarily chain gang films, spun off of the success of Warner Bros. hit *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*. Robert E. Burns's memoir *I Am a Fugitive From a Georgia Chain Gang!*—which he wrote while on the lam—is the basis for the film's narrative. Burns originally published his story as a serial in the pulp magazine *True Detective Mysteries* in 1931 and as a best-selling book in 1932. On February 27, 1932, Jack Warner went to New York and secured screen rights for the story, paying Burns $12,500, and inked up-and-coming star Paul Muni for the leading role of James Allen a few weeks later.[43]

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[42] MPPDA, "The Big House File, Microfilm." "Col. Joy's Resume, 2-18-31."
[43] Robert Elliott Burns, *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), v. MGM also expressed interest in the picture. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter MPPDA), "History of Cinema. Selected Files from the Motion Picture

Making a prison film was hardly controversial by 1932, but there were significant hurdles for Warner Bros. to overcome in the making of *Fugitive*. As Thomas Schatz and others have documented, many studio personnel—including Warner Bros. highest-paid director, Roy Del Ruth, who passed on making the film—and executives in the New York office were skeptical about its commercial prospects. Further, the story department wrote to Daryl Zanuck on February 19th that "all the strong and vivid points in the story are certain to be eliminated" by censors just a few days before Jack Warner bought the rights.[44] Jason Joy sent nearly identical letters to Zanuck and Irving Thalberg on February 26th regarding the censorship prospects for the film. (His letter to Zanuck suggests that the two had discussed the film over the phone prior to the writing of the letter, while

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Producers and Distributers of America, Production Code Administration Collection, Microfilm Reel 4. I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang! File.," n.d.; Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 143. "Resume, Feb. 26/32." The film tells the story of James Allen (Paul Muni), a northern veteran of the First World War. Upon returning home, he desires to continue the engineering work that he conducted in the Army rather than the drab factory work he had done prior to fighting in Europe. Allen sets out across the country, wandering place-to-place and taking jobs as they come, eventually finding himself in an unspecified southern town at a flophouse. Another hobo named Pete (Preston Foster) takes Allen to a hamburger stand for a handout. While at the lunch wagon, Pete pulls a gun on the owner and forces Allen to clean out the cash register, which contained a paltry $5.00. As they leave the restaurant, the police arrive and Pete is shot dead. Allen makes a break for the side door and is caught as soon as he gets outside.

Allen is sentenced to ten years at hard labor on the chain gang and the audience is initiated to the horrors of that system of punishment as he learns about them in the film. Allen must wear leg irons, eat horrendous food, work from 4:20am until 8:20pm every day, and ask permission to do everything, even to sweat. Allen decides he cannot take it anymore and has an African American prisoner bend his shackles with a sledgehammer so he can slip them off and make a run for it. Allen escapes north to Chicago where his hard work pays off and sees him rise from mere laborer to the head of an engineering firm and a prominent member of society. When he first arrives in the city, he boards with an attractive young blond (Glenda Farrell) with whom he winds up in a relationship. When Allen is ready to move on to find his own place and another woman, she finds out that Allen is a fugitive by reading his mail and blackmails him into marriage. When Allen eventually falls in love with another woman (Helen Vinson) and offers alimony with a divorce settlement, his wife refuses and turns him in to chain gang officials. On guarantee of a pardon, Allen returns to the chain gang, but not before he creates a media firestorm over the horrific conditions there after his arrest. Officials renege on their offer of parole and Allen must serve out his entire ten-year sentence. After a daring escape, Allen resigns to the life of a criminal, unable to find steady work or stay in one place for long, and the film ends chillingly, as described above.

[44] Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 143–145.

the letter to Thalberg indicated that MGM sent a synopsis of Burns's book to the SRC that morning). Joy opined—echoing the Warners' story department—that "the important parts of the story from a dramatic point of view are just those things which cannot be shown successfully on the screen," namely the cruelty of the chain gang and the details of Burns's fantastical escapes.[45]

Joy and others at the SRC seemed more concerned about the way that southerners would respond to the film's criticism of chain gangs than with onscreen representations of cruelty and prison escapes. Joy devoted almost all of his letters to Zanuck and Thalberg to this topic. "Southerners," Joy suggested, "who are over-sensitive on all matters pertaining to their manners and customs, will regard the story as an unfair indictment, deliberately brought against them." He goes on to mention the hostile reaction to, and censorship of, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before discussing his reticence for re-opening "old wounds" of sectional tensions between North and South á la Burns's autobiography. Joy suggested chain gangs "may seem [a] barbarous relic of the Middle Ages," but "from a business standpoint we ought to consider carefully whether we are willing to incur the anger of any large section by turning our medium of entertainment to anything which may be regarded as a wholesale indictment."[46] The same day, Joy wrote to Will Hays—president of the MPPDA when it adopted the Production Code, popularly known as the "Hays Code"—expressing concern that MGM and Warner Bros. were pursuing Burns's book. Joy wrote

[45] MPPDA, "History of Cinema. Selected Files from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributers of America, Production Code Administration Collection." (Microfilm, Woodbridge, CT, 2006), Reel 4. "Jason S. Joy to Irving Thalberg, February 26, 1932," and "Jason S. Joy to Darryl Zanuck, February 26, 1932."
[46] Ibid.

> While it may be true that [chain gang] systems are wrong, I very much doubt if it is our business as an entertainment force to clear it up, and thereby possibly get into trouble with the Southern states who, as our Southern representative puts it, can stand any criticism so long as it isn't directed at themselves.[47]

The SRC's "southern representative" was Lamar Trotti, Joy's assistant and native Atlantan, who typed the letter, and remarked in a memo to Hays's secretary Julia Kelly that "I worry about this [film] more than others because I think I know the sensitiveness of the South in such matters."[48] According to Matthew H. Bernstein, Trotti—a "Professional Southerner"—played "a crucial role in providing Hollywood with insight into the South," while at the SRC from 1927–1932.[49] His sentiments regarding *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* differ dramatically from prison officials' pro-reform statements regarding *The Big House*, and belie the extent to which such sentiments were profit-motivated.

Thomas Schatz's account of the script development suggests that these concerns were at the forefront of Zanuck's mind throughout the process. Brown Holmes, a staff writer at Warner Bros., worked with the fugitive himself, Robert E. Burns, on the treatment of his autobiography in April of 1931. A more experienced studio writer, Sheridan Gibney, worked with Holmes to develop the continuity script by the end of May. Zanuck was apparently displeased with the resulting document, insisting that yet another writer—Howard J. Green—get involved in revising the screenplay as well. Zanuck asked that Green "minimize the polemics against chain gangs" and avoid

[47] Ibid. "Jason S. Joy to Will H. Hays, February 26 1932."
[48] Ibid. "Jason S. Joy to Will H. Hays, February 26 1932," and "Lamar Trotti to Julia Kelly, March 15, 1932."
[49] Matthew H. Bernstein, "A 'Professional Southerner' in the Hollywood Studio System: Lamar Trotti at Work, 1925–1952," in *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, ed. Deborah E. Barker and Kathryn McKee (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 142.

mentioning the location of the chain gang in the revised script. Green later claimed that Zanuck sensed his desire to make the film a "blasting tirade" against chain gangs in general, and forced him to "incorporate into my script sincere arguments in favor of chain-gang systems." Once the draft met with Zanuck's approval, with its minimally persuasive arguments in favor of chain gangs included, the studio executive and legal departments were satisfied that they had a hit that would be safe from litigation and pass censors.[50]

Ultimately, following a screening in mid-October, Joy and the SRC were confident that the film would pass censors. In a letter to Albert Howson—head of the Warner Bros. censorship department in New York—Joy suggested that because the film portrayed Burns's unique and unlikely-to-be-replicated story as a particular miscarriage of justice, it could not be interpreted as "a general indictment" of chain gangs. As such, Joy felt "the motion picture industry is thoroughly justified in making pictures like the present, provided that they are free from propaganda and sectional prejudice, and with a proper consideration for the requirements of entertainment."[51] Similarly, in a letter to Zanuck, Joy expressed his view that *Fugitive* "should rate as one of the most important pictures of the year; and we sincerely trust that you will have little or no trouble from sectional prejudice or official censorship."[52] Finally, in his report to Will Hays, SRC member Geoffrey Shurlock remarked that the film would have a "better than even chance of getting by with minimum censorship difficulty," especially because RKO's

[50] Schatz, *The Genius of the System*, 144–145.
[51] MPPDA, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang! File, Microfilm." "Jason S. Joy to Albert Howson, October 17, 1932."
[52] Ibid. "Jason S. Joy to Darryl Zanuck, October 17, 1932."

competing chain gang picture, *Hell's Highway*, passed censors with little trouble a month prior in September.[53]

While the semantics and syntax of *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* differ in significant ways from *The Big House*, the films share many elements as well. The expository, documentary-style presentation of the conditions in the chain gang and the corrupt nature of the southern criminal justice system represent a different inflection of the "failure of the system" narrative and harsh prison conditions presented in *The Big House*. In place of regimented, concrete penitentiaries are the steamy, dusty, and miserable chain gang camps of the rural South. The spiritual-singing African American convicts and remote locales mark the camp as "southern," while the penitentiaries in earlier films were almost always adjacent to urban areas. Convicts toil under oppressive conditions in rock quarries and forests from 4:20AM until 8:20PM, eat rotten food, and live in filthy wooden bunkhouses alongside medieval torture implements. Rather than well-meaning reformist prison officials, the southern warden, guards, and prison commissioners are cruel, unjust, and vengeful. While James Allen's compatriots all seem to be unrepentant (if good-hearted) criminals, he is completely innocent of his crime. In fact, he proves he is a good citizen while on the lam in Chicago, becoming a prominent engineer and publisher.

However, the film maintains that the southern chain gang does not merely fail to adequately care for its charges; it corrupts them (if it doesn't kill them first). In fact, *I Am*

[53] Ibid. "Geoffrey Shurlock to Will Hays, October 17, 1932." Mordaunt Hall, "Hell's Highway: Richard Dix in a Melodrama Concerned With Inhuman Treatment of Chain-Gang Prisoners," *New York Times*, September 26, 1932.

*a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* suggests far greater problems than the failure of the southern prison system: the whole of this southern state government, up to the governor, is corrupt and prisoners have no recourse for grievances. This type of indictment echoes and extends the criticisms of state-sanctioned punishment leveled by *The Big House.* James Allen, unlike Morgan, is ultimately failed by the state, and transformed into a lifetime crook. Whereas the political mechanisms that caused trouble in *The Big House*'s penitentiary are left offscreen, *Fugitive*'s more ambitious critique places the failures of southern politicians at the center of its onscreen narrative.

*I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* is rarely discussed in relation to *The Big House* in the scholarly literature, especially when it comes to visual style and sound design. However, the aesthetic innovations and generic conventions established by *The Big House* reappear in *Fugitive*, most notably in the film's initiation sequence. Like its predecessor in *The Big House*, this sequence addresses the central conflicts of the film and delivers the most straightforward criticism of the harsh conditions of prison life. Beginning after Allen is sentenced (about 17 and a half minutes into the film) and ending shortly after he learns the only ways out of the camp (around 36$^{th}$ minute)—"to work out or die out"—this initiation sequence sets the stage for the rest of the film and is only slightly longer than its counterpart in *The Big House*.[54]

The sequence opens with a match dissolve between the banging of the judge's gavel in the courtroom and a blacksmith's hammer on James Allen's ankle shackles. The

[54] In both films, the initiation sequence accounts for around 20% of the overall screen time in the film. In *The Big House*, the sequence is approximately 15 out of 87 minutes (17%). In *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, the sequence is approximately 19 out of 92 minutes (21%).

camera tracks away from the anvil upon which Allen's ankle is perched to reveal a medium long shot of an overall-clad smithy wielding the hammer while Allen looks on in distress, a disinterested guard leaning against the wall of the old-timey blacksmith shop, then a long shot of the dirt-filled prison yard enclosed by high wooden fences and guard towers. The audio throughout the sequence is sparse and diegetic. The sound of the hammer clinking against Allen's leg irons persists as dissolves show the audience the camp grounds, with striped convicts being led about in chains, wooden wagons and buildings, and a cross (presumably for punishment) at the center of the yard. Another dissolve to a shot revealing the name of the camp—"County Camp No. 2"—on a high, barbed-wire topped fence also shows an armed guard peering over the walls from atop a guard tower (Figure 11). Allen examines his chains and how they will impair his gait after a tense exchange with the smithy before a cut to the next scene (Figure 12). Like Kent in *The Big House*, the first thing Allen learns is that he will be watched over and guarded. These shots establish the primary semantic elements of the chain gang camp.




**Figure 11. Shot of guard tower in *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* (1932).**



**Figure 12. Smithy inspecting James Allen's leg irons, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* (1932).**

The next few scenes chronicle a typical day in the camp, beginning with the clanging of a morning bell as a title card proclaims “4:20AM.” The long bunkhouse full of convicts in stripes sit up and stretch in their bunks with armed guards posted at either end of the row and standing behind the barred doors between rooms. When a guard shouts “Pick ‘em up!” the convicts raise a length of chain connected to their leg irons, through which another chain is run—chaining all of the convicts together and to their bunks—all the way to a padlock outside of the building. The sounds of clinking chains and keys continue as close-ups of the padlocks being unlocked cut to striking images of the chain being pulled through all of the links inside the building. A guard notices that Allen sleeps through this entire sequence, pushes him off of his bunk by his head, and then throws the chain link in Allen’s face, shouting “That’ll learn you to sit up and hold on to THIS!” Unfazed by early morning brutality, the other men put on their shoes and clink and clank into the mess hall to eat. Glance-object cuts guide viewers as Allen learns that he must lift both of his feet over the table benches to sit at breakfast, and a look of disgust comes across his face when he tries his food. Other convicts tell him to get used to it, and Allen notices another convict break down in tears at the table.

Another fade out and back in takes the audience out into the yard as guards usher convicts, white and black, onto flatbed trucks in the dark. A series of glance-object cuts follow Allen’s eyes as he looks upon the faces of his fellow prisoners in various states of waking and sleeping, and the mules that are chained just like the men in preparation for a days work (Figures 13–14). Next the audience is taken to the rock quarry where the convicts will break rocks all day in the sun. Allen learns, after a punch

to the face from a guard, that he must ask permission to wipe the sweat from his face or use the bathroom. Bomber (Edward Ellis), one of the other convicts, points out a "big buck" African American convict who "never misses" with a sledgehammer, "They like his work so much they are gonna keep him here for life." The convict who cried at breakfast passes out in the heat before another fade to black and fade in bring the audience back to the camp at "8:20PM" as the trucks pull back into the yard with headlights blazing against the dark background.



**Figure 13. Part 1 of glance-object cut of James Allen, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* (1932).**



**Figure 14. Part 2 of glance-object cut of James Allen, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* (1932).**

Dust fills the air as the weary and filthy convicts and mules are unchained. The convicts' chains are checked and the men are counted off as they enter the bunkhouse to rinse themselves in a pail of dirty water and sit down to another paltry meal. A dissolve to Allen in the bunkhouse shows the Warden and guards walking the row in search of men who didn't give a good day's work. Those who haven't worked are to be beaten with a leather strap. When he speaks up on behalf of the convict that fainted in the quarry, Allen is forced to take a beating in his stead. Allen's beating takes place off screen, but can be seen via shadows against the wall. Unlike the man beaten before him—whose back was bloodied and covered with gashes—Allen doesn't scream. The camera tracks down the row of bunks as convicts listen to the sound of the strap against Allen's back, revealing looks of disgust, pleasure, and indifference. In the next scene Allen learns there are only two ways out of the camp: to "work out," or "die out." Allen discusses escape with Bomber, as waiting out his sentence seems unbearable.

The quick pace and documentary style of this sequence recalls the initiation of Kent in *The Big House*. Like Kent, Allen learns the rules of prison life. He is outfitted with prison garb and meets the Warden. However, the ordered, moral, and almost scientific nature of prisoner cataloguing in the penitentiary is replaced with a barbarous, medieval process of initiation replete with chains, whippings, and torturous labor. Impersonal shots of Kent's orderly initiation are replaced with point of view editing, close-ups, and glance-object cuts as Allen learns about the brutal, unforgiving world of the chain gang. Rather than moralistic speeches lamenting prison overcrowding, the quick cuts and fast-paced exposition of director Mervyn LeRoy's initiation sequence highlights the pervasive

evils of the chain gang camp and its program of punishment. The prison officials are unquestionably evil and Allen is an innocent man trapped in a set of circumstances over which he has no control. The semantics and syntax make clear the pragmatic message of the film: southern chain gangs are awful, brutal, and unjust. The system does not even pretend to reform criminals. This sequence syntactically sets up James Allen's quest for freedom and self-definition that drives the plotline of the rest of the film, and the unrepentant evil and corruption which pervades the southern justice system. Allen is characterized as more like Morgan's reformed criminal in *The Big House* than Kent, whose "yellow streak" defines his character.

Publicity for *Fugitive* focused primarily on Paul Muni and the film's connection with Robert E. Burns's story. Images of Muni, an accomplished stage actor who had made a splash in *Scarface* earlier in 1932, dominated advertisements, reviews, and announcements. Photographs of his face and photographs of him in stripes and chains were the most common of these images.[55] Nelson B. Bell of *The Washington Post*, who was particularly fond of Muni, featured segments about the star in his "About the Snowshops" column twice in the week of the premiere, and his *Post* review focused intently on Muni's performance.[56] Glenda Farrell (who plays James Allen's wife) and other players in the film were lauded for their capable performances, but rarely

[55] "Many Stars—and Some Stripes—on Local Screens," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 13, 1932; "Plays and Films of the Week: Paramount, Uptown: 'I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang,'" *Daily Boston Globe*, November 12, 1932; "Metropolitan Hit Relates Personal Risks Author Ran," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 1932.

[56] Nelson B. Bell, "About the Snowshops with Nelson B. Bell," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1932; Nelson B. Bell, "About the Snowshops with Nelson B. Bell," *The Washington Post*, November 8, 1932; "New Cinema Offerings: Metropolitan," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 1932.

appeared in advertisements. Robert E. Burns's name was plastered across headlines and in the body of nearly every bit of publicity for the film. Some pieces discussed his real life ordeal alongside the film, while others mentioned him in passing.[57] The fact that Burns was arrested and Georgia sought to extradite him from New Jersey while the film was in theaters was a boon to Warner Bros.'s bottom line as well.[58]

Reviews of *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* celebrated its gritty, realistic expose of southern chain gangs. Before comparing the film to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the reviewer at *The Boston Globe* recalled, "The filth, the brutality, the nauseating food, the back-breaking labor, the despair in these chain gangs radiate from the screen in horrifying waves right to the hearts of the audience."[59] Mae Tinée of *The Chicago Tribune* compared the film to RKO's *Hell's Highway,* which "was comparatively mild as compared with this powerfully enacted drama. Here are cruelty and injustice in the raw."[60] Like *The Big House*, reviews often mentioned the "replica of a state prison camp for chain gang convicts was built at Warner Brothers Studio in Hollywood," in their discussion of the film's realism. The detail of one *Atlanta Constitution* review suggests a fascination with the brutality and realism of the film:

> The whipping post, where recalcitrant convicts are lashed with great leather thongs until they scream in agony or faint, special cells for solitary confinement,

[57] "Plays and Films of the Week"; "Metropolitan Hit Relates Personal Risks Author Ran"; Bell, "About the Snowshops with Nelson B. Bell," November 8, 1932; Mae Tinee, "Film of Chain Gang Fugitive Is Great Drama," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 17, 1932.
[58] Bell, "About the Snowshops with Nelson B. Bell," November 8, 1932; "Georgia Asks Burns's Return: Fugitive From Chain Gang Held in New Jersey Decision of Gov Moore Awaits His Study of Case Mother, in Pittsfield, to Fight for Him," *Daily Boston Globe*, December 16, 1932; "Crime Partner Blames Burns: Claims Fugitive Planned Holdup, Kept Loot Flagg Says Pal Paid $25 Bribe to Escape Chain Gang," *Daily Boston Globe*, December 19, 1932.
[59] "Plays and Films of the Week."
[60] Tinee, "Film of Chain Gang Fugitive Is Great Drama."

