The Ideology of the Carceral State: Examining the Prison Through Film

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THE IDEOLOGY OF THE CARCERAL STATE: EXAMINING THE PRISON

THROUGH FILM

by

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B.S. May 2015, Eastern Kentucky University
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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE CARCERAL STATE: EXAMINING THE PRISON THROUGH FILM

Ryan Phillips
Old Dominion University, 2021
Director: Dr. Ruth Triplett

Mass incarceration began almost fifty years ago and has proliferated to the point that the United States is the world leader in incarceration. Much work has been done that examines the history and nature of mass incarceration and the carceral state. However, an area that has received far less attention is how people think about prisons. To address this gap, I ground my analysis in the works of Louis Althusser, Slavoj Zizek, and Mark Fisher to formulate “Carceral Realism”, which I argue is the ideology of mass incarceration. To better understand the nature of this ideology, I employ a content analysis of prison films to examine how they portray prisons and the people in them. In the analysis, I show that prison films support the ideology of Carceral Realism by selectively portraying what kinds of people are in prison, by focusing on particular acts of violence, especially rape, and by depicting the primary purpose of prisons as incapacitation.
I would like to thank all of my committee members for their time spent serving on this dissertation committee. I thank my chair, Dr. Ruth Triplett, for her patience and the hard work she has put in editing this dissertation. I also would like to thank her for her kindness and for always having an open door when I needed someone to talk to. I thank Dr. Vanessa Panfil for helping me realize my interest in qualitative research. Her Interviewing and Ethnography course has had a lasting impact on my intellectual interests, and I thank her for teaching that course. I thank Dr. Alison Reed for teaching an awesome Abolition Literature course that taught me a lot about prison abolition. I originally developed the idea of Carceral Realism for a paper for that course, and I do not think that this dissertation would have happened without it. Lastly, I want to thank Dr. Stephen Young for his friendship and guidance over the past four years. He has helped me out personally and professionally in more ways than I can recount.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

A few years back I was at the annual American Society of Criminology meeting in Atlanta, Georgia. It was Friday afternoon and the conference had been going on for three days. As an eager graduate student, I had decided to find a panel to attend for every time slot of every day of the conference. As anyone who has attended ASC or conferences like it will know, this was quite the endeavor, and I was exhausted. The people I was with that day had decided to attend a panel; however, I decided enough was enough and that I needed a break. I was behind on responding to emails anyway.

I found a group of chairs, all without occupants, that were off to themselves in a lonely corner of the hotel away from the bustle and noise of the conference. I picked a chair, got out my laptop, and made myself busy thinking I would be undisturbed. As I was working, a group of around five or six people came over and sat down in the chairs near me. I could tell they were fellow conference attendees from their dress, nametags, and the bags they carried emblazoned with the letters “ASC” that all members are given upon registration. I was slightly annoyed by their presence as I thought I had found some time to myself; however, I determined to not notice them and attend to my task at hand. This was not what happened, however.

As tends to be the case when people get together, the group was in constant conversation. I do not recall everything they talked about, however due to the loud nature of their voices and my inability to tune people out I picked up on many things they were saying. The group began talking about a panel they had attended about corrections and prion reform, and one way or another the conversation made its way to mass incarceration. It was no surprise that mass incarceration came up given what they had started talking about, but I was struck by what they
had to say about it. One person suggested that while prison reform was a good thing, we
certainly do not want to go too far with it as it would probably lead to an increase in the crime
rate. Another chimed in that they agreed, and that the US’s high number of prisons and jails
could be one of the reasons why the violent crime rate has been decreasing for the past few
decades. The conversation continued for a while with others from the group echoing similar
sentiments. Then came the comment that I was taken aback by the most. One person suggested
that, though it may be good to reform prisons, some people are just so bad as to be beyond help
or rehabilitation. Prisons and jails, they said, are appropriate places for these people, and letting
people out *en masse* risks letting loose the people who cannot be a part of society.

The type of thinking that was clearly embedded in the minds of this group of
criminologists is one I have seen reflected in other places as well. I had seen it in news media, as
well as in conversations I have had before with people outside of academia. However, perhaps
being too naïve, I had not expected to hear it at the ASC annual meeting. Although I thought a
large percentage of people in society felt this way, hearing it in this context made me ponder that
it might be a more pervasive sentiment than I had at first realized.

At the time I was taking a graduate course called “Abolition Literature”, and as the
semester was ending, I was tasked with writing an end-of-term paper that was in some way
focused on the carceral state. I wanted to write a paper about how people think about prisons and
jails, so I had been reading Mark Fisher’s (2003) book *Capitalist Realism*, as well as some works
by Slavoj Zizek and Louis Althusser. All of these works center on ideology and what role it
plays in shaping what people believe in. I began to think about how ideology is at work in
making people think what they do about prisons and jails and the need to punish people who
commit crime. It was from this conversation, in concert with what I was reading, that I
formulated the concept of Carceral Realism, which is the ideological sentiment that we as a society must have the carceral state in order to keep us safe and to control crime.

