THE SPECTACLE OF PUNISHMENT: CINEMATIC
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

by

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of modern cinema has fostered the evolution of three motifs, or cinematic tropes of the prison setting: prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox. Prison as a playground is depicted in cinematic productions that emphasize the macabre aspects of a stereotypical prison setting, including threatening behavior, manipulation, violence, and prison rape. Prison-as-penance is demonstrated when prison is portrayed as a necessary institution that mends out punishment to recalcitrant convicts, with the epitome of punishment represented as the death penalty. Prison as a paradox appears in movies and television shows that emphasize the ambiguity and confusion of the prison setting, highlighting the intrinsic and irreparable defects of the prison-industrial complex. Since firsthand information about prison is typically hard to come by, the information presented in these cinematic productions becomes a source of knowledge to the viewer. This knowledge, in turn, underpins a belief that the prison-industrial complex is a necessary institution, thereby reinforcing tacit support for its continued growth and harshening.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

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CHAPTER I
THE OUTLAW AND THE LAWMAN IN LES MISÉRABLES

On Christmas morning of 2012, Universal Pictures released yet another film reproduction of Victor Hugo’s 1862 classic, Les Misérables. This latest version is based on a musical adaptation, which The New York Times reports “has been translated into 21 languages, performed in 43 countries, won almost 100 awards, and been seen by more than 60 million people” since it was first performed in 1985. The newest film made $283 million during its first month in theaters, garnering numerous prize nominations, and winning three Golden Globes and three Academy Awards. Even the soundtrack proved extremely profitable, reaching the number one spot on the Billboard 200 chart just weeks after the film’s debut. A century and a half after the book was originally authored, the film adaptation still packed movie theaters, demonstrating the story’s continued resonance with modern audiences.

Les Misérables has proven longstanding in part because of the construction of what have since become archetypal characters. An archetype is a recurring pattern, identifiable by commonly held traits, and as Carl Jung contends, “The archetype is a tendency to form such representations as a motif—representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.” Jung further discusses the study of archetypal images and characters:

What we mean by “archetype” is in itself irrepresentable, but has effects which make visualization of it possible, namely, the archetypal image and ideas. We meet with a similar situation in physics: there the smallest particles are themselves irrepresentable but have effects from the nature of which we can build up a model. The archetypal image, the motif or mythologem, is a construction of this kind.
Les Misérables introduced two such archetypal characters, the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman, whose “basic patterns” have remained consistent for more than 150 years.

The protagonist in Les Misérables is Jean Valjean, a paroled convict who enters the story as an angry social outcast. Despite his best efforts to move beyond his past life of “crime” (he was initially incarcerated for stealing a loaf of bread), the rest of the world is unprepared to give him a second chance. His yellow identification papers mark him as a dangerous criminal, and he struggles to find employment, food, and lodging wherever he goes. When Valjean is eventually taken in and cared for by a stranger, he responds to the good deed by making off with the man’s valuable silver in the middle of the night. Those who had turned Valjean away based on his yellow papers seem for a moment to have been correct in their assumptions about his character, as he proves himself to be a stereotypical recalcitrant thief.

Valjean is arrested and returned to the house to answer for his crime, but in a twist of plot, the homeowner claims that the items were a gift, and Valjean is subsequently released. The unexpected sympathy is a turning point in the story, as Jean Valjean the common criminal begins the transformation into Jean Valjean the redeemed outlaw. Throughout the following years, in his quest for redemption, Valjean rescues two small children from a burning building, becomes Mayor of a local town, and saves the life of a man who is pinned beneath a heavy cart. Mike Nellis describes the art of adapting such characters to film in an article in Theoretical Criminology, where he pinpoints Les Misérables as “the foundational redemptive text.” According to Nellis, Valjean acquires his redemption in the story through a series of deliberate penitent acts: he “experiences
guilt and takes responsibility for his future, makes amends by becoming a productive citizen and prevents suffering in another generation,” while consistently enduring “whatever moral duty requires of him.”9 The archetypal character of the redeemed outlaw has remained a prominent figure in prison literature for more than a century. The level of success that the redeemed outlaw experiences in his attempt at reformation varies from story to story, and sometimes the archetypal character discards the idea of redemption altogether, but the desire to make a sincere change always materializes at some point in the narrative of the archetypal redeemed outlaw.

Les Misérables also introduced audiences to a second archetypal character, obstinate Police Inspector Javert, who represents the counterpart of the redeemed outlaw. Javert serves as the story’s primary antagonist, incessantly chasing the reformed Valjean wherever he flees regardless of the years that pass or the amends Valjean appear to make.10 According to Nellis, Javert, who was himself born in a prison, “embodies all that is hostile to the principle of giving offenders second chances . . . he represents both the long shadow of imprisonment, and the impossibility of ever becoming free of its influence or stigma, and the diffusion of penal authority into every crevice of public life.”11 Javert refuses to entertain the possibility of redemption as an alternative to punishment, and near the end of the story, when the man he is chasing puts his own safety in peril to save the Inspector’s life, Javert finds himself unable to accept the outlaw’s virtuous deed. Incapable of fulfilling both his moral and his official duty, Javert commits suicide to avoid taking Valjean back to prison. The archetypal obstinate lawman lacks the capacity to recognize sincere redemption in the character of the
redeemed outlaw; thus, when faced with the possibility of the outlaw’s redemption, he chooses his own death.

The two archetypes detailed above, the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman, continue to appear as recurring characters in modern texts and films. In 1967, *Cool Hand Luke* introduced viewers to Luke Jackson, a decorated war veteran who is sentenced to prison for drunkenly stealing the heads off of parking meters.\(^{12}\) *The New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther said that the film’s script “elevates this brutal picture above the ruck of prison films and into the range of intelligent contemplation of the ironies of life.”\(^{13}\) Luke’s crime is petty, and his status as an ex-Sergeant in the Army gains him the viewer’s support early in the story. As such, the viewer holds no hostility toward Luke and does not desire to see him punished for a victimless crime. Once incarcerated, Luke becomes a mascot of sorts, changing the atmosphere of his cellblock from banal and institutionalized to lively and imaginative. In a famous scene, when Luke boldly bets, “I can eat fifty eggs,” his friend questions his claim, saying, “You ever eat fifty eggs?” Luke coyly responds, “*Nobody* ever ate fifty eggs,” exemplifying the “Cool,” unbreakable attitude which he exudes throughout the movie.\(^{14}\) The archetypal lawman in *Cool Hand Luke* is portrayed as a sharp-shooting guard with a quick trigger-finger who eventually murders Luke when he realizes, much like *Les Misérables*’s Javert, that the system he represents is not equipped to deal with an inmate like Luke, who does not fit the typical convict stereotype.

Also released in 1967, Robert Aldrich’s *The Dirty Dozen* tells the story of a group of twelve men, each convicted of a violent crime and sentenced either to life in prison or to death.\(^{15}\) American film critic Roger Ebert said that, “right up to the last scene the
In the film, the convicts are given a chance to regain their freedom by accepting a dangerous mission that will almost certainly end in their deaths. Colonel Everett Dasher Breed is the story’s obstinate lawman, a strict leader who is incapable of entertaining the possibility that a group of convicts could possibly prove successful in anything except for crime and mayhem. In a conclusion that seems to both confirm and reject the Colonel’s beliefs, the surviving convicts trap a group of German officers and their mistresses inside of a bunker, douse them in gasoline, and then ignite them with a grenade. The assault is a success, but only a single convict survives the mission to regain his freedom and, presumably, to seek his redemption.

In 1974, *The Longest Yard* won a Golden Globe Award for Best Picture in the category of Musical or Comedy. The film tells the story of redeemed outlaw Paul Crewe, a former professional quarterback who is sentenced to 18 months in prison for “stealing” his girlfriend’s expensive car and drunkenly (and intentionally) driving it into a lake. In prison, Crewe agrees to coach a group of his fellow convicts in a scrimmage game against the prison guards, who already have a well-trained team. The film’s obstinate lawman is Warden Hazen, who threatens Crewe with additional trumped-up charges unless he intentionally loses the climactic game. Crewe’s girlfriend is portrayed as a cliché spoiled-brat, and the viewer holds little against Crewe for drowning her expensive car, but he further gains the viewer’s sympathy as the final football game plays out. In a hilarious scene where Crewe proves his loyalty to his fellow inmates, he is flagged for two subsequent penalties when he intentionally throws the football at a guard’s crotch, and then has the entire convict team pile on top of him. The inmates
eventually win the game, after a last second, one-yard run—the longest yard—puts the convicts ahead as time runs out.

In 1979, *Escape From Alcatraz* exploited the same man-against-the-system method of redemption in telling the semi-biographical story of Frank Morris, who is convicted of bank robbery and sent to Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary. Roger Ebert said that the movie “is a taut and toughly wrought portrait of life in prison,” emphasizing “the ways of dehumanizing that are peculiar to this prison.” For example, his first night at Alcatraz, Morris is marched through the cellblock stark naked, and then locked in his cell as a guard quips, “Welcome to Alcatraz.” As the film unfolds, the plot pits Morris against the prison itself, and when he is targeted in a sexual assault and a subsequent attempted murder, his only solution seems to be to escape from the prison. The obstinate lawman in *Escape from Alcatraz* is the nameless Warden, who is unable to accept the apparent success of the prison break, insisting instead that Morris and his co-conspirators drowned. As he and his men walk the shoreline in search of the inmates’ bodies, the Warden finds a chrysanthemum that belonged to one of the escaped convicts, presumably placed there when the escapees came to shore. Rather than accepting the blatant evidence of the successful prison break, the Warden throws the flower into the sea and obstinately continues the search.

In 1996, *Sling Blade* became what Nellis calls “arguably the first of a series of movies which quite explicitly placed personal redemption at the heart of the released prisoner narrative,” presenting a picture of a convicted felon who wants to “go straight,” and “also feel[s] compelled to make amends for harm done, to atone.” Karl Childers is a mentally challenged man who is released from a criminal asylum after serving 20 years
for murdering his mother and her lover in a confused fit of rage. Childers is presented as a good hearted and likely harmless character, and it is not difficult for the viewer to feel sympathetic to his situation early into the story. He embraces a pious lifestyle and is befriended by a 10-year-old boy named Frank. When he discovers that Frank and his mother are being abused by the man who they live with, he takes matters into his own hands. In a dramatic, final act of redemption meant to protect Frank and his mother, Childers murders the abusive boyfriend and ends up back in the custody of the film’s symbolic obstinate lawman, the criminal asylum.²³

In 1998, James Gray’s *American History X* was heralded by *The New York Times* as a film that presents a “bold but reckless synthesis of visual enticement and rhetorical fever” in a way that “dares to address America’s neo-Nazi culture with brutal candor.”²⁴ *American History X* provides one of the most extreme examples of inmate redemption in the character of Derek Vinyard, who begins the film as the leader of a Neo-Nazi gang in Los Angeles, California. Two African-American men murder Vinyard’s father while he is working as a fire fighter, and Vinyard subsequently murders two other African-American men when he catches them breaking into his car. During the three years that he spends in prison for manslaughter, Vinyard experiences a polar change in his belief system, but not until after he is gang raped by white supremacists in retaliation for befriending an African-American inmate.²⁵ Helen Eigenberg and Agnes Baro have noted that “*American History X* also uses rape as a central theme to motivate major change in the main character,” causing the viewer to sympathize with Vinyard based on the horror he experiences in prison.²⁶ Once released, Vinyard becomes a spokesman for racial equality, but he is rejected by many of his old friends, who still profess the Neo-Nazi
beliefs he supported prior to his incarceration. He continues to seek redemption by attempting to help his younger brother avoid a fate similar to his own; or, as Nellis suggests, he “makes amends by becoming a productive citizen and prevents suffering in another generation,” while consistently enduring “whatever moral duty requires of him.”

It could easily be argued that the obstinate lawman in *American History X* is the extreme racism that Vinyard experiences while in prison, for his time in prison changed his entire belief system and led to his altruistic ideology, and it refused to release its ideological hold on him when he was released.

Jim Sheridan’s 2005 *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* is an embellished biographical account of rapper, Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson, who plays the role of Marcus, the story’s redeemed outlaw. The New York Times Film Critic A. O. Scott called the movie “the latest film to propose hip-hop stardom as both an alternative to and an extension of the criminal life . . . a follow-your-dream tale of adversity and redemption.”

Marcus is a drug dealer who winds up in prison, where he learns that his girlfriend is pregnant with his child. He subsequently challenges the obstinate lawman, portrayed as the social system that provided him few options other than drug sales, and then sentenced him to prison for his misbehavior. Marcus manages to polish his talent for rapping, and once released from prison, he pursues what Nellis describes as “redemption through art,” thus disengaging himself from the drug trade and pursuing a legitimate lifestyle.

As these brief comments on some of the key cinematic representations of prison demonstrate, the archetypal characters of the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman have been repackaged time and again and then resold as different individuals in new movies, yet each portrayal continues to display similar characteristics. This is what Carl
Jung meant when he described archetypal images as “representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.” In addition to the tried-and-true archetypes of the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman, modern television shows and films that focus on imprisonment have fostered the evolution of the cliché prison setting, as producers have discovered that the formula for cinematic gold requires certain key ingredients. The success of these films often seems to depend on the ability of their creators to emphasize aspects of the prison environment that viewers find entertaining, while neglecting features that viewers find unpleasant or boring. For example, according to the United States Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, from 2011-2012, 4% of state and federal prisoners reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual victimization by either staff or fellow inmates during the previous year. But in a recent article in *Sexuality and Culture*, Eigenberg and Baro posit that “while most studies on male rape in prison suggest that it is a relatively rare event,” in modern movies, “the inclusion of at least a reference to male rape and/or a peripheral rape scene has become a standard part of prison film production.” Likewise, Dawn Cecil recognizes a similar formula at work in modern movies depicting eroticized female prisons: “These ‘babes-behind-bars’ films perpetuate highly sexualized images of female prisoners . . . It is Hollywood, after all; they do not necessarily seek to educate—instead they aim to titillate.” Leonidas K. Cheliotis perhaps said it best in a recent article in *Crime, Media, Culture*, where he described the fictional prison setting as a place where:

Imagination tends to be taken on a sensational journey into spaces where the false and the fictional arise victorious from the ashes of the real. Prisons are usually typecast either as dark institutions of perpetual horror and virulent vandalism or idyllic holiday camps offering in-cell television and gourmet cuisine on the back of taxpayers.
In sum, television and film representations of the prison environment reinforce exciting
tropes of incarceration, while minimizing aspects of imprisonment that fail to sufficiently
“titillate” the viewing audience.

This Masters Thesis will examine the emergence and growth of three archetypal
prison settings, and the way that these settings interact with the archetypal obstinate
lawman and the redeemed outlaw. Cheliotis’s institutional “idyllic holiday camp,” which
I shall refer to as prison as a playground, is exemplified in scenes depicting prison
murder, rape, or drug sales, and recently, as Bill Yousman posits, such “sensationalized
versions of prisons and prisoners are most familiar to television audiences.”36 These
crimes represent many of the very acts that prisons are supposed to dissuade, but scenes
depicting them taking place inside of a prison suggest that, for at least some inmates, the
rules can be circumvented. The “dark institutions of perpetual horror and virulent
vandalism” described by Cheliotis are what I shall refer to as prison-as-penance, and the
focus will be on films that portray the penitentiary as a terrible-but-necessary place where
convicted felons serve their well-earned punishment. A third motif seems to recur in the
movies reviewed within this analysis, represented through the confusion and systemic
ineffectiveness of the prison institution; the intrinsic ineptness of the prison-industrial
complex is represented in what I shall refer to as the trope of prison as a paradox. These
three archetypal prison settings and their relationship to the characters presented with and
through them will provide the focus of this study.