> eating rooms where chains clank to the rattle of tin dishes, sentry posts where stand armed guards instructed to shoot to kill, guard rooms with gun racks, washrooms, the booking dock, the blacksmith shop where chains are forged on human legs, and the kennels where bloodhounds strain their leashes eager to lead in the deadly man hunt of some unfortunate fugitive. These form the background in which some of the most dramatic scenes ever presented in pictures.[61]

*The Boston Globe* review seemed especially focused on the realism of the film, proclaiming that, "Clippings in every newspaper 'morgue' on the Maillefert trial and on the dramatic life of Robert E. Burns verify" that the film's exploits are true-to-life and based on Burns's experiences.[62] The film's semantics relate directly to the syntactic and pragmatic elements at its heart: the exposure of the horrible evils of the chain gang system in the South.

Jason Joy predicted that the inevitable chain gang cycle that would follow from *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* would be "a headache" because of the way that he feared southerners would react to the films.[63] Joy called the Warner Bros. film the "father of them all [chain gang films]" and wanted the studio to be sure to obscure the location of the camp so as to not implicate any particular state in the film's narrative. Not surprisingly, a Los Angeles reviewer stated that if the film "can do anything to correct an evil that is a blot on civilization, it will not have been made in vain."[64] Millions of people viewed the film and Georgia prison officials' reactions made their opinions

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[61] "Georgia Shows Burns' Story Of Chain Gang," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 13, 1932.
[62] "Plays and Films of the Week." The "Maillefert trial" was a case in Florida in which two chain gang guards were tried for the murder of a convict by locking him in a sweatbox. The trial was underway during the film's wide release.
[63] MPPDA, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang! File, Microfilm." "Lamar Trotti to Miss Julia Kelly, March 15, 1932," "Jason S. Joy to Mr. Will H. Hays, March 25, 1932,"
[64] Tinée, Mae. "Film of Chain Gang Fugitive Is Great Drama." *Chicago Daily Tribune* November 17, 1932. Parsons, Louella. *Los Angeles Examiner*, quoted in O'Connor, 42.

about the pragmatic impact of the film clear when they filed suit because they "thought their reputations had been unjustly smeared."[65] However, according to SRC documents, the film was not censored in Georgia; when it was censored elsewhere, the most likely scene to be cut was Allen's visit to a flop house in Atlanta where he encountered a prostitute, not chain gang brutality.[66] The other chain gang films in this cycle—*Hell's Highway* and *Laughter in Hell*—featured nearly all of the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements of *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* From the dusty terrain to the brutal guards, southern chain gangs were oppressive and backward institutions to the core. Corrupt, vengeful, and violent officials oversaw racially integrated work camps bent on exploiting convict labor rather than reforming criminals. These semantic and syntactic elements suggested an obvious pragmatic concern: reform of southern chain gangs.

Although *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* has received significantly more attention from scholars of prison films and Depression-era cinema, *The Big House* had perhaps the greatest impact on the development of the prison film genre. *Fugitive* proved the financial viability of prison films for other studios. These two films' success, and the success of the films that capitalized on the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic

[65] "'Chain Gang' Suit for Libel Opens," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 1938; "Film Libel Suit Set for Monday," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 16, 1938; "'I Am A Fugitive' Film Brings 4 More Suits," *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 27, 1934; "Libel Jury to See Chaingang Film: Picture's Use Authorized as Part of Opening Statement of Defense," *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 21, 1938; "Mistrial Is Asked In 'I'm Fugitive' $100,000 Action," *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 20, 1938., 43. Warner Bros. settled at least six cases for libel related to the film out of court.

[66] MPPDA, "I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang! File, Microfilm." Censorship cuts by James Wingate for Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts all cut the flophouse scene. Only New York and Massachusetts cut any scenes of brutality.

elements at their core, drove this production cycle of prison films in the early sound era. While *Fugitive*'s legacy looms larger in the popular imagination, its success counted upon the innovations of George Hill and Irving Thalberg at MGM just two years earlier. This cycle is representative of the genrefication process identified by Altman. The repetition of the initiation sequence convention in *Fugitive*—and other shared stylistic and narrative techniques—represent the development of generic norms and expectations.

## Conclusion

Applying Altman's approach to this cycle has allowed me to answer pragmatic questions important to social science scholars studying prison films—such as how prisons are represented in certain time periods—while also keeping in mind the conditions of production and reception they often ignore. The realities of producing and distributing films about prison in pre-Code Hollywood—especially the concerns over censorship and sectional tension—resulted in a coherent, stable set of semantic and syntactic elements for the prison genre in the early sound era that were all geared toward a pragmatic message in favor of prison reform. The major characterizations of convicts (guilty and innocent, good hearted and cruel), wardens and guards (evil, paternalistic), and other criminal justice officials which continue to be integral to prison films appeared in some form in these early titles. This cycle demonstrated the ways in which these elements were sectionally inflected in the 1930s as a result of the historical context and contemporary scandals involving southern chain gangs. The sectional setting in these films also affected the way in which the prison itself was imagined and

constructed; northern and western prisons were large, stone penitentiaries near urban areas while southern prisons appeared as convict camps and chain gangs. The major syntactic conflicts were also addressed by films in the cycle: the failure (or success) of prisons' claims of rehabilitation, the morality of death row, the injustice of a punitive model of crime control. Production documents, reviews, and advertisements stressed the use-value or pragmatics of these films as well. Because they were social problem films that addressed contemporary concerns about prison conditions and prison reform, these films were deemed educational and supported by officials at various levels of government and heads of activist reform organizations.

Future applications of this approach to other intrageneric cycles might reveal a different set of pragmatic concerns. I can imagine cycles of prison films from the 1950s and 1960s deploying and adapting the semantic and syntactic elements of these early titles and their conventions toward a pragmatics of racial liberalism [like in *The Defiant Ones* (United Artists, 1958) and *Riot in Cell Block 11* (Walter Wanger, 1954)] or anti-establishment themes (like *Cool Hand Luke*, Warner Bros., 1967); perhaps cycles in later decades would pragmatically focus on racism and criminality [like in *Animal Factory* (Franchise Pictures, 2000) or *American History X* (New Line Cinema, 1998)].

The trajectories of these two generic styles—the chain gang film and the penitentiary film—also present opportunities for future analysis. Chain gang films provide fertile ground for analysis of representations of the South, and of ideas about justice and punishment in the region more specifically. The divergence in the representations of chain gangs and penitentiaries in the 1930s is a product of

contemporary punishment practices, but chain gangs—and prison labor more generally—remained a staple of representations of southern prisons in later films. Even when southern penitentiaries do appear on screen, as in *Brubaker* (20th Century Fox, 1980) or *The Green Mile* (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1999), they bear a striking resemblance to the chain gangs of earlier Hollywood fare. Brutal and racist guards, corruption, and regional backwardness characterize many a cinematic southern prison. On the other hand, penitentiaries and supermax prisons become the modern alternative to the antiquated prisons of the South. Though these prisons are just as often corrupt and violent as their southern counterparts, advancements in surveillance and weaponry (among guards and the guarded) demonstrate the pros and cons of the technical efficiency of modern punishment.

Finally, this cycle cemented the importance of the initiation sequence as a foundational generic convention for the prison genre. These expository sequences are essential shorthand for educating audiences about the central narrative and thematic conflicts in each film. They demonstrated the horrible overcrowding of penitentiaries—and the lack of political will to change such conditions—in *The Big House*, and the horrifying conditions and corruption of the southern penal system in *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*. These sequences, mimicked by other titles in this cycle of 1930s prison films, became the narrative shorthand for prison films in every decade thereafter. The next chapter will take a closer look at the initiation sequence *as* a generic convention in order to expose how studios adapted the style and content of these 1930s

sequences in the time since then to demonstrate how the conflicts at the heart of prison narratives changed, and remained the same, in the last 80 years of filmmaking.

# Initiation Sequences:
# The Generic Vocabulary of the Prison Film Genre




*Be sure to view the videographic essay before reading the accompanying text. If you are reading this dissertation on paper, the videographic essay can also be found at https://vimeo.com/122788057 using the password "emoryu1".

Like the initiation sequences discussed in the previous chapter, the ones depicted in this videographic essay provide essential exposition for the films of which they are a part. As noted in the Introduction, Leger Grindon has helpfully characterized generic conventions function as "a vocabulary for addressing a genre's fundamental dramatic conflicts." Close analysis of this particular generic convention—the initiation sequence—reveals a great deal about generic storytelling, and how cinema speaks directly to major generic conflicts through conventions.[1]

[1] Leger Grindon, *Knockout : The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 5–6.

This videographic essay examines style and storytelling in initiation sequences in the prison film genre. This text adds some context to the images above.

Initiation sequences tend toward a pattern set forth in *The Big House* and *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* in the 1930s, whereby a criminal arrives in prison after he is convicted of a crime, and is introduced to the rules and realities of prison life. The major conflicts in the film, and the genre as a whole, are represented in these sequences. They can be broken down into three major phases: processing, education, and acclimation. Each phase addresses different aspects of the new prisoner's initiation, yet which phase is most indicative of an individual film's major conflicts varies from title to title. While most films contain all three phases, how they are directed toward larger generic conflicts will depend on the narrative trajectory of each individual film.

There is a great deal of variation from title to title within the genre, especially with regard to initiation sequences. Indeed, some prison films do not have them at all. For example, in *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1958), the film's principle characters are on the lam for the entire film. While its plot follows on a pair of black and white convicts chained together, and their literal and figurative incarceration in a racially biased southern locale, it does not show them entering the prison—or in prison at all for that matter. However, in *The Defiant Ones* and other prison films whose characters are not initiated into prison, *audiences* are initiated into the prison world instead. Even if we do not watch as a convict learns the rules of the prison upon arrival, we learn them—and the central generic confict of the film—indirectly through traditional exposition.

When I speak of generic conflicts, I am talking about the syntactical elements of the prison genre. These thematic elements of individual titles are as variable as the narrative

trajectories they are built upon. In her discussion of "stock plots" in prison films, Nicole Rafter suggests that the two principle narrative trajectories for prison films end in riot and escape.[2] This is a bit reductive, as even her analysis of differences across the genre shows. Though I am reticent to claim an "ideal" or "traditional" set of narrative trajectories, it is worth outlining some of the most common variations in some detail here in order to contextualize how the different phases of the initiation sequences included in the videographic essay and accompanying discussion work. Once in prison, most genre films follow three broadly defined narrative trajectories: 1) Individual versus institution; 2) Innocence restored or corrupted; and 3) Getting out, whether through escape, time served, or death.

One film in particular illustrates the ways in which all three of these trajectories work: *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994). In the film, wrongly convicted Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is a victim of violence and abuse while imprisoned in Shawshank Penitentiary. After awhile, he begins to make some friends on the inside, and employs his skills as a banker—from his life on the outside—to do the guards' taxes and run a money laundering scheme for the corrupt warden. The warden and guards actively conspire to keep Andy at Shawshank, even murdering a young convict who could have identified the man who murdered Andy's wife and set him free. Andy then performs one of the most elaborate and memorable escapes in the history of the genre, and takes down the corrupt prison administration in the process. His battle against the warden and guards, and their corruption, are one of the central conflicts of the film and representative of the first narrative trajectory. Other films that center on this type of conflict between inmate and institution are *Escape from Alcatraz* (Don Siegel, 1974), *The Longest Yard* (Robert Aldrich, 1974), and *Death Race* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2008),

[2] Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120–121.

among others. Sometimes this plays out from the perspective of a guard, or in the case of *Brubaker* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1980) the warden himself. Andy's escape and exposure of the corrupt prison officials restore his innocence, and balance the scales of justice for the audience at the end of the film.

This narrative resolution is indicative of the second narrative trajectory. Films in which innocence is similarly restored are *The Big House*, *Life* (Ted Demme, 1999), and *Con Air* (Simon West, 1997). *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* Represents the other possible outcome of such a narrative trajectory, whereby an innocent convict is corrupted by his prison experience. Finally, in *The Shawshank* Redemption, Andy's escape and his friend Red's (Morgan Freeman) parole are indicative of the "getting out" narrative trajectory. This trajectory includes the countless escape-from-prison films as well as titles that follow an inmate as they walk the last mile on death row, as in *The Last Mile* (Samuel Bischoff, 1932), *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), or *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995). Whether a film's narrative trajectory focuses on escape, conflict with institutions, or the balance of justice, they almost always dramatize the commission of a crime, and sentencing in court. And after their conviction, criminals must first go through the processing phase of an initiation sequence.

In the processing phase, a newly convicted civilian leaves the courtroom and boards a bus to a correctional institution. These scenes generally begin with the film's protagonist on the prison bus, complemented by wide shots of the bus as it passes convicts on road duty or sweeping views of imposing prison structures. Cinematographers often take great care to emphasize the enormity of correctional institutions in these scenes. Helicopter shots show masses of convicts working outdoors or congregating in the prison yard under the surveillance of armed guards. High walls, barbed wire fences, and steel gates adorn the prison's perimeter,

and slam loudly as the prison bus enters the institution. While the camera takes in this enormity, it also returns to the face of the newly convicted character as they contemplate the world they are about to enter. These often montage-heavy sequences visually stress the ways in which the prison's security and surveillance apparatus oversees everything that happens inside. The spectacle of an arriving prison bus signals the beginning of the initiation process. Fear and the threat of violence become palpable as convicts mob the gates to inspect new inmates.

Upon arrival, "new meat" are subject to ritual inspection and cleansing of their bodies, which visually and narratively reinforce the fact that their humanity and identities from the outside are no longer relevant. Their names are replaced by numbers, their clothes by prison issue garments, and their privacy and control over their body all forfeited to the state. Convicts are washed of their old identities with fire hoses or showers, covered with delousing powder, and subject to body cavity searches. The rigorous inspection of bodies in early titles like *The Big House* represented the rational nature of prison management, but the exploitative and violent aspects of this treatment on the psyche of new convicts became the focus of later films. The initiation sequences of *The Big House* and *Fugitive* are illustrative in this respect. *The Big House* praised the ideas that governed prisons as institutions, but suggested that they needed reform. In this construction, the rational—even scientific—ways that convicts were processed into prison were seen as a positive good. On the other hand, the brutal and backward nature of the southern chain gang system necessitated an initiation that violently initiated convict bodies. In these scenes, the camera inspects convict bodies. Shot reverse shot editing catalogs the ways in which guards act upon now-helpless inmates as their bodies are stripped, searched, beaten, and sanitized. Over time, as the genre moved away from reformist messages and collaboration with officials, and as attitudes about prisons themselves changed, these scenes became more focused upon revealing the physical structures of prisons, and the breaking down of old

identities for new convicts, than about "rational" prison management. *Cool Hand Luke* (Warner Bros., 1967) is an excellent example of this shift. Either way, this portion of the initiation sequence leaves uncertain what a convict's new life in prison will be like. If the processing phase makes anything certain, it is that the freedom and identity that new convicts held dear on the outside have been stripped away. The education phase of the initiation sequence further emphasizes this knowledge.

The education phase begins most often with new convicts lined up on the yard or in the prison, with a guard or warden addressing them as a group. Shots of convicts marching in chains, and authority figures pacing back and forth in front of them, establish the parameters of the relationship between inmates and prison authorities. Those in power will speak, and inmates will listen. These scenes answer the uncertainty created by the first phase of initiation with rules and penalties for breaking them; with the authority figures' statement of philosophy on prison management; and with their disregard for the safety and lives of their charges. Insubordination, escape attempts, and complaints will meet with swift and sometimes deadly punishments. These didactic lectures visually emphasize the gaze of the authority figure, and the submission of the new convicts, often with either over-the-shoulder shots of convicts and wardens in shot reverse shot, or with point of view editing. Audiences are often both subject to, and identified with, this gaze, encouraging them to judge the guilty, but also experience their fundamentally transformed reality. Now stripped of their freedom and their identities, convicts learn that their well-being hinges upon total submission to the guards and warden.

In some cases, these scenes are replaced with or supplemented by meetings between the individual convict and the prison warden. As in *The Big House*, when the warden laments that overcrowding can lead to the corruption of "yellow" prisoners, these meetings lay the

groundwork for the major dramatic conflicts of individual titles. Several of these dialogue exchanges reveal that the warden has brought a particular convict to their prison for a specific reason. In *The Longest Yard* (1974 and Peter Segal, 2005), the warden wants former NFL quarterback Paul Crew (Burt Reynolds or Adam Sandler) to help coach the prison football team in exchange for a lighter sentence. In *Big Stan* (Rob Schneider, 2007), Rob Schneider's corrupt former real estate agent Stan is asked to help the warden get the prison closed in order to build timeshare condominiums. In *Death Race*, Jason Statham's character is asked to resurrect his auto-racing career for the titular for-profit televised spectacle of violence in exchange for an early release. And, in *Escape from Alcatraz*, Clint Eastwood is brought to Alcatraz Island because he had escaped from other prisons, and "no one has ever escaped from Alcatraz." Eastwood's relationship to the warden is slightly different, because the warden wants nothing in return except for him to remain incarcerated. In each of these cases, the protagonist's relationship with authority is dramatized, and the narrative's stakes laid bare. In the same way that guards narrate the rules that govern prison life, these conversations with wardens set the boundaries for individual narratives.

In either case, the education phase provides exposition for one of the central conflicts of the genre: the struggle of the individual convict against an oppressive authority. The nature of this dramatic conflict is made clear in these expository scenes. In films like *The Longest Yard* or *Death Race*, our convict heroes must put their lives and safety on the line to win the favor of corrupt and greedy prison officials. They do so in order to gain early release, but also to expose to the outside world how these correctional institutions and their leaders not only fail to carry out, but also actively work against, their purported reformatory mission. Morally bankrupt officials must be brought to justice at the hands of our criminal protagonists. In other cases, such as *Cool Hand Luke* or *Escape from Alcatraz*, when wardens are more cruel than corrupt,

convicts must defy their oppressors through escape, successfully defeating an authority figure and institution whose cruelty is at odds with the idea that prisons enact just punishments on convicted criminals. In either case, the narration of these interactions position convict heroes—and audiences—at odds with the prison's authority figures. However, as they learn in the third phase of the initiation sequence, the rules of prison authorities are not all that new prisoners must contend with in the prison genre.