THE PROBLEM

While hearing that conversation at ASC served as an eye-opening moment for me, one does not need to listen in on the conversations of others to know that our society is permeated by the idea that prisons are necessary. A well conducted public opinion poll would perhaps not be as informative as simply looking around the US at all of the evidence. Research finds that prisons and jails mark the landscape in increasing numbers (Mai Belaineh Subramanian and Kang-Brown 2019), the number of people incarcerated in the US is high in comparison to other countries because of increases in the past decades (Equal Justice Initiative 2019), and we spend billions on incarceration and increasing punitive measures while defunding social safety nets (Wang 2018). What has received far less attention is the ideological impact of the carceral state, or why we are so invested in it (Reed 2017). This is the main reason I formulated Carceral Realism. The research proposed for this project examines the ideology of Carceral Realism. In particular, the project examines prison films as a heuristic to demonstrate how Carceral Realism works. The goal is that this research will help develop a better understanding of how the idea that the carceral state is necessary develops and is reproduced.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There are four questions which I have set out to address in my analysis of prison films in this dissertation. First, do the prison films selected for this study reflect the ideological tenets of Carceral Realism? Second, if they are present, how do they manifest through imagery and
language? It is possible of course that these films will involve narratives that are counter to Carceral Realism, and if this is the case then that must be explored also. Third, why is it that the message of Carceral Realism would be reflected in pop culture in the first place? Finally, and most importantly though, how does the ideological message in prison films create and reproduce a general understanding of the prison as necessity?

PROJECT OUTLINE

In the next chapter, I lay out in more detail the argument that the US is invested in prisons. The chapter then turns to a discussion of Althusser (1970) and Fisher (2003) to explain the theoretical framework of Carceral Realism. After a discussion of the character and functional dimensions of Carceral Realism, the chapter turns to a discussion of the importance of films as a cultural product/artefact and why they should be studied by criminologists. Then, in the third chapter, the method of film analysis that will be used for this project is discussed. As this is a qualitative project, the chapter also touches on the nature of subjectivity and positionality in qualitative research. The chapter ends with a discussion of the theoretical bases of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Visual Criminology.

Chapters four, five and six report on the findings of the analysis. They demonstrate how Carceral Realism is displayed in these films, discussing the major themes that consistently came up during the viewing process. The fourth chapter lays out what I term the “underserving criminal”, an ideal type that I found to be common in prison films. The underserving criminal is usually one character in a film that is portrayed as the “worst of the worst”, is overtly violent, and has no prospects for reform or redemption. The chapter illustrates how the underserving criminal is portrayed through both imagery and language. The second half of the chapter then
focuses on what I call the “moral protagonist”. As found in the analysis, this is a character that is meant to be the opposite of the underserving criminal and with which the audience is meant to identify. The moral protagonist often serves the purpose of highlighting just how “bad” the bad people in prison are, and of signaling to the audience who does and does not “belong” in prison. Such consistent representation of these two types of characters represents the Carceral Realist tenet that there are good people and bad people, and that the bad are more deserving of being in prison.

The fifth chapter explores the portrayal of violence, in particular, rape in prison films. Rape has historically been portrayed in a lot of American films (Projansky 2001), and the same is true of nearly all the films in this study. The findings indicate that depictions of rape from these films often employ various rape myths from popular culture, such as the psychotic rapist. Rape is also used by the films to test a male character’s masculinity, and to set up a motivation/revenge arc for a male character. The chapter also discusses how the film’s reliance on rape myths feeds into Carceral Realist ideology. The sixth chapter then explores findings regarding how these movies approach the idea of what the prison is for. Most of the films from this study do not try to actively engage with the prison as an idea. As the findings indicate though, the majority of the films portray the prison as a space of incapacitation where people who are clearly meant to be seen by the audience as bad are kept away from the rest of society. Some films focus on the prospects of reform, although only in a shallow manner. Lastly, the chapter concludes by comparing the differences in portrayals of the prisons in films that are set in foreign countries to those that are set in the US, and with a discussion of how the contrasts in these films are rooted in Carceral Realism. The final chapter explores all the threads of Carceral
Realism discussed in the analysis chapters, while also briefly discussing the need for future research.
CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The carceral state is more prevalent today than perhaps any other period in US history (Murakawa 2014). The boom that prisons and jails have experienced from roughly the early 1970s to now demonstrates that the US is thoroughly invested in incarceration. Below I discuss briefly the nature of the carceral state in the US and how its broad scope represents this investment. I will then discuss Carceral Realism as an ideology that is rooted in this investment, as well as the theoretical foundations of works by Althusser (1970) and Fisher (2003) upon which it rests.

MASS INCARCERATION

The geography of the US is marked by prisons and jails. A map of the jails and prisons in the US demonstrates that it would be difficult for a person to move around any state in the country and not run into one even in areas that are not necessarily densely populated (See Eason (2017) on the prevalence of the carceral state in rural areas). Leaving aside whether or not we realize that we rely on the carceral state, its prevalence in society clearly demonstrates that we act “as if” (Zizek 2008:12) we need it. While prisons have been around in some form since the early part of the 1800s (Beaumont and Tocqueville 1833/1964), the reliance on them that began in the 1970s is much more recent. In the late 1960s there were around two hundred thousand people in US prisons (Davis 2003). While this is a high number in comparison to many other countries, it is a far cry from where we are now. According to a 2020 Prison Policy Initiative report, over 1.3 million people were incarcerated in federal and state prisons in 2019, while the number for jails is around 700,000. When the numbers on other forms of incarceration are added
in, over seven million people in the US are under some form of “correctional” control by the carceral state.