As Hollywood has consistently sought to outdo itself with each new film or
television production, the tropes of prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison
as a paradox have been refined and adjusted to satisfy consumer demands: a brutal prison
rape in a new movie must outdo the brutal prison rape from the last movie. Yousman describes the outcome of such representational evolutions, stating that:

Brutal state practices are therefore legitimated through narratives that frame the punitive treatment of prisoners as both necessary and deserved. These brutalizing fictions suggest that the penal system is too lenient or soft . . . that rehabilitation is impossible, that prisoners are dangerous creatures who require severe punishment, and that, ultimately, capital punishment is the only solution . . . If this is the case, if these creatures are so unlike us, so alien and dangerous, then we must become even more punitive, even more repressive in our approach to criminal justice. Even more policing and surveillance is necessary, even more prisons, even harsher prison environments and sentencing policies; this is all deemed necessary by these narratives of terror.  

In fact, Yousman goes on to describe the power of cinematic representations to affect the perspective of individuals *who have been to prison*: “even those viewers whose life experiences were full of firsthand stories and images of life in prison resorted to mass-media representations to make sense of their lives.”

Not only does the evolution of the cliché cinematic prison setting reinforce the perception that the prison-industrial complex is indispensable, but it insinuates the necessity of its continued expansion and harshening if society is to remain free from the threat of dangerous and malicious criminals.

**Literature Review: The Roots of the Spectacle**

The New Testament Bible gospel of Matthew tells the gruesome story of John the Baptist’s death. During a drunken party, King Herod was so enchanted by the erotic dancing of a young lady that he offered her any gift that she requested. After discussing her myriad options with her mother, she decided that she wanted the head of John the Baptist *delivered to the party on a silver platter*. At the time, John the Baptist was still alive, locked in a Roman prison for crimes against the state. The gruesome execution of the Jewish prophet and the subsequent displaying of his severed head provided
entertainment for a room full of the King’s party guests. The historical account of this macabre event provides a two-thousand-year-old example of the spectacle of punishment: execution as a source of entertainment, with a plot driven by an intoxicated King’s overzealous libido.

The tradition of the spectacle of punishment continued to evolve throughout the next two millennia. Jesus Christ was publically executed in the most brutal fashion by the penal institution of his time. The crucifixion narrated in the Biblical gospels was not uncommon in its viciousness, and Jesus was actually executed at the same time as two other criminals, both sentenced to death for the crime of theft. In fact, Jewish law at the time stipulated the spectacle of public execution for a number of other non-violent “crimes,” including blasphemy, adultery, and homosexuality. These executions typically occurred in public venues, and were frequently carried out at the hands of the citizenry via the horrific method of stoning: the general public would throw rocks at the accused until he or she was dead. This method of execution not only provided a free, public spectacle of punishment to anyone who wished to attend, but it also created a “hands on” experience for those who wished to participate in the killing by throwing stones at the condemned. Although the modern day Bible does not explicitly describe these events as exciting or entertaining, the fact that Jewish society recognized the laws and carried them out for thousands of years is evidence of the long-standing social acceptance of the spectacle of punishment: someone had to throw the stones that resulted in the death of the accused. As states progressed into more modern nations and jurisdictions, many such acts of public violence were eventually declared illegal; but state-sanctioned violence as punishment for a crime remained a spectacle that served to
satisfy what Sigmund Freud refers to as “The natural instinct of aggressiveness in man,” which “opposes this program of civilization” when left unregulated. Civilized man would no longer be responsible for meriting out his own justice based on his “natural instinct of aggressiveness,” but would have to seek relief through the “program of civilization,” also known as the legal system.

In the opening paragraphs of Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Michel Foucault describes a grisly scene from the mid-eighteenth century in which a man convicted of murder was publically executed after being tortured before the citizenry: he was beaten, burned with sulfur, ripped asunder with red-hot pinchers, quartered by horses, and eventually burned to ashes. Antebellum America adopted a similar attitude toward the public spectacle of punishment, and as Stephen Hartnett explains, even founding father William Penn felt that “corporeal punishments were useful public performances, literally theatrical plays demonstrating that elites would use violence to create political order.” The public stood witness to such spectacles of punishment, including public torture, hangings, and beheadings, until well into the 19th century, when, according to Foucault, the emphasis on judging the crime began to be replaced with an emphasis on judging “the soul of the criminal.” But punishment that was sanctioned by the sovereign had already assumed its place in human culture, creating a permanent distinction between portrayals of violence that were legal, and those that were not.

From the Street to the Screen

The spectacle of punishment has long since moved from the street gallows into the walled penitentiary, where it now remains stubbornly hidden from public view. In modern times, the spectacle of punishment is instead presented via television and movies,
commodified for what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called “aesthetic mass consumption,” a term that encompasses film productions designed to appeal to a mass audience. 47 The walls that keep prisoners contained also keep the eyes of the general public restrained, but the film reproduction of a prison environment casually discards this bothersome censor. As Yousman claims, “because most viewers will not have experienced incarceration directly, media representations become their primary form of imagining prison.” 48 It is easier, safer, and more comfortable to view a prison through a movie or a television show than to visit an actual prison, and the sheer number of prison films produced in the last half-century (see Appendix A) shows that viewers still enjoy such vicarious trips to the penitentiary. These representations cause the viewer to feel as if she is a part of the prison settings, while also preserving a sense of safety and security. As Cheloitis contends, “The inherent artificiality of media exposure to crime helps neutralize the incipient sense of personal danger, without preventing evocation of it as real and grave.” 49 The viewer is exposed to events and environments that would normally evoke a sense of trepidation, but the safety of the screen allows for the temporary disabling of such emotions because the danger is not real, it is only an illusion. In this way, prison and the spectacle of punishment are key components of the cultural industry, providing many consumers with the only source of information readily available to them concerning the operation of a penitentiary.

As Michel De Certeau argues, “Today, fiction claims to make the real present, to speak in the name of facts and thus to cause the semblance it produces to be taken as referential reality.” 50 In this quotation, Certeau refers to the ability of imaginary spaces created through the magic of cinema to feel to viewers as if they are real: the production
masquerading as reality. For example, Shawshank Prison does not exist; it is a figment of author Stephen King’s imagination projected onto a dilapidated state prison facility in Mansfield, Ohio. But *The Shawshank Redemption* is a movie that takes the viewer into the bowels of a high-security, early twentieth-century prison. For those who have never been inside of an actual prison, the dark scenery and violent atmosphere serve to provide a point of reference in the absence of any real personal knowledge, an excellent example of Certeau’s “referential reality.” The concept of fiction experienced solely for enjoyment is supplemented with a dual-reality in which Shawshank Prison and the actors who occupy it create a space that the viewer experiences as reality. Adorno and Horkheimer pre-figured Certeau’s sentiment: “Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies . . . the film forces its victims to equate it directly with reality.”

Sometime during the fourth century B.C., Plato described how “Art imitates life” in Book X of his stoic masterpiece, *The Republic*: “The imitator or maker of the image [artist] knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only.” Plato’s contention was that the artist does not know enough about the situation she recreates to present a truly accurate picture. Instead, the artist learns only enough to present an acceptable facsimile: a copy fit to convince only those with minimal knowledge of the subject matter. Two millennia later, flamboyant author Oscar Wilde flipped Plato’s assertion around to claim that “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates life,” suggesting that mankind’s insatiable “desire for expression” feeds upon itself: “Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. Life seizes on them and uses them, *even if they be to her own fault.*” Although the two statements seem at first antithetical, Plato and Wilde both agree that the artistic
representation is only a simplified version of some original, and more importantly, that the representation provides the otherwise uninformed viewer with what Certeau later called “referential reality.” Fredric Jameson took this concept a step further, ominously suggesting that the commodification of culture will leave future societies reliant on these narratives as a source of historical knowledge: “we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history.” Whether one holds that art imitates life or that life imitates art, the two ideas share an interconnected and curiously dialectical relationship: they appear to both illuminate and complicate one another at the same time.

Eigenberg and Baro demonstrate this curious dialectic in a recent article in *Sexuality and Culture*, where they delineate the interconnected relationship between the real and its cinematic portrayal, in this case referring to scenes of sexual assaults in male prison movies:

Male rape was depicted as almost inevitable . . . movies that sensationalize male rape in prison may actually contribute to a social structure that has come to accept, perhaps even endorse, that rape is part and parcel of the incarceration experience. It is abhorrent to think that we live in a society that views rape in prison as a form of deterrence, but the deconstruction of these films suggests . . . there is no general outrage that men are imprisoned in institutions where they are not safe from either the threat or the reality of sexual assault.

Referring to the same cinematic portrayals, Cheliotis claims that, “Rather than undermining the external legitimacy of prisons, and despite endangering professional careers, media representations reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening.” Travis Dixon posits that, when it comes to cinematic prison portrayals, “stereotypes tend to be both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating precisely because they help us explain the
And Sue Mahan and Richard Lawrence said it succinctly in a recent article in *The Prison Journal*: “When it comes to crime, media coverage is socially constructed reality.” Since actual penitentiaries are essentially censored from public oversight, “media coverage” provides the most prominent source of information concerning the silent and hidden world of prison operations.

In the following pages I will examine the emergence and evolution of movie and television representations of the prison setting, following the progression of three motifs that consistently emerge in prison representations: prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox. Each television show and movie examined herein will present a picture of an archetypal prison setting, as each was chosen to serve as what Communication scholar Kenneth Burke called a “representative anecdote:” a story that is “supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate. It must have scope. Yet it must also possess simplicity, in that it is broadly a reduction of the subject matter.” “Representative anecdotes” are valuable tools for understanding the objects they portray, and in the case of movies and television representations of prison, any event that is left out of the program—any “reduction of the subject matter”—can say just as much about the film as the events that are included. In many regards, the viewer appreciates this “reduction,” for most movies and television shows would be far too lengthy and banal if every second of the main character’s life was included. The events emphasized and those ignored create the very fabric that holds the movie plot together, allowing the viewer to follow along with minimal effort on her part.

Burke expounded on his idea of selective focus, claiming that, “men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop
vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality.”\(^{63}\) In this regard, the television and movie tropes of prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox are each a “reflection,” a “selection,” and a “deflection” of reality: the producers of prison movies choose to portray certain aspects of incarceration, while underemphasizing others and ignoring some completely. In the half-century that has passed since Burke first coined his idea of selective focus, the largest advancement in the way of television and film production involves the improvement of technology, namely digital editing software. While producers can manipulate scenes and add realistic special effects more easily than ever before, viewers have more entertainment options and can access information faster than ever before. What has resulted is a situation in which the images that appear on a screen are increasingly unreliable, even as they continue to appear more realistic.

Steven Shaviro describes this phenomenon in his recent book, *Post Cinematic Affect*, where he succinctly explains the history of media technology as follows: “Film has long since been displaced by newer media—television, video, and a whole panoply of computer-based forms—as the ‘cultural dominant’ of our society.”\(^{64}\) He goes on to describe how new modes of production, digitization, and improved special effects have created a standard based upon “a different mode of production than those which dominated the twentieth century.”\(^{65}\) Shaviro delineates this concept, stating that:

Recent film and video works are expressive . . . they provide indices of complex social issues . . . but they are also productive in the sense that they do not *represent* social processes, so much as they participate actively in these processes, and help to constitute them. Films and music videos, like other media works, are *machines for generating affect* . . . they generate subjectivity, and they play a crucial role in the valorization of capital.\(^{66}\)
Rather than acting as a simple representation of an object, Shaviro shows that films actually help to create a “structure of feelings” related to the object—that there is a dialectical relationship between the film, the objects portrayed in it, and the consumer’s sense of subjectivity while viewing the images. As with any commodity, images that elicit a desirable affect in the viewer represent a genre that she is likely to return to; and conversely, images that do not elicit the desired emotional response will be subsequently passed over for alternatives that may produce the desired affect. As such, producers of any commodity, including television and movie prison narratives, must meet standards that satisfy the consumer’s demands, or else the consumer will simply choose a more affective substitute. Coupled with the unprecedented ease of access to mass media via the Internet and video services such as YouTube and Netflix, Shaviro’s “different mode of production” is playing a part in the entertainment decisions of more individuals than ever before.67 The spectacle of punishment has joined the ranks of commodity, streaming ceaselessly into the homes of consumers via television sets, computers, smart phones, and tablets.

As Guy Debord notes in Society of the Spectacle, “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life.”68 Once the representation of the prison environment, as depicted via Shaviro’s “new media” representation, becomes a source of knowledge to the viewer, there is no need for additional information: “The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.”69 This is what Michel de Certeau meant when he described the illusion of knowledge produced from the consumption of “copies of stories,” each of which “claims to make the
real present, to speak in the name of the facts and thus to cause the semblance it produces to be taken as referential reality.”\textsuperscript{70} As the proliferation of mass media continues unchecked, the spectacle of punishment will continue to evolve, carving out an expansive space of “referential reality” which the viewer is enticed to accept as fact in the absence of any additional information.

This slippage between an actual prison and its cinematic representation has negative policy implications. Indeed, Certeau’s “referential reality” leads to what Yousman describes as a situation in which, “when viewers mistake violent media spectacles for ‘real beings,’ they tend to embrace increasingly severe forms of social control such as increased surveillance, policing, and incarceration.”\textsuperscript{71} As this examination of the tropes of prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox unfolds, the dialectical relationship between the real and the spectacle will reveal a situation in which, as Cheliotis aptly posits, “media representations reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening.”\textsuperscript{72} Yousman’s claim that “even those viewers whose life experiences were full of firsthand stories and images of life in prison resorted to mass-media representations to make sense of their lives,” suggests that not only do these narratives create Certeau’s “referential reality” in the absence of any personal information, but that, in some cases, they have the ability to supersede the real accounts of those who have served time in prison.\textsuperscript{73} When the source for society’s information concerning criminal corrections consists solely of cinematic spectacles, the necessity of sustaining and expanding the current system is unquestionably reinforced. As Yousman so aptly contended, “These brutalizing fictions suggest that the penal system is too lenient
or soft . . . [that] even more policing and surveillance is necessary, even more prisons, even harsher prison environments and sentencing policies; this is all deemed necessary by these narratives of terror." As this Thesis unfolds, a consistent theme will emerge in the cinematic accounts examined herein, and the recurring tropes of the prison environment will be shown to tacitly reinforce the belief in the necessity of the continued growth and harshening of the prison-industrial complex.
CHAPTER II

PRISON AS A PLAYGROUND

The discussion of the trope of prison as a playground for demented, recalcitrant felons will revolve around FOX’s Prime Time television series *Prison Break*. New episodes of the show aired for more than four years on FOX’s local affiliate stations, and the series has since been released in multiple formats via Internet and videodisc. It was both widely viewed and wildly popular, winning a People’s Choice Award in 2006.

More importantly, *Prison Break* presents an excellent example of the recent evolution in portrayals of the trope of prison as a playground in modern television. False convictions and clandestine escape plans dominate the show’s main plot, while a constant barrage of violence and mayhem keeps viewers occupied as the story unfolds. The show’s emphasis on illicit behavior was discussed in an article in *USA Today*, which detailed “the racism, violence, and sexually predatory behavior” of the main character’s “dysfunctional fellow prisoners.” As such, *Prison Break* provides a superb example of the modern television trope of prison as a playground.

*Prison Break* is exactly what its title suggests, the story of a group of men who conspire to break out of prison. The main character is Michael Scofield, a wealthy businessman who inexplicably robs a bank one day. He subsequently gives himself up and swiftly makes a deal with prosecutors: he will plead guilty if he is allowed to serve his sentence at Fox River State Penitentiary. Once Scofield is in the prison, the real plot begins to unfold. Michael has a brother who is also incarcerated in the prison, falsely convicted of murder and awaiting execution on Death Row. The show evolves as Michael’s intricate plan to break both he and his brother out of the prison slowly comes
together. In the mean time, viewers are presented with an environment replete with stereotypical prison characters, including a redeemed outlaw, an obstinate lawman, and a host of unrepentant, villainous convicts.