The third and final phase of initiation sequences is the acclimation phase, during which new prisoners grow accustomed to the routine of prison life, and find their place among their fellow convicts. Scenes in this phase document the day to day life of convicts, including their waking and sleeping patterns; the food they eat; the labor that they must perform; and the relationships that they form with their fellow convicts. These scenes add nuance and contour to the major conflicts identified in the earlier phases of initiation. A convict's battle against authority is stymied or supported by his fellow inmates; his quest for freedom is advanced with some helpful advice; the totality of institutional oppression is further emphasized by the cruelty of his fellow inmates; the failure of prison management to run a safe prison that reforms its charges is made obvious when gangs run the prison from the inside. In general, the relationships between an inmate and the social world in which he has been inserted are the most important aspects of this phase. New inmates take their place among their convict brethren, establishing their position through individual acts of violence—committed by or against them—or by identifying with a group or gang of like-minded individuals, most often delineated by race.

Violence is typically the centerpiece of these scenes. New convicts establish themselves at the top or bottom of the prison hierarchy through acts of physical violence. New convicts like Eddie Murphy's character in *Life* or Paul Newman's in *Cool Hand Luke* take on the biggest and

most powerful inmate in prison to show that they will not submit to the established social order of the convict population. Win or lose, performances of bravery, and occasionally wit, in these scenes help new convicts win the favor of the inmate community. While fights help these characters integrate into the prison population on equal footing with their compatriots, they sometimes function to show the authority that new prisoners will assert over those already inside. In *Escape from Alcatraz* and *Big Stan*, the protagonists attack powerful inmates in order to ward off rape attempts. This threat of sexual violence undergirds much of the physical violence experienced by new inmates, as in *The Shawshank Redemption*. While it is occasionally associated with actual homosexual identity, prison rape is often a tool for physical and psychic domination of weaker inmates. Both types of violence, however, are crucial parts of the acclimation phase of initiation sequences.

Although violence is used as a means to establish a hierarchy of masculine authority in some films, it is also a way to assert the authority and territory of prison gangs. Prison gangs, especially prominent in more contemporary films and, as noted earlier, almost always defined along racial lines, present an alternative to a prison world governed by individual violence. In titles like *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998) and *American Me* (Edward James Olmos, 1992), among others, these gangs represent safe havens for new inmates seeking protection and friendship from their fellow African Americans, Nazis, Latinos, or other ethnic or racial groups. The gangs fight for control of certain aspects of prison life, like jobs, control of drug traffic, and contraband smuggling. These groups rely as much on violence and sexual predation as the gang-free prison social worlds, using them as tools for asserting or re-asserting authority over territory or goods.

Whether finding their way among prison gangs or in a social world defined exclusively by violence, new inmates often form alliances and even friendships while on the inside. These friendships help drive the narrative momentum began in the first two phases of the initiation sequence. In films like *Escape from Alcatraz*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Death Race*, or *The Longest Yard*, new inmates' friends and associates help them escape, exact revenge on corrupt authorities, or both. In *American History X, American Me*, or *Let's Go to Prison* (Bob Odenkirk, 2006), this phase of the initiation sequence helps inmates to find their identity in prison, protect themselves, gain and assert power, and pass their time more easily. The relationships formed in this phase of the initiation sequence help to signal to audiences additional challenges to the plight of their convict heroes.

Finally, initiation sequences are such an important part of how media craft narratives about prison that they are even condensed into episodes of television shows. For example, in the 2011 episode of the Showtime drama *Shameless* entitled, "Iron City," one of the lead characters—Fiona Gallagher (Emmy Rossum)—goes through an initiation sequence when she is incarcerated for a drug crime. While Fiona's initiation is intercut with scenes that follow other characters in the show, it covers all three phases described here. It begins when she is transferred from a holding cell to a Cook County women's prison on a prison bus. She arrives in prison, turns in her personal belongings, and is forced to undergo a strip search before donning her prison garb. The camera follows the prison guard's eyes and flashlight as they search Fiona's body. Close-up shots of Fiona's face and trembling hands are intercut with medium close-ups of the guard inspecting her. She makes her phone call to her family members and say that she is sorry. She meets with a public defender to discuss her arraignment. The camera follows her around the prison in a medium close-up, and her meeting with her attorney is framed in shot reverse shot. We see her huddled on her bed in her cell during lights out, preparing to sleep

there for the first time. She eats bad food in the cafeteria, and then makes bail. While initiation sequences are shorthand for what we understand to be the hardships of prison life in condensed versions like the one in *Shameless*, they serve as crucial exposition for generic conflicts in prison films.

# *Cool Hand Luke*: Adaptation and the Pragmatics of the Prison Film Genre

The success of the prison film cycle in the early 1930s guaranteed that American audiences would continue to see both penitentiary and chain gang films produced by major and minor Hollywood studios. Production of both types of prison film and their variations continued unabated throughout the 1930s and in the decades that followed.[1] Films like *Brute Force* (Mark Hellinger, 1947), *Riot in Cell Block 11* (Don Siegel, 1954) and *The Defiant Ones* (Stanley Kramer, 1955) were popular hits that commented on prisons and punishment. The semantics and syntax of these films—like their predecessors—had pragmatic 'use-value' in their depictions of broader issues in society such as public neglect of criminal justice issues and racism.[2] By this time, audiences had formed generic expectations based upon previous prison genre films. This chapter will explore *Cool Hand Luke* (Warner Bros., 1967) to demonstrate how Warner Bros. adapted the semantics and syntax of the prison genre—the characters, tropes, and conventions established by earlier titles—in the film to fit with a pragmatic message the studio thought would be attractive to late-1960s audiences.

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[1] Ronald B. Querry, "Prison Movies," *Journal of Popular Film* 2, no. 2 (April 1, 1973): 180–97; Ronald B. Querry, *The American Prison as Portrayed in Popular Motion Pictures of the 1930's*, 1975; James Robert Parish, *Prison Pictures from Hollywood: Plots, Critiques, Casts, and Credits for 293 Theatrical and Made-for-Television Releases* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1991).

[2] Matthew Bernstein, "Institutions and Individuals: Riot in Cell Block 11," *The Velvet Light Trap* 28 (Fall 1991): 16; Alan Gilchrist Pike, "Natural Born World Shakers: Southern Prisoners in Popular Film" (M.A. Thesis, University of Mississippi, 2010); John Nickel, "Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (October 1, 2004): 25–48.

The late 1960s was a critical time in the history of Hollywood filmmaking, one of transition between the Classical Hollywood System and the New Hollywood.[3] In addition to changes in filmmaking and filmmakers, studios adapted to changing industrial and financial conditions, and rapidly changing audiences. According to Paul Monaco, competition at the box office with European auteurs forced studios and directors to rethink how to create films on the spectrum from "artsy" to "conventional." In addition, "the feature film industry in the United States continued to struggle with the competition of television" and shrinking domestic audiences for theatrical releases throughout the decade.[4] Aniko Bodroghkozy suggests that attendance was declining among every major demographic group except those under 30, and by 1967, over half of the American population was under the age of 25. Bodroghkozy argues the ultimate result of these demographic changes and the attendant financial losses was that studios "hitched their future fortunes" to young baby boomers, "a cohort of the population characterized by extreme suspicion and distrust of all dominant social and cultural institutions." The studios appealed to youth audiences with a cycle of "youthpix" in the early 1970s, whose countercultural roots lay in revolutionary films of the late 1960s.[5]

The most interesting of these late-60's products—whether an innovative film like *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967) or more "traditional" studio fare like *Cool Hand*

[3] For more on how 1967 represented a watershed year during this transition see Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008).
[4] Paul Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-1969*, vol. 8, History of the American Cinema (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 1–9.
[5] Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," *Cinema Journal*, no. 41.3 (2002): 38–40.

*Luke*—presented what Murray Pomerance calls "the specter of rebellion" on screen.[6] This specter played out in a cycle of films released by major studios such as MGM, Universal, Paramount, and Columbia that dealt with youth in rebellion, campus unrest, and other "hippie-oriented" topics in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[7] *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) is one of these iconic late-1960s films—released by Warner Bros.—often remembered for its eponymous nonconformist hero (Paul Newman), whose struggle against an oppressive system of authority captured the feelings of the countercultural movement.[8] *Cool Hand Luke* was just one of many 1967 films which dealt with rebellion. In the same year, *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) all promised to challenge some aspect of the social order.

[6] Pomerance in Grant, cinema of 60s

[7] Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries," 38–40.

[8] The basic narrative of *Cool Hand Luke*, in both the novel and the film, is relatively straightforward. Lucas Jackson is sentenced to labor on a chain gang after chopping the heads off of parking meters in a southern city. Once on the chain gang, Luke endears himself to his fellow convicts with his exuberant spirit, defiance of authority, and heroic exploits (like eating 50 eggs). After spending some time in the camp and making friends and becoming something of a hero to his fellow convicts, Luke's mother dies. The prison guards lock him in a sweatbox for a few days to keep him from trying to escape to attend her funeral. After she is buried, he is released from the box, and then escapes from the camp. After a short time on the lam, Luke is captured and returned to camp and given a set of leg chains. Shortly thereafter, Luke's disdain for the prison authorities grows, and he runs for a second time. Out for a longer period of time during this escape, Luke sends his fellow convicts a picture of himself in a bar in New Orleans with two women. His heroic image is cemented for the convicts in the camp and this image becomes their religious icon. When Luke is captured again and badly beaten, the men obsess over the details of the picture. The prison guards tell Luke that if he tries to run again, they will kill him. Then, they punish Luke indiscriminately, pushing him until he hits a mental and physical breaking point. The convicts begin to lose respect for their hero after he is broken by the oppressive prison regime. But, after a time in which Luke plays the ideal prisoners for his captors, he regains their admiration when he steals a work truck from the road in a fantastic escape with his best friend Dragline. The two men end up in a church at the end of the narrative, and the guards murder Luke, finally fulfilling the seemingly inevitable death of the Christ like titular character.

Indeed, *Cool Hand Luke*'s message was received loud and clear. Warner Bros.' advertisements and film reviewers all lauded Luke's (Paul Newman) nonconformist tendencies. The 1965 novel of the same name, written by Donn Pearce (who wrote the original screenplay for the film), was also praised for its depiction of the individual hero's battle against authority. However, for all that they share, the novel and the film offer different challenges to the prevailing 1960s social order. In this chapter, I will examine the intertextual relationship between the film and its source novel. Moving beyond simple questions of fidelity, I will demonstrate the ways in which the novel's specific critiques of southern racism and the United States military in the post-WWII period were transformed into a broader non-conformist challenge to authority in the film. This transformation was accomplished by a shift in narrative point of view from the first-person flashbacks of Sailor and Dragline in the novel to the less informative narration and mise-en-scene of the film adaptation.[9]

## Race and Place in Donn Pearce's *Cool Hand Luke*

Donn Pearce's novel *Cool Hand Luke* was published by Scribners in 1965 and received generally favorable reviews. Pearce originally published a paperback of the novel with another press (Fawcett) before Scribners released the hardback in 1965.[10] Publicity for the novel often highlighted Pearce's time served on a chain gang in Florida,

[9] My analysis is informed by Robert Stam's essay on adaptation, which suggests a move away from issues of fidelity and toward the "grammar of transformation." Stam suggests that film critics focus on "dialogical responses—to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material." Stam, "Beyond Fidelity," 68, 76.

[10] Benjamin Alsup, "This Was a Man," *Esquire*, October 2005, 144. According to Alsup, Fawcett paid Pearce $2,500 for his novel and shopped it around for awhile before Scribners agreed to publish the hardback.

the realism of his story, and Luke's battle with authority.[11] Reviewers frequently commented on the realism of Pearce's account; Hubert Creekmore of the *New York Times* remarked that "its objective notation of this Florida prison-camp's regime and milieu, and the human responses to them [remind] me of a documentary film." Malcolm Brown of the *LA Times* called it "a pseudo-documentary account of life in a Florida road gang."[12] Creekmore also suggested that Pearce's "vivid and galling" tale was "the most brutal and authentic account of a road gang—or chain gang—that we have had."[13] Lester Goran of the *Chicago Tribune* called it "unrelentingly savage."[14] Creekmore and Goran both suggested that Luke's "assertion of freedom from social authority" was the most appealing and central component of the novel.[15] These critical accolades notwithstanding, the novel was a commercial flop; Pearce noted in a 2005 interview that the hard copy edition "was a nonentity," and sold only 1,100 copies. Despite its commercial failure (and limited critical attention), Pearce sold the movie rights to Warner Bros. for $80,000 and was paid an additional $15,000 for his first draft of the screenplay.[16]

The way that Pearce—though his convict-narrator Sailor—constructs *Cool Hand Luke*'s South denies a reading that only focuses on "the conflict of law-authority and the

[11] John P. Callahan, "A Picket Rejoices at His First Novel: Seaman Beams Despite the Routine of a Strike," *New York Times*, August 8, 1965; "Display Ad 199 -- No Title," *New York Times*, August 8, 1965.
[12] Malcolm M. Brown, "Life on the Chain Gang," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1965.
[13] Hubert Creekmore, "Everyman in Chains," *New York Times*, September 18, 1965, Proquest Historical Newspapers.
[14] Lester Goran, "A Cage of Jailbirds," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 22, 1965.
[15] Creekmore, "Everyman in Chains."
[16] Alsup, "This Was a Man," 144.

rebel-free soul" suggested by Hubert Creekmore.[17] Although this conflict is at the heart of Pearce's novel, it is more complex than Creekmore suggests. In the novel, Sailor recalls the story of Luke, a disillusioned WWII veteran, while on a lunch break in an African American town; his reflections are accompanied by the songs of an African American choir singing in the background, who—like the convicts—are similarly subject to, but not beneficiaries of, the southern legal system. This specific location in a racially polarized and impoverished area in central Florida grounds all aspects of the story. Pearce's use of space and place, and how music is intertwined with those things, drive his critique of southern race relations, the plight of shell-shocked WWII veterans, and chain gang justice.

Sailor's narration begins with forty pages of introduction to the rigors and routine, surveillance and subjugation of convicts in the prison camp. Then, he sits down with his fellow convicts for a lunch break on the side of the road near an African American church. After eating, Sailor rests underneath a tree apart from his fellow convicts, who surround another convict named Dragline, all of them thinking of Luke and waiting to reminisce about their time with him. Sailor describes how the convicts grow anxious as they approach this spot on the road, for it "was sacred ground to us and making us eat here was a deliberate act of heresy. For this was the very spot where they finally caught up with Dragline and with his buddy Cool Hand Luke" when they were on the lam.[18] From this location, via flashback, Sailor relates his story of Luke, his narration

[17] Creekmore, "Everyman in Chains," BR54.
[18] Donn Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1999), 31.

occasionally interrupted by Dragline's complementary storytelling not far away. Sailor's narration frames all that the reader learns about the chain gang camp and Luke, and contextualizes the memories of Luke that Dragline's parallel narration bring up for the other convicts.

Sailor speaks directly to the reader throughout the book, often distinguishing between the "we" and "us" of the convicts and "you" the reader in "your Free World" [sic] outside of the camp and the prison system. In the novel, "Free World," as well as a number of otherwise improper nouns are "capitalized and sacred" as places, people, or ideas of particular importance to the convicts. "The Hard Road" references the Florida roads upon which the convicts toil daily, and the "Bull Gang" is what the convicts who worked the road with Luke, Dragline, and the other named characters called themselves.[19]

> So this is the Chain Gang. Among ourselves it is most often referred to as The Hard Road, as a noun and a proper name, capitalized and sacred. In the evening, you can see us driving down the highway in a long caravan of black and yellow trucks heading back to Camp. And as we go by we get down on our knees in order to get a better view, our wicked, dirty faces peering through the bars to eyeball at your Free World."[20]

This distinction is part of the Sailor's—and Pearce's—larger project of emphasizing the isolation of the convicts and their prison camp home, and The Hard Road that they work. It works like an initiation sequence in the films discussed in previous chapters, introducing the readers to the realities of day-to-day life in the camp, the inmates that

[19] Pearce, 6. In my discussion of the novel, I will retain those capitalizations in fidelity to Pearce's points of emphasis.
[20] Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke*, 6.

will be Luke's comrades. Indeed, Sailor describes the orange groves that surround the camp as at once both adjacent to and impossibly far away from the "iron world in which we live." While the Bull Gang rides in a cage truck from camp to the location of their roadside labor, Sailor observes, "the fruit on the orange trees [going] speeding by like the globes of distant planets dangling in outer space;" the chain gang camp and its inhabitants are in a world of their own, completely separate from the Free World of the reader, and of those Floridians who benefit from the convicts' roadside labor.[21]

Although Sailor's narration emphasizes the isolation of the convicts, it also places SRD Camp #93 in a very specific location. In his introduction to life in the camp, he relates the stories of some of the convicts' crimes, a number of which take place in recognizably Floridian cities such as Palm Beach, Miami, and Tampa.[22] Further, he details Luke's trip from Raiford State Prison in northern Florida (west of Jacksonville) to the south, down a "narrow asphalt road that goes eleven miles to the town of Starke, and then down Route 441 through the very center of the state, passing Gainesville and then Ocala" before leaving the highway on a small side road through the orange groves to SRD Camp #93, somewhere in central Florida between Ocala and Orlando. Readers could realistically find this location, perhaps inspired by Pearce's own time on a chain gang near Tavares, Florida northwest of Orlando, on a map.[23] Sailor's memories are always "placed" in this way. The spring after Luke's arrival, the Bull Gang worked:

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[21] Ibid., 2.
[22] Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke*. Koko stole jewels in Palm Beach before being caught near Lake Okeechobee, 6; Dragline was arrested in Miami, 37; Luke cut the heads off of parking meters in Tampa, 46.
[23] Ibid., 58. Florida Department of Corrections, "Timeline: 1966-1967 - A History of Corrections in Florida," *Florida Department of Corrections Website*, accessed September 11, 2014,

> Up and down the whole of Lake County and along the edges of Orange County and Sumter County, form the big towns of Leesburg, Tavares and Apopka to the tiny villages of Zellwood, Crow's Bluff, Lady Lake, Okahumpka, Umatilla, Astatula, and Howey-in-the-Hills…Then they sent us out on Eyeball Boulevard which is really Route Number 441.[24]

Sailor's fond memories of Eyeball Boulevard reveal that the convicts are not so isolated after all. Although they are forbidden from looking up from their work at the outside world, the convicts mastered the surreptitious act of "Eyeballing" the "fancy homes, the enticing billboards, Cadillacs, kids, gardens, blonds and brunettes, restaurants, bars, sport clothes—everything," that surrounds them on The Hard Road. They eyeball "like mad at the black girls strolling by on the sidewalk or sitting on the front porches" of small towns and hamlets across the state while digging ditches and cutting grass on the roadside. They cross the street in traffic with civilians, and see people walking about towns and in their homes. One such interaction with a teenage girl in a bikini likely inspired the infamous car wash scene in the film. [25] Regardless of where the convicts are working, Sailor offers precise details of the landscape and the location, and the sounds of traffic roaring "right by us in both directions; the sedans and the jalopies, a farmer's pickup, a Greyhound bus, the semi's going by with their exhausts on high, their diesels pounding away," all of them on their way to Miami, to "Paradise just beyond" the orbit

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http://www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/timeline/1966-1969.html. Florida Department of Corrections, "Timeline: Introduction - A History of Corrections in Florida," *Florida Department of Corrections Website*, accessed September 11, 2014, http://www.dc.state.fl.us/oth/timeline/index.html. and Florida Department of Corrections, "The Department of Corrections Opens Its Official Museum," *Correctional Compass*, October 1988, 2.

[24] Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke*, 128–129.

[25] Ibid., 130–135.

of the chain gang.[26] Despite their seeming isolation in central Florida, Sailor, Luke and the other convicts are constantly interacting with the Free World and imminently aware of their place—socially and spatially—within it.