Mass incarceration began in the early 1970s, its rise coming on the heels of the US prison population per capita being as low as it had been in 45 years (Simon 2007). The late 1960s and early ‘70s was a tumultuous time in the US, with active anti-war and Civil Rights campaigns that threatened state legitimacy. Though mass incarceration cannot be viewed as a response to any one event from this time period, its rise was certainly part of “a long counterinsurgency against the Black freedom, labor, and socialist alliance that took shape in the struggle to abolish Jim Crow racial capitalism” (Camp 2016:5). This is evidenced by the passing of the 1968 Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, an important bill which was a response to nationwide unrest and set the stage for mass incarceration (Murakawa 2014).

The brainchild of President Johnson, the bill sought to modernize the criminal legal system, and had lofty ideological goals such as reducing crime rates by 20 percent in just five years (Murakawa 2014). It was a failure, as violent crime rates actually increased in most places that received federal funds. However, this failure does not mean that the 1968 bill has not been influential. On the contrary, it served to centralize and expand the power of policing in the US, a key component of mass incarceration. It also helped set the stage for a punitive turn in policy in the coming decades. As Murakawa (2014) writes, “Johnson’s modernization to improve minority relations slipped easily into Nixon’s modernization to be tough on crime” (70).

While the 1970s saw a large increase in the incarcerated population, the biggest increase in US history happened from 1980 to 1993 (Schoenfeld 2012). Perhaps the most important factor during this time period was President Regan’s declaration of the war on drugs in 1982. Research has shown that drug arrests were “the major component of the overall growth” (Blumstein and
Beck 1999:21) in the incarceration rate during this time, making up around 33% of the growth in prison and jail admissions. Communities of color were hit particularly hard during this time, and indeed during the entirety of the war on drugs. As an example, black people make up 13 percent of the US population, yet make up around 40 percent of the population incarcerated in federal and state prisons for drug offenses (Drug Policy Alliance 2018). Racialized disparities in drug arrests and convictions were driven in part by the introduction in 1986 of the 100-to-1 disparity in sentencing for crack versus powder cocaine (Coyle 2002). Part of the larger Anti-Drug Abuse Act, the 100-to-1 ratio would mandate the same sentence for 5 grams of crack cocaine as for 500 grams of powder cocaine. The law was part of a larger racist moral panic, later proven to be false, which labeled black women as degenerate crack users who were birthing “crack babies” that were born addicted (Murakawa 2014).

Another important factor in the build-up of prison populations during this time was the rapid expansion of the use of mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines. Mandatory minimums saw “[c]umulative net expansions [quintuple] from 1980 to 2000 (from 77 to 284)” (Murakawa 2014:116), with most of the expansion occurring under the Clinton presidency. While the increase in use of mandatory minimums has resulted in increased arrests for a number of crimes, one of the most notable areas of expansion has been in drug arrests. From 1984 to 1990, roughly 90 percent of people sentenced under mandatory minimums were convicted of drug offenses (Murakawa 2014). The ratio was reduced in 2010, though it is still an 18-to-1 disparity.

During the 1990s, despite a drop in violent crime nationwide, prison admissions continued to increase. From 1993 through the year 2000, the incarceration rate in state prisons rose by over 22 percent (Schoenfeld 2012). There were three bills passed in the 1990s during the Clinton regime that contributed to the continuation of mass incarceration (Murakawa 2014). The
first was the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 which introduced new punitive sanctions for various offenses. It also introduced new “three-strikes” laws, which are a kind of mandatory minimum sentence that go into effect the third time someone is convicted of a particular type of offense. The other two were the Federal Death Penalty Act of 1994, and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. As the names suggest, both laws focused on the death penalty, greatly increasing the number of capital crimes and cutting down on the number of appeals capital defendants can file, as well as the time they have to file them (Murakawa 2014). Although the total number of people incarcerated in the US has declined recently, mass incarceration continues largely unabated (Sawyer and Wagner 2020).

THE CARCERAL STATE AND THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

When we think of carceral spaces, prisons and jails come to mind as they are locations utilized for the racialized incarceration of millions of people. The term carceral state, however, conveys more than just the physical presence of sites of imprisonment. It connotates how the US government has come to govern around crime as a central problematic. The carceral state is “more and less than a state that builds and fills prisons” (Simon 2007:476). The carceral state is, thus, also a logic that affects and directs everyday life. This mentality is part of an overall shift in the economic sphere in the US and globally towards neoliberalism and austerity. With the economic shift has come a change in the political sphere also, as New Deal era welfare programs have been financially gutted while punitive measures like incarceration and policing have seen a tremendous influx of funding (Harvey 2005). While the rise of the carceral state has been accompanied by a move towards the right in American politics, it is supported by both the Republican and Democratic parties (Murakawa 2014). As an example, much of the legislation
that the carceral state was built on, such as the 1968 Omnibus Crime Bill, was enacted by Democratic regimes.