Michael Scofield is the story’s redeemed outlaw, and like Les Misérables’s Jean Valjean, he seems doomed to remain ensnared in a correctional system that refuses to release its firm hold on him. He is convicted of a crime in which no one was injured, and his motives were noble if not valiant, therefore the audience sympathizes with him from the story’s outset. The employees and the warden of the prison exude the stereotypical obstinate lawman attitude, and like Les Misérables’s Javert, they refuse to consider the possibility of the outlaw’s redemption. The first season is set in Fox River State Penitentiary, a maximum-security prison that epitomizes the trope of prison as a playground. Fox River is full of characters versed at manipulating the system for their own personal comfort, and at times the setting seems more like a demented funhouse than a maximum-security prison.

Theodore Bagwell, or “T-Bag,” is a recalcitrant inmate who acts as one of the prominent antagonists in Prison Break. He is a proud white supremacist, a flagrant sexual predator, and a convicted rapist-murderer who is esteemed by a large following of other white supremacists inside the prison. Bagwell thrives in the prison environment and revels in his role as an unapologetic criminal, flagrantly parading his macabre escapades before his fellow inmates and the guards. For example, in the course of the first season alone, he perpetrates numerous sexual assaults on other inmates, incites a prison-wide race riot, and eventually murders one of the guards to avoid disciplinary sanctions. More than just a character inside of the prison, Bagwell, whose nickname
(T-Bag) is also a euphemism for a sadistic sexual act, actually represents the trope of prison as a playground, and his debauchery is a reflection of the environment that the producers wished to convey to the audience. He is an example of Kenneth Burke’s “reduction, selection and deflection of reality,” and his conduct paints the prison environment as a dangerous playground.

The representation of the prison environment through the sadistic actions of an inmate is not a new development in television and film production, and Bagwell is just one of the latest in a long line of cinematic characters who thrive in a restrictive prison environment. In 1995, *The Shawshank Redemption* won a host of movie awards, and was praised by Film Critic Roger Ebert as a film that “creates a warm hold on our feelings because it makes us a member of a family.”81 In *The Shawshank Redemption, Prison Break’s* character of Bagwell is represented in inmate Boggs, the leader of a group of sexual predators known as “The Sisters.”82 The Sisters perpetrate sexual assaults and rapes on other inmates, and when the movie’s narrator, Red, hears a potential victim of the Sisters ask, “I don’t suppose it would help any if I explained to them that I’m not homosexual,” he casually responds, “Neither are they. You have to be human first; they don’t qualify.”83 The Sisters are a gang that thrives in the contained environment of Shawshank Prison, and they are shown committing gang rapes and sexual assaults throughout the film. Their conduct appalls even the other inmates, as evidenced by Red’s dehumanizing comment, yet their behavior continues with minimal interference. “The Sisters” manipulate the rules of the system in the contained spaces within the prison walls to create and utilize a power dynamic that leaves their victims at a severe disadvantage: they make the prison their playground.
Two years after the release of *The Shawshank Redemption*, the cable television network HBO raised the bar on glamorized prison environments when it began airing episodes of the hyper-violent prison series *Oz*. Most of the episodes take place inside of a maximum-security prison housing unit, and the cast is made up almost entirely of murderers, rapists, violent criminals, and colluding guards. The program frequently depicts scenes of violence, conspiracy, and prison rape, suggesting that these activities are prison norms rather than isolated incidents. The recipe for *Oz* appears to be a simple distillation of the shocking aspects in the trope of prison as a playground: remove the banal and mundane, leaving nothing but the violence, depravity, and macabre. Author Elayne Rapping contends that the hyper-violent depiction of the prison milieu in *Oz* “presents a vision of hell on earth in which inmates are so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society.”

This is a perfect example of what Cheliotis referred to as ”media representations [that] reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening.” *Oz* and *Prison Break* introduce audiences to a world that is alien to most and dangerous to all, giving viewers the impression that an hour of Prime Time television represents a typical day in prison. But as Bill Yousman claims, “*Oz*’s purported ‘realism’ is therefore not only fictional, but fictional in ways that reproduce the worst stereotypes about prisons and prisoners.”

In another article discussing the success of *Oz*, Yousman claims that the program falsely romanticizes the prison environment, offering audience members “a titillating glimpse of an alien, frightening world.” Transcending the accusation that *Oz* simply offers an unrealistic or exaggerated representation of a typical prison environment,
Yousman chooses the word “titillating,” hinting at the vicarious pleasure that accompanies the viewing of such sadistic portrayals of inmate misbehavior. Dawn Cecil echoed Yousman’s fitting language, saying, “It is Hollywood, after all; they do not necessarily seek to educate—instead they aim to titillate.”

*Oz* epitomizes the trope of prison as a playground, framing the correctional environment as an elaborate and ever-exciting spectacle fraught with drugs, violence, and depraved entertainment—aspects that, while often present in the typical prison environment, are far from its premier characteristics. The trope of prison as a playground as demonstrated through *Prison Break*’s Bagwell is expanded to comprise the entire group known as the Sisters in *The Shawshank Redemption*, and enlarged yet again to incorporate nearly the entire prison population (and some of the guards) in *Oz*. Whether the trope is represented through a single inmate or through the entire prison population makes no difference, for the purpose remains the same: reflect the demented and menacing trope of prison as a playground.

Bagwell provides the starkest example of prison as a playground in *Prison Break*, but many of the other inmates also aid in the creation of the environment. John Abruzzi is the leader of an Italian-American mob family who is serving a life sentence for a number of crimes, including murder. Abruzzi’s reputation and his wealth land him the coziest job in the prison, and he continues to run his criminal operation during his time behind bars. He orders the murders of numerous enemies, has two of Scofield’s toes cut off, and eventually chops Bagwell’s hand off with an axe during an escape attempt gone awry. Abruzzi adds to the sense that prison is a twisted playground for those who have the right connections: the rules that govern the behavior of most of the convicts do not seem to apply to him because of his mob ties. On the contrary, at times, Abruzzi seems
free to perpetrate nearly any act he wishes in the prison, as long as he does not leave the facility. He frequently conspires with Officer Brad Bellick, a guard at Fox River who is repeatedly shown collecting money from inmates in exchange for various illegal services. Bellick also reflects the trope of prison as a playground in his consistent clandestine manipulation of the system for personal gain. A “dirty” guard presents a particularly poignant addition to the trope of prison as a playground, as even those in a position of authority operate on unscrupulous standards.

The redeemed outlaw, Scofield, is perhaps the shrewdest example of an inmate who understands the prison to be a playground, and his character is presented as extremely intelligent, astutely observant, and always one-step ahead of everyone else. In fact, *Prison Break* is constructed around Scofield’s prior knowledge of the atmosphere of prison as a playground, and from the story’s outset, he seems prepared to utilize any advantage he can muster. For example, early into the series it is revealed that Scofield has a massive tattoo that covers his entire torso, from his neck to his waist. The images are convoluted and abstract, including numerous large, distorted angels and demons locked in fierce battle, surrounded by archways and crisscrossing patterns. Later in the series, viewers discover that the tattoo is in fact an elaborately concealed copy of the prison’s blueprints, cleverly interwoven with intricate artwork to prevent its detection. In other words, Scofield intentionally branded the prison’s blueprints onto his body so that they could not be taken from him, and then he disguised them so that they would not be detected. Scofield’s manipulation of the trope of prison as a playground gave him an advantage over his fellow inmates, allowing him to manipulate the system and to make the prison into *his* playground.
The producers of Prison Break clearly realized the genius of using Scofield’s body as a clandestine tool for gaining power in the playground of Fox River Penitentiary, and they took the idea further than the concealed prison blueprints. During one episode, Scofield decrypts a tattooed recipe for a strong corrosive that can be made with chemicals that are readily available in the prison, and then he uses the chemical to burn a hole through a pipe. In another episode, Scofield uses a razor blade to slice into his forearm and remove a hidden pill, which he later delivers to his brother in a plot to forestall his execution. Scofield’s tattoo also holds a number of additional “keys” to the eventual prison break, including the make and model of a screwdriver needed to remove a prison toilet, the name of the streets that will be traveled during the escape, a contact’s coded phone number, the passcode for a combination lock, and GPS coordinates for a safe house outside of the prison. In fact, it could be argued that Scofield’s tattoo constitutes its own representation of the trope of prison as a playground; its continued ability to upset the power dynamic, tilting the scales in favor of the redeemed outlaw, is evidence of the producers’ motives to paint it as such. Without the tattoo, Scofield’s plan would have been doomed to failure from its inception, but time and again, the redeemed outlaw’s concealed hand provided a path of escape that would have been unavailable to other inmates without such information. Rather than painting the redeemed outlaw as a victim of the playground, such as was done in The Shawshank Redemption and American History X, Prison Break shows the redeemed outlaw using the trope of prison as a playground to his advantage. Scofield’s ability to smuggle the information he needed into the prison, and to utilize it appropriately throughout the series, was all part of an ultimate plot to manipulate the rules of the prison as a playground.
The Cushion of Comedy

As the preceding section has shown, recent television portrayals of the trope of prison as a playground reflected through a recalcitrant convict have been distilled and sanitized to the level of pulp characterization. The success of Oz demonstrates the ability of these dramatizations to entertain audiences, but as Oz’s “Mature Audience” rating suggests, the characters that result from this process are often too violent and demented for a general audience to enjoy. But something strange happens when macabre subject matter is wrapped in a cushion of comedy, and suddenly the fear associated with an event, such as the shanking or raping of an inmate, becomes palatable. Sigmund Freud spoke of this power, which is inherent to comedy and wit, claiming that “the main character of wit-making is to set free pleasure by removing inhibitions,” a process which “affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and of opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources.”

An excellent example of this phenomenon is Bruce Helford’s television comedy series Anger Management, which airs weekly on the basic cable television network, FX. According to a review in Rolling Stone magazine, the show’s first episode “drew a record-breaking 5.47 million total viewers,” making it “the most-watched debut in FX history.” The show frequently follows counselor Charlie Goodson as he leads an anger management group inside of a prison. The prisoners who attend the group represent the glamorized trope of prison as a playground, and tales of sexual exploits, assaults, and even murders frequently dominate the treatment sessions. But the comical atmosphere of
the show allows viewers to experience joy rather than horror when an inmate confesses to a recent prison rape, assault, or murder. “Laugh tracks” are added when punch lines are delivered, creating a strange ambivalence in which the viewer seems invited, even obliged to laugh along. In a recent episode, the prisoners take Charlie and another man hostage during a prison riot, yet even as the inmates explain that they may have to kill the men, the cushion of comedy (and the laugh track) leaves the audience free from the worry that such a horrific scenario is likely to unfold.\textsuperscript{99} Such presentations place a cushion of comfort between the viewer and the scene: the spectator knows that she is unlikely to be accosted by graphic violence despite the macabre dialogue, which often suggests otherwise.

The 1996 prison comedy, \textit{Life}, is another excellent example of the penitentiary wrapped in the cushion of comedy.\textsuperscript{100} Roger Ebert praised the film, saying it is “a sentimental comedy with a backdrop of racism . . . the movie is ribald, funny and sometimes sweet, and well acted by Murphy, Lawrence, and a strong supporting cast.”\textsuperscript{101} Like \textit{Anger Management}, the film adopts an overtly comical tone, leaving the viewer protected by a constant bubble of comfort concerning the subject matter. As such, in a scene where a guard offers inmate Gibson his freedom if he shoots fellow inmate Banks, the viewer can rest assured that a murder is \textit{not} about to take place. However, in a tense scene in \textit{The Shawshank Redemption} when the despondent warden raises his pistol as the authorities close in, the somber atmosphere leaves viewers with no such assurance of safety, and the graphic suicide that ensues is hardly a surprise.\textsuperscript{102} Similarly, in inmate Gibson’s (Eddie Murphy) famous “cornbread” diatribe in \textit{Life}, where he responds to a large inmate’s demand for his cornbread with threats of “consequences and
repercussions,” the cushion of comedy protects the audience from the threat of retaliation, and this protection continues even as a comedic fight scene ensues.\textsuperscript{103} A similar scene takes place in \textit{Cool Hand Luke}, when Luke questions the authority of the largest inmate in his camp, leading to a fight that plays out nearly the same as in \textit{Life}. Gibson and Luke both refuse to stop fighting even after they are obviously defeated, but the primary difference between the two fight scenes lies simply in the framing of the movie up to that point: the cushion of comedy assures the audience that Gibson is not likely to be seriously injured or killed, while the somber tone sustained in \textit{Cool Hand Luke} makes it difficult to know how that fight will end.

In 2006, \textit{Let’s go to Prison} presented the trope of prison as a playground, heavily cloaked in a cushion of comedy that frequently bordered on slapstick.\textsuperscript{104} The thickly cushioned representation of the prison environment left producers free to explore themes such as violent assault, attempted murder, and even rape, while preserving an atmosphere designed to elicit joy rather than sorrow or empathy. A \textit{New York Times} movie review reiterated this claim, suggesting that the movie “is actually a sly, very funny comedy, one that stays admirably deadpan every time you think it’s about to veer into gross-out territory.”\textsuperscript{105} At one point in the movie, a man sells his roommate to another man for sex, and when the unwitting victim is pulled from his cell by a gang of men and delivered to his “purchaser,” it is strongly insinuated that a rape is about to take place. However, despite the distasteful subject matter, the following scene is packed with elements designed to elicit laughter from the audience rather than horror: a \textit{Kama Sutra} sex-position poster hangs on the cell wall where the rape is about to occur, the rapist offers his victim Merlot wine made “in the toilet,” and rather than an actual rape, the scene ends
with the two men rubbing noses in a harmless “Eskimo kiss.” In the next scene, the main character is stabbed in the leg with a fork, but his assailant quickly pulls the fork back out and continues to eat his meal with it. The film is packed with similar scenes depicting violence and sexual victimization, yet, as Sigmund Freud said, the cushion of comedy “affords us the means of surmounting [these] restrictions and of opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources.” Rather than visceral abhorrence, rape and violence stimulate laughter; as Freud contends, “When we laugh over a delicately obscene witticism, we laugh at the identical thing which causes laughter in the ill-bred man when he hears a coarse, obscene joke.”

Regardless of the comedic tone adopted, films and television shows that depict the trope of prison as a playground become “referential reality” to the viewer, reinforcing the importance and legitimacy of the archetypal obstinate lawman. If prisons are filled with inmates that, as Rapping contends, are “so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society,” then the obstinate lawman is transformed into the story’s lone hero. In sum, the trope of prison as a playground flips the dynamic of the archetypal redeemed outlaw and obstinate lawman from *Les Misérables* on its head. This juxtaposition paints the obstinate lawman as society’s savior—the only person who is able to see through the façade and recognize the truly “rotten apples” of society as the irredeemable outlaws that they are. Reiterating Yousman’s contention, “These brutalizing fictions suggest that the penal system is too lenient or soft . . . that rehabilitation is impossible, that prisoners are dangerous creatures who require severe punishment, and that, ultimately, capital punishment is the only solution.”
The Fresh Fish Fetish

In the trope of prison as a playground, the cushion of comedy allows viewers to obtain pleasure from otherwise forbidden sources by cloaking the sadistic behavior of convicts in a safe, comical tone. The opposite of the cushion of comedy could be described as the fresh-fish fetish, a motif exemplified in scenes depicting new inmates arriving at a prison, while old, tenured inmates threaten and cajole them from nearby. One of the most famous fresh-fish movie scenes takes place in *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Andy and a group of inmates are unloaded from a transport bus that is surrounded on three sides by rowdy prisoners who are shaking and banging on the fences that restrain them. Inmates on the yard greet the newcomers with whistles, cheers, and applause, and the first audible phrase uttered is, “Hey fish, come on over here.” The situation becomes more volatile as Andy is marched past the cheering throng, and the veteran convicts begin making bets on which “fish” they can break down first.