This world, created by Pearce and narrated by Sailor, is a post-WWII, bi-racial South in which African Americans play an important part. This is perhaps most evident in the location from which Sailor narrates Luke's story: an African American hamlet, just past the "Negro general store" on the lawn across the road from the church, as the sounds of gospel music from the black choir inspire his and the other convicts' memories.[27] But none of the convicts mention Luke aloud while on their lunch break, not until the music from the church changes, "becoming a deep spiritual sung with improvised harmonies, a mournful groan dragging towards the Infinite until a high, clear tenor began to separate itself, pleading and cajoling that God on high." The reader imagines the novel's soundtrack as alternating between this spiritual and other music performed by the African American musicians, steadily "singing their gospel hymns with a grating energy, a song that expressed as much despair as it did of hope and put off the whole question of salvation."[28] This musical accompaniment suggests it would be insufficient to tell a story about prison in the postwar South without the presence of black voices; that the sorrow and despair of black life in poverty-stricken central Florida is intimately linked to the criminal justice system.[29] It also reflects an imaginary of black

[26] Ibid., 12.
[27] Ibid., 28–30.
[28] Ibid., 36, 139..
[29] It is worth noting here that this is the same motivation that led to the inclusion of African American characters in *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, and other chain gang films from the 1930s. All of the

pain's expression in song. The idea that African American characters—and their redeeming virtues ascribed to romanticism and evangelical religion—could be used to enhance the virtue and stature of white characters is as old as American fiction, and a common trope in cinema as well.[30] The songs of oppressed black Floridians in Pearce's novel remind the reader and the narrator of the powerful forces at work against the desire for freedom among the convicts. And as a plot device, these mournful black voices add emotional gravitas to the story of Luke and his battle against authority.

The story of Luke's second escape from SRD Camp #93 demonstrates the importance of this situatedness—in place and space—to the critique of the relationship between race and criminal justice in Pearce's postwar Florida locale.[31] As noted above, the convicts in this story are not completely isolated from the outside world. They pick up bits of news via discarded newspapers, rumors passed down from the guards, and from interactions with visitors and family members who come to the camp on Saturdays. Sailor's detailed descriptions suggest that convicts are well aware of their

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chain gang features from the early 30s cycle featured black convicts, while the penitentiary films remained lily white.

[30] For more on this topic, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (Wesleyan University Press, 1987); Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2004); Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, "The Power of Black Magic The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 2 (November 1, 2009): 135–52; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Fourth Edition (Continuum, 2001); Joseph A. Boone, "Male Independence and the American Quest Genre: Hidden Sexual Politics in the All-Male Worlds of Melville, Twain and London," in *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Judith Spector (Popular Press, 1986); Hernan Vera, *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness / Gordon, Andrew,; 1945-* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Reprint Edition (New York: Vintage, 1993).

[31] I am using the term "situatedness" as it is defined by Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, "Situatedness," in *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Their definition is "The dependence of meaning (and/or identity) on the specifics of particular sociohistorical, geographical, and cultural contexts, social and power relations, and philosophical and ideological frameworks, within which the multiple perspectives of social actors are dynamically constructed, negotiated, and contested."

location, and the relationship between the Hard Road and the Free World that lies beyond the authority of the guards. One day, Luke runs from the road while supposedly relieving himself in the bushes. He already has leg chains on at this point—a penalty for his first escape attempt—and the guards figure they will catch him quickly, especially since his trail is a straight line from the road. Luke, knowing the racial politics and recent history of the area, heads straight for an African American town nearby. According to Sailor, "Luke knew about this place;" a white mob attacked the town a year earlier when two "teenaged colored boys" were accused of trying to rape a white woman. Luke "worked his way past the wrecked and burned remains of the cabins that had been attacked after the mob discovered that the boys had been whisked away from the county jail and taken to Raiford for protective custody."[32] The mob, upon finding out that the young men were gone, "turned their fury on the village, terrorizing the inhabitants, firing pistols and shotguns through the windows and walls, breaking into abandoned cabins where the boys had lived and smashing up the furniture," and burning a number of other cabins as well.[33] Luke

> Knew that these people would sympathize with him, that they wouldn't care what he had done nor would they bother wasting time asking what crimes he committed. They would only see that he was a man who was being persecuted, a fugitive from the same Law which had never been on their side.

While Pearce's supposition about the mindset of these African American townspeople seems rather naïve, they do help Luke. They equip him with black pepper, curry, and chile powder so that he can confuse and disable the bloodhounds tracking him, and

[32] Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke*, 236–237.
[33] Ibid., 236.

refuse to acknowledge the lawmen that tear through the town searching for the escaped convict once he is gone.[34]

A white lynch mob terrorized this town. The African Americans inhabitants, according to Sailor, helped Luke because he was at odds with "the same Law which had never been on their side." Although it seems a rather dubious plot manipulation, this anecdote brings clarity to the relationship between the songs of black pain and suffering coming from the African American church that serve as soundtrack to the "song and story of Cool Hand Luke." If, as mentioned above, the story of prison in the South cannot be told without the presence of black voices, it follows that it cannot be told without exploring the role of lynching. In Pearce's South, and in reality, extralegal violence—often in the form of lynchings—was an integral part of the criminal justice apparatus. Pearce's story shows a South in which justice for whites is meted out with hard labor in prison camps, while justice for African Americans comes at the hands of white mobs. Luke's freedom rests on the pain of these African American townspeople just the same as his story rests upon their painful songs in the same way that the criminal justice system (for whites) of the nineteenth and twentieth century South rested upon a foundation of violence—legal and otherwise—against black bodies.[35] Pearce's narrative, praised for its portrayal of "the conflict of law-authority and the

[34] Ibid., 237–239.

[35] For more on extralegal violence's role in criminal justice in the South, see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor*; Oshinsky, *Worse Than Slavery*; Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression*; Perkinson, *Texas Tough*; Miller, *Hard Labor and Hard Time*.

rebel-free soul" by Herbert Creekmore, is accompanied by, and grounded in, the musical expression of the black pain and suffering that arises from the harsh realities of race and place in postwar in Florida.[36] The importance of this temporal frame, in the post-WWII South, is critical for Pearce's narrative.

## Luke's War with Authority in Donn Pearce's *Cool Hand Luke*

On the lawn of the African American church, with the choir "hitting its stride, warming up their gospel mood," Dragline, "accompanied by the background of folk music and the sounds of the traffic, of rattling chains and sharpened metal … recited the song and the story of Cool Hand Luke" for his convict audience. According to Sailor, Dragline began Luke's story "somewhere in the middle," so his own recollections of Luke came before Dragline's narration.[37] The convicts hear about Luke long before he arrives in camp, as news of his senseless crime arrives in SRD Camp #93 via discarded newspapers and gossip from the Free Men. Sailor imagines his crime—cutting the heads off of parking meters—taking place in downtown Tampa. Luke, a 28-year old from Birmingham, Alabama with two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, and a Silver Star, is drunk on Franklin Street,

> All he could see were the green benches and parking meters spaced along the curbs. He realized that they were advancing, marching forward in open ranks, a battalion of emaciated soldiers with ugly faces beneath odd-shaped foreign helmets. And across the forehead of every one of them was tattooed in red letters the word VIOLATION.

[36] Creekmore, "Everyman in Chains," BR54.
[37] Pearce, *Cool Hand Luke*, 42.

In a drunken haze, he cuts the heads off of the parking meters with a pipe cutter, addressing them variously as "sergeant," "general," and "Colonel Chicken Shit," as he lops off their heads with a pipe cutter, saying that he will "show 'em some *real* violations."[38] His conversations with the parking meters illustrate his disillusion with his wartime service,

> O.K. Mister General, you son of a bitch. *Sir*. You think you can straighten everything out with an old beatup silverdollar with a peppermint stripe ribbon hangin' on it? Is that it? Speak up, man! Chin in! Chest out! Count cadence, loud and clear. So you gave me your fuckin' medal and now everything's just copacetic. Well, I gotta cut your god damned head off. It's a matter of principle. It's my god damned patriotic duty. But don't worry. They'll give you the Medal of Honor. For sure. Post-humorously. With crossed turds on a field of gold.[39]

Luke is eventually confronted by a police officer. He tries to escape in his truck, but the officer shoots out one of his tires and he crashes through the window of a closed restaurant. Before he is arrested, he stumbles out of the truck and decides to turn on some gospel music in the restaurant's jukebox. His crime complete, he "left behind him an anguished chorus of forlorn voices praying over an abandoned city as he danced his way heel and toe right over the debris and into his cell."[40] Even Luke's crime is accompanied by the voices and instrumentation of gospel singers. While it was unclear at this early stage in the novel what happened to Luke during WWII, his experiences clearly impacted his mental condition, and instilled in him an inherent distrust—or perhaps outright disdain—for authority.

[38] Ibid., 47–49.
[39] Ibid., 48–49.
[40] Ibid., 50–54.

After his brother brings him a banjo one weekend, Luke begins playing regularly for the other convicts and they begin "to learn something of Luke's past. In little snatches we caught disconnected glimpses of his life. But when accompanied by the banjo it all made sense. He was never really performing nor was he telling a story. It was more like thinking aloud, explaining it all to himself." Sailor recalls Luke's talking blues as "a song and a story, a jeremiad of pain and bitterness, a ragged tale made of scraps of memory, things seen and heard and half dreamed within the nightmare of combat."[41] Like the African American spirituals that accompany the convicts' memories of Luke, Luke's talking blues appropriate the pain and suffering of African American music to add emotional resonance to his own story. Luke's song is replete with violence and death, public executions, rapes, and pillaging, which cause him to turn toward alcoholism. Since Luke is only allowed to play on the weekends, the convicts hear his story in bits and pieces.

Early on, Luke's song is playful and occasionally humorous. He sings about how important it is to play it "cool," and his time in England, Africa, and Sicily. He talks about living up to the expectations of his father, a preacher. As the war rages on, Luke is driven to drink, to stop playing it cool:

> Luke and his men rolled on, moving too fast to wash or shave, too fast to think or feel, demented by their conquest, their immortality. They carried bottles in their packs. They confiscated civilian cars and charged over pastures and fields like a squadron of mad cavalry pursuing the enemy in any direction, they cared not which. Prisoners were fed. Prisoners were shot. Girls were given chocolate bars. Girls were raped. Orphans were given shelter. Homes were broken into and

[41]Ibid., 156, 158–159.

ransacked.[42]

Luke is "heroic" in the war, despite participating in wartime atrocities on and off the battlefield, earning medals of distinction for his heroism, and reaching the rank of Sergeant before going AWOL and being discharged as a Private. As he tells his story, he is clearly wrestling with the idea of being decorated for killing "bad guys" and doing his "patriotic duty," especially when it means being ordered not to give leftover food to starving European children and raping civilian women, events that are also prominent in Luke's "Talking Blues."[43]

Luke's experiences in Europe during World War II clearly change his perspective on authority, especially of his government. His superiors order his unit to deprive starving children of leftover military rations, even to the point of burying food scraps underground and packing the earth with a bulldozer.[44] He is traumatized by the violence, the looting, and the drink. His horrific experiences drive him to alcoholism; the combination of drink and the memories of these experiences lead to his arrest. But, according to Sailor, Luke's "music had taught us to understand the melody of the leg chains," of life in the camp, and the struggle with their authoritarian overlords as "just part of a prolonged and complicated hymn."[45] It is as if Luke's pain, and his lifelong struggle against the expectations of authority—whether his father or his superiors in the military—make clear how the rest of his story will play out. His talking blues represent the beginning of his end. The song and story of Cool Hand Luke, sung in the African

[42] Ibid., 158.
[43] Ibid., 45, 150–159.
[44] Ibid., 155–156.
[45] Ibid., 161.

American musical style of talking blues, presaged his showdown with the guards in SRD Camp #93. This battle that leads to Luke's death also leads to the roadside in front of the African American church where Sailor and Dragline sing Luke's praises. His painful jeremiad of the war is just like that of the African American hymns—also described as jeremiads—that accompany the story of his life and death in the camp.

Luke's struggle against the overbearing authority of the prison guards—and against God—dominates the remainder of the narrative.[46] This fact supports the assertions of reviewers like Lester Goran, who thinks:

> Luke's accomplishments are treated by the author and the other prisoners as jousts with authority, valorous tournament triumphs against the cruel slavery of their lives: and authority extending upward from Carr, a trustee, to Boss Godfrey, the captain, and even beyond that, in a final sermon Luke delivers in a Negro church, to the highest boss.[47]

But, the way that Pearce constructs the world in which this "conflict of law-authority and the rebel-free soul" occurs makes this conflict more complex.[48] Pearce's account is firmly grounded in the heart of biracial, postwar central Florida. Goran calls it "the other Florida, a place where no missile towers or plush hotels bloom in the sand."[49] This "other Florida" is, in fact, informed by his life experiences Pearce left home at fifteen, lied about his age and enlisted in the Army at 16 in 1944. He did a lot of time behind bars in his life: in the Army stockade, in a prison in Marseilles, and on a road gang while doing two years at Raiford in Florida for breaking and entering and grand larceny. According to Pearce, "about a third of *Cool Hand Luke* is his story, a third is based on the

[46] Ibid., 171–176.
[47] Goran, "A Cage of Jailbirds."
[48] Creekmore, "Everyman in Chains."
[49] Goran, "A Cage of Jailbirds."

stories he heard while doing time at Raiford, and another third is pure fiction."[50] Pearce's story reflects his own personal struggles with authority in the military, with the horrors of war-torn Europe, and the realities of the postwar South. At the same time, it lacks reflection about the reality of black life in the same time and place, as his constant appropriation of black pain in the service of his white protagonist demonstrates.

As a result, Luke's story reveals the complex politics connecting race, place, and criminal justice in postwar Florida while also shedding light on the impact of wartime service on WWII veterans. During the 1960s, when Pearce's novel was published, a narrative about the oppressive nature of the southern criminal justice apparatus, and the denial of equal protection and equal opportunity to African Americans in the South tapped into the popular outrage and indignation being stoked by the 1964 Freedom Summer and the momentum of the black freedom struggle. Luke's jaded view of his own heroism, and his jarring memories of wartime atrocities would have made sense to those protesting the Vietnam War, and his battle with authority reflected the milieu in which various protest movements challenged the status quo of social, political, and racial arrangements in the United States as the 1960s rolled on. It is perhaps unsurprising that Warner Bros. bought the rights to adapt this book that achieved little commercial success. As the 1960s rolled on, the central themes of Pearce's novel became even more central to US culture.

[50] Alsup, "This Was a Man."

## Warner Bros.' *Cool Hand Luke*

The fact that Pearce's narrative dealt with many of the social and cultural movements driving the upheaval of the 1960s—if only on the surface level—was not lost on Jack Lemmon. Lemmon bought the rights for the novel for his production company Jalem Productions in August of 1965 when producer Gordon Carroll saw a mention of it in *Publisher's Weekly*. Less than 10 days after the book was published, Jalem and Columbia inked a deal to co-produce and release the film, and then signed Pearce to work on the screenplay.[51] The film's director Stuart Rosenberg and screenwriters, including Frank R. Pierson, were all signed on while still under contract with Columbia.[52] Pierson won an Academy Award for the screenplay he co-wrote with Walter Newman for *Cat Ballou* in 1965, and was highly sought after at the time.[53] Jack Warner announced that Paul Newman would fill the starring role in the film, which he acquired from Columbia, in May of 1966. An Art "Murf" Murphy piece in *Variety* in 1966 suggested, "Insiders maintain that switchover was to fulfill a Newman contract with Warner Bros."[54] On the contrary, Charles Champlin reported in November of 1967 that "the "Luke" project began at Columbia but moved to Warners after an amicable disagreement over what

[51] Robert B. Frederick, "Miscellany: Donn Pearce: Chain Gang Antecedents Into Novel Sold to Jack Lemmon," *Variety*, September 15, 1965. Pearce apparently represented himself without an agent in the sale of the film to Lemmon, and earlier of the novel to Scribners. Purchase of the film rights was first reported in "Pictures: New York Sound Track," *Variety*, August 25, 1965.
[52] Special to the Constitution, "Pierson Signs To Write 'Luke,'" *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, March 28, 1966.
[53] David Konow, "Cool Hand Screenwriter," *Creative Screenwriting* 10, no. 3 (May 2003): 60–64.
[54] "Pictures: Warners Picks Up 'Luke,'" *Variety*, May 18, 1966.

Columbia thought would work and what Carroll and Rosenberg intended for the picture."[55]

*Cool Hand Luke* was the beginning of a four-film partnership between Paul Newman and director Stuart Rosenberg. By 1967, Paul Newman was at the peak of his Hollywood career, and according to Paul Monaco, "widely regarded as one of the industry's most accomplished talents… [combining]…work as an actor, director, and a producer. Newman's first hit as an actor was nearly a decade earlier, as the lead in *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (MGM, 1956). Newman gained a reputation for his method acting in onscreen portrayals of "proletarian" characters like "Fast Eddie" in *The Hustler* (Rossen Films, 1961) and a Texas cattleman in *Hud* (Paramount, 1963).[56] Stuart Rosenberg, on the other hand, had only two low-budget feature film credits as a director: *Murder, Inc.* (Princess, 1960) and *Question 7* (RD-DR Productions, 1961). Prior to his work with Newman, Rosenberg was better known for his work as a television director, including episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955), *The Naked City* (1959), and *The Untouchables* (1959). He won an Emmy award for a 1963 episode of *The Defenders*, and later worked on TV movies like *Fame is the Name of the Game* (1966).[57]

With a director and star in place, executives at Warner Bros. began aggressively marketing the film as a story about a loner non-conformist, tragically caught in a battle against an oppressive government authority hell-bent on denying his freedom. Nodding

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[55] Charles Champlin, "Hollywood 67: A Hopeful Pair of Achievements," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1967.
[56] Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-1969*, 8:141–2. Rosenberg and Newman also worked on *WUSA* (Paramount, 1970), *Pocket Money* (First Artists, 1972), and *The Drowning Pool* (First Artists, 1975).
[57] Daniel O'Brien, *Paul Newman* (London: Faber, 2004), 129, and note I.

to the generic expectations of audiences, producer Gordon Carroll quickly denied that *Cool Hand Luke* would be a typical southern prison film,

> We're not running away from the tags prison drama, chain gang drama, but we want people to understand that we're attempting to do something that is nothing at all what they've been led to expect from such descriptions."[58]

Advertisements for Warner Bros.' *Cool Hand Luke* focused almost exclusively on the rebellious non-conformity of Luke, excluding any critiques of the southern racial politics and anti-war/anti-military sentiments of the novel. Art Murphy's review proclaimed that the "theme is, at least, commercial: one man's rebellion against rules, imposed and perpetuated by flunkies."[59] Movie posters often repeated the camp Captain's (Strother Martin) iconic phrase "What we've got here is a failure to communicate," (which did not appear in the novel) typically pairing it with an image of a beaten and bleeding Luke being held up by two guards. Most advertisements featured slogans such as "Paul Newman just bugs the Establishment as Cool Hand Luke," or "The man…and the motion picture that simply do not conform," (Figure 1).[60] The images on these posters always feature Luke (and sometimes the guards), emphasizing his singular battle against authority as the rebel anti-hero. A *New York Times* advertisement read "Newman is Luke, a man who only wants to be himself, but whose particular self just doesn't fit in anywhere…You won't resent Luke, you'll sympathize with him; what's more, <u>if you can understand this man, you've begun to understand the under-25</u> generation [emphasis in

[58] Kevin Thomas, "Cinema Gospel According to 'Cool Luke,'" *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1966, Proquest Historical Newspapers. On "generic expectations," see Altman, *Film/Genre*.
[59] Art "Murf" Murphy, "Film Reviews: Cool Hand Luke," *Variety*, May 31, 1967.
[60] Movie posters viewed at http://www.movieposterdb.com/movie/0061512/Cool-Hand-Luke.html.

original].”[61] This last line highlights Warner Bros.’ efforts to reach out to baby boomer audiences, or at least appeal to the sentiments that they were expressing in public protests across the country. Alternatively, advertisements like this also seem to target *older* audiences attempting to “understand the under-25 generation,” some of whom were loudly protesting the status quo.