When it comes to time and money, we have invested “as if” we require the carceral state. At the beginning of the 1980s, the budget for all federal prisons was around $1 billion, a number which pales in comparison to current figures. The BJS’s most recent report puts the annual cost of mass incarceration at $81 billion (Equal Justice Initiative 2017). However, a more recent report conducted by the Prison Policy Initiative, which included factors like fines and fees charged to people inside prisons and jails, found that the BJS report was short by around a staggering $100 billion, and that the cost in total is actually around $182 billion (Prison Policy Initiative 2017). These exorbitant costs de facto reflect that the US is firmly ideologically invested in the need for prisons. Further contextualization reveals that this investiture is at the detriment of many other areas of government spending. A 2016 report by the US Department of Education found that spending on prisons and jails by states and local municipalities has, for the past thirty years, tripled compared to that spent on public education for primary and secondary schooling (U.S. Department of Education 2016). The money that is spent on incarceration is not spread out evenly among the population, as the carceral state tends to home in on certain communities. Evidence of this is the “million-dollar block”, which refers to how cities spend in excess of $1 million to incarcerate people who all live in one residential block (Story 2016). These exorbitant costs reveal that prisons and jails are a near ubiquity in our society, and by themselves reflect that the US is firmly ideologically invested in the need for the carceral state.

The costs of the carceral state are multi-faceted and go beyond money, however. For instance, mass incarceration disproportionately targets Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), and has ravaged entire communities. For instance, research by Clear (2009) finds that
some of the BIPOC communities most affected by mass incarceration have about 1 in 5 men who are from that community locked up on a given day. He reports further that the devastation brought to these communities by mass incarceration has made it so that nearly everyone knows someone who is incarcerated, and many families are split up due to members being on the inside. This is made worse by the fact that, far from actually serving as crime control, Clear (2009) finds that areas which are most targeted by the carceral state actually see increases in crime and deviance.

The rise of mass incarceration has resulted in the proliferation of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), a system characterized by the “overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” (Critical Resistance, n.d.). The PIC goes beyond just prisons and jails, as it also includes an interlocking system of police, the courts, probation and parole services, and other institutions that work with and alongside corporations that profit off people being incarcerated. While it is impossible to put a start date on when the PIC emerged, the term came into widespread use in the 1990s as a descriptive of the California penal system’s relationship with multi-national corporations, and its development into “a major economic and political force” (Davis 2003:85).

An important component of the PIC is prison labor, which is by itself a billion dollar industry in the United States (Leung 2018). As Leung (2018) reports, prison labor is particularly used by companies in the manufacturing and consumer goods industries, such as multi-national clothing corporation Victoria’s Secret. Technology companies such as IBM use prison labor to make products and provide tech support, and Microsoft has contracts with prisons and jails across the US to provide computers and other hardware (Davis 2000; Henderson 2015). Leung
(2018) also notes that the financial industry also makes money from prisons, as they invest in highly-profitable construction bonds when new prisons or jails are built. Finally, he argues that the draw for companies to use prison labor is rooted in the profit motive, as people who are incarcerated are not entitled to earn the regular minimum wage, and often are paid at rate of $1 per hour or less. Companies using prison labor do not have to be concerned with profit-reducing factors like health benefits or unionization efforts by employees. Thus, by employing prison labor, companies dramatically increase their profits. The growth of the PIC, and particularly prison labor, shows just how invested in prisons we are as a society, as they are becoming increasingly important to the US economy, as well as state and local economies.

In terms of local economies, prisons and jails are often framed as institutions that can help to build or revive areas that are struggling financially. This is evidenced by the large increase in the number of prisons and jails that have been built in the Appalachian region of the US over the past few decades (Perdue and Sanchagrín 2016). Selling prisons and jails as potential financial booms has an obvious angle in terms of Appalachia, as it is comprised of many areas that experience high levels of poverty, inequality, and joblessness. Locating prisons and jails in rural spaces also has the effect of putting them “out of sight, out of mind”. Thus, even those who might live close to a prison or jail, do not have to see or think about them on a daily basis (Schept 2014). Even prisons and jails that are in plain view can often be built in such a way as hides them. As anecdotal evidence, a jail about two hours from where I grew up in Kentucky has been built to look like a horse farm to make it fit in with the surrounding area.

Descriptions of the scope of the carceral state have deservedly received much attention from scholars (Gilmore 2007; Simon 2007; Gottschalk 2013). What has received far less attention is the ideological impact of the carceral state, or why we are so invested in it (see Reed
2017). This is the main reason I formulated Carceral Realism. It is to the theoretical foundations of Carceral Realism that I now turn.

ALTHUSSER, IDEOLOGY, AND CARCERAL REALISM

The theoretical foundation for Carceral Realism (CR) rests on the work of Louis Althusser, perhaps the most-well known Marxist theoretician who attempted to address the issue of ideology. Althusser (1970) starts from the assumption that “the state” includes more than just the typical arms of government (the police, military, etc…) and must be thought of as part of the private sphere as well. In this theoretical vein, he begins his analysis by delineating the superstructure between two areas of state power: the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and the (Repressive) State Apparatus (RSA). The ISAs are where ideology primarily comes into play; they are the realms in which the dominant ideas and perspectives of the ruling classes originate and are disseminated to the masses. Althusser says there are many ISAs, including but not limited to “the education ISA…the family ISA…[and] the communications ISA” (143). While these various ISAs may appear to be separate, they are brought together in their subjection to the ideology of the ruling classes.