Later that night, when the lights turn off and the guards vacate the cellblock, a low, resonating voice sings, “Hey fish! Fish, fish, fishy . . . you ain’t scared of dying, is you?” Red (the film’s narrator) explains the scene as it unfolds, saying, “The boys always go fishing with first timers, and they don’t quit until they reel someone in.” Shortly after the catcalls begin, one of the “fish” breaks down and begins to loudly cry out for his mother, as an unseen voice proclaims, “We have a winner!” The scene comes to a dramatic conclusion with the entire cellblock chanting “fresh-fish, fresh-fish, fresh-fish,” causing the guards to angrily return. The cheers immediately stop when the officers reenter the area, but the silence is broken by the continued whimpering of the despondent inmate, who is still crying for his mother. When he cannot stop his
blubbering, the guards remove him from his cell and *beat him to death* with their nightsticks in full view of the rest of the cellblock. The scene elicits a visceral sense of abhorrence and confusion: abhorrence at the brutal beating of a man who is already crying out for his mother, and confusion at the baffling language of the diatribe that causes him to break down in the first place. As such, *The Shawshank Redemption* presents the prison environment not only as a physical threat, but also as an emotional and mental threat—a place where it seems that psychological breakdown at the hands of one’s fellow inmates is a very real danger.

A similar fresh-fish theme is also poignantly presented in *Animal Factory*, a film that *The New York Times* columnist Elvis Mitchell said “deals with a dehumanization more insidious than the kind normally seen in prison movies . . . more harrowing than most prison fare because institutional life is treated as quotidian, a norm to which most of the men have already adjusted.”114 In one scene in the film, an inmate points out the story’s redeemed outlaw to a veteran convict by saying, “The new guy over there . . . he’s a fish, but he’s alright.” The veteran responds, “Is he a broad?” presumably inquiring whether or not the third inmate is homosexual, and if he is available for sex.115 The term “fish” is employed here to emphasize the difference between the new inmate, of whom little is know, and the veteran convict, who already has a reputation. The sexually charged response informs the viewer that the term “fish” indicates more than just an inmate’s recent arrival, and implies that the new inmate is also inexperienced, and therefore a potential victim. *Animal Factory* follows the theme of the fresh-fish fetish throughout the movie, and the plot revolves around a young convict who is taken under the wing of a veteran and protected from the typical dangers associated with being a
“fish.” As such, *Animal Factory*, in its entirety, could be referred to as a fresh-fish film, rather than a movie that simply utilizes a fresh-fish scene to allude to the danger that a new inmate typically faces.

In another excellent example of the fresh-fish fetish, *Blood in Blood Out*, viewers follow redeemed outlaw Miklo into San Quentin State Prison. Roger Ebert described *Blood in Blood Out* as a brutal film that “shows a prison world where guards and officials essentially stand aside while prison gangs run the institution, distribute favors, make rules, and enforce their laws with violence.”116 The film first presents the fresh-fish fetish as Miklo’s transport bus pulls up to the main gate of the prison and a pair of guards on the overhead boardwalk are heard commenting, “Another fish tank in from L.A.”117 The bus enters the gate and drives past an expansive exercise yard packed with hundreds of inmates who all appear to be lifting weights, and one of them asks another, “What the fuck do we got here? Fucking fresh fish, can you believe this shit?” The new inmates exit the bus and the jeers begin immediately, with the majority of the sexual advances being directed at the young Miklo. A large, bearded inmate with a muscle-clad shirtless friend yells, “Hey baby! Been a long time since I had a West-Texas ballroom bitch, how about you being my ol’ lady,” as another inmate grabs his crotch and says “Mamacita, look over here. I got something for you!” The jeers do not stop when the inmates enter the prison structure, and as Miklo walks to his cell for the first time, an unseen inmate shouts, “It smells like fish!”118 This presentation creates an atmosphere where the new inmate is at a disadvantage inside the prison environment simply because he is new, and this threat frequently transcends vulgar jeers and shouted sexual advances, entering a realm that could be referred to as prison as sadism.
Prison as Sadism

*Blood in Blood Out* follows the fresh-fish fetish beyond the simple use of the pejorative, and as Miklo explores the prison for the first time, he is confronted by a group of men whose feminine behavior resembles the sexually aggressive actions of “The Sisters” from *The Shawshank Redemption*. As he passes their table, one of the men places a hand on Miklo’s chest and says, “*Hola* Pretty, are you blond all over?” Miklo responds angrily and slaps the man’s hand away, but another man in the group grabs him firmly by the shirt. Before the confrontation can proceed any further, an inmate named Popeye notices a gang-related tattoo on Miklo’s hand and intervenes. Popeye appears to be a pimp for the “prostitutes,” and after he sends them away, he takes Miklo on a brief-yet-harrowing tour of the prison. In less than five minutes, Popeye makes it clear that the entire prison is divided into racial cliques, explaining, “It’s the gangs that run this place,” the Black Gorilla Army, The Arian Vanguard, and his own primarily Mexican *La Onda*: “We clique together for power, to protect ourselves.” Miklo, who is a first-time inmate, is thereby placed in a setting replete with threats of physical violence and sexual predatory behavior, surrounded by inmates who all seem either to want to fight him or to have sex with him.

The aggressive dialog continues as Miklo and Popeye walk through a prison dayroom, and predatory behavior permeates the scene in an abundance that transcends the presentation of prison as a playground. Miklo seems caught off guard at the sexual advances from the prostitutes, and he seems oblivious to the fact that the man who sends them away is their pimp. As he follows his guide through the dayroom, an inmate who Popeye is indebted to suggests, “Maybe you would like to swap for some of that tender,
You can pay your bets with that,” suggesting that fresh-fish Miklo can be traded as a sex slave. Miklo and Popeye leave the dayroom and head to the housing unit, where their initial encounter ends with yet another violent sexual act. As Miklo turns to enter his cell, Popeye springs a trap and attacks him with a knife, yelling, “You white bitch, give me some chum chum.” A brutal fight ensues in which Miklo is stabbed, and Popeye seems to have the upper hand; the rape is only halted when the leader of a prominent prison gang intervenes. Despite the failed rape attempt, in just his first day in prison, Miklo is roughly accosted by a group of feminine prostitutes, stabbed by a sex-crazed rapist, introduced to three large prison gangs, and propositioned with employment as an (unwilling) sex-slave. This hyper-sexualized behavior is what Eigenberg and Baroderided, stating that “movies that sensationalize male rape in prison may actually contribute to a social structure that has come to accept, perhaps even endorse, that rape is part and parcel of the incarceration experience.”

The reprehensible behavior of the prisoners in Blood in Blood Out continues to produce an atmosphere of prison as sadism, and as Miklo endeavors to exchange the label of “fish” for that of veteran convict, he must move from the role of victim to that of perpetrator. For example, in one scene, acting on the orders of a prison gang leader, Miklo lures another man into a storage room with an offer of oral sex, only to spring a trap and brutally stab him to death. The constant barrage of graphic violence and sexual assault directed at the new “fish” from nearly every inmate he encounters makes it seem as if these activities are a normal part of the prison experience, and as Elayne Rapping contends, “presents a vision of hell on earth in which inmates are so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon
The prison-industrial complex thrives on such depictions of Rapping’s “hell on earth,” reinforcing Cheliotis’ claim that, ”Rather than undermining the external legitimacy of prisons . . . media representations reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening.”

*Blood in Blood Out,* along with an entire genre of prison movies that depict the behavior of inmates as sadistic and unrepentant, transcends the trope of prison as a playground and enters the realm of prison as sadism. Rather than exposing the bad behavior of the few, these representations suggest that everyone who goes to prison is likely to be subjected to confusing and dangerous situations in which sadistic inmates will take advantage of them, often for no discernable reason. The only way for a “fish” to avoid or to halt the abuse he is certain to sustain at the hands of his tormentor(s) is to become a tormentor himself: to personify the “hell on earth in which inmates are so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society.” As such, representations that paint the prison setting as a playground, or worse, as pure sadism, leave the viewer with a sense of relief that the vicious monsters depicted are contained inside of a prison.

As this examination of the trope of prison as a playground has shown, titillating cinematic accounts of prison produce a “referential reality” which the audience is enticed to accept in the absence of any additional information. This process leaves the viewer with a skewed perception of life behind bars, and Yousman’s description of “creatures [who] are so unlike us, so alien and dangerous” becomes a reality in which “we must become even more punitive, even more repressive in our approach to criminal justice.”
Whether the representations are brutally sadistic, or cloaked in the cushion of comedy, these cinematic accounts of the spectacle of punishment reinforce society’s belief that massive correctional institutions and increasingly severe criminal sanctions are a vital part of a well managed and growing social apparatus. As such, cinematic representations of the trope of prison as a playground encourage the tacit approval of the continued expansion and harshening of the prison-industrial complex.
CHAPTER III

PRISON AS Penance

As briefly discussed in Chapter One, the trope of prison-as-penance paints the penitentiary as a dangerous-but-necessary repository for society’s recalcitrant rule-breakers. In dealing with such irredeemable villains, the penitentiary has but a single purpose: the mending out of righteous and justified punishment. By filling the prison with guilty-yet-unrepentant characters, many who seem entirely incapable of ever being reformed, the trope of prison-as-penance emphasizes the necessity of prison as a tool of punishment. Cinematic accounts replete with such characters encourages audience members to support the legitimacy of the prison-industrial complex by implying that it is a necessary part of a healthy society, thereby reinforcing Yousman’s contention that “brutal state practices are therefore legitimated through narratives that frame the punitive treatment of prisoners as both necessary and deserved.”126 In other words, the trope of prison-as-penance paints the penitentiary as an indispensable and irreplaceable instrument of punishment, and as the only place where society can house its irredeemable convicts in the name of dispensing justice while protecting the general public.

As I have already shown, best selling author Stephen King has proven especially adept in the creation of fictional prison narratives for what Adorno and Horkheimer called “aesthetic mass consumption.”127 In a recent Chicago Tribune article, journalist Julia Keller praised King’s uncanny “ability to create, time and again, stories that adhere themselves to the inside of the reader’s mind like some vicious, twisted Velcro.”128 In 1995, as previously discussed, King teamed up with director Frank Darabont to create The Shawshank Redemption, a film that shocked audiences with the trope of prison as a
playground, represented in part by “The Sisters” and the system that permitted their predatory activities. King’s success stems in part from the fact that he does not restrict his prison representations to a single trope, and in The Shawshank Redemption, audiences also see an excellent example of the trope of prison-as-penance in the actions of the film’s narrator, Red. As the movie unfolds, a theme emerges in which nearly every prisoner at Shawshank seems patently unwilling to admit his guilt. Red exposes this regularity when he asks fellow convict, Andy, why he killed his wife, and Andy responds by claiming that he is innocent. Red declares with a chuckle, “You are going to fit right in. Everyone in here is innocent, you know that?” He then yells to another convict across the yard, “Hayward, what you in here for?” and is rewarded with the response, “I’m innocent. My lawyer fucked me.” This snippet of dialog highlights the necessity of Shawshank Prison’s objective punitive stance: everyone sent to Shawshank Prison must receive the same harsh treatment and be required to follow the same regimen, regardless of any subjective circumstances (such as professed innocence). The trope of prison-as-penance requires the penitentiary to be a machine of punishment, and this machine must operate with equal brutality on each and every one of its subjects. Like its faithful companion, the obstinate lawman, the machine of punishment lacks the capacity for recognizing innocence or redemption in the outlaw.

A cinematic portrayal of an entire prison packed with convicts who all refuse to admit their guilt, and by proxy, to recognize the legitimacy of the punitive sanctions placed upon them, cunningly advocates for the necessity of prison-as-penance for recalcitrant criminals. As Cheliotis said, these “media representations reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of
its further growth and harshening,” for if the outlaw refuses to even admit his guilt, he can never begin to seek redemption for his crime. The universal feigned innocence claimed by nearly every character in The Shawshank Redemption leaves the guards and prison officials portrayed in the film with no option except to disregard the outlaw’s individuality, and to instead assume that every prisoner is the same, guilty and recalcitrant. Red is the sole exception to the norm of denial, and he readily admits his guilt to the viewer, to the parole board, and even to his fellow cons, at one point joking that he is the “only guilty man in Shawshank.” With his confession, Red becomes one of Les Misérables’s redeemed outlaws, as, according to Nelllis, he “experiences guilt and takes responsibility,” rather than joining the ranks of the majority, who continue to stubbornly profess their innocence.

The trope of prison-as-penance reveals the necessity of the obstinate lawman’s impartially harsh treatment of the redeemed outlaw. Because the entire population of Shawshank Prison claims to be innocent, none of them can be considered innocent; rather, as far as the obstinate lawman is concerned, every man must be guilty of his crime. When the redeemed outlaw is found to be different than his cohort—when one of the multitude decrying a false conviction is found to be telling the truth—the obstinate lawman breaks down, as seen in Javert’s suicide, Cool Hand Luke’s murder, and the Warden from Escape from Alcatraz, who symbolically throws the escapee’s chrysanthemum into the ocean. The obstinate lawman lacks the ability to expect or to recognize anything other than stereotypical recalcitrant behavior in the redeemed outlaw. This lack of flexibility is seen in another scene in The Shawshank Redemption, when a new convict arrives at the prison and reveals evidence to the Warden (and to the viewer)
that will likely result in the acquittal of the redeemed outlaw, Andy. In an obstinate act of “obtuseness,” the warden first turns a deaf ear to the evidence, and then locks Andy in “the hole” for sixty days while he has the witness murdered.\textsuperscript{134} The system is not equipped to deal with an inmate who does not fit the typical pattern, and the pattern of Shawshank Prison rejects the very possibility of a false conviction. As such, the fictional setting of Shawshank Prison presents an excellent example of two separate tropes of the prison setting, prison as a playground and prison-as-penance, yet both representations serve to emphasize the necessity of the continued expansion and harshening of the prison-industrial complex.

King and Darabont hit gold again in 1999, when Warner Brothers released \textit{The Green Mile}, a film that Roger Ebert said “has detail and space . . . it tells a story with a beginning, middle, end, vivid characters, humor, outrage and emotional release. Dickensian.”\textsuperscript{135} King builds the story around the epitome of penance: the state’s official duty in procuring the ultimate recompense, life, from Death Row inmates. \textit{The Green Mile}’s redeemed outlaw is inmate John Coffey, an extremely large, mentally disabled man whose murder conviction is almost certainly false. Officer Percy Wetmore, a prison guard who obtained his job on Death Row from his Uncle, the State Governor, is the story’s obstinate lawman. Wetmore’s inhumane treatment of the inmates is his defining characteristic, and throughout the film he consistently abuses and tortures his charges: he intentionally breaks an inmate’s fingers with his nightstick, he crushes an inmate’s pet mouse, and he causes a prisoner to painfully burn to death during an official execution. Wetmore’s sadistic behavior is always aimed at a character who is sentenced to death, and he clearly draws a distinction between his fellow guards, who he typically treats with
obligatory respect, and the Death Row inmates, who he incessantly and mercilessly torments.