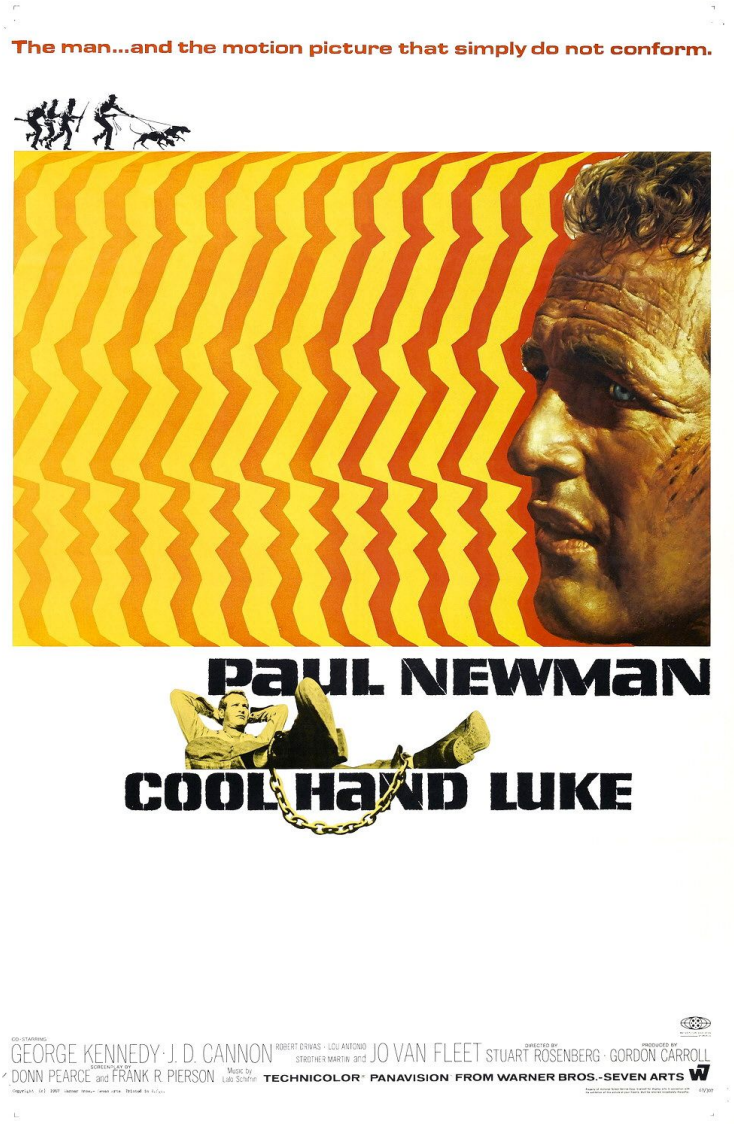



**Figure 15. Movie poster for *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

[61] “Display Ad 158—No Title,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1967.

*Cool Hand Luke* lives up to its billing. The film's narrative follows non-conformist Luke's seemingly hopeless battle against prison authorities. Reviewers' comments demonstrate this focus, and reveal the elision of the critiques of racial politics and the United States military that were so prevalent in the novel. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* proclaimed chain gang prisoners were "traditional objects of sorrow and compassion in American folk song and lore," but that Lucas Jackson was "more than a conventional misused convict, more than a human being who is unjustly abused. He is a psychologically disturbed and complicated victim of his own self-ostracism and pride." Crowther called Luke "a fugitive not only from the chain gang, but also from society, and, indeed, from life."[62] Peter Bart, also of the *New York Times*, described Luke as "the ultimate nonconformist and rebel" and the film's director Stuart Rosenberg said, "Luke is the perfect existential hero."[63] R. H. Gardner of the *Baltimore Sun* proclaimed that Luke "is the incorrigible, alienated, nonconforming anti-hero of today."[64] Echoing many reviewers, Kevin Thomas of the *LA Times* opined that Luke "was his own man, the strength of his individualism ultimately brings him into conflict with 'the system' as represented by the prison hierarchy."[65] This narrative of a man fighting the system on screen differed from the novel in significant ways.

The remainder of the chapter will demonstrate the ways that Rosenberg's film differs from the novel, and the final shooting script of the film, and how these semantic

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[62] Bosley Crowther, "Screen: Forceful Portrait of a Man Born to Lose," *New York Times*, November 2, 1967, Proquest Historical Newspapers.
[63] Peter Bart, "A Newman Non-Interview," *New York Times*, October 9, 1966.
[64] R. H. Gardner, "Cool Hand Luke at Three Local Theaters," *Baltimore Sun*, November 19, 1967.
[65] Thomas, "Cinema Gospel According to 'Cool Luke.'"

and syntactic changes produce a pragmatics centered on Luke's battle against authority.[66] The primary semantic change is an erasure of the specific South created by Pearce, covered in the next section. The primary syntactic change is that Luke's wartime experiences are almost completely omitted from the film, and with them, the context for his disdain for authority. The resulting pragmatics—the larger circulation of meanings associated with the film's reception—is wholly focused on the loner nonconformist hero at the center of Rosenberg's film. In essence the film's emphasis on an individualized, liberal narrative reduces the energies of more radical social movements occurring at the same moment to a libertarian struggle of the individual.

## Rosenberg and Hall's South

Rosenberg's film follows the basic narrative of Pearce's novel, but he does make significant changes, which I will discuss below. The film adopts a mostly objective depth of narration in telling Luke's story, rather than maintaining the subjective depth provided by the flashback framework of the novel. This change in depth of narration exchanges the powerfully specific setting in postwar Florida that Pearce created—a setting rife with powerful invocations of southern racial politics and the scars that WWII left on the mind of Luke—for a washed out, abstracted South. This South, free of people in general and African Americans in particular, isolates the convicts in space and concentrates the narrative exclusively on Luke's battle against the prison guards. The

[66] This comparison relies on the final shooting script of the film. Frank R. Pierson and Hal Dresner, *Cool Hand Luke: Final Shooting Script (9/29/66)* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004).

finished film, as directed by Rosenberg and shot by Hall, renders ambiguous all of the signifiers of race, place, and Luke's postwar shell shock.

Art Murphy noted the ambiguity of the film, suggesting the setting is "obviously supposed to be the South, but without specific location, [and] was shot near Stockton, Calif."[67] The cinematic landscape is sundrenched and burnt out. The convicts labor along vast stretches of open road, surrounded on both sides by empty, barren fields or broad expanses of dead brown grasses. The *LA Times*'s Charles Champlin remarked on this grim color palette, suggesting that all of the "archaic" and "sadistic" aspects of the chain gang camp were "captured in heat-hazed white, road-dust greens, denims, and drabs." In a later commentary on the film, Champlin lauded Rosenberg and Hall for their use of "pre-fogged film and of filters" in capturing "the baked, bleached-out look of the Florida flats and the drab, despairing outlook of the convict.[68]

The cinematographer, Conrad Hall, was well known for his commitment to realism, experimentation, and preference for natural lighting and location shooting.[69] Gordon Carroll recruited Conrad Hall to be the cinematographer as a result of his

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[67] Murphy, "Film Reviews." Gordon Carroll, Stuart Rosenberg, and Art Director Cary Odell scouted locations in Florida around Tampa and Orlando in July of 1966. "Pictures: New York Sound Track," *Variety*, July 13, 1966. *Variety* reported that the film would shoot in Stockton beginning October 3, 1966. "Pictures: New York Sound Track," *Variety*, August 24, 1966. Several articles in the press poked fun at the idea of a southern chain gang in California. Florabel Muir, "Georgia Prison On Movie Set," *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 19, 1966; Thomas, "Cinema Gospel According to 'Cool Luke'"; "Screen Convicts Put to Work," *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution (1950-1968), Sunday Ed.*, January 8, 1967; "Road Work," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 19, 1967. I find it especially interesting that the erasure of place that occurred in *Fugitive* 35 years prior—to alleviate censorship concerns—is reproduced in a 1960s prison film to further remove southern politics from the cinematic narrative.

[68] Charles Champlin, "Movie Review: 'Cool Hand Luke,' Simple Tale With Truths to Tell," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1967; Champlin, "Hollywood 67."

[69] Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-1969*, 8:74, 78–9.

excellent camerawork with Paul Newman on *Harper* (Warner Bros., 1966).[70] Hall, although relatively new to Hollywood, had already garnered two Academy Award nominations for cinematography for *Morituri* (20th Century Fox, 1965) and *The Professionals* (Columbia, 1966). Hall's earlier work on *In Cold Blood* (Columbia, 1967) in black and white and in color in *Cool Hand Luke* are often noted as critical points in his career as a cinematographer, as he "began breaking away from the beauteous imagery of the past to a grittier, more naturalistic sense of reality."[71]




**Figure 16. Roadside view from title sequence in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

In *Luke*, which Hall shot in Panavision, the fog filters and overexposure combine with broad sweeping widescreen views of the landscape to emphasize the barrenness of The Hard Road and the isolation of the convicts (Figure 2). But, these images do not necessarily signify the South, because they are free from clear place markers. The only

[70] O'Brien, *Paul Newman*, 116, 129.Ibid. Newman enjoyed working with Hall so much that he specifically asked that he work on *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (20th Century Fox, 1969).
[71] Mike Plante, "Conrad Hall: A Tribute," accessed April 2, 2015, http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/hall/; Stephen Pizello, "Conrad L. Hall, ASC: 1926-2003," *American Cinematographer: The International Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques*, May 2003, http://www.theasc.com/magazine/may03/cover/index.html.

way to be sure that this prison camp is in the South, rather than somewhere else, is to hear the accents of the bosses and the convicts, to know that the chain gang is a southern practice, and to recognize orange groves and Spanish moss in the trees outside the camp.

Reviewers understood the film as southern, including Bosley Crowther who located the chain gang "camp in what is evidently some Southern state."[72] Crowther and audiences drew this conclusion because they knew that chain gangs were prominent in the South, as several reviewers' comments made clear. Richard L. Coe of the *Washington Post* commented that the film is "a binge of sadism," which "concerns one of those Southern chain gangs." Coe goes on to question why Luke was sent to the chain gang for his ludicrous crime in the first place:

> For this he gets the chain gang? Well, this is the South and all moviegoers have been long indoctrinated in how backward, vicious, ignorant, lazy, plain-no-good Southerners are. So, that takes care of that.[73]

Though Coe's tongue-in-cheek remark alludes to a lack of logic in the script, it also points to audience understandings of the region, and of the nature of southern justice. These audience expectations are further reinforced by the fact that the landscape, in addition to this peculiarly southern form of punishment, disciplines the convicts. The inmates are bathed in sun while on the road, sweating profusely through their brown, tanned skins. Oppressive southern heat causes the men to sweat even while in their bunkhouse at night; violent thunderstorms only aggravate the suffering of the convicts

[72] Crowther, "Screen: Forceful Portrait of a Man Born to Lose." Charles Champlin, cited above, did note that Pearce's novel was set in Florida, but that the setting was "unspecified here" in the film. Champlin, "Cool Hand Luke: Simple Tale with Truths to Tell."
[73] Richard L. Coe, "A Binge of Sadism," *Washington Post*, November 23, 1967.

by increasing the humidity. The film's narration and the cinematography of Hall crafted every aspect of this world relentlessly conspiring to discipline the convicts. And unlike the convicts in the novel, whose interactions with the outside world while on the road are frequent, Rosenberg's convicts are almost completely isolated.

In the first several scenes of the film after Luke's arrest, the camera gazes at the convicts over the shoulders of the guards on the roadside, and from their guard towers inside the camp. The shooting script describes these scenes as "bleached and hot." When Luke arrives in camp, Luke's view from inside the prison bus is described as "a desolate panorama of gnarled trees and grubby landscape, bleak and hopeless."[74] Medium shots of the barbed wire fence surrounding the camp and the armed guards opening the padlocked gate when the convicts enter and exit the yard mark the boundaries of the convicts' existence. Indeed, the outside world is like an abstract dreamscape for the incarcerated convicts.

In addition to the isolation framed by these early shots of the camp itself, Rosenberg's decision to cut particular scenes from the final shooting script further emphasizes the isolation of the convicts. Several scenes and minor encounters between the convicts and Free World citizens in the script are omitted from the finished film. In the shooting script, the scene in which Luke and the other new convicts' work their first day on the road was supposed to include two encounters with civilians. It was scripted to include a shot in which "an open red Continental with kit zips past, the driver grinning

[74] Pierson and Dresner, *Cool Hand Luke: Final Shooting Script (9/29/66)*, 5, 9.

at the Gang," but the shot doesn't appear in the final cut.[75] In the film, Dragline bets Society Red that Luke will not make it through the day, and at the end of the scene, Luke playfully remarks that he "owes that fella a cold drink," before a cut to the work trucks returning to camp. In the shooting script, the men chat longer about the workday, and then Koko spots a woman on a bicycle out of the back of the truck. Then, "the men rush to look out at the vision of freedom on the bike," and Dragline gives her a name and tells a story about how she reminds him of a girl back home.[76] Later, just before the film's infamous car wash scene, another encounter with a Free World woman is omitted. In the excised scene, Dragline "smells" a blonde woman who stops for the "Men at Work" sign at the end of the line of working convicts. And

> sure enough, in the second car slowed down by Rabbit's sign, is a lush BLONDE in a sun dress that is hiked up high on the thighs and cut low over the bosom. She cringes under [the convicts'] gaze and starts the top going up on the [convertible] as though to hide from them.[77]

Unlike Pearce's prison camp, Rosenberg's is completely isolated. These frequent encounters with Free World citizens in the shooting script create the sense that the convicts are embedded in this southern locale, instead of isolated from it. Rosenberg's decision to excise these interactions, combined with the fog filters and overexposure of Hall's camerawork, replace the sense of situatedness that defines the novel with an abstract South.

[75] Ibid., 27.
[76] Ibid., 31–32.
[77] Ibid., 35*36.

Just as the overexposure of Hall's cinematography visually removed color from the southern landscape, Rosenberg's decision to further excise African Americans from the scenery whitewashed the recondite South of the film. While the shooting script offers a substantially whiter narrative by erasing the details of the lynching in the African American town, the hymns of the African American church choir, and Luke's appropriation of the talking blues, it includes more screen time for African Americans than the finished film. When Luke escapes for a second time, he runs through an African American town, just like in the novel. After he runs from the road, the script calls for the next scene to open on

> EXT. DIRTY ROAD (DAY).
> It is a rutted country road with farms on both sides. Luke appears, a filthy wide-eyed, stumbling, bearded beast in filthy uniform and chains. PAN with him past sharecropper's village of ramshackle huts, rusted junk. An OLD NEGRO WOMAN sees Luke and goes inside, closing the door. PAN with him to a General Store where an OLD NEGRO MAN watching, quickly retreats inside leaving only two small Negro boys (BEN and LAWRENCE) staring at Luke as he shambles toward them.[78]

The shooting script here calls for a shot of Luke arriving in this poor, black sharecroppers' town, one that surveys the town and its inhabitants as they hide from this white intruder. It also names the boys, even though their names are never spoken.

Instead, in the finished film, the scene opens on a shot of an African American man asleep in a rocking chair on his front porch, swatting at flies around his face while a lone harmonica bleats in the background (Figure 3). Luke appears from behind the wall

[78] Ibid., 102.

of the shack in the center of the frame, and the camera pans to the right, marking Luke's movement to the other side of the shack.



**Figure 17. Luke arrives in the African American town while on the run in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**



**Figure 18. Luke on the run, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**



Figure 19. African American woman disinterestedly watching Luke, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).

Luke then runs across an open dirt area between the shacks, with old newspapers blowing down the alley, and an African American woman hanging laundry on a clothesline in the background. Luke notices the woman as he crosses the alley, and holds his eyes upon her as he slows to a stop, and she stops her work to return his gaze. The camera looks across Luke's back, following his eyes. A reverse shot looks over the back of the woman at Luke in a long shot that captures the woman and her clothesline, a rusted out automobile, the shack he just ran around, and the open farmland and power lines in the distance (Figures 4 and 5). Unbothered by Luke's presence, she ducks under the clothesline to face the camera and continues hanging her laundry. Unlike Pearce's townspeople, whose help Luke actively sought, and the African Americans of the script, who hide from Luke in fear, Rosenberg's African American characters almost completely disregard him. Perhaps this is because they are used to seeing escaped convicts so Luke's appearance is unremarkable to them. Maybe they prefer not to get involved with Luke because of his race. Either way, like the harmonica music that

accompanies their appearance on screen, these African American characters mark the landscape as poor and southern, not a place where escaped convicts and oppressed African Americans unite to challenge the authority of the Law. Luke appears more worried about the townsfolk noticing him than seeking them out.