The RSA is the realm of more direct and forceful social control on the part of the state. The RSA is comprised of the more straightforward institutions of the state; i.e., the police, the courts, prisons, among others. As a whole, the RSA is more monolithic than are the ISAs, and the parts which compose it are all part of the “public” (i.e., taxpayer funded) sector of society. These more overt methods of control work, at least in the final instance, by violence, although often the threat of violence is enough.
An important aspect of Althusser’s (1970) theorization is that, though he separates the state between ISAs and the RSA, this is largely for practical reasons, as they are dialectically connected. In fact, there are segments of society that are a part of both the ISAs and the RSA. Althusser (1970) mentions “the Law” as just such an example. While ISAs may operate in the first instance by ideology, and the RSA primarily by violence/repression, each one has what we might call a secondary function as well. This double-faceted conception of the wings of the state means that, though there are the areas of the ISAs and areas of the RSA, no ISA is completely ideological, and no RSA is only repressive. This distinction is noteworthy for many reasons, one being that it shows a conception of power and ideology that, while pervasive and influential, is an incomplete project. While the Foucauldian notion of power is often thought of as a nearly all-powerful process which directs behavior, for Althusser (1970) ideology is not perfect and is always backed up by violence or the threat of it.

Knowing that ideology is a pervasive phenomenon which is at play in both the ISAs and the RSA, it is also important to understand how it operates. In his writings on ideology, Althusser (1970) makes a theoretical separation between individuals and subjects. On the one hand, individuals are persons who have not yet encountered ideology. The individual is loosely an ideal comparable to Kant’s “thing-in-itself”; an attempt to theorize someone who has not been disturbed by the limitations which ideology places on perception. On the other hand, the subject is brought into being when the individual encounters ideology and is “interpellated” by it (Althusser 1970:170). Though this may sound straightforward, in practice and effect the interpellation process is non-linear and multifaceted. For example, in the case of being assigned a sex, which is tied to a sex category and presumed gender, at birth, it is true that individuals are subjects before they are ever born. Ideology is always present, so we are always-already subjects.
Another facet of ideology is that it hides its nature as ideology. Althusser writes that “one of the effects of ideology is the practical denegation of the ideological character of ideology by ideology” (175). This characteristic is vital to ideology and contributes to its pervasiveness, as it is difficult to root out or challenge a belief if it is not seen as a belief at all. If we think of gender again, many people confuse gender with sex, thinking it to be a biological trait. However, this is an ideological delusion, as gender is a social construct and has different meanings across different societies and time periods (Lorber and Farrell 1991).

To better understand how ideology conceals its ideological nature, we can compare and contrast ideology-as-fact with Althusser’s (1970) discussion of Christianity. I refer here to these as “structural” ideologies which connotates the structure which Althusser (1970) works out to demonstrate how ideologies operate. Thinking in a linear manner, Christianity confronts a subject with the choice of accepting God as the only legitimate god in existence. The subject, thus, has a choice of which they are consciously aware.

Ideology-as-fact in general is different from this in the sense that the nature of the “confrontation” changes. Instead of having an overt choice presented, ideology-as-fact presents no choice, at least not in the sense that it is recognized as being such by a subject. Take for example the carceral state. None of us chose to accept it as a necessary part of our society. This is not to say that choice is not involved at all, or that the prevalence of prisons and ideology is deterministic. Rather, what is lacking here is the recognition of choice, which is due to the nature of ideology-as-fact. So, ideology-as-fact does not confront subjects as subjects, and the interpellation which Althusser (1970) speaks of is more along the lines of the sublimation of an idea.
One the one hand, structural ideologies like Christianity tell the subject what they must believe or “know”. On the other hand, ideology-as-fact does not make any demands of the subject. It does not tell them what they must know but insists that they act “as if” (Zizek 2008:12) they believe in the necessity of some particular social arrangement. Ideology-as-fact allows the subject to keep a distance from any sort of active belief. So long as we act as if something (e.g., incarceration) is needed, then the ideology does not need us to actively believe in anything. In this sense, the true believers in a particular ideology-as-fact are those who do not actively believe in it at all. The subject is free to allow the Other to do the believing for them, while they act out belief in the things they do (Zizek 2006).

One last point that is vital to understand about this theory of ideology is why he was theorizing it in the first place. Although it goes unsaid in his writings, Althusser (1970) is significantly invested in understanding the concept of agency or choice. Does the interpellation process always end in the subject accepting the ideological proposal? Although people are always subjects in that they are born into ideology, this does not mean ideology is deterministic. As mentioned above, the process of interpellation by which ideology operates is not totalizing. If it were, there would be no need for police, the military, or any other direct-control organ of the RSA. Further, subjects have the ability to choose to reject an ideological proposal, or to only believe in it a little bit. Going back to a previous example, many people reject the sex category, gender, or both, they are assigned upon birth at a certain point in their life. No ideological proposition is full proof. What is noteworthy is that, though we may reject one or many ideological proposals, we are doing so based on our buying into some other ideological proposal(s). So, we have choice, however choice always operates within the (fluid) limits of ideology.
Recent work is in the same theoretical vein as Althusser’s (1970) work on ideology. Mark Fisher (2003) uses many of the same theoretical assumptions to theorize Capitalist Realism, an example of ideology-as-fact which he argues is the ideology of late capitalism. The essence of Capitalist Realism is the fatalistic proposal that capitalism is the only economic mode of production around which society can be organized. Any other alternatives (i.e., communism/socialism) have been tried and failed. We live in a world where capitalism “occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher 2003:7). In this sense, the realism of Capitalist Realism connotes not the acceptance of any sort of “true” reality, but the lowering of expectations and passively accepting what is seemingly the best and only way.