In the trope of prison as a playground, the reprehensible actions of inmates are aimed at some sort of incentive: “The Sisters” at Shawshank want sex, Schofield and “T-Bag” want to escape, and the prisoners in Oz are typically seeking drugs, sex, money, or power. But Wetmore actions are coldly disconnected from any sort of palpable reward, and instead, he appears to obtain pleasure simply from inflicting physical and psychological pain on others. Even Wetmore’s assignment to Death Row suggests a morbid predisposition, for his nepotistic ties allowed him any assignment in the State, yet he chose the one that was sure to expose him to suffering and death. This ambiguity of motives leaves viewers with the impression that Wetmore is simply a demented sadist who revels in the agony of others, and as such, a Death Row cellblock may be the best place for him; otherwise, he may release his sinister actions on an innocent society. This representation of prison as sadism is different from that discussed in Chapter Two, for when the sadistic actions come from a prison official, it is implied that, in the name of punishment, Death Row inmates are acceptable targets for torture.

*The Green Mile* is reminiscent of *The Shawshank Redemption* in its presentation of prison as a playground through the character of “Wild” Bill Wharton, an inmate who consistently manipulates the guards and his fellow prisoners in an effort to instigate excitement in the otherwise banal environment. Wharton enters the story as a new Death Row inmate who pretends to be overmedicated during his transport, only to spring an assault on the unsuspecting guards as soon as they arrive on Death Row. He revels in the system that will eventually take his life, consistently creating chaos in the otherwise calm
environment of the cellblock. For example, when the lights dim one night during the execution of a fellow inmate, Wharton’s behavior reaches a dramatic climax; as the other inmates silently morn the death of one of their own, Wharton screams and swings wildly from the bars of his cell, loudly banging on the walls and chanting, “He’s frying now!”

Even as the prison offers him a glimpse of his own eventual fate, Wharton refuses to show any hint of regret, trepidation, or anger, instead exhibiting an inexplicable, stubborn mania that creates an atmosphere similar to a playground: he revels in the excitement of his own eventual demise.

As my examination of *The Shawshank Redemption* has already shown, King does not restrict his portrayals of the prison setting to a single archetypal representation. In *The Green Mile*, his portrayal of prison as a playground is limited to the single character of “Wild” Bill Wharton, but King also emphasized the trope of prison-as-penance in his portrayal of the other characters, and of the prison setting itself. For example, three official executions are carried out in the movie, resulting in the death of the falsely convicted John Coffey, as well as two guilty inmates who are paying the ultimate penance for their crimes. In fact, King and Darabont portray the trope of prison-as-penance through the feigned innocence of every inmate in Shawshank Prison and the ultimate penance required of the inmates in *The Green Mile*. In so doing, they construct the prison settings through the actions of its characters in the same way that the producers of *Oz* and *Prison Break* portray the trope of prison as a playground through the actions of “T-Bag” Bagwell and mafia boss Abruzzi. The inmates in these dramas are more than just characters inside of a prison; rather, they play a vital role in the construction of the prison, for without them the penitentiary would be nothing more than an empty zoo.
Torture as Punishment

The same technique for the creation of prison-as-penance is frequently displayed in modern prison films, usually when the redeemed outlaw is incarcerated for a crime he clearly committed. For instance, in *American History X*, the redeemed outlaw (Vinyard) brutally kills two young African-American men who he catches breaking into his car, and his subsequent trip to prison is well-deserved punishment for his racially motivated crime.138 Once Vinyard gets to prison, the atmosphere rapidly evolves from a simple depiction of prison-as-penance to an extreme example of prison as a playground. In a pivotal scene that exemplifies this shift, Vinyard is gang raped by his fellow white supremacists in retaliation for befriending an African-American inmate. The brutal attack causes Vinyard to question, and eventually to discard his prior racist belief system. While the concept of justified punishment (for murder) provides the basis for Vinyard’s incarceration, as Eigenberg and Baro posit, “*American History X* also uses rape as a central theme to motivate major change in the main character,” and it is clear to the viewer that the rape, rather than his incarceration, causes Vinyard to become disillusioned with his radical views.139 More importantly, as Eigenberg and Baro go on to say, *American History X* and other “movies that sensationalize male rape in prison may actually contribute to a social structure that has come to accept, perhaps even endorse, that rape is part and parcel of the incarceration experience.”140 Rather than pure disgust and abhorrence, viewers of *American History X* must consider whether the brutal sexual assault that Vinyard sustained was, in the end, a good thing, for it seems to have played a pertinent role in initiating his drastic change of heart. In other words, viewers of *American History X* are not only led to believe that gang rape in prison is a regular
occurrence, they are also tempted to accept the idea that rape and the threat of rape constitute a vital and necessary component of the criminal justice system. Eigenberg and Baro express their disgust in this regard, stating, “it is abhorrent to think that we live in a society that views rape in prison as a form of deterrence, but the deconstruction of these films suggests . . . there is no general outrage that men are imprisoned in institutions where they are not safe from either the threat or the reality of sexual assault.”

Cinematic representations of the trope of prison-as-penance that focus on abuse sustained at the hands of prisoners suggest that prison is an environment where the convicts are as much a part of the punishment machine as the guards. When the depiction of a violent, prison gang rape is shown to “punish” a prisoner enough to initiate a heartfelt quest for redemption, the viewer is tempted not only to assume that such representations are accurate, but also, and more importantly, that such an environment is justified. In other words, the single, inmate-initiated punishment of gang rape was more effective than the entire prison sentence Vinyard had served up to that point, for, until he was raped, Vinyard had never so much as questioned his principles. When a brutal rape is depicted as an effective and rational method of punishment, the viewer’s tacit endorsement of a harshening prison environment is casually-yet-horribly reinforced.

*American History X* is not the only film to include scenes of inmate-initiated punishment in prison, nor is it the first to depict such punishment in a graphic manner. In 1977, *Short Eyes* told the fictional story of Clark Davis, a man who finds himself in jail awaiting trial on charges of raping a little girl. *The New York Times* said that the story’s main character stands out “as the victim of victims, but also because he gives a performance so intimate it’s almost painful to watch.” In the film, Davis tells another
inmate that he does not remember committing the crime he is accused of, but he admits that he has perpetrated a number of similar crimes against children—crimes that were never brought to the attention of the authorities. In a macabre twist of the trope of prison-as-penance, Davis is likely to be released based on shoddy evidence, but his fellow inmates (the film’s archetypal obstinate lawmen) take matters into their own hands and mend out an arbitrary sentence of death. In a gruesome finale, the inmates bind Davis and place him on top of a table in the middle of the cellblock. Despite his pleas for mercy, his throat is brutally cut from ear to ear, and he bleeds to death as his fellow convicts stand by watching. The trope of prison-as-penance is epitomized in the actions of the prisoners, who act as agents of the punishment machine to enforce retribution where the system is incapable. At the movie’s conclusion, the viewer must consider which is the worst of two evils, releasing an unrepentant child molester back into the community to (presumably) reoffend, or endorsing the brutal, unsanctioned execution of a man who has been convicted of no crime. As seen in both American History X and Short Eyes, the trope of prison-as-penance can leave audience members with a sense that inmate-initiated rape and murder are acceptable methods of punishment, or at the very least, extreme options for especially difficult cases. As Yousman so aptly contended, “These brutalizing fictions suggest that the penal system is too lenient or soft . . . [that] even more policing and surveillance is necessary, even more prisons, even harsher prison environments and sentencing policies; this is all deemed necessary by these narratives of terror.”144

The concept of inmates as substitute lawmen who are ready to step in when the official lawman is unable to perform his duty has also been adapted to numerous other
prison narratives, some of which present the redeemed outlaw as such a likeable and trustworthy character that he seems to slip seamlessly into the role of the auxiliary lawman. One such movie, *Con Air*, tells the story of Cameron Poe, an archetypal redeemed outlaw who the audience immediately sympathizes with because his crime was a justifiable homicide. The New York Times film critic Janet Maslin described the main character’s likability, stating, “Cameron Poe: he’s our hero . . . he loves his family. He protects women. He sounds like Elvis . . . He must be a really nice guy.” In the film, Poe returns home from war a decorated veteran, but when three men attack his pregnant wife and him one night as they leave a restaurant, he incidentally kills one of the attackers in self-defense. A conviction of involuntary manslaughter lands him in prison for seven years, where he finds himself surrounded by a group of men who exemplify the trope of prison as a playground. But Poe himself reflects the trope of prison-as-penance, and his consistently calm demeanor assures viewers that he poses no danger to society and that the only reason he is in prison is to serve out his punishment. The viewer does not expect Poe to exhibit a change of heart or to embrace a more benevolent belief system, for he simply defended his family when they were attacked, an action that demands no redemption. Although it cannot be said that Poe is falsely convicted, the viewer sympathizes with him for the same reason that they feel sorry for Andy in *The Shawshank Redemption*: despite their seemingly obvious “guilt,” both characters are victims of circumstances beyond their control.

*Con Air* unfolds as a group of violent convicts, along with the recently paroled Poe, are loaded aboard a prison transport airplane. An escape plan is already in motion, and shortly after takeoff, the convicts, who know nothing of Poe’s recently granted
parole, overtake the guards and assume control of the plane. The obstinate lawman in *Con Air* is U.S. Marshall Vince Larkin, who is dedicated to hunting down and recapturing the escaped convicts at any cost. In a strange plot twist, Poe and Larkin (the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman) end up working together to catch the rest of the escaped convicts, who all exude the trope of prison as a playground. In the end of the movie, the one man who represents the trope of prison-as-penance, Poe, overcomes the multitude of men who represent the trope of prison as a playground. This narrative of the trope of prison-as-penance overcoming the trope of prison as a playground reinforces the belief that, as Rapping contends, “inmates are so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society,” not even one of their fellow inmates. In other words, in *Con Air*, the stereotypical characters are so patently irredeemable that one of their own teams up with the authorities to make sure that punishment is served, and that none of them escape to wreak havoc on society.

Travis Dixon reveals the underlying issue with such narratives, stating, “stereotypes tend to be both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating precisely because they help us to explain the world.” When trying to explain the hidden world of prison, the stereotypical convicts from *Con Air* constitute an unrepresentative sample, since, as one character explains early on in the film, the hijacked flight is transporting “the worst of the worst . . . these guys are pure predators, each and every one of them.” When the stereotypes that “help us to explain the world” are based on the “worst of the worst,” Dixon’s prediction of self-fulfillment becomes a frightening notion.

In 1993, the previously mentioned *Blood in Blood Out* told the story of redeemed outlaw Miklo, a young gang member who is sent to San Quentin Prison after being
involved in the shooting of a local rival. The movie was heralded by *The New York Times* as a film that “takes on real heft as it follows Miklo’s cool, brutal rise through the prison’s Chicano power structure to become a figure of dark political importance.”

The film’s obstinate lawman, Paco, begins the story as Miklo’s friend, but when they are both arrested for a shooting and Miklo is sent to prison, Paco manages to avoid jail by signing up for the military. In a dramatic scene later in the movie, Paco, who has become a police officer, shoots Miklo during an attempted robbery. The injury leads to the amputation of Miklo’s leg, and he is subsequently returned to San Quentin to serve another prison sentence. Miklo presents an excellent example of an archetypal redeemed outlaw who is unwilling or unable to fully embrace the concept of redemption, and his recidivism prevents the viewer from feeling overly sympathetic to his plight, which is seen as a result of his continued bad behavior. This aids in the creation of the trope of prison-as-penance, since Miklo is clearly guilty of numerous crimes. But the producers go further in their emphasis on punishment, cleverly inserting the epitome of the trope of prison-as-penance, represented in a recurring character that I will hereafter refer to as the Dead Man Walking.

**Dead Man Walking**

The idea of the ultimate recompense through the taking of a life as punishment for a crime is not a new development in film, and I have already touched on the importance of such representations, such as was seen in *The Green Mile*. Examining the trope of prison-as-penance reveals the power of a Dead Man Walking scene in a prison movie, as it serves to pinpoint the extreme limit of what the punitive machine is capable of procuring. In *Blood in Blood Out*, the prison setting is portrayed as a dangerous spectacle
dominated by the threat of physical violence and sexual assault: an excellent example of the trope of prison as a playground. But the fact that the story’s redeemed outlaw is patently guilty of numerous crimes, and the consistent recalcitrance of the other inmates who occupy the prison, create a sense that the punitive prison is a necessary institution of punishment.

The producers of Blood in Blood Out attempted to emphasize the concept of penance in one of the first scenes to take place inside of the prison. In the scene, Miklo is being shown around the recreation yard when a pair of guards suddenly appear, one escorting a shackled inmate while the other repeatedly announces, “Dead man walking.” The death row inmate plays no further role in the movie; he is included simply to highlight the punitive nature of the prison setting, and to symbolize the ability of the punitive machine to procure, if necessary, the ultimate recompense through the taking of a life as punishment for a crime. Such representations suggest that the character of the Dead Man Walking is as much a necessary part of the punitive machine as any other part of it, or, as Yousman suggests, “that prisoners are dangerous creatures who require severe punishment, and that, ultimately, capital punishment is the only solution.” If this is the case, then the constant growth and harshening of the prison system must continue to include a provision for the ultimate recompense by way of capital punishment.

In The Shawshank Redemption, the theme of capital punishment is emphasized in a statement by Red, when he says, “they send you here for life, and that’s exactly what they take.” Although The Shawshank Redemption does not include any scenes depicting death row inmates, the producers manage to conjure the theme of a system
capable of exacting the ultimate penance in the actions of Brooks, an inmate who is released on parole. Brooks has spent most of his life behind bars, and when he is released, he is unable to adapt to life outside of the prison walls. Despondent at his institutionalization, he writes a long letter to his still-incarcerated friends and then commits suicide, demonstrating the inescapable power of prison-as-penance to exact the ultimate recompense of life. Brooks’s friends, who are still incarcerated, listen as his suicide note is read aloud, and the point of the scene seems to be encapsulated by Red’s claim that “they send you here for life, and that’s exactly what they take,” a statement which resonates with Yousman’s contention that “ultimately, capital punishment is the only solution.” Brooks shows no emotion as he composes his goodbye letter and then hangs himself, and his friends in prison, although saddened, are not at all surprised at his fate; the atmosphere makes it seem as if Brooks’s death was simply a forgone conclusion—an eventuality that could not possibly have been avoided. The inmates’ casual acceptance of their friend’s demise entices the viewer to feel the same way, as if death or suicide is the unavoidable culmination of a life that has been squandered behind bars.

Other films have been even more poignant in depicting inmates who accept or embrace their eventual fate at the hands of the prison system, leading up to and including state ordered execution. One such film, Monster’s Ball, was praised by A. O. Scott as “one of those rare movies in which even people glimpsed only for a moment or two seem to have lives that ramify beyond the screen, as if the story were being witnessed rather than dramatized.” The story’s redeemed outlaw is Lawrence Musgrove, a death row inmate who seeks redemption through trying to help his family prepare for his death.
Musgrove is executed early into the film, and he exemplifies the trope of prison-as-penance in an emotional scene where he says goodbye to his wife and son. When Musgrove’s adolescent son asks, “I’m not going to see you again after this? Why not?” Musgrove responds, “Because I’m a bad man . . . but you know something? You aint me.” His final words to his wife are, “For every time I hurt you, I’m sorry,” and with that he silently walks away from her for the last time. Musgrove is an archetypal redeemed outlaw who is resigned to the trope of prison-as-penance, and his ability to face his circumstances with calm acceptance presents a picture of prison in which even the criminal awaiting execution is amicable to the system that orders his death. The gut-wrenching scenes that lead up to Musgrove’s execution reiterate the fact that, although he does not want to die, he has embraced the finality of his situation: when asked if he has any last words, he simply says, “push the button.” Such cinematic portrayals of the ultimate recompense of death provide an example of the process by which, as Yousman said, “Brutal state practices are therefore legitimated through narratives that frame the punitive treatment of prisoners as both necessary and deserved.” When even the man who is sentenced to death feels that his punishment is “necessary and deserved,” the viewer is left to either join his side, or to stand against him alone.