Luke does not seek out this town as a safe haven, he happens upon it. Rather than being actively assisted by the townspeople, Luke orders two African American boys to fetch him the necessary tools to successfully escape. He tricks the first boy, Lawrence, into getting him an axe by challenging him that he is "not big enough" to heft it. He promises the second boy, Ben, that he will "see something funny" if he retrieves black pepper, curry, and chile powder for him from the store. Then, Luke takes the axe from the first boy and breaks his chain before spreading the spices across his tracks to confuse the bloodhounds. This scene is all about Luke's own cleverness rather than about his knowledge of the plight of African American Floridians. In fact, he simply appropriates the knowledge and agency of the novel's back townsfolk in the film. Again, by obscuring the racial history or politics of the South, Rosenberg's narrative focuses more narrowly on the story of the nonconformist hero. In place of the knowledgeable narration of place and the soundtrack inflected with racial politics in Pearce's novel, film audiences got a hazy South accompanied by vaguely southern background music.[79]

Cinematically, this abstraction works for Rosenberg's film in two ways. First, Hall's visceral, burnt out, and colorless southern landscape evokes the kind of simplistic,

[79] In fairness, there are several scenes in which convicts sing spirituals. However, they are used to 1) foreshadow the death of Luke's mother, which motivated him to run 2) to foreshadow Luke's own death.

whitewashed—literally and figuratively—interpretations of "the South" that Richard Coe discussed in his review of the film.[80] Audiences understood this visual language, and they understood this particular way of imagining the South on screen. Second, Rosenberg's choice to remove scenes in which the convicts interacted with Free World citizens further emphasizes the sense of isolation created by Hall's cinematography. In the same way that Hall's use of fog filters and overexposure remove all traces of color from the film's semantic elements, Rosenberg's editorial choices eviscerate its syntax. The complex and situated narrative of Pearce's novel is whitewashed in the screenplay he co-wrote with Frank Pierson, and the film that Rosenberg and Hall create from that script is, to use Hall's words, completely "bleached-out."[81]

## Luke's War with Authority in Warner Bros. *Cool Hand Luke*

The nature of Luke's war against authority is substantially different in the film than in the novel, as well. Rosenberg's choice to greatly reduce the role of Luke's military service in the film results in a more ambiguous struggle against authority. In the film's initiation sequence, the major narrative conflict—Luke versus authority—is set up in the film; it differs significantly from the same exposition in the novel. Indeed, the script describes him as, "a lonely realist with an ironic sense (as opposed to rational understanding) of the uselessness of existence in a universe empty of God and devoid of meaning." He is, in this description, "not a conventional rebel: to rebel against the system is only anarchical, or even worse, it is to propose to supplant it with another

[80] Coe, "A Binge of Sadism."
[81] Champlin, "Cool Hand Luke: Simple Tale with Truths to Tell."

system, which by definition will be as false in terms of existentialist principles. His purpose is to live with his own life, not reform the lives of others."[82]

As discussed above, Luke's wartime service drove him to alcoholism, and when he cut the heads off of the parking meters in downtown Tampa, he was drunkenly exacting revenge on his commanding officers whose orders conflicted with his own sense of morality. In Rosenberg's opening scene however, when Luke commits his crime on screen, this inner conflict is completely omitted. In the shooting script, the film opens with on the exterior of a "Southern City Street," a close-up on a parking meter with its "irritating head [opening] up a glaring red eye: the red flag pops across the entire screen: VIOLATION." Then comes a close-up of "a pipe cutter attached to the [parking] meter neck, metal slivers curling out. From [off screen] we HEAR – LUCAS JACKSON cheerfully humming and mumbling Auld Lang Syne and then:"

LUKE
Okay, Mister General, you son of a bitch. Sir. Think you can put things right with a piece of tin with a ribbon hangin' on it? Gonna put you right.[83]

In the finished film, Luke neither hums Auld Lang Syne nor speaks to the parking meters. He is also not wearing the "GI Field Jacket" called for in the script. Instead, he is shirtless and his crime is accompanied by diegetic sound effects like the pipe cutter on the parking meters and non-diegetic plucking strings accompanying the VIOLATION flags; he does not speak at all. Other than that, the only sounds that are audible in the scene are

[82] Pierson and Dresner, *Cool Hand Luke: Final Shooting Script (9/29/66)*, A.
[83] Ibid., I–4.

the sound of the police car arriving from offscreen, Luke opening his beer, and the policeman asking him “What are you doin’ there fella?” In a long shot, sitting on the ground with his back to the camera leaned against a parking meter and facing the headlights of a police car and two silhouetted officers, Luke mumbles a response about cutting the heads off of parking meters. When they suggest that Luke “better come along with us,” the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Luke, spotlighted by the patrol car headlights. He laughs as the film’s title appears on the screen, and his leitmotif plays in the background (Figure 6).




**Figure 20. Luke prior to his arrest, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

This music, repeated throughout the film, consists of a simple, finger-picking guitar melody at first. Later in the film, additional instrumentation—ranging from harmonica, horns, guitar, and percussion to a full orchestra with the accompaniment increasing as the film progresses—is added. Rather than a drunken flashback or alcohol-induced hallucination fed by shell shock, Luke’s crime in the film seems like a senseless, arbitrary violation of the law. His crime can be explained by his drunkenness, and by his clear antipathy toward the authority of the police officers that approach him. The scene is

played up for humor, with Luke's own laughter and the lighthearted music suggesting the protagonist's lack of concern for his crime or punishment.

After a scene that shows the rest of the convicts working the road, we see Luke arrive in the camp for the first time aboard a prison van. He and the other convicts are lined up in front of the Captain (Strother Martin), as he reads their crimes aloud and gives them a speech about the camp. The shooting script describes the Captain as:

> The embodiment of sweet reason…A bureaucrat who finds in the system all the structure his universe needs: violate the rules, incur his righteous anger. Nothing is inhuman here—in his mind [emphasis in original]—because everything is ordered. He is one end product of the liberal humanistic revolution: the punishments fit the crimes, everybody knows and understands the rules, so any violations must be assumed to be deliberate defiance and are corrected by so many (count 'em) hits with the sap, or nights in the box.[84]

This description makes the film's conflict between the Captain and Luke an inevitable one, a product of the fundamental contradictions in the men's worldviews. The script describes Luke's demeanor in this scene, "All except Luke look apprehensive, worried. Luke stands with languid grace, neither insolent nor hostile, nor fearful."[85] The Captain reads off the men's crimes, and one of the guards, Mr. Hunnicutt (Luke Askew), tells the new prisoners that they should "call the Captain 'Captain,'" and "call the rest of us 'Boss,' you hear?" When he gets to Luke, the Captain asks about his crime, "maliciously destroying municipal property while under the influence, what was that?" Cut to a medium close-up of Luke laughing to himself about the crime, and stunned looks from the other new prisoners before getting back to the Captain's startled expression as he

[84] Ibid., E–F.
[85] Ibid., 10.

queries, “Well, we ain’t never had one of them before. What did you think that was gonna get you?” Luke’s response, “I guess you could say I wasn’t thinkin’, Captain,” demonstrates his lack of patience for the Captain’s questions. In addition, Luke is acknowledging the absurdity of his crime, and patronizing the Captain while doing so. The Captain’s face reveals his curiosity and confusion as he begins reading over Luke’s record (Figure 7), remarking upon Luke’s accomplishments in the war, “Says here you done real good in the war: Silver Star, Bronze Star, couple Purple Hearts. Sergeant! Come out the way you went in: Buck Private.” While the captain reads, we see a medium close-up of Luke with the camp’s American flag over his shoulder (Figure 8). The other new convicts share in the Captain’s confusion—as registered by reaction shots (Figure 9)—and Luke’s facial expression suggests the verbal response he gives, “Like I was just passing time Captain.” Before sending the men into the bunkhouse, the Captain gives a monologue

> We’ve got all kinds here, and you’re gonna fit in real good. Of course, in case you get rabbit in your blood and decide to take off for home, you get a bonus of some time and a set of leg chains just to keep you slowed down a little bit. Now, it’s for your own good. You’ll learn the rules. Now, it’s all up to you. I can be a good guy, or I can be one real mean son of a bitch.

Luke grimaces at the end of this speech and the Captain takes a seat in his rocking chair. “It’s all up to you,” he repeats. Close up shots of Luke’s look of disgust reflect a growing annoyance with the Captain’s speech-making, and his general indifference to the camp’s highest authority figure stand in stark contrast to the timid, curious facial expressions of the other new convicts.



Figure 21. The Captain reads Luke's file, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).



Figure 22. Luke's face while his war record is discussed, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).



Figure 23. The other "new meat" are surprised by Luke's accomplishments in the war, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).

Luke is first in line as the new convicts enter the camp through the chain-link, barbed-wire fence gate; he smiles confidently as he walks. Political scientist William Haltom describes Luke's smile, one of his defining characteristics, as "signaling exuberance, and mockery" of authority.[86] The next shot is inside the barracks, where the camera follows the trustee prisoner in charge of the barracks, Carr (Clifton James), as he dictates a list of rules that the prisoners of the camp are required to follow and what they will get if they don't: "a night in the box (solitary confinement in a sweatbox)."[87] They learn when they will sleep, where and how they can smoke, where they can fight, and a laundry list of infractions that will result in "a night in the box," in a speech that, according to Murray Pomerance,

> encapsulates the sense of debilitating and invasive social anxiety about order that this film reflects. This camp is the last bastion of a world obsessed with putting everything in its place, controlling every impulse, correcting every deviation, profiting upon every exertion and every drop of sweat."[88]

Throughout the speech, Luke and the other new convicts are putting on their state-issue uniforms, and Luke laughs to himself about the seriousness of Carr's delivery of the exhaustive list of rules. The camera cuts between shots of the pacing Carr, typically medium close-ups from below his face to emphasize his position of authority, to the confused looks of the new convicts, and Luke's expressions of disgust. The camera is close up on Carr's face as he finishes his speech. As he states "I'm responsible for order

[86] William Haltom, "Laws of God Laws of Man: Power, Authority, and Influence in Cool Hand Luke," *Legal Studies Forum* 22 (1998): 239.
[87] "The box" was a wooden stall that sat upon a concrete block; its door was padlocked when the prisoner was interred therein with his coffee can of drinking water and chamber pot.
[88] Murray Pomerance, "1967—Movies and the Spectre of Rebellion," in *American Cinema of the 1960s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 176.

in here, any man don't keep order spends a night," he hesitates and the camera registers the worry on his face (Figure 10) before cutting to a shot of an amused Luke mouthing along with Carr when he resumes with "in the box. I hope you ain't gonna be a hard case." Luke shakes his head as if Carr has nothing to worry about.



**Figure 24. Carr eyeing Luke because he doesn't take the rules seriously, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

The next scene sets the tone for the remainder of the initiation sequence, in which Luke and the other convicts size each other up, and establish the hierarchy of authority among the convicts. If trusty prisoners like Carr are active participants in the implementation of prison authority, Luke finds out that Dragline (George Kennedy) and the other prisoners are complacent within this structure. The shooting script describes Dragline as at "the top of the prisoner's hierarchy…an unwitting accomplice to the guards' brutality."[89] He expresses this authority by giving "new meat" convicts their Bull Gang names. Before lights out on Luke's first night in camp, Dragline reprimands one of the new prisoners for speaking out of turn, "Boy you're new meat. You're gonna have to

[89] Pierson and Dresner, *Cool Hand Luke: Final Shooting Script (9/29/66)*, B–C.

shape up fast and hard for this gang. We got rules here. In order to learn 'em you got to do more work with your ears than with your mouth." The camera focuses on Luke in a medium shot during this exchange; he laughs at Dragline's rules and the convicts all turn and glare at him as he violates the unspoken rules of the gang. "Did somebody say somethin'?" Dragline asks. "Nah, I didn't say nothing—Boss," replies Luke sardonically. Reasserting his authority, Dragline asks, "You don't listen much, do ya boy?" Luke calmly answers, "I ain't heard that much worth listenin' to; just a lot of guys layin' down a lot of rules and regulations." Dragline stares angrily at the defiant new meat as Luke turns down an invitation to a poker game and walks to his bunk.

Over the next few nights, Luke shows his proclivity for challenging authority. He starts off by contesting Dragline's power among the convicts, and his penchant for reinforcing the rules set down by the bosses, setting up a showdown between the two. When one of the new convicts is forced to spend a night in the box, Dragline justifies it by saying, "They've got their rules; we ain't got nothin' to do with that. It would probably happen to him sooner or later anyway—a complainer like him. He gotta learn the rules, same as anybody else." Luke's response, "Yeah, them poor ole Bosses need all the help they can get," leads Dragline to challenge him to a boxing match the following day. Although Dragline beats Luke badly in the boxing match, Luke never gives up. He refuses to follow the rules of the match or listen to the advice of the other convicts, demonstrating his desire to go his own way. The guards and the convicts all watch in distress as Luke continues getting up, time after time, when Dragline knocks him down with powerful blows to the head and body. None of the men, or the bosses, has seen a

man so unwilling to succumb to authority. Luke's insistence upon fighting against the authority of Dragline and asserting his individuality, his nonconformity, define him for the audience and the other convicts in these final scenes of the initiation sequence. These plot developments, and the way in which the camera frames Luke, and many shots of the convicts' reactions to him, move him from outsider status, to the top of the convict hierarchy in a matter of days. The days of reinforcing the rules of the bosses will be over when Luke takes the mantle from Dragline. Although the men are still not sure what to think of Luke, they all begin to look up to him. Dragline, who initially resents Luke's resistance, seems exhausted by this failure to assert his dominance.

After these early scenes, the film's narration constantly shows the audience the other convicts' reactions to Luke's various exploits. The audience gets to know Luke at the same time as his fellow prisoners, and we learn to understand him from their subjective point of view. We see him refuse to give up in a boxing match against the bigger, more powerful Dragline, boldly win a poker game on a bluff, play the banjo, and eat fifty eggs. Luke becomes the center of attention in the camp and it becomes clear his next grand spectacle will be his escape. Unlike the novel, in which readers learns about Luke via nostalgic song and flashback from the point of view of Sailor and Dragline, the film's audiences are amongst the convicts *as* they meet Luke. We are frequently optically positioned with the other prisoners. We see Dragline and the others in camp and on the road while Luke is on the lam, and are encouraged to empathize with the convicts as they watch Luke reach his heroic status. We realize that the camp isn't the same without him, but also continue to hold him in high regard while he is

gone. Like the other convicts, we obsess over “the picture,” a photograph of Luke in a bar in New Orleans, while he is on the lam. We smile alongside the other convicts as we see this image of Luke, smiling with two showgirls, piles of cash, and bottles of booze as it cements his godlike status, becoming an icon in itself (Figures 11 and 12). However, the narration grows more objective as the film progresses.



**Figure 25. "The Picture," arrives in camp, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**



**Figure 26. The convicts gather around "The Picture," to worship their pal Luke, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

Although the film's narration occasionally focuses on the guards' surveillance of and reactions to Luke's exploits, it is not until he tries to escape that the friction between them and this convict hero become central to the story. A shift in narration occurs as Luke begins to challenge the Bosses directly after his mother's death, as these instances are represented via shot-reverse-shot sequences following Luke's fiery return gaze at his captors. Previously in the film, the camera regularly gazes upon the eyes of the guards as they watch over the convicts, but the convicts rarely, if ever return this gaze. Going forward, almost every scene that features Luke challenging the authority of the Bosses—by himself or with the help of his fellow inmates—juxtaposes shots of the exuberant convict with the ominous presence and consternation of the guards as well as reaction shots of his fellow convicts (Figures 13–15).



**Figure 27. The other convicts watch as Luke and the guards battle each other, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**



Figure 28. Luke stares in defiance as the guards mercilessly punish him, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).



Figure 29. Guards return Luke's gaze as he refuses to submit, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).

The suspense created by this type of editing is supplemented by suspenseful non-diegetic music, which only heightens the sense of danger suggested by these scenes. Unlike earlier scenes in which the simple instrumentation of the music serves to remind audiences of the southern locale of the film, orchestral strings, horns, and percussion play suspenseful, complex music in these scenes. As Luke more aggressively seeks his freedom and attempts successive escape attempts, he becomes more and more isolated. Supporting characters gradually fade into the background, becoming

spectators as the narration centers on Luke's heated battle with authority. The result of this careful camera work and editing is that, rather than remember Luke's battle against authority via flashback (as in the novel), audiences are encouraged to fight the battle against authority with him. The film's narration exchanges the powerfully specific critique of authority—military authority in particular—in the novel for a more general showdown between Luke and any kind of authority at all. Luke's struggle against the prison authorities, and their rules and regulations—and the punishments meted out for their violation—is without context or depth. He is a wild-eyed rebel, unwilling to conform, just as Warner Bros. advertisements proclaimed. As Paul Monaco argues, "*Cool Hand Luke* was emblematic of a shifting audience taste toward stories about individualists, malcontents, and rebels who steadfastly resisted the proprieties of respectable society."[90]

## Conclusion

The obfuscation of the racial and social politics of the South in favor of an individualized war with authority represents a shift in the politics of chain gang films within the prison genre. Earlier prison films like *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!* or *Hell's Highway* crafted compelling narratives about individuals in the face of horrific southern prison conditions, their semantics and syntax all (ostensibly) geared toward the pragmatic ends of prison reform. Because production conditions in pre-Code Classical Hollywood Cinema required that reformers and prison officials collaborate on films in order to get

[90] Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960-1969*, 8:182.

them past censors, criticisms of the chain gang system criticized institutions. Paul Muni's chances of escaping the clutches of the equally obscure southern prison were slim because the system itself was brutal, racist and backward. It was a product of a society hell-bent on stealing the labor of African Americans and exploiting anyone caught in the grips of the criminal justice system. From the guards to the warden, to the parole board and the governor, the southern criminal justice system was corrupt. The prison system described in Donn Pearce's novel was not dramatically different from Robert E. Burns's, and each focused on the individual's struggle against a harsh prison system. But Burns struggled against the system, while Pearce's Luke struggled against authority.

*Cool Hand Luke* tells a powerful story about a man struggling against brutal conditions in a southern prison, but makes no suggestion that the system should change. This represents a major shift in characterization and syntax in the genre. Luke's battle is an individual one—sometimes played for laughs, as in the opening scene of the film—against authority in general, not an evil or corrupt justice system. This convict is a rebellious hero, and his martyrdom suggests a triumph of individual will and anti-conformity rather than a victory for justice. Indeed, Luke is a Christ-like figure in the film. After beating out Dragline in a boxing match and winning the admiration of the convicts, he eats fifty eggs and, according to R. H. Gardner of the *Baltimore Sun*, "begins to assume for [the convicts] the stature of a god."[91] In his *LA Times* review of the film, "Cinema Gospel According to 'Cool Luke,'" Kevin Thomas pointed to this iconic scene's heavy-handed ending that makes the metaphor clear, with a "cut to a shot looking

[91] Gardner, "Cool Hand Luke at Three Local Theaters."

down from above on the satiated and bloated, half nude, glistening body [of Paul Newman], the arms hanging out and the ankles beautifully crossed," (Figure 16).[92]



**Figure 30. Luke at the end of the egg-eating scene, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

This Christ-like imagery runs throughout the film, proclaiming Luke an anti-establishment hero before the advertising department began promoting the picture. After he is shot at the end of the film, Luke is ushered into a car to be driven to the prison hospital an hour away. As the car drives down the road, with Luke's leitmotif playing in the background, it runs over Boss Godfrey's sunglasses (Figure 18), which serve as the ultimate symbol of oppressive authority in the film—most memorably in an extreme close-up during the opening credit sequence (Figure 17). This final act is signifying Luke's symbolic victory over the bosses' power. The car then passes through a traffic light as it changes from green to red, signifying the death of the hero. William Haltom suggests that because the light changes from green to red with the green light on top and the red light on bottom that, even in his death, Luke has turned authority on

[92] Thomas, "Cinema Gospel According to 'Cool Luke.'"

its head.[93]

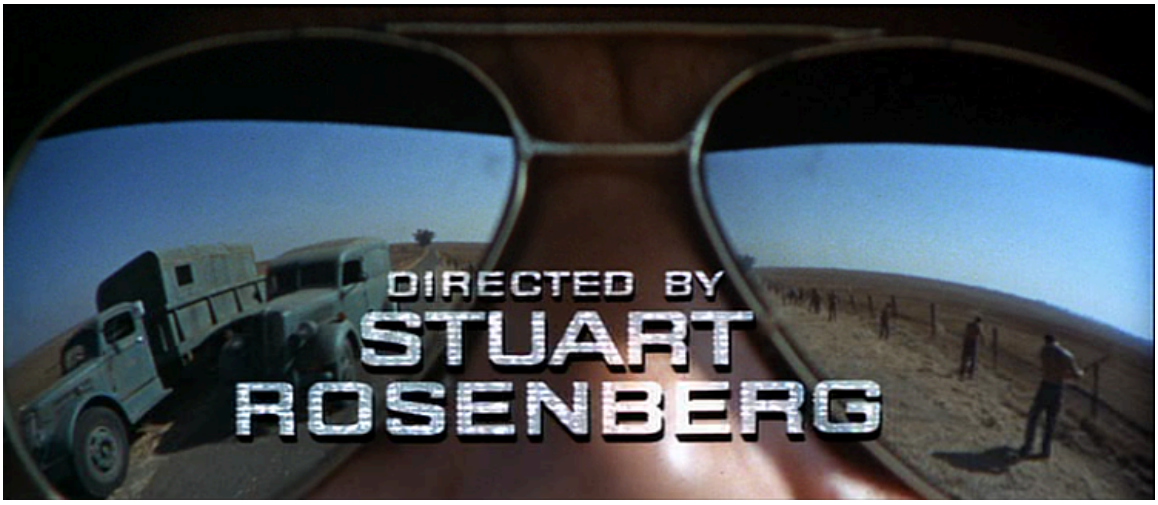



Figure 31. Boss Godfrey's sunglasses in the opening credits, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).