Capitalist Realism follows in the same theoretical current as Althusser’s (1970) theory of ideology in two ways. First, they both operate under the assumption that the primary purpose of ideology is the perpetuation of the status quo. This does not mean any particular ideology which is dominant at a certain time period will always line up with that period’s material societal relations. Ideology, once it is brought into being, can take on a life of its own and continue even after the social relations which brought it into being have mostly or completely disappeared (Zizek 1989). This represents one of the central contradictions of ideology. In spite of this, given that the ruling classes are mostly in charge of ideological “production” through their control of the ISAs and the RSA, ideology works to preserve the social relations that gave it existence.

Secondly, Capitalist Realism masquerades as being non-ideological. This is in keeping with Althusser (1970), who argued that ideology is able to mask its nature as such. All ideologies hide in plain sight in some manner. However, they still have some identifiable structure, and require active belief or acceptance from their subjects. Capitalist Realism relies on the non-belief of its subjects rather than requiring the overt acceptance of a set of tenets. Subjects do not have
to actively believe that capitalism is wholesome so long as they passively accept that any other option is horrific.

This brings us to the concept of the Real, a central component in Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Lacan’s model, what we experience as “reality” on a daily basis is in effect a fantasy, which is to say it is ideologically mediated (Zizek 2006). Reality, mediated by Capitalist Realism, might ingrain in a subject that capitalism indeed is the only way. The truth of the matter, which is that there are options, lies in the Real, which is social reality without the delusion brought on by ideology. The Real must be suppressed by Capitalist Realism, and indeed by all ideologies, in order for legitimacy to be maintained. What sets Capitalist Realism apart from structural ideologies is the recognition that there is a Real to suppress. They do not deny other possibilities, and these may be kept at bay for numerous other reasons. However, Capitalist Realism, by appearing free of or post-ideology, denies the Real altogether. After all, there is nothing to suppress if there are absolutely no alternate ways of being.

CARCERAL REALISM

This brings us now to my own theorization of the ideology-as-fact of the prison: Carceral Realism. The main tenet of Carceral Realism is that prisons are a vital aspect of public safety, acting as crime control by keeping “criminals” separate from society. This tenet relies on an essentialization of human nature by putting people into either a “good” or a “bad” category. The good people are those who obey society’s rules, while the bad do not, and thus are in need of incapacitation.

Considering that the US recently had the largest incarcerated population it has ever had and the largest in the history of the world (Camp 2016), it is not a stretch to say that prisons play
a greater role in social control now than they ever have in the US. However, there is a disconnect between this and what the supposed purpose of prisons and jails is, which is crime control. We are told that we need prisons and jails to serve as bastions against lawlessness and criminals. In other words, prisons are there for our safety. The fact that the places that are targeted most by the carceral state have increases in crime rates (Clear 2009) denies this. As does the prison’s role as a mechanism of social control for the purpose of checking the contradictions of capitalism, which has been demonstrated (Inverarity and McCarthy 1988; Gilmore 2007).

The phrase Carceral Realism has been used beyond my own theorization. Specifically, Place (2019) mentions it in a review of the book Carceral Capitalism (Wang 2018) as follows; “Wang discredits the carceral realism that makes it so difficult to imagine a world without prisons”. This use of the term is similar to mine in that it refers to ideology, and specifically to an ideology that makes it difficult to see past prisons. Place (2019) uses the term in passing, however without going into depth about what it actually means beyond a simplistic ideological concept. My theorization involves understanding how ideology works, as well as parsing out the various aspects of Carceral Realism.

It is also worth noting the relation of my theorization of Carceral Realism to Wang’s (2018) Carceral Capitalism. In this book, Wang (2018) lays out how what they term the “predatory state” (17) governs in such a way as to produce criminality. This process is racialized, specifically targeting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). One aspect of the predatory state then is the increased use of surveillance and policing to target BIPOC communities, an example being the data-driven tactic of predictive policing. Furthermore, Wang (2018) demonstrates how this kind of policing is, though not completely driven by a rational economic logic, expropriative in that fines and fees are often levied as punishments against
people who cannot pay them. These people become trapped in a cycle of increasing debt, hence the term “predatory state”.

Wang’s (2018) book focuses largely on the political economy of the predatory state, whereas Carceral Realism is more concerned with what ideology does and how it does it, specifically with regard to our society’s reliance on the prison. I envision it as a companion theorization to Carceral Capitalism. Whereas Wang (2018) lays out how the predatory state criminalizes BIPOC through policing and surveillance in Carceral Capitalism, with Carceral Realism I am trying to understand why the prison as an accepted logic of crime control is so accepted in our society.