In Con Air, the Dead Man Walking is Cyrus “The Virus” Grissom, a character whose personality stands in stark contrast to the calm acquiescence of Musgrove from Monster’s Ball. Cyrus is one of the “worst of the worst,” and he must be chained up and locked in an individual cage while onboard the plane. His convictions include kidnapping, robbery, extortion, escape, inciting a riot, and eleven inmate murders, and as the film’s obstinate lawman says of him, “He likes to brag that he has killed more men
than cancer. Cyrus is a poster child for the criminally insane, a true product of the system.”\textsuperscript{161} Where the redeemed outlaw in \textit{Monster’s Ball} exhibits a submissive and regretful acceptance of his fate, Cyrus’s character seems to represent Musgrove’s rebellious polar opposite. For example, once Cyrus and his fellow convicts assume control of the plane, a number of violent assaults and murders rapidly ensue. The resulting presentation creates yet another of Rapping’s characters that are “so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society,” while reinforcing the viewer’s perception that prisons are full of people like Cyrus.\textsuperscript{162} Reiterating Yousman, “If this is the case, if these creatures are so unlike us, so alien and dangerous, then we must become even more punitive, even more repressive in our approach to criminal justice.”\textsuperscript{163}

Similarly, in \textit{The Green Mile}, the Dead Man Walking theme is exemplified in the actions of the sadistic obstinate lawman, Percy Wetmore, when he walks the newly-arrived John Coffey past the other death row inmates chanting, “Dead man walking. We got a dead man walking here.”\textsuperscript{164} Wetmore continues to exude a punitive attitude in his behavior toward the inmates throughout the film, and he consistently torments and abuses them up to and even during their executions. In a climactic scene that exemplifies Wetmore’s desire to see as much punishment as possible mended out to his charges, he intentionally fails to wet the sponge that is placed atop a prisoner’s head during electrocution to ensure a swift death. The oversight causes the execution to take much longer than normal, and for more than three minutes the tortured inmate flails and struggles against his restraints, only dying after he finally catches on fire. Wetmore seems disgusted at the result of his actions, but when he tries to avert his eyes from the
spectacle, his superior officer forces him to watch the horrible death that he has caused, cleverly reflecting the trope of prison-as-penance back onto the obstinate lawman.

The three-minute electrocution scene is by far the most brutal execution depicted in The Green Mile, but two additional state-ordered deaths warrants are carried out during the movie. Each time an inmate is to be executed, a “trustee” acts as a stand-in while the staff repetitively walks through the execution from start to finish. This repeated exposure to the process leading up to an inmate’s death causes the situation to seem casual and ordinary, as if the execution of a man is just one more cog in the expansive wheel of justice, no more significant than any other. In fact, at one point during an execution rehearsal, the guards begin to uncontrollably laugh at a dirty joke that the stand-in inmate tells, failing to maintain their composure as they prepare to put a man to death.\textsuperscript{165} The casual manner in which the men go about preparing to perform their official duty leaves viewers with the impression that the killing of a man is just business-as-usual, reinforcing the belief that prisons are full of individuals who are destined to the same eventual fate: death at the hands of the state.

In her book, A Report on the Banality of Evil: Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Ardent explains the calloused groupthink mentality of German Nazi Colonel Eichmann and his fellow commanders, who organized and participated in the atrocities of the Holocaust. Commenting on the ability of Nazi officers to join in such barbaric brutalities, Ardent posits, “the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.”\textsuperscript{166} Ardent goes on to describe how, by surrounding himself with individuals who were devoted supporters of the Nazi regime, Eichmann
committed “crimes under circumstances that make it well nigh impossible for him to
know or to feel that he is doing wrong.” Eichmann and his men were simply following
orders, and as such, they neither questioned the motives nor the integrity of their
superiors: they simply carried their orders out to the best of their abilities with
emotionless and unquestioning dedication. In this regard, the guards depicted joking
during the execution rehearsal exude an attitude in line with Ardent’s “Banality of Evil,”
for much like Eichmann and his henchmen, the Death Row guards are simply carrying
out the orders of their superiors with blind indifference, supported by the similar loyalty
of their cohort.

Ardent’s business-as-usual theme, exemplified by prison guards who are just
following orders, creates an atmosphere in which prison officials are involuntary
instruments of penal authority, up to and including the implementation of the death
penalty. One film that explores the banality of business-as-usual, Tim Robbins’s Dead
Man Walking, was described by the Los Angeles Times as a movie that examines “capital
punishment with as much dispassion as possible, trusting in the power of events to
engage us without the aid of over-dramatization.” The film follows Death Row inmate
Matthew Poncelet through the months leading up to his execution for murder and rape,
and the prison guards are consistently depicted as unemotional participants who are
simply performing their official duty. For example, in Matthew’s final visit with his
family, which is conducted in a small room as six guards silently stand around the
perimeter, a camera shot out the window reveals another group of guards walking one of
their own in circles, apparently practicing the proper way to escort Matthew. As his final
visit comes to a close, the same guards enter the room and take up the same positions
around Matthew, as one firmly orders, “Up on your feet,” and another tells the family, “You can say your goodbyes now.” The guards in the room, now numbering nearly a dozen, are cold, dispassionate, and authoritative, and their composure remains even as they force Matthew to bid a final farewell to his family. In any other setting, a gang of armed men who force a man to say goodbye to his family before they kill him would appear to be heartless and sadistic monsters, but these men are just doing their job.

Shortly after Matthew returns to his cell, the warden coldly informs him that the federal appeals court—his final hope for survival—has turned him down, further illustrating the indifference required to act out the official duties associated with capital punishment.

*Dead Man Walking* represents the trope of prison-as-penance leading up to and throughout Matthew’s execution, and the guards are consistently depicted as unemotional machines who are only following the orders of their superiors. Taking this line of reasoning a step further, the robot-like behavior of the guards is simply a component of the larger machine of justice, and as such, their actions are not questionable, since they are just following orders. Rather, the guards are all simply cogs in a wheel, and each cog must serve its purpose or be immediately replaced if the machine of punishment is to continue to operate effectively. In the conclusion of *Dead Man Walking*, the machine is ultimately shown to be operational when Matthew finally gives in and confesses his guilt at the proverbial eleventh hour. Just before he is taken to the execution room, Matthew tells his religious advisor that he was much more involved in the crime than he has before admitted. As he confesses, a flashback scene depicts the brutal rape and murder committed at the hands of this evil man, and the viewer is provided with the justification for the execution that is about to occur. In placing the confession directly before the
execution, *Dead Man Walking* portrays the death penalty as an effective and necessary tool of justice. Matthew’s execution is not only justified, but the death sentence serves the dual purpose of punishment and closure: punishment by way of death, and closure by way of eliciting a confession that seemed unobtainable via any other method. This strange cinematic construction of an effective, punitive machine of justice further endorses the belief that the prison-industrial complex, and its ultimate tool of penance, capital punishment, are effective and vital instruments for ensuring social order.

As this examination of the trope of prison-as-penance has shown, cinematic representations that paint the prison environment as a necessary tool of justice reinforce the belief that prisoners are recalcitrant, irredeemable monsters who must be punished and contained for the greater good of society. When that punishment is at the hands of prisoners rather than the prison, the trope of prison-as-penance takes a dangerous turn into cloudy waters where gang rape and group murder appear as acceptable means to an end. At the far end of the punitive spectrum, the procuring of the ultimate recompense, death, is the most extreme example of the trope of prison-as-penance. When capital punishment is shown to serve the dual purposes of punishment *and* closure through a last-minute confession that seems to be elicited by the imminent imposition of the sentence, the punitive machine is yet again glorified. As such, the elements included in a portrayal of a Dead Man Walking scene serve to reiterate the punitive nature of the prison-industrial complex, tacitly convincing viewers that, in Yousman’s words, “ultimately, capital punishment is the *only* solution.”

CHAPTER IV
PRISON AS A PARADOX

In 1967, *Cool Hand Luke* introduced viewers to one of America’s favorite archetypal redeemed outlaws, Luke, a decorated war veteran who is sent to prison for destruction of public property. *The New York Times* calls Luke a character who “has never been so forcefully revealed as a victim not only of the brutality and sadistic discipline of his captors, but also—and this is most important—of the indirect cruelty that comes from the idolization in the eyes of his fellow prisoners and, finally, of himself.”¹⁷¹ This somewhat confusing description of “cruelty that comes from idolization” provides an excellent example of the trope of prison as a paradox, for seldom is idolization an act that can be described as cruel. Yet as Luke gains the respect of his fellow convicts through his persistent over-the-top antics (such as the previously mentioned “I can eat fifty eggs” scene), he seems to become increasingly despondent at his inability to escape the confines of the prison.

Luke eventually does escape, cutting a hole through the cellblock’s wooden floor and slipping away undetected during a celebration. But his freedom is short-lived, for he is quickly tracked down and returned to prison. In an infamous scene, Luke is paraded before his fellow convicts, shackled with a set a permanent ankle chains, and then beaten by the warden, who quips, “what we’ve got here is failure to communicate. Some men you just can’t reach . . . I don’t like it any more than you.”¹⁷² The warden’s comments, accompanied by the violent, public spectacle of punishment, not only suggest that Luke is being beating and shackled for his own good, but also that the warden feels awful about having to mend out the punishment. Confusion and cruelty that seem to stem from the
rather than the inmates, produce an atmosphere that epitomizes the trope of prison as a paradox.

Luke’s counterpart in Cool Hand Luke is Boss Godfrey, an obstinate lawman who always wears large, mirrored sunglasses to prevent anyone from seeing his eye.  He seemingly never speaks, and when a prisoner asks Luke one day, “Doesn’t he ever talk?” Godfrey fittingly shoots a bird, to which Luke responds, “I think he just said something.” In examining the trope of prison as a paradox, Boss Godfrey presents a particularly poignant example of the prison-industrial complex reflected onto an individual who exudes an aura of unquestionable authority. He sees, yet he is never seen, and he communicates without speaking, leaving the viewer (and the prisoners) unsure of exactly what to think about this obstinate lawman.

In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison, Foucault describes the invention and utilization of a clever device called the panopticon: an organizational prison system in which every inmate in a given area can be seen by a single guard, while none of the prisoners under observation can view their observer. “The major effect of the panopticon,” contends Foucault, is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” The fundamental purpose of the panopticon is to assure that this “automatic functioning of power” continues unabated, and that the power remains under the control of the lawman and not the outlaws. This is accomplished through the creation of a paradox that leaves the prisoners without recourse: the inmates cannot know when they are being observed, who is observing them, or what the observation is directed at uncovering, yet they must always suspect that they are under surveillance. Foucault’s contention that the

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penitentiary panopticon creates a situation in which power is both “visible and unverifiable” is clearly seen in the metonym of Boss Godfrey and his permanent mirrored sunglasses. Boss Godfrey is constantly visible, always standing nearby as the convicts carry out their daily activities, but his mirrored sunglasses make it impossible for the inmates to make eye contact with him. In fact, the inmates can never truly know if they are being observed at any given moment; Boss Godfrey could close his eyes and nobody would be the wiser. This sort of supervision provides the same sense of self-sustaining power that Foucault attributed to the physical edifice of the penitentiary panopticon.

*Cool Hand Luke* presents the panoptic theme of the prison environment not only through the mirror-eyed Boss Godfrey, but also through the consistent portrayal of prison as a confusing environment with ambiguous rules: prison as a paradox. For example, as soon as Luke enters his cellblock for the first time, a man who calls himself the floorwalker monotonously recites a long list of rules punishable by something he calls a “night in the box.” Any inmate who forgets his number, loses his spoon, fails to return his soda bottle, or is caught “playing grab ass” is subject to this punishment of a “night in the box.” Despite the questions posed as he unemotionally recites the list, the floorwalker provides no additional insight as to what the rules mean, nor does he expound on what “the box” is. Later in the movie, “the box” is finally revealed as a plain, outhouse-sized building with no plumbing and wooden floors, lit by a single light bulb that dangles from a wire. After finding out that his mother has recently passed away, Luke is pulled from his work detail and placed in the box for what amounts to preemptive punishment: the warden believes that the death of Luke’s mother may tempt him to plot an escape. Even the officer who is ordered to place Luke in the box seems
confused and dismayed by the underserved punishment, and as he places two empty buckets on the ground (presumably to be used as toilets), he rationalizes his behavior by saying, “Sorry Luke, I am just doing my job. You gotta appreciate that.” Luke apparently disagrees with the guard’s rationale, as he responds to his justification by saying, “Calling it your job don’t make it right, boss.” As the door is shut and then barred, the other convicts leave for their work detail, and the audience is left to ponder why Luke is being punished for something that he has not (yet) done. Luke’s contention that “calling it your job don’t make it right” pinpoints the underlying theme of the trope of prison as a paradox, for when even the officers who administer the punishment are offended by their own actions, the viewer is also confused and dismayed by what amounts to senseless abuse at the hands of the system.

Later in the movie, the trope of prison as a paradox is reiterated in perhaps the most torturous scene in the entire film, when Luke is returned to the prison after a second escape attempt. As punishment, Luke is ordered to dig a ditch, and then to fill it in, only to be ordered to dig it again. The punishment begins early in the morning and continues until well after nightfall, and each time Luke nears completion of his assigned task, the guards step in to update the chore. The punishment takes place in full view of the other prisoners, and as such, it is clearly meant to serve as an example of the prison’s unquestionable and inescapable authority. In addition, the exercise also seems to be an effort to break the will of the stubborn convict, and a successful one, as Luke later admits, “they broke me.” In the end, the psychological and physical extent of the ditch-digging scene seems more like cruelty than punishment—a public spectacle designed to torture a strong willed man into forced compliance. The drudgery of performing a
seemingly endless task that borders on torture paints a harrowing picture of the prison-industrial complex, elevating Luke to the status of a metonym for the frustration felt by millions of men and women ensnared in the drudgery of the modern punishment machine.

Much like the brutal rape depicted in *American History X*, the incident does initiate a change in Luke’s behavior, and he adopts a submissive attitude toward the prison guards for the first time in the film, implying that perhaps the extreme treatment was justified, or at least effective. Even the guards trust that Luke’s submissive attitude is sincere, until he spots a set of keys in the ignition of a work truck one day and mounts yet another escape attempt. After witnessing the ditch-digging incident, which left the viewer convinced of Luke’s brokenness and submission to the prison system, albeit by extreme and torturous means, the unexpected escape suggests that even the worst punishment available—punishment that borders on physical and psychological torture—is not sufficient to permanently rehabilitate the redeemed outlaw. As such, by failing to produce an enduring change of behavior, the ditch-digging scene in *Cool Hand Luke* acts as what Yousman calls a “brutalizing fiction” that suggests that “rehabilitation is impossible” and that prisoners are beyond rehabilitation or redemption. However, unlike representations of prison as a playground and prison-as-penance, the representation of prison as a paradox in *Cool Hand Luke* emphasizes the short-fallings of the prison: when even the most extreme punitive sanctions at an officer’s disposal are incapable of compelling rehabilitation, the system is exposed as fundamentally broken. By singling out Luke for extreme, public punishment, which ultimately failed to alter his
behavior, the prison guards highlight the fact that the system, even when pressing the limits of its punitive ability, is incapable of effecting real and enduring rehabilitation.