Figure 32. Godfrey's sunglasses after they are run over, *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).

Dragline recounts this final scene for the rest of the prisoners during a break on the road near the church as the film draws to a close. A montage of Luke grinning at various points in the film plays as Dragline describes how Luke was smiling when the car pulled away, "He was smiling that *Luke smile*…He had it on his face right to the very end. Hell, if they didn't know it 'fore, they could tell right then that they weren't e'er a-gonna

[93] Haltom, "Laws of God Laws of Man: Power, Authority, and Influence in Cool Hand Luke," 255.

beat him. That old *Luke smile*. Oh, Luke. He was some boy. Cool Hand Luke. Hell, he's a natural-born world-shaker." A shot of Dragline and the other convicts working the road follows this last sentence, and Luke's leitmotif, at first played with sparse instrumentation, is joined by a full orchestral accompaniment. The camera pulls back to a helicopter shot of intersecting roads forming a giant crucifix. Then, superimposed over this crucifix is "the picture," of Luke in New Orleans, scotch-taped together; even the rips in the paper form the shape of a cross. The camera zooms in on Luke's smiling face in "the picture," and the film ends (Figure 19).



**Figure 33. Shot from final sequence in *Cool Hand Luke* (1967).**

The pervasive use of crucifixion imagery informs audiences that Luke's death is inevitable. The film's ending suggests that Luke's death delivers the other convicts from the oppressive power of the chain gang authorities, and Luke enters history as a heroic martyr. Richard L. Coe took issue with such an ending:

> Man, [Luke's] a real idol he is. And after those callous, cruel, ignorant Southerns have gotten blood all over him while killing him, we can't just have all that be in our final memory can we? So we fade out on the chain gang gazing up into the bright blue heavens, superimposed against which is smilin', boyish, blue-eyed

> Luke just the way we all knew and loved him. A binge of sadism is this [film], but under it another binge of bilge."[94]

Other reviewers noted the religious iconography of the film, as well. Simons Anekwe of the *New York Amsterdam News* called the film "a sermon without words."[95] Several reviewers noted the "sadism" of the guards, positioning them as evil antagonists against a "Christlike" hero.[96] Murray Pomerance argues that comparisons to Christ are examples of where the film "sold out," instead of continuing its representation of Luke as an independent spirit because his "show of personal strength and courage, then, wraps up as an homage to codified, state-sanctioned religious iconography, the furthest thing from rebellion."[97] But, within the narrative, Luke's death delivers the convicts from the power of the bosses. When Luke is shot, Dragline attacks Boss Godfrey, knocking the sunglasses that symbolize his mysterious power from his face in the process. In the final sequence of the film, before the helicopter shot of the convicts working the road, Dragline smiles as he works—no longer complicit in the oppression of his fellow convicts—in spite of his fresh set of leg chains. *Cool Hand Luke* is the kind of film that social scientists like Nicole Rafter would argue has little "value," because it narratively precludes the necessity for changes in prison conditions due to its focus on individuals. Its celebration of rebellion itself, rather than a narrative that critiques institutions, closes off the possibility of advocacy for reform.

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[94] Coe, "A Binge of Sadism."
[95] Simons Anekwe, "`Cool Hand Luke' Drama Of Unfortunates," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 4, 1967.
[96] Champlin, "Cool Hand Luke: Simple Tale with Truths to Tell."
[97] Pomerance, "1967—Movies and the Spectre of Rebellion."

Ultimately, this was Warner Bros. intention with the film. Unlike in 1932 when they produced *Fugitive*, the studio had no intention of critiquing the nature of prisons and punishment in the South any more than they hoped to encourage discussions about southern racism, the plight of shell-shocked WWII vets, or alcoholism. As African American reviewer Lindsay Thomas noted in 1968,

> Hollywood has hidden behind the label "Entertainment Only," refusing to come to grips with the *guts* of social problems…"Cool Hand Luke," for example, might just as well have taken place during Hell Week in a college frat house. No Southern chain gang, white or black, ever had it so good, and in such immaculate surroundings. Hollywood missed its chance to show candidly the shocking violence and wretched conditions of a perverted and outmoded American institution, thus, maybe, stirring up a public outcry for long overdue reforms.[98]

This was a film that the studio hoped would capture the anti-establishment spirit underway throughout the decade, and to cater to youth audiences, not advocate for social change. That Rosenberg and the studio took Pearce's novel and transform it into the film it became demonstrates the limitless possibilities for generic storytelling, and for the prison genre in particular. Because 1960s audiences—young or otherwise—held such clear expectations for the prison genre, the semantic and syntactic elements could be used toward virtually any pragmatic end. The film mimicked the semantic elements of earlier films to construct an abstract southern landscape, populated by oppressive guards and lovable convicts. The shorthand of the initiation sequence laid bare the narrative stakes for the film's plotline, and the studio used the rest of the picture to build up, break down, and crucify a Christ-like antihero on the premise that his quest for

[98] Lindsay Patterson, "Hollywood's Boy and Girl Next Door -- Color Them White," *New York Times*, June 16, 1968.

individuality, for self definition, and for freedom from conformity would lead to his demise. While the film celebrates the rebel hero, it does not set him free. Like Robert Allen in *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang!*, Lucas Jackson does not escape the system, the system escapes him.

# Conclusion

In 1999 Rick Altman called for genre studies to move beyond the investigation of individual texts, and which films belong in a generic corpus, toward a consideration of genre as "a complex situation," as part of the overall circulation of meaning associated with a process in which a large number of texts are produced, marketed, and distributed widely to large audiences.[1] This dissertation has answered Altman's call by using his semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre criticism to study the prison genre in American cinema.

I have demonstrated that genre is a process, rather than a transhistorical set of ideas, symbols, and narrative structures with static meaning. There is no "ideal" genre picture, or "standard" narrative. But, the production cycle of prison films in the early 1930s did establish a broad set of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements that would remain essential for the development of the genre in future decades. The films in this cycle made clear that Hollywood could sell prison pictures to American audiences. These early titles set forth the semantic aspects of the genre—like the nature of penitentiaries and chain gangs. They articulated the visual and narrative constructions of the physical spaces and mechanisms that imprisoned and punished criminals in the genre. They suggested that convicted criminals could be sympathetic, even heroic characters or evil, violent monsters. Syntactically, they posited that prison could be a hard place; that it could reform or corrupt its charges; that prison officials could be

[1] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 84.

corrupt or paternalistic; hamstrung by their superiors, or empowered by vengeance. All of these elements were constructed with the idea of prison reform in mind, so that these pre-Code films could pass censor boards. Using Altman's approach to study this early production cycle reveals the relationships between the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements of the genre crystallized during this period.

One of the most important innovations of this cycle was the initiation sequence. As I show in Chapter 2, films throughout the 1930s, and in every decade since, adapted the visual and narrative elements of this generic convention. The relationship between the semantic elements of those sequences in the 1930s—the prisoners and guards, the institutions in which they operate, and the ways that they were represented visually and aurally—are intimately connected to the syntax of those early films: the struggle of individuals inside of corrupt or mismanaged institutions. This relationship, in turn, speaks to the pragmatic calls for prison reform made and inspired by the films. As the videographic essay in that chapter demonstrates, those same relationships are represented across the genre, speaking to different syntactic and pragmatic concerns in different films and time periods. These sequences reveal the ways in which prisoners must deal with the loss of privacy, threats of sexual violence, forming a new identity, violent and oppressive prison authorities or inmates, and the existential challenge of incarceration. These sequences expose the fundamental human dramas that prison films contain, and the ways in which those relate to their historical milieu.

The third chapter, which focuses on how *Cool Hand Luke* deploys the initiation sequence and other elements of the genre in service of a pragmatics of rebellion in the

1960s, demonstrates how generic storytelling can reveal social concerns of specific time periods, and the ways that studios capitalized upon them using the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements of the prison genre. Also, it shows how those elements continued to be colored by the regional distinctions made in the production cycle of the 1930s. Old tropes and narratives are recycled toward new ends in the film, and innovations by studios, directors, and cinematographers create new possibilities for future films in the genre. As I argue in the first chapter, the realities of production and marketing substantially impact how the film depicts prison and punishment. The case of *Cool Hand Luke* is a perfect example of why Altman's approach is superior to that of social science, which would ignore the ways that Warner Bros.' quest for youth audiences, and the process by which the novel was adapted for the screen, are effaced by scholars who favor an analysis of how the prison operated, or whether it truthfully depicted life on a chain gang during the period.

Considering these chapters together it is clear that there is a coherent prison film genre in American cinema. Investigating the genre's history through the framework of Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach has revealed the ways in which industrial conditions related to the production of prison films are as important to the systems of meaning in which they operate as the films themselves. Studios created 1930s prison films under threat of censorship, and their collaboration with prison experts led to texts that contributed to ongoing conversations about prison conditions by leading scholars, prison officials, and reformers. Warner Bros. created *Cool Hand Luke* in a changed Hollywood in which studios coveted youth audiences, and adapted

the semantic and syntactic elements of Donn Pearce's story to attract baby boomers to theaters with the pragmatics of rebellion. In these and later films, initiation sequences provide the expository narration that drives home these connections between semantics, syntax, and pragmatics in specific moments in the genre's history.

These connections between industrial conditions, prison films, and the "cultural categories" of which they are a part persist in contemporary media as well. Below, I will briefly demonstrate how my approach might apply to an examination of the prison genre in television. In the 1990s and early-oughts, all of the major Hollywood film studios were acquired by or incorporated into major media conglomerates whose substantial interests in film, network and cable television, and internet properties represented a shift toward a new media landscape in the United States and the world. Because Hollywood film production became but one of many line items on the budgets of these media corporations, genre films became the new norm in Hollywood production because it relied upon reliable, proven formulas and conventions.[2] At the same time, prison populations in the United States were soaring to unprecedented heights.[3]

Under these conditions, it is unsurprising to see a renaissance of sorts for the prison genre. These new vertically-integrated media conglomerates were able to capitalize on successful formulae—like the prison genre—by producing generic content across media platforms, contributing to the "generic situation" on more levels than

[2] Wheeler W Dixon, *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 8–9. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2008).
[3] Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999).

Classical or New Hollywood could have ever imagined. For instance, Castle Rock Entertainment which produced both *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (1998), was owned by what would eventually become Time Warner, Inc. Time Warner, Inc. was also the parent company of HBO which, in 1997, produced their first scripted television series *Oz*—a prison drama. In 1996 and 2000 respectively, Time Warner began exhibiting *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile* in syndication on its cable television networks TNT, TBS, and Turner Classic Movies and has not stopped. In addition to syndicated movies, a plethora of prison programs aired on network and cable TV and streaming services in the 1990s and 2000s, including: *Oz* (HBO), *Lockup* (MSNBC) (and its spinoffs *Lockup: Raw, Lockup: World Tour, Lockup: Extended Stay, Lockup: Special Investigation,* and *Life After Lockup*), *Prison Break* (FOX), *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix) and countless others. At a time when mass incarceration made prisons a bigger part of American life than ever, the changing media landscape led to an increased presence of prisons and prisoners on our screens as well.

Many social science scholars suggest that television programming (and Hollywood films) about prisons in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s essentially reflect or support the ideologies which inform the "tough on crime" criminal justice policies of the period. Gray Cavender and Mark Fishman suggest that *America's Most Wanted* and *Cops* reinforce the prevailing ideology which sees crime as "a vile social blight," criminals as "dangerous, depraved, unremorseful people," whose capture and eventual imprisonment are the ritual denouement which satisfies the vengeful desires of morally

outraged victims and audiences.[4] Elayne Rapping suggests that prison reality shows are logical extensions of police-centric programs like *Cops* as well as procedural fictional programs like *Law & Order* which almost always end with the capture and imprisonment of criminal threats to the prevailing social order.[5] These valuable studies of television and streaming programs in the prison genre, like earlier investigations of prison films, focus exclusively on the semantic or—more commonly—syntax of their subjects, overlooking entirely the relationship between those elements and the conditions under which they were created and the context in which they were received. If these texts represent the primary vehicle for information about prisons for most Americans at a time when incarcerations rates are at historic highs, then understanding them seems an essential part of one of the defining criminal justice issues of the new century.

MSNBC's "documentary" series *Lockup* is a prison program that has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years.[6] The six episodes of the first season examined here were repackaged and sold as *Lockup: Inside America's Prisons* by the Films Media Group's *Films for the Social Sciences & Humanities* distribution company which specializes in "world-class academic content." This collection features five episodes culled from the first full season of *Lockup* in 2005—"Inside Folsom," "Inside Wabash," "Inside North Carolina's Women's Prison," "Return to Rikers Island," "Return to Valley State"—as well as one—"Lockup: The Criminal Mind" (which focuses on

[4] Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender, *Entertaining Crime*, 82–85; "Lockup," *44 Blue Productions*, accessed April 29, 2012, http://www.44blue.com/lockup.html.
[5] Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV*, 74, 81–86.
[6] *Films for the Humanities and Sciences - Lockup: Inside America's Prisons*, n.d., accessed April 29, 2012.

California's Atascadero State Hospital)—from the *MSNBC Investigates* series from the year 2000.

The highest-rated and longest running prison reality show on television, *Lockup* was created in the same context as the other programs mentioned above. It is logical to expect that the success of police procedural shows, courtroom dramas, and courtroom reality television programs during the 1990s would eventually lead to the creation of television programming related to prisons.[7] *Lockup* started out as a single iteration of the *MSNBC Investigates* television documentary series in the 1990s. The first iteration of the *Lockup* series that appeared on the network was in a 1994 episode entitled *Lock-Up: The Prisoners of Rikers Island*.[8] The show was a part of a diverse offering of documentary programming which included shows episodes about prisons, tattoos, heroine, hospitals, UFOs, etc.[9] The 24-hour cable news channel MSNBC bills *Lockup* as a documentary series. The network advertises its award-winning documentary unit as producing content that "combines compelling storytelling with exclusive access to some of the most intriguing and rarely seen places and people in the world, allowing viewers to become eyewitnesses." Building on the world-class newsgathering and talent of MSNBC and NBC News, the MSNBC documentary unit takes audiences undercover to investigate

[7] Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV*, 76. Rapping makes this connection between reality programs about police and the fictional prison television show *Oz* (1997-2007), which spawned several reality show imitators in the late-1990s.
[8] "Lock-up: The Prisoners of Rikers Island," *Internet Movie Database*, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113684/.
[9] "MSNBC Investigates," *Internet Movie Database*, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1179310/.

in-depth some of the most important stories of our time.[10] In addition to fulfilling the goals of the documentary unit, these programs are substantially cheaper to produce than shows with highly paid hosts and guests, writing staffs, and researchers.

Although *Lockup* is produced by 44 Blue Productions—an independent production company—it surely fits the billing.[11] Each episode of the show begins with a verbal and written warning regarding the "mature subject matter" of the program read aloud by a narrator whose voice over sounds eerily similar to those which open the *Law & Order* television series. A montage of images of razor wire follows this immediately, along with shots of wrists being handcuffed, and bearded and tattooed faces staring out from behind prison bars as the narrator states, "There are over two million people behind bars in America. We open the gates. Lockup," while a music track replete with percussion and deep bass drones on behind his ominously deep voice. This sequence ends as the *Lockup* title image is centered on the screen with the name of the featured prison immediately below it as the audience hears the unmistakable sound of a prison cell door slamming. This montage is always followed by another composed of various images and interview clips from the upcoming episode before the narrator John Seigenthaler offers an introduction from a studio setting.

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[10] "MSNBC TV Documentaries," accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036750/ns/msnbc_tv-documentaries/.

[11] Jack Curry, "MSNBC's 'Lockup': Documentary or Reality TV?," *The Washington Post*, July 10, 2011, sec. Lifestyle, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/msnbcs-lockup-documentary-or-reality-tv/2011/06/03/gIQAQ8853H_story.html."Elisewarner.newsvine.com - Elise Warner," accessed April 30, 2012, http://elisewarner.newsvine.com/."Elisewarner.newsvine.com - Elise Warner," accessed April 30, 2012, http://elisewarner.newsvine.com/. Elise Warner, the executive producer of the show, claims that she vets all of the show's content with the same standards with which news programming on the network is edited.

These expository introduction sequences confirm what viewers expecting a documentary program anticipate when they turn on *Lockup*. The show purports to "open the gates" and offer a glimpse into the secret world of prisons in the United States. These montage sequences almost invariably depict prison guards in riot gear, inmates discussing how bad prison life is, guards or administrators discussing inmates' violent behavior and crimes, prisoners speaking about the horrors of prison life from behind bars or fences, and the major themes that the episode will deal with—generally violence, mental illness, or, in episodes that deal with female prisoners, relationships with other inmates and/or pregnancy in prison. Such glimpses sensationalize these elements of prison life that are also exaggerated by fictional accounts of prisons on television and in Hollywood film.[12] They also adapt types of narratives common in fictional accounts. The title sequence functions like the initiation sequences of prison films, enunciating the semantic and syntactic elements of the episode that is about to unfold, all with framed by the authoritative address of documentary programming. The pragmatic function of such an address is, as the narrator states, to "unlock the gates."

After this opening sequence, episodes generally follow a standard format. Host John Seigenthaler opens each episode by giving a general overview of a particular prison and its reputation—the prisons featured on the show are notoriously dangerous or violent and populated by mentally ill and/or violent criminals. On return visits to prisons featured in previous episodes, as in the cases of "Return to Rikers Island" and "Return to Valley State," Seigenthaler offers reminders of MSNBC's previous visits to these facilities

[12] Cecil, "Televised Images of Jail," 67–70.

and the violence and conditions discovered there with the help of file footage. John Seigenthaler, a long-time NBC employee and Emmy Award winner, hosted the *NBC Nightly News Weekend* broadcast from 1999-2007 as well as the entire *MSNBC Investigates* series prior to hosting *Lockup.*[13] On the show, Seigenthaler wore a suit and tie and was filmed in a medium close-up standing on a studio set with a mock prison cell in the background; this set up was not radically different than the presentation of a typical newscast or news magazine, except that the cell replaced the usual newsroom in the background. Using a well-known news anchor lends credibility to the show's narration and is a strategy used by previous television reality crime shows. Staging and shooting Seigenthaler as if he were on a news magazine show like *60 Minutes* (CBS)—instead of a documentary/reality show hybrid—also presents viewers with the idea that *Lockup* is a serious program.[14] Seigenthaler's narration accompanies the exploration of each prison and is interspersed between interviews with prisoners, prison guards, and prison administrators. Finally, each episode ends with Seigenthaler in the studio, typically reciting the dishearteningly high rate of recidivism at each prison. Although the show presented itself as serious, documentary or news-like programming, its sensational(ized) content was not a radical departure from its reality-television counterparts like *Cops*.