In order to demonstrate how the prison serves primarily as a form of social control, it is important to understand how the contradictions within capitalism as a set of social-economic relations make social control necessary in the first place. Capitalism is not planned and has no central goal other than operating in the pursuit of infinite growth and accumulation of capital (Callinicos 2011). In order for this unsustainable expansion to take place, there must be a large number of people who are unemployed, and yet ready and willing to work because of their precarious social position. This is known in Marxist parlance as the “disposable industrial army” (Spitzer 1975:643). Here is a central contradiction within capitalism. While capitalism requires an unemployed mass, if this mass grows too large or organizes it becomes a threat to existing social relations. In our own times, which has been referred to as “late capitalism”, the risk represented by this group becomes even more pronounced as an increase in automation causes more people to lose work. Marx noted this phenomenon in his own time in his writings on the organic composition of capital (Marx 1867/1992). All this means is that, as the disposable army
becomes larger in our period of late capitalism, social control becomes an increasingly important part of the state’s prerogative.

The mechanism of social control deployed to contain the revolutionary potential of this racialized class is dependent on material societal relations and does not have to be incarceration. For instance, the welfare state was a primary method of general social control in the US from its inception during the New Deal until it was largely dismantled by successive neoliberal regimes (Harvey 2005). The destruction of the welfare state was not a foregone conclusion. However, as it was more a form of “soft” power, it was not likely to do the job of general social control indefinitely. This was recognized by Spitzer (1975) who, writing at the time just before mass incarceration took off, noted that as “deviance production [increases]…the resources of the state need to be applied in greater proportion to protect capitalist social relations” (647). Thus, the attack on the welfare state was part of a historical material process that served to tighten the grip of capital and reinforce racial and class power.

The dismantling of the welfare state did not signal a pulling back of the state. What it did signal was that the state was determined to use a more forceful, repressive form of social control to protect the interests of capital (Camp 2016). This shift in social control to the RSA can also be seen as part of the never-ending attempt by the state to fully consolidate its monopoly on the legal use of violence. While the rise of incarceration, like that of the welfare state, was not a foregone conclusion, it certainly seems to be the most likely course of development based on a materialist understanding of the circumstances that gave rise to it. The untenable nature of the welfare state gave rise to circumstances which led to formation of the carceral state.

Along with the process explained above, there are countless other factors which gave rise to mass incarceration, explored by scholars such as Camp (2016), Gilmore (2007), and Wacquant...
It is important to point this out because the repressive function of the prison is its primary mode of operation, and an understanding of the purpose of incarceration is a prerequisite to ascertaining its ideological role, which is more subtle and insidious. Though the ideology of incarceration is secondary to its direct violent aspect, this does not at all mean it is not important. The RSA in general, and the prison specifically, are reliant on ideology for legitimacy and support. This is especially so for the US which prides itself on the promotion of freedom and democracy while maintaining the largest incarcerated population in the world (Brown 2009).

There is not a large body of work that has studied ideology and incarceration. This presents quite the gap in knowledge, as “why and how people desire mass incarceration” (Reed 2017 para. 8) is of particular importance, and this is where we will now turn. In order to address this gap, I have drawn on Capitalist Realism (Fisher 2003), the current dominant ideology which sustains capitalism, to theorize “Carceral Realism”, which is the ideology spawned by the carceral state. The central tenet of Carceral Realism is the perception that the prison is an absolute necessity of our current social reality because it keeps crime in check and preserves law and order. This tenet does not however constitute an active form of belief. Rather, Carceral Realism is defined by the same ideological core as Capitalist Realism; nonbelief. Prisons are not seen as something we have to want, but simply as something we have to have, a “fact” not to be considered or remotely questioned.

A seemingly contradictory aspect of this is that Carceral Realism does not seek to make people think prisons in and of themselves are good. On the contrary, people are certainly capable of thinking prisons are bad places, which they often do (see Wozniak 2014). What matters most is that people passively accept that we must have prisons and jails in order to be safe and secure. As long as, on a societal level, we do not think beyond prisons and jails we de facto passively
accept their necessity even if we think they are an awful arrangement. We see then that Carceral Realism does not really need to make a case for the prison, it must just make a case against alternatives. To adopt a phrase from Sartre (2007), self-evidence precedes essence.

Integral to the apparent necessity of the prisons and jails is the dimension of Carceral Realism which I call the “punishment ontology”. As the name suggests, the punishment ontology tells us that the only appropriate way to deal with crime or any deviant behavior is through the employment of punitive measures. As the motto for Capitalist Realism is the Thatcherite utterance of “no other way”, the key phrase here must be that “nothing works”. This is the infamous statement, though never actually said, from the Martinson Report (Cullen Smith Lowenkamp and Latessa 2009) which is brought up time and again to prove that criminals are beyond rehabilitation and must be incapacitated. The idea that behavior deemed inappropriate might be met with something other than harsh punishment gets cast aside, making it difficult to imagine alternatives.

Another part of the punishment ontology is the division of the world into two groups of people deemed “good” and “bad”. Nothing is said about why the bad people are bad, just that prisons and jails are the best way to deal with them. This concept of bad people is similar to the popular theory in criminology of Routine Activities, which makes the assumption that people who commit crime are different from the rest of society (Groff 2008). The good-bad people dynamic is common in popular discourse, an example coming from an article on The Guardian’s website by Nick Herbert (2008). The article states that “(j)ails may have changed, but the enduring truth that they are necessary has not”. It goes on to state the reason for this being that “we will always have a small minority of offenders who, by their behavior, pose so great a threat to the lives and property of the law-abiding majority that they must be kept apart from us”. This
type of logic encourages an amnesia, as prisons and jails have not been around long historically speaking. Once this is forgotten, it becomes much easier to passively accept that there always have been and always will be bad people, and thus we do now and always will need to incarcerate them.

The argument in *The Guardian* article also speaks to another point about Carceral Realism - while it was spawned by the material conditions of mass incarceration, it can exist without it. Although mass incarceration is a dominant form of social control deployed by the RSA, it is not likely that it will continue on forever. Per Althusser (1970), once an ideology has become part of the superstructure, it can still hold sway even if the base relations that produced it have changed. *The Guardian* article tells us that it is a “small minority” of people who provide the threat to the rest of us, which means that mass incarceration is not necessary. This thinking is in line with prison reformers across the political spectrum in the US who have, in some form or fashion, called for the number of prisons and/or prisoners to be decreased. Reformist logic though is not a threat to Carceral Realism or the idea of the prison itself, as it does not see the prison as the central issue to be dealt with. In other words, the trouble lies not in having prisons or jails at all, but in having more of them than we need. Even if we buy into the prospect that the system needs reforming, it is still the case that prisons are seen as a requisite tool for crime control. It may even be the case that prison reform could strengthen Carceral Realism, as it has served to entrench the carceral state in the past (Murakawa 2014).

*Carceral Realism and Prison Abolition*

The prevalence of Carceral Realism does not mean that everyone in society has accepted its central prospect and sees the prison as inevitable. We would not expect this, as ideologies are
always uneven and incomplete. There are many prison abolition groups in the US, in addition to around the world, that have pushed back against popular narratives about prisons and the criminal legal system generally. Perhaps the most well-known of these groups in the US is Critical Resistance, a grass-roots organization that seeks to build support for ending prisons. Critical Resistance has engaged in many forms of direct action and organizing, and has published numerous toolkits, articles, and reports that address the many harms which prisons inflict on society, particularly poor communities and communities of color. For instance, a short article they have published titled “Towards the Abolition of Imprisonment: Dismantling Jails”, lays out why and how jails are harmful and violent, how they are not in the interest of public safety, and what can be done concretely to abolish them.

Numerous scholars within criminology, as well as related disciplines such as sociology, have also done work that pushes back against the necessity of prisons and jails. An article that pushes back against the tenet of Carceral Realism that prisons and jails are integral to public safety is “Insurgent Safety: Theorizing Alternatives to State Protection”, by Meghan McDowell (2019). In the article, McDowell calls our current conception of public safety “carceral safety” and explores how current public safety institutions such as policing do not provide security in any real sense. The article then uses interviews with residents in and around Durham, North Carolina, to try to theorize alternatives to current conceptions of safety that are centered on incarceration and caging. Several other important works, such as Are Prison Obsolete? By Angela Davis (2003) and Golden Gulag by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), also counter the narrative that the carceral state is an institution that ensures public safety, and discuss alternatives for public security.
FILMS, MEDIA, AND PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Films and tv shows have an important role to play in influencing and shaping the attitudes and beliefs of those who consume them (Delehanty and Kearns 2019). Research suggests that the impact of films on public perception can be just as or more important than the news media on certain topics, such as prisons (Bennett 2006). Films have even been found to have a significant impact on political orientation, which is one of the most studied areas of public opinion (Adkins and Castle 2014). The idea that films not only inform public opinion, but can also be used to gauge it regarding certain topics, has been explored (Herbst 2001). Given the permeation of visual media and the ubiquity of screens in our society, the relevance of films comes as no surprise. Though the importance of the cinema has long been known, criminologists for the most part have ignored films in terms of their importance in shaping public ideas related to the field. Recently, however, a group of criminologists has recognized the value of this potential area for research and have made efforts to make film studies a larger part of criminological inquiry.

In recent years, there has been a push towards the establishment of what has come to be called “public criminology”. Public criminology is an effort to bring criminology out to the public. It argues that the study of popular culture and crime should be one of the main focuses of criminology. Seeing as people learn and communicate so much through visual means, studying the visual is perhaps the best way to make criminology relevant to the general public. Part of this effort involves prioritizing research into various subjects that have been largely or totally rejected by criminology in the past, such as tv shows and films (Rafter, 2006). Rafter and Brown (2011) write that “crime films are integral to crime, criminology, and culture itself, comprising a popular discourse that must be understood if thinking about the nature of crime is to be fully
understood” (7). One could replace “crime films” with “prison films” in this quotation, as a priori their effect on how prisons are seen and imagined in the popular conscience is similar to that of crime films.

Even with the increase in support of public criminology recently, there is not a large literature within criminology that researches the impact films and tv shows have on public perception of crime, the criminal justice system, and the like. A search of Google Scholar of the terms “crime films” and “public opinion” produces only a few relevant results such as an article looking at conservative attitudes on crime films (Lenz 2005). A search replacing “public opinion” with “ideology” leads to few results as well. A few relatively recent books (Rafter 2006; Rafter and Brown 2011), however, have examined crime films in terms of their relevance to popular attitudes. In addition, there has been some specialization within this research, such as analyzing films about genocide to see how they “create and transmit collective memories of the ‘crime of crimes’, provoking public understandings of atrocity” (Brown and Rafter 2013:1017).

The interest of numerous criminologists in taking criminology to the public, and in seeking