Similar scenes depicting prison as a paradox appear in numerous modern prison films, demonstrated in scenes where the redeemed outlaw is subjected to official treatment that leaves the viewer confused or even indignant. In *The Green Mile*, the archetype of prison-as-penance gives way to the archetype of prison as a paradox when John Coffey, an innocent man who can heal the sick, is nonetheless executed in the electric chair. Viewers have no control over whether or not Coffey will die, and it seems that neither does the film’s obstinate lawman, Officer Paul Edgecomb, who is unequivocally convinced of Coffey’s innocence. At a pivotal point in the movie, a distressed Edgecomb asks Coffey, “Tell me what you want me to do. Do you want me to take you out of here? Just let you run away? See how far you could get?” Edgecomb does not offer to file an appeal on behalf of Coffey, to contact the governor and request a pardon, or to seek any sort of legal remedy to the situation; he simply asks Coffey if he wants him to “take him out of here,” presumably to run from the authorities for the rest of his life. Coffey’s situation is a riddle with no solution, a paradox that represents the frustration and confusion that saturate the prison-industrial complex. Edgecomb, a man intimately involved in the penal system, believes that the only possible solution to Coffey’s imminent execution is to simply sneak the man out a back door when nobody is looking. This scene serves as a symbolic Javert suicide, as the obstinate lawman is unable to continue blindly performing his official duty. Instead, he decides to let a Death Row inmate walk out of prison, an act that will almost certainly land him in a prison cell. His offer is quickly refused, however, in another paradoxical moment, when Coffey
responds, “Why would you do such a foolish thing?” and accepts his own execution rather than trying to live. ¹⁸¹ In the end, the viewer is left with the feeling that the execution is defensible, not because the outlaw deserves to die, but because, as Yousman claims, “such media images and narratives construct the penal system as just, as a flawed but ultimately functional institution.” ¹⁸² In such an oxymoronic broken-yet-functional institution, a few mistakes are acceptable if the punishment machine is to continue to operate on a massive level.

In the previously discussed Dead Man Walking, the trope of prison as a paradox is demonstrated as the film’s main character, Matthew, is prepared for execution. Throughout the film, despite his guilt, Matthew continues to insist that he is innocent, but his brand of innocence is not likely to win him any sympathy from the viewer, for, by his own admission, he stood by and watched a rape and double-murder unfold. As the film develops, Matthew is repeatedly portrayed as a cliché Bad Guy who is racist, sexist, unrepentant, and downright mean. In one scene, he endorses Hitler and white supremacy, claiming that “Castro was on the right track,” and that the Holocaust has “never been proven.” ¹⁸³ In another scene, he defends his hatred of African-Americans, calling them “lazy welfare-taking coloreds sucking up tax dollars.” His reprehensible behavior is eventually derided by his religious advisor, who angrily explains, “You are making it so easy for them to kill you, coming across as some sort of a crazed-animal Nazi, racist mad dog who deserves to die.” ¹⁸⁴ In this regard, as the guards unemotionally prepare to enforce the death sentence, the viewer is tempted to endorse their actions despite Matthew’s profession of innocence, for even if he is every bit as “innocent” as he claims to be, he is still one of Rapping’s characters who are “so depraved and vicious that no
sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society." As such, the viewer is indifferent to Matthew’s death, and his professed innocence does not matter: if the punishment machine must turn out a few errors, let this monster be one of them. In fact, the film reinforces this sense of justified revenge when, just minutes before he is executed, Matthew confesses to committing the rape and murder, removing any remaining sense of apprehension the viewer may have felt about putting an “innocent” man to death. As previously discussed, the last minute confession also shifts the representation of prison as a paradox to prison-as-penance, leaving the viewer with a cozy, final impression that, despite its confusing and extensive flaws, perhaps the system can be effective.

In the trope of prison as a paradox, the penitentiary is depicted as a broken and self-perpetuating system that reinforces the very antisocial behavior it is intended to correct. For example, in Life, the trope of prison as a paradox is exemplified in the aforementioned cornbread diatribe, in which Rayford Gibson responds to a large inmate’s demand for his cornbread with threats of “consequences and repercussions.” The resulting one-sided fistfight is almost identical to a scene in Cool Hand Luke, and both fights present superb examples of the trope of prison as a paradox. Gibson and Luke both instigate a fight with the largest man in the prison, both continue to fight well past the point of defeat, and both fights take place in plain view of the guards. Most importantly, after the fights, both men are awarded a strange sort of respect from the rest of the prisoners, as if the fact that a man would needlessly subject himself to a brutal beating is worthy of some sort of bizarre adoration. These scenes exemplify the trope of prison as a paradox by presenting prison as a place where idolization is cruel and masochism is
respectable. A correctional system that endorses or encourages such behavior is clearly incapable of effecting rehabilitation. As such, the viewer’s indignation, which would be directed toward the depraved actions of prisoners in representations of prison as a playground and prison-as-penance, is instead directed at the prison system, which is shown to be fundamentally defective. In sum, where the trope of prison as a playground perpetuates stereotypes of inmates as hedonistic monsters, and the trope of prison-as-penance reinforces the idea that the penitentiary is the only way to protect society from these monsters, the trope of prison as a paradox emphasizes the prison’s culpability in creating and sustaining the behavior of the convicts that it holds, painting the prison-industrial complex as an ineffective and systemically broken institution.

As this brief examination of some of the key cinematic representations of the trope of prison as a paradox has revealed, the ambiguity and inefficacy of the prison-industrial complex is the central theme in representations of prison as a paradox. When an inmate suffers abuse at the hand of prison officials rather than other inmates, the viewer is tempted to assume that such methods of “punishment” are justified in the name of rehabilitation. But when extreme methods that border on torture are nonetheless shown to be unproductive, as is frequently the case in representations of prison as a paradox, the viewer is forced to question the effectiveness of the punishment machine. In sum, where the tropes of prison as a playground and prison-as-penance endorse the necessity of an eternally expanding prison-industrial complex, the trope of prison as a paradox exposes the penitentiary as a brutal-yet-ineffective machine of punishment. In so doing, such films force viewers to recognize the intrinsic brokenness of the prison system, and to question the necessity of its continued growth and harshening.
CHAPTER V

THE VIEW FROM INSIDE THE LOOKING GLASS

This Thesis has explored modern television and film representations of the prison-industrial complex, focusing on the schism between Certeau’s condensed and edited “referential reality,” created with information gleamed from film, and the actual environment of prison, which most viewers will never experience first hand. The archetypal characters of the redeemed outlaw and the obstinate lawman have been shown to reappear time and again in cinematic representations of prison. My findings have tended to focus on the negative consequences of such cinematic portrayals, namely, the reinforcement of the viewer’s belief in the necessity of the continued growth and harshening of the prison-industrial complex as a vital prerequisite for society’s continued safety. This conclusion was based, time and again, on the fact that the cinematic portrayals examined were all examples of Kenneth Burke’s “reflection, selection, and deflection of reality,” and that, as Dawn Cecil said, these Hollywood-style productions “do not necessarily seek to educate—instead they aim to titillate.”

Cinematic representations of prison have become a thorn in the side of my fellow academics seeking to educate the public as to the shortcomings of the prison-industrial complex, as we must consistently overcome stereotypes perpetuated by Hollywood’s titillating cuisine. In an effort to overcome this barrier, an increasing number of individuals have taken up the pen from a position inside of the prison walls, and as Nellis posits, “The newly emergent ‘convict criminology,’ produced in the USA by ex-cons (usually imprisoned as a result of the ‘war on drugs’) who have subsequently become academics, arguably enables criminology in general to go beyond the best of what it has
said hitherto about release and resettlement.” Although academics will frequently find themselves at a disadvantage when competing against Hollywood’s never-ending spectacle of punishment, the voices of those who have seen the system from the inside will prove valuable in supplementing the glamorous Hollywood tropes of prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and a prison as a paradox with a more concrete representation of the prison experience as a whole. In addition to firsthand narratives penned from within the prison-industrial complex, the last decade has seen the emergence and expansion of a number of activist organizations devoted to what Yousman calls media-literacy education: the idea that viewers can choose to question the distorted images provided by television and movies, working to “break the hold that the media industries have over our perception of mass incarceration.” The remainder of this essay will focus on the efforts of authors, academics, and activists who are already working both inside and outside of prison to reveal the truth about what goes on behind the stubbornly opaque walls of the penitentiary.

Mumia Abu-Jamal is an activist, journalist, and radio personality who was sentenced to death for the murder of a police officer in 1982. He has been incarcerated in a maximum-security Pennsylvania prison ever since his conviction, and the majority of his time has been spent on Death Row, until, following a long legal battle, his death sentence was commuted to life in 2011. Abu-Jamal, who The New York Times has referred to as “perhaps the world’s best known death row inmate,” has written a number of books detailing his life behind bars. In an excerpt from one of his most popular texts, Live from Death Row, Abu-Jamal describes the prison milieu in a succinct statement: “Life here oscillates between the banal and the bizarre.” This is not a
description of the dark and threatening atmosphere of Shawshank Prison or of *The Green Mile’s* Death Row; there is no suggestion of the self-created entertainment seen in *Cool Hand Luke’s* fifty-egg scene, or of the comic relief frequently provided by the cushion of comedy. Abu-Jamal’s words strike at the heart of the prison-industrial complex, and his statement clearly identifies the schism between the prison he lives in and those typically portrayed in film: in the cinematic representation, the viewer has no patience for the banal, and so there is no oscillation. But as Abu-Jamal emphasizes throughout the text, the banal is the dominating theme in his world, and the bizarre is an infrequent break from “The mind-numbing, soul-killing savage sameness that makes each day an echo of the day before, with neither thought nor hope of growth,” making “prison the abode of spirit death.” Descriptions like this one, authored by an inmate writing from the inside looking out, provide a sincere and sobering picture of the reality of life in prison. There is no playground for Abu-Jamal to manipulate, no penance that can be served on his way to redemption, and no way to escape the paradox of prolonged torture he describes. Instead, the prison-industrial complex that Abu-Jamal lives within is a blunt tool of punishment that acts with brutal consistency upon each of its charges.

The revelations of Abu-Jamal are startling in their simplicity, but his perspective as an incarcerated inmate limits his objectivity. However, firsthand accounts of the prison-industrial complex have also been authored by men and women who have *voluntarily* entered the walls of prison. In one such book, *New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*, which *The Denver Post* called “experimental journalism at its best,” author Ted Conover details his experiences as a Corrections Officer at New York’s Sing Sing Prison. As a guard, Conover’s narrative provides a unique perspective of the prison-industrial
complex, for he sees the system from the inside, yet, unlike the inmates he is charged
with supervising, he is in a position of authority and can leave the prison whenever he
wishes. In the book, Conover poetically describes the anguish that Abu-Jamal alludes to,
and speaking from the perspective of a guard entering the prison, he says:

    You feel it along the walls inside, hard like a blow to the head; see it on
    the walls outside, thick, blank, and doorless; smell it in the air that assaults
    your face in certain tunnels, a stale and acrid taste of male anger,
    resentment, and boredom . . . walls built not to shelter but to constrain.196

Conover details the same sense of despair that seems to permeate the entire edifice of the
penitentiary, but his viewpoint is poignantly different from Abu-Jamal’s in that Conover
is a guard, or, as he so aptly describes it, “it was a life sentence in eight-hour shifts.”197 A
guard’s “life sentence” is described throughout the book as an emotionally exhausting
role, and Conover explains how he and his fellow officers “adopted blank, tough
expressions that betrayed no weakness or curiosity, no disgust or delight . . . Was this
only about closing the blinds on your own soul so they couldn’t see in?”198 On Christmas
Day, Conover describes that, “as an officer, you mainly had to deny it. Christmas
spirit—generosity, forgiveness, goodwill toward men—ran pretty much counter to what
we were supposed to be doing. Prison was for punishment; it wasn’t ours to forgive.”199
And on New Years Eve, a night when most people celebrate new beginnings, Conover
says that, “unlike my friends, they [the inmates] weren’t celebrating the arrival of the
New Year so much, it seemed, as closing the book on the old.”200 Conover’s accounts of
life in prison provide valuable insight into the nature of the punitive machine, and
narratives such as his, highlighting the inhumane treatment of prisoners, provide a
valuable tool for disseminating information concerning the reality of prison operations.
Conover’s perspective as a guard allows the reader to rest assured that his accounts are
unlikely to be biased by preexisting antipathy for the system, and narratives of this type provide important anecdotal evidence as to the shortcomings of the prison-industrial complex.

Judith Tannenbaum is the author of *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin*, an appropriately named book that provides yet another perspective of a prison from inside of its walls. In the book, which was praised by Historian H. Bruce Franklin as “powerful, moving, and exceptionally significant,” Tannenbaum consistently notes the sense of despair and hopelessness that seems to predominate the prison environment. At one point, Tannenbaum reveals her frustration at the rigidity of the system, envisioning “an image of prison as a brick wall I kept hurling my body against. I knew my body would certainly be crushed long before even the slightest of dents appeared in the brick wall.” In another section, she talks about one of her popular students, and how she wonders if he “ever worried that prison might eventually wear down his capacity to be a human being out in the world.” Yet at the same time as she voices concern that prisoners may be institutionalized by the inflexible prison system, she consistently humanizes the inmates she speaks of, at one point explaining that, “the longing to be emotionally close to another creature [is] part of the human experience. A man or a woman in prison doesn’t stop being human, and so, doesn’t stop desiring closeness.” Tannenbaum’s story presents an example of the sort of firsthand narratives written from inside of prisons that will prove invaluable to overcoming the stereotypes perpetuated by the plethora of prison films and television shows that reinforce the necessity of the prison-industrial complex.

In addition to academics who have taken up the torch, a number of firsthand
accounts of the prison environment penned by individuals who are not (yet) academics reiterate the mind-numbing banality of the prison setting. Damien Echols served nearly two decades on Arkansas’s Death Row after being convicted of three murders when he was just eighteen years old. His sentence was eventually commuted to “time-served” in 2012, after much public attention and three separate HBO documentaries concerning the case led prosecutors to reexamine some questionable evidence. Shortly after his release from prison, Echols published *Life After Death*, a gritty memoir of his time spent behind bars that *The New York Times* said “tries to reconcile all these extremes into a single narrative, and to a great extent it accomplishes this magic trick.” In the text, Echols notes the ability of the prison-industrial complex to produce something akin to the opposite of rehabilitation, or as he states it, to “send a man to prison for writing bad checks and then torment him there until he becomes a violent offender.” He goes on to explain life inside prison as follows:

> On an average day there is nothing kind, generous, caring, or sensitive within these walls. The energy directed at you is hatred, rage, disgust, stupidity, ignorance, and brutality. It affects you in mind, body, and soul, much like a physical beating. The pressure is relentless and unending. Soon you walk with your shoulders slumped and your head down, like a beast that’s used to being kicked.

Echols is describing his own life inside of prison, and his firsthand description presents a harrowing picture of criminal corrections that is a far cry from Cheliotis’ account of cinematic representations where “Imagination tends to be taken on a sensational journey into spaces where the false and the fictional arise victorious from the ashes of the real.” In Echol’s world, there is no sensational journey to interrupt the banality of the prison that he calls “this hell devoid of anything that makes life worthwhile.”

Numerous other firsthand accounts of the prison-industrial complex verify the
claims of Abu-Jamal, Tannenbaum, Conover, and Echols concerning the scarring nature of the system. Stephen Hartnett poetically details his experiences teaching creative writing classes to incarcerated convicts, describing:

reeling from the stifling ugliness of gray walls gray clothing gray food gray soul gray dismal gray no bright colors no music no laughter no beauty.\textsuperscript{210}

In another section of the same text, Hartnett alludes to Hannah Arendt’s previously discussed ideas concerning the “banality of evil,” stating:

but for the pressure to inflict pain damaging the guards as much as the prisoners
the temptation so great to abuse the impunity of unchecked power

guard culture so klanish defining honor through cruelty dehumanizing others themselves\textsuperscript{211}

Inmate Amos Rogers similarly describes the dehumanization of life behind bars, stating, “prison is being told what you can wear, what you can own, what you can eat, how much sun and fresh air you can enjoy, and when you can call home, if you have a home.”\textsuperscript{212}

Such descriptions of the prison-industrial complex speak volumes to the plight of the men and women who are locked for extended periods inside of these stressful environments. It is no wonder that, as Echols so aptly described, society can “send a man to prison for writing bad checks and then torment him there until he becomes a violent offender.”\textsuperscript{213}

When the tropes of prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox are compared to firsthand accounts from those inside of the system, the prison-industrial
complex is exposed as the massive, ineffective dungeon that it has become. Only by choosing to supplement the information provided by Hollywood’s tempting array of television shows and movies with fundamental facts concerning the actual operations of the prison system can the barriers constructed from years of stereotypical cinematic prison representations begin to be demolished.