[13] "Former NBC Nightly News Weekend Anchor John Seigenthaler Joins His Family's PR Firm," accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.observer.com/2008/07/former-nbc-nightly-news-weekend-anchor-john-seigenthaler-joins-his-familys-pr-firm/; "Seigenthaler Public Relations :: Staff - Bio," accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.seig-pr.com/About/Staff-Bio.aspx?id=173.
[14] Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender, *Entertaining Crime*, 88.

Many commentators openly questioned whether the show was "Documentary or reality TV?," as in a 2011 article in the *Washington Post* that quoted a defensive MSNBC president Phil Griffin saying, "*Lockup* is not MSNBC's *Jersey Shore*."[15] While discussing the unexpected and difficult-to-explain success of the show, Griffin felt it was necessary to distinguish his "documentary" show from MTV's wildly popular yet trashy reality television show that was on the air at the same time. Scholars such as Dawn K. Cecil have suggested on several occasions that the show is in fact "infotainment." Her analyses suggest that *Lockup* disproportionately features only the most violent criminals in the largest and most violent prisons in the country, kowtowing to the tropes and imagery of popular fictional programming such as HBO's violent prison drama *Oz*—which was still running during the first few seasons of *Lockup*.[16] When asked how he toed the line between reality TV and documentary on the show in 2010, *Lockup*'s creator and producer Rasha Drachkovitch stated that he liked to think about the show as a "Docu-soap," suggesting a mixture of the seriousness of documentary and the melodrama of soap operas. In the same interview, Drachkovitch claims that his experiences of filming *Lockup* have revealed a disconnect between the reality of prison life and how people perceive it, which he attributes to the show *Oz* and Hollywood films like *The Shawshank Redemption*. He suggests that *Lockup* is successful because it offers a realistic view of prisons that counters these narratives of extreme violence and

[15] Curry, "MSNBC's 'Lockup.'"
[16] Cecil, "Televised Images of Jail"; Dawn K Cecil and Jennifer L Leitner, "Unlocking the Gates: An Examination of MSNBC Investigates – Lockup," *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 48, no. 2 (May 1, 2009): 184–99; Cecil, "Looking Beyond Caged Heat Media Images of Women in Prison." Cecil and other scholars have specifically mentioned *Oz* as a dramatic predecessor to prison reality television programming.

fantastic escapes and that while filming the show he learned "ninety percent of prison life is actually very boring, very routine." He suggests that his show "holds a mirror up to what is going on inside [prisons]. Consequently, it is a fair depiction of life inside these very, very extreme environments."[17] Drachkovitch openly acknowledges his show's debt to fictional programming. He claims to offer more "realistic" glimpses of life behind bars, suggesting that the semantics of the fictional prison genre fail to show what prisons are actually like, that the narratives about prison life fail to capture the true meaning of punishment. But his program—like its fictional counterparts on television and in film—fails to document the ninety percent of prison life he claims to have discovered while shooting. Instead, his "docu-soap," takes the themes of violence and sex that pervade 1990s programs like *Oz* and dress them up with a veneer of journalistic integrity.

*Lockup*'s depiction of prison life is far from boring. Each episode offers 45 minutes of dramatic footage and interviews of violent offenders, inmates with mental illness, and stories about women's relationships and pregnancies behind bars. These stories presented from the perspective of the inmates, the prison staff, and narrator John Seigenthaler suggest that prison life is full of action and drama. Although the sensational vignettes in each episode undoubtedly fulfill the generic pleasures of audiences whose perceptions of prison are generally shaped by fictional prison films and shows, they are tempered by the authoritative view of prison administrators and staff.

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[17] *Rasha Drachkovitch, Producer of MSNBC's "Lockup," Interview, 2 of 3 (Sept. 2007)*, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oy-ZnoQZfw&feature=youtube_gdata_player. *Rasha Drachkovitch, Producer of MSNBC's "Lockup," Interview, 3 of 3 (Interview)*, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8umHl7TYRQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player. *Rasha Drachkovitch: How to Shoot MSNBC's "Lockup," 1 of 3 (Interview)*, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FebabJwYPUA&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

Altman suggests that "generic pleasure" is what audiences experience when they watch scenes that conform to the conventions of Hollywood genre films. In this case, scenes that might produce generic pleasure for audiences might reproduce violent convicts, violent guards, riots, escape attempts, etc. which appear often in prison films, and are sometimes shown in *Lockup* and other reality shows. One can think of this idea as applying to the reality crime genre in general, and to the conventions of punishing criminals, seeing them commit violent acts, and as unfit for society as a result of their amoral criminality.[18]

The producers of *Lockup* have to get permission from prison officials in order to film on location in correctional institutions. Wardens and administrators control where camera crews are allowed to go and with whom they have permission to speak. Rasha Drachkovitch mentioned that he often had to "make sure we were telling the same story" as the wardens with whom they worked at various institutions and that the major challenges for crews filming inside of prisons were dealing with logistical problems like not being able to control where they could go and needing permission for everything they did.[19] It is unsurprising that the general feel of the prison reality show is heavily influenced by the desires of those who are in charge of the institution whose gates are being "unlocked."

John Seigenthaler's narration often emphasizes the violence of correctional institutions in America. In one episode, he characterized Atascadero State Hospital as

[18] Altman, *Film/Genre*.
[19] *Rasha Drachkovitch*.

"easily one of the most dangerous places in the country" and recounted that Folsom Prison had "gained a reputation for violence and bloodshed" as early as 1880. Despite noting a ninety percent decrease in violence since MSNBC's first trip to Rikers Island, "Return to Rikers Island" replayed footage of outbreaks of violence from the earlier episode and emphasized the violence which still occurred there in its inmate profiles. The later episode prominently featured an inmate in the introductory montage describing how easy it is "to get stabbed, cut up, and raped" in the "messed up environment" at Rikers Island.

The majority of the inmates profiled in the show are incarcerated for violent offenses, and Seigenthaler recites the sentences of each inmate along with the crime for which he or she was convicted when introducing them to the audience. Dawn Cecil and Jennifer Leitner's study of *Lockup*'s first full season suggest that violent offenders are overrepresented in the show relative to their proportion in the overall prison population. This finding, while not surprising, further supports the assertion that *Lockup* prefers to use sensational content for entertainment value rather than to document a representative 'reality' of life in prison.[20] Seigenthaler frequently references statistics about the numbers of violent offenders in each prison and the prevalence of gangs, leaving the impression that all prisoners are guilty of violent crimes. All of the episodes in this sample featured at least one segment inside what Seigenthaler called "a prison within a prison," or administrative segregation units reserved for violent offenders deemed incapable of living in the general population due to a history of violence or

[20] Cecil and Leitner, "Unlocking the Gates."

mental illness. The host regularly characterizes these individuals in negative and sensational terms; he describes the inmates in the sexually violent predator unit at Atascadero State Hospital as having "a history of monstrous crimes." The cumulative effect of profiles highlighting the extremes of violence and mental illness in prisons is that *Lockup* obscures the everydayness of most prisoners' lives (which Drachkovitch referenced in his interview). Furthermore it creates unrealistic understandings of the prisons profiled on the show, which appear to be violent havens for drug addicts, dangerous violent men, gangs, and mentally unstable criminals. The impression left upon audiences is quite different from the one left upon Drachkovitch after shooting the show in prisons across the country.

Seigenthaler's journalistic presentation of facts generally serves to heighten the drama of *Lockup*'s portrayals of prisons and prisoners. While viewers are able to draw their own conclusions about criminals and the efficacy of the prison system after watching *Lockup*, Seigenthaler's narration tends to favor the point of view of corrections officials and proponents of "tough on crime ideology." Although Sigenthaler has not gone on the record about his own opinions on the corrections system, it is likely that his narration is heavily influenced by the arrangements made with prison officials prior to the show's production. Cavender and Fishman, Rapping, and Cecil all note that the relationship between criminal justice officials and television producers generally serves to reproduce the ideologies which support the continued growth of the criminal justice

apparatus.[21] Rasha Drachkovitch confirms this argument by suggesting that one of the chief motivations for correctional officials to allow *Lockup* crews into their prisons is that it gives them an opportunity to showcase the work that they are doing.[22] In addition, individual institutions and state governments stand to gain financially from allowing the show to visit their prisons. Wardens hoping to make money for their prisons often handled such arrangements, as evidenced by a disputed $100,000 contract between 44 Blue and the state of Florida in 2011.[23] Seigenthaler ends each episode—except the one focused on Atascadero State Hospital—with a warning that, despite the availability of educational, vocational, and mental health programs recidivism rates are above fifty percent in each of the featured prisons.[24] Pragmatically, this sad state of affairs might serve as an argument for prison reform due to a failure of these institutions to rehabilitate their charges. More likely though, as a result of the sensational nature of the program and its debt to the conventions of reality television, it can provoke fear by suggesting that unreformed criminals are on the loose, further necessitating the existence of prisons as places to house society's unwanted criminal other. Also, the show's focus on individuals—often the most violent and mentally ill convicts—allows viewers to imagine prisons as the best place for all criminals.

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[21] Mark Fishman and Gray Cavender, *Entertaining Crime*, 11.Cecil and Leitner, "Unlocking the Gates." Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV*.
[22] *Rasha Drachkovitch*.
[23] "Cable News Nightmare! MSNBC's Lockup Gets Shut Out Of Florida Prison," accessed April 7, 2015, http://www.mediaite.com/tv/cable-news-nightmare-msnbcs-lockup-gets-shut-out-of-florida-prison/.
[24] The lone exception is Atascadero State Hospital, which actually houses prisoners who are "mentally unfit" to return to normal society even after their sentences have been served, and whose population also consists largely of people who are mentally unfit to stand trial. These inmates are not counted in recidivism statistics because they have not been convicted of any crimes, and are instead patients of the state.

*Lockup* showcases the violent nature of the inmates in correctional facilities by highlighting gang activity and improvised weapons created by prisoners. Every episode features at least one segment that details prison officials searching inmates' prison cells. While none of the searches in these six episodes yield weapons or any other contraband, corrections officers discuss the possible hiding places (like toothpaste tubes and shampoo bottles) in which inmates could store illicit items. One episode features a segment in which prison officials search through inmates' mail to remove contraband from envelopes, cards, and packages. Because the on-camera searches are unproductive in some episodes, officers showcase and describe the contents of their prison's collection of confiscated improvised weapons. They describe in great detail how inmates use various items to construct weapons and how they are used in the prison on inmates and guards alike. Guards also discuss safety precautions required to undertake a search or to handle violent prisoners. These interviews almost always include descriptions of inmates hurling feces, urine, spit or blood at guards as biological weapons. These stories only reinforce the idea that prisoners will do anything to arm themselves against the authorities and each other. They also demonstrate that the show's producers will do anything to present a narrative about prison that conforms to the generic expectations of audiences who understand prisoners as violent. Once the show moves beyond the unproductive searches and into the collection of improvised weapons in the guardroom, it is almost as if they find those objects every day. Tropes about violence among inmates that audiences would have encountered in fictional prison programs are reproduced out of thin air in the stories recounted by guards in these scenes.

Prison officials and mental health professionals on *Lockup* proclaim that mental illness is often the primary cause of violent and predatory criminal behavior. Seigenthaler and prison officials spend a great deal of time talking about mental health problems in the Atascadero State Hospital, Valley State, Rikers Island, and Wabash prison episodes. Atascadero is a unique case in that it is an institution for the "criminally insane." Atascadero houses convicted criminals, unconvicted suspects who are mentally unfit to stand trial, and convicted criminals who are deemed mentally unfit to reenter society even though they have already served their full sentences. A full ninety percent of the patients—prisoners become patients when they arrive at Atascadero—are on some form of medication, mostly anti-psychotic drugs. The pharmacy is deemed the most important part of the facility, and distributes over 12,000 pills per day that allow patients to function in the prison environment. The episode profiles several of the therapists and clinicians who work at Atascadero and each sing the praises of the various programs that the hospital provides to its patients. In spite of those praises, good care is not available for all inmates. Dr. Ernst, one of the psychiatrists interviewed, suggests, "We don't talk about cures here. We talk about bringing symptoms under control and teaching patients their risk factors." This applies especially to the Sexually Violent Predators (SVPs) that are kept in the prison. In addition to mediation, the hospital offers voluntary chemical and actual physical castration as "treatments" for sex offenders in this administrative segregation unit.

Depictions of these most mentally ill of patients are especially jarring. The men profiled regularly speak of hearing voices, as well as their preferences for where to

abduct child victims. These shocking vignettes are also present in the Wabash Prison episode. However, instead of child molesters, this episode profiles on self-mutilating inmates and cannibalistic murderers. Many of these men apologize for their crimes and express their regret, as well as the horror that they feel when thinking about their own crimes. Many of these inmates and patients acknowledge that medication has dramatically improved their lives. However, these men are serving life sentences without parole, regardless of their mental health or stability. Although Atascadero staff and mental health professionals at these facilities proclaim a desire to reform offenders and return them to society, there are few success stories presented on the show.

*Lockup*'s focus on these types of patients has a complicated relationship with ideologies of mass incarceration. Vignettes such as these tend to suggest that criminally insane inmates and patients—like Joseph Garner, who slit his father's throat and then ate part of his brain—belong in prison. They also humanize these criminals, including the ones that blame their mental illness on their impoverished childhood or abusive parents. These statements, supported by mental health professionals and prison administrators who must deal with the realities of mental illness every day, seem to suggest that alternatives to prison might be more practical. These arguments are even more compelling when John Seigenthaler discusses the tremendous costs of caring for mentally ill inmates—especially those who must remain in prison for the remainder of their lives even after they serve their sentences—later in the Atascadero episode. These interviews sensationalize the illnesses of these criminals, exploiting their mental conditions for entertainment value. They mirror in "fact" the same types of mentally ill

characters that appear in films like *Con Air* (1997) or *The Green Mile* (1999) in the same period.

Finally, in *Lockup* episodes that deal with women in prison, "Return to Rikers Island," "Return to Valley State," and "Inside North Carolina Women's prison," similarly sensational topics are the main focus. The common themes of these episodes, as expressed by Seigenthaler, inmates, and corrections officials and administrators are female sexual relationships and maternity. Gloria Henry, the warden of Valley State, suggests that

> women have a strong need for touch and to be close to each other and talk. Many women say they get married to other women while in prison. Many of our prisoners who wouldn't be gay in the free world are drawn to each other here in a supportive family-like concept that may lead to sexual lesbian relationships.

This type of assumption—borne out by *Lockout*'s profiles—is also commonly associated with women-in-prison films made in Hollywood.[25] Almost the entirety of the episode in the North Carolina Women's prison was devoted to lesbian relationships. Inmates discuss their relationships with other women, administrators talk about how sexual encounters are forbidden, and inmates discuss how they distract officials to allow other couples to have intimate time together. In addition to the treatment of lesbian relationships between inmates, one segment of the episode documents inmates' discussion of inappropriate relationships between male and female guards and inmates

[25] Anne Morey, "'The Judge Called Me an Accessory': Women's Prison Films, 1950-1962," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 23, no. 2 (1995): 80–87.

The warden is quick to assure the audience prison authorities swiftly and appropriately handled this exploitative situation.

The Rikers Island and Valley State episodes focus much more narrowly on pregnant women and women with children. Seigenthaler notes early in the episode that eighty five percent of the women in Valley State prison are mothers. Unlike the male prisoners in the other episodes, the female inmates are given the opportunity to speak extensively on camera about their families—instead of about their crimes. These women talk about their children that they have left behind and how much they miss their families in ways that male prisoners in the series never do. Viewers see photos of their families and even meet one woman's family who comes to visit on the weekends. The only interaction in the episodes in this sample between male prisoners and their families consists of two prisoners being visited by their wives, one of which is a conjugal visit played up for its sexual nature.[26] Women prisoners are much less violent and generally calmer than their male counterparts on the show, which perhaps helps facilitate these types of interactions.

The Rikers Island and Valley State prisons both oversee hundreds of births per year. New mothers housed at Valley State have to ask a family member or legal guardian of their child come and pick it up within 48 hours of the birth before social services takes custody of their newborn. However, at Rikers, where women's sentences are usually shorter, they can keep their child in the nursery wing for up to one year,

[26] Here we see the sexual theme relied upon so heavily in the segments on women in use with male prisoners.

where prison staff are confident that the child will get better care than if their mothers were "out in the community." According to Cecil, maternity is the second major frame through which women prisoners are traditionally represented in fictional representations of female prisoners.[27] While these narratives about women prisoners undoubtedly humanize their subjects, they simultaneously reproduce dominant narratives about women behind bars from other media. Further, provision of in-house child care for new mothers in jails and prisons can be seen as a positive good or a waste of government funds, depending on the perspective of audience members. Either way, the fact that these women are pregnant when they are arrested and often in poor health suggests that they are unfit mothers to begin with. Frames like these lead to policies like the one pursued at Valley State, and are unfortunately perpetuated by *Lockup*. These same narratives about women's lives behind bars are reproduced to similar soap-opera-level dramatics in the recent and wildly successful streaming series *Orange is the New Black*.

Overall, *Lockup* presents a mixed bag for audiences about prisons. John Seigenthaler often remarks on the size and cost of prisons in the series, noting how prisons are overcrowded and underfunded even though they are likely to continue to grow. His frequent references to the failure of rehabilitative services combined with a remarkably high rate of recidivism suggest that prison neither reforms criminals nor serves as an effective deterrent of crime. The acts of violence, weapons, and warnings of prisoners documented on the show suggest that prison is a dangerous place filled

[27] Cecil, "Looking Beyond Caged Heat Media Images of Women in Prison."

with dangerous people. These representations further imply that these criminals belong in prison, and that they are incapable of reforming themselves, justifying the warehousing model of penology. However, as many inmates and prison officials on the show suggest, their crimes are driven by poverty, lack of education or opportunity, and mental illness that they were unaware of or couldn't afford to treat. Prison life and the ineffective treatment, educational, and vocational programs offered by correctional institutions depicted by *Lockup* hardly seem to be the answers to social problems.

As this cursory analysis of *Lockup* shows, applying Altman's method to contemporary media in the prison genre can uncover the "meaning-grounding institutions that make meaning seem to arise directly out of semantics and syntax."[28] It is overly simplistic to suggest that *Lockup* is exploitative of its subjects; but an understanding of how the show's producers and the network view the journalistic mission of the product—or the lack thereof—allows for a more grounded analysis of the texts themselves. *Lockup* does "unlock the gates" of prisons, but it is only to show how they fit our already preconceived notions of what they are like on the inside. Instead of offering potential solutions to the problems of prisons in the twenty-first century, *Lockup* edits the footage that its creators capture in real prisons into episodes that fit with the generic expectations that audiences form through prison films and television programs, all of which build upon the semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements identified in the films in this study. Understanding the interplay between these generic expectations and the types of programs produced in the prison genre in the last twenty

[28] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 210–211.

years is critical to any scholarly investigation of the "carceral imaginary." It is my hope that my dissertation's inquiry into historic prison films offers an example for how to conduct future inquiries into the nature of the carceral imaginary. Scholars hoping to understand how media representations of prisons reflect or impact prison policy must consider generic prison media as historically specific products whose relationship to previous generic texts is as important as the conditions under which they were produced and marketed. If we consider how shows like *Lockup* interact with the films and television programs that were on large and small screens during its long run on MSNBC, and those that came before it, we might gain a better understanding of its success, and how it contributes to the carceral imaginary in the twenty-first century.

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