In addition to the revealing perspectives offered by firsthand prison narratives, Yousman endorses the idea of public media-literacy education, claiming that:

The commercial media industries have in fact amassed enormous profits by making us feel isolated from one another, anxious, unworthy, and, ultimately, very afraid. Alienated from other people we thus turn to the myriad products that the consumer society dangles in front of us with promises of fulfillment and salvation.¹¹⁴

The cinematic tropes of prison as a playground and prison-as-penance create irredeemably evil characters that cause viewers to feel “very afraid,” yet the “consumer society dangles before us” the solution of the obstinate lawman and his machine of punishment, the prison-industrial complex. However, Yousman’s model of media-literacy education suggests that “viewers can question and resist the distorted picture of incarceration” typically offered by Hollywood productions, “and they can work to change the media system that perpetuates these misleading images.”¹¹⁵ In addition to individuals writing firsthand narratives from within the prison-industrial complex, numerous organizations devoted to Yousman’s concept of media-literacy education are utilizing modern forms of media to disseminate information, attempting to reveal a more complete picture of prison than what is typically offered in a Hollywood representation.

The Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education Collective (PCARE) is a group of communication scholars founded in 2002 who, utilizing both
traditional print publications and an internet blog, seek to combat the continued expansion of America’s prison system. According to PCARE’s website, “Mass incarceration is one of the great crises of our time and is inextricably bound to the troubling discourses of crime and punishment that permeate our schools, media, and communities.”

PCARE’s publications include *Working for Justice: a Handbook of Prison Education and Activism*, which contains Yousman’s “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” an illuminating chapter that delineates the complicated relationship between cinematic prison portrayals and an ever-harshening prison-industrial complex. PCARE’s website also provides links to prison statistics, activism groups, prison poetry publications, and The Bureau of Justice Statistics, thereby serving as a gateway to additional resources dedicated to educating the general public as to the realities of the prison-industrial complex.

Other organizations have adopted a much more comprehensive approach to media education, seeking to address the problems related to globalization and media transparency. One such organization, The Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME), is a non-profit group of individuals whose website boasts, “Free of any funding from Big Media, ACME is an emerging global coalition run by and for media educators. . . . ACME’s unique approach to media education involves teaching citizens how to more effectively access, analyze, evaluate and produce media.” Yousman recently described the group’s missions as follows: “ACME’s vision of media education is linked with media activism focused on changing the media industries’ priorities and practices.” As such, ACME seeks to expose the influence that large corporations have over what is broadcasted via mainstream media. Specifically, ACME claims that “just a few
multinational corporations (Big Media) own much of the media that shape our 21st century culture,” and, as such, independently funded media resources are vital for insuring accurate and transparent new reporting.

Founded in 2002, Free Press is another well-established activism group devoted to encouraging transparency in the media by exposing the elaborate connections between multinational corporations and the mainstream media. According to the organization’s website, “Free Press advocates for universal and affordable internet access, diverse media ownership, vibrant public media and quality journalism.” Free Press seeks to combat what it calls “corporate control over our print media” through ensuring “that the public has a seat at the table.” In relationship to the prison-industrial complex, the goals of Free Press relate not only to news stories about prisons, but also to Hollywood-style prison narratives, such as those examined throughout this Thesis. As such, Free Press provides resources meant to supplement the limited and biased information supplied by Hollywood cinematic representations of prison, providing movie viewers with legitimate information to enrich their “referential reality.” These activism groups, and many others who endorse similar objectives, serve as valuable hubs for social justice activists in search of support, resources, or information.

In addition to the concept of media literacy education, the documentary film presents a particularly effective tool for combatting the cinematic tropes of prison as a playground and prison-as-penance, for despite its lack of a pre-written script, it uses the same tools of visual and audio representation that draw the viewer to fictional prison films. The Media Education Foundation (MEF) creates and distributes documentaries concerning myriad topics, and the website claims that the project is informed by “the
notion that language—and by extension, image—define the limits, and possibilities, of human imagination and thought.” Paper Tiger Television is another organization devoted to creating and distributing documentaries that, according to their website, “expose and challenge the corporate control of media.” Similarly, The California Newsreel is an online documentary-distribution company whose website boasts, “produces and distributes cutting edge, social justice films that inspire, educate and engage audiences.” These documentary film companies pride themselves on offering an alternative to the mainstream media, and unlike Cecil’s characterization of Hollywood films as productions that “do not necessarily seek to educate—instead they aim to titillate,” MEF, Paper Tiger Television and The California Newsreel do seek to educate. Although the modern genre of the documentary film is as vulnerable to edits, cuts, and context manipulation as any other, it nonetheless presents an alternative to the purely fictional prison narrative, and as such, it serves to richen the viewer’s knowledge of the prison-industrial complex. This brief list of alternative media resources is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the numerous organizations working to reform society’s notion of mainstream media. In sum, organizations such as those discussed above provide valuable online resources for movie and television viewers seeking evidence to either support or refute their beliefs about the prison-industrial complex.

The movies and television shows examined in this Thesis have repeatedly confirmed the existence of three representational tropes: prison as a playground, prison-as-penance, and prison as a paradox. These stereotypical prison representations provide the viewer with a source of information concerning a typical prison environment, and, absent any first hand knowledge to authenticate or to disprove what is seen, the movie or
television representation becomes what Certeau called “referential reality.” As I have shown, this “referential reality” can lead to tacit approval of the prison-industrial complex, and by proxy, of its continued growth and harshening, since the penitentiary is frequently depicted as an indispensable component of society. As Abu-Jamal said, “prisons have become a warped rite of passage, a malevolent mark of manhood, and a dark expectation.” Conover took this line of reasoning a step further, and, expressing his contempt at the notion of prison as a rite of passage, he states, “but can rite of passage possibly be the correct term for a kind of suspended animation that leaves you older, weaker, less sexually attractive, and less connected to the community than before you went in?” When the cinematic accounts that Cheliotis derided as places where “Imagination tends to be taken on a sensational journey into spaces where the false and the fictional arise victorious from the ashes of the real,” are compared to Conover’s and Abu-Jamal’s first hand accounts of “rites of passage” that leave people “older, weaker, less sexually attractive, and less connected to the community,” the disconnect becomes obvious. As Tannenbaum eloquently explains, “We cannot ‘look horror in the face’ if we keep repeating the same stories, based on the same myths, with the same conclusions.” These “same stories based on the same myths” are exemplified in the modern tropes of prison, and in the exaggerated prisoner stereotypes portrayed in cinematic prison productions. If we are to “look horror in the face,” and challenge the prison-industrial complex’s strict and unquestionable punitive grasp, then as Nellis said, “The newly emergent ‘convict criminology’, produced in the USA by ex-cons . . . arguably enables criminology in general to go beyond the best of what it has said hitherto about release and resettlement.” The “convict criminologists” who authored the afore mentioned books,
and those who will author the next generation of firsthand prison narratives, represent the counterpart to Hollywood’s glamorized prison environment, and the information contained in their accounts will prove invaluable in combatting the continued growth and harshening of the prison-industrial complex. In addition, activist organizations dedicated to providing media-literacy education through online blogs and multimedia resources will continue to play a valuable role in disseminating information about prison conditions and operations, serving to expose the intrinsic short fallings of the prison-industrial complex.
ENDNOTES


14 *Cool Hand Luke*. 


21 Escape from Alcatraz.


26 Helen Eigenberg & Agnes Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower you are on your own: Images of Male Rape in Selected Prison Movies,” Sexuality and Culture 7, issue 4 (Dec, 2003): 56-66, quotation at 76.


31 Carl Jung, Man and his Symbols, 58.


33 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower you are on your own,” 86, 64.


37 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

38 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 152.

39 See The Bible, Matthew 14:6-12, New International Version.


41 See Leviticus 24:16 for Jewish law concerning blasphemy; see Leviticus 20:10 for Jewish religious law concerning adultery; see Leviticus 20:13 for Jewish religious laws concerning homosexuality.

42 Numbers 15:34, Deuteronomy 17:2-7, Leviticus 24:10-16.


48 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 145.


53 Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 126.

54 Plato, *The Republic* (Norwalk, CT: The Easton Press, 1944), 529. Written in the fourth century B.C.


58 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower you are on your own,” 87.


67 Youtube.com is a free video service that broadcasts user-uploaded videos; Netflix.com is a for-fee service that offers subscribers unlimited access to a plethora of new and archived films and television shows.


69 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 47.


71 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 145.

72 Cheliotis, “The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility,” 175.

73 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 152.

74 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.


83 *The Shawshank Redemption*.


86 Cheliotis, “The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility,” 175.

87 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 147.


94 *Prison Break*.

95 *Oz*.


102 The Shawshank Redemption.

103 Life.


106 Lets Go to Prison.

107 Freud, Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious, 206, 150.

108 Freud, Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious, 147.


110 Rapping, Law and Justice as Seen on TV, 81.

111 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

112 The Shawshank Redemption.

113 The Shawshank Redemption.


118 Blood in, Blood Out.

119 Blood in Blood Out.

120 Blood in Blood Out.

121 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower you are on your own,” 87.

122 Rapping, Law and Justice as Seen on TV, 81.

123 Cheliotis, “The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility,” 175.

124 Rapping, Law and Justice as Seen on TV, 81.

125 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

126 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

127 Adorno & Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 139.


129 The Shawshank Redemption.

130 The Shawshank Redemption.

131 Cheliotis, “The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility,” 175.

132 The Shawshank Redemption.


134 The Shawshank Redemption.

136 The Green Mile.

137 The Green Mile.

138 American History X.

139 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower,” 76.

140 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower,” 87.

141 Eigenberg & Baro, “If you Drop the Soap in the Shower,” 87.


144 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.


147 Rapping, Law and Justice as Seen on TV, 81.


149 Con Air.


151 Blood in Blood out.

152 Blood in Blood out.

153 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.
154 *The Shawshank Redemption.*

155 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.


159 *Monster’s Ball.*

160 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

161 *Con Air.*

162 Rapping, *Law and Justice as Seen on TV,* 81.

163 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

164 *The Green Mile.*

165 *The Green Mile.*


170 Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.
Bosley Crowther, review of *Cool Hand Luke*, *New York Times*, November 2, 1967, 
C679EDE.

*Cool Hand Luke.*

*Cool Hand Luke.*

*Cool Hand Luke.*

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 201.

*Cool Hand Luke.*

*Cool Hand Luke.*

Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

*The Green Mile.*

*The Green Mile*

Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 146.

*Dead Man Walking*

*Dead Man Walking.*

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*Life.*


194 Abu-Jamal, Live From Death Row, 54.

195 Ted Conover, New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing (New York: Random House, 2001); quote taken from front cover.


197 Conover, New Jack, 21.

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199 Conover, New Jack, 295.

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201 Judith Tannenbaum, Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), quote taken from back cover.

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203 Tannenbaum, Disguised as a Poem, 18.

204 Tannenbaum, Disguised as a Poem, 140-141.


207 Echols, Life After Death, 64-65.

208 Cheliotis, “The Ambivalent Consequences of Visibility,” 175.


Yousman, “Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex,” 159.

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“What We Do,” Free Press website, [http://www.freepress.net/about](http://www.freepress.net/about).


Tannenbaum, *Disguised as a Poem*, xiii.

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*Con Air.* DVD. Directed by Simon West. 1997; Burbank, CA: Disney-Touchstone Pictures.


_Escape from Alcatraz_. DVD. Directed by Don Siegel. 1979; San Francisco, CA: Paramount Pictures.


Lets Go to Prison. DVD. Directed by Bod Odenkirk. 2006; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios.


Monster’s Ball. DVD. Directed by Marc Forster. 2001; Vancouver, British Columbia: Lions Gate Films.


Oz. DVD. Created by Tom Fontana. 1997-2003; Bayonne, New Jersey: Levinson/Fontana Company & HBO.


## APPENDIX: LIST OF ARCHETYPAL PRISON FILMS

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<th>Movie/Television Program</th>
<th>Character Archetypes</th>
<th>Prison as a Playground, Penance, or Paradox</th>
<th>Additional Comments</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Les Misérables</strong> (1934-2012)</td>
<td>Jean Valjean, Inspector Javert</td>
<td>Penance</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Grapes of Wrath</strong> (1940)</td>
<td>Tom Joad, The legal system &amp; society</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Shockproof</strong> (1949)</td>
<td>Jenny Marsh, Parole Officer Griff Marat</td>
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<td>Early example of a film that uses a false conviction as an antagonist, and the eventual defeat of the false conviction as a redemptive act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Convicted</strong> (1950)</td>
<td>Glenn Ford, George Knowland</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Noon</strong> (1952)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Man in the Dark</strong> (1953)</td>
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<td><strong>Riot in Cellblock II</strong> (1954)</td>
<td>James Dunn, State politicians &amp; the Governor</td>
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<td>Early depiction of the power of media coverage.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cape Fear</strong> (1962)</td>
<td>Max Cady, Parole officer, and the police</td>
<td>Playground, Paradox</td>
<td>Max Cady is a recalcitrant released convict seeking revenge, not redemption.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Baby the Rain Must Fall</strong> (1965)</td>
<td>Henry Thomas, Kate Dawson</td>
<td>Penance</td>
<td>Redemption through making amends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Dirty Dozen</strong> (1967)</td>
<td>A group of 12 convicts, Col. Everett Dasher Breed</td>
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<td>The prisoners in this film find redemption by accepting a suicide mission that will help end WWII.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Going Home</strong> (1971)</td>
<td>Harry Graham, Jimmy Graham</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>The Getaway</strong> (1972)</td>
<td>Doc McCoy, Sheriff Beynon</td>
<td>Penance</td>
<td>Sheriff Beynon hires McCoy to rob a bank.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Papillon</strong> (1973)</td>
<td>“Papillon” &amp; Louis Dega, The French penal colony of Devil’s Island</td>
<td>Playground, Penance</td>
<td>Papillon and Dega plot to escape the island prison, but in the end only Papillon manages to escape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Piñero</strong> (1975)</td>
<td>Miguel Pinero</td>
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<tr>
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<td>“Cannonball” Buckman</td>
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<td>* <strong>Short Eyes</strong> (1977)</td>
<td>Clark Davis</td>
<td>Davis’s fellow prisoners</td>
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<tr>
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<td>The Turkish Justice System</td>
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<td><strong>Penitentiary</strong> (1979)</td>
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<td>Playground, Paradox</td>
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<td><strong>Brubaker</strong> (1980)</td>
<td>Henry Brubaker Lee Bullen, &amp; Richard Coombes</td>
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<td>Playground, Paradox</td>
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<td><strong>48 Hrs.</strong> (1982)</td>
<td>Reggie Hammond</td>
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<td><strong>Dead Man Walking</strong> (1985)</td>
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<td>Character 1</td>
<td>Character 2</td>
<td>Setting</td>
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<td>Silence of the Lambs (1991)</td>
<td>Hannibal Lecter</td>
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<td>Malcolm X</td>
<td>None specified</td>
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<td>Hank Grotowski</td>
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*“Fresh Fish” film, containing representations of prison as a playground through a new inmate’s cruel treatment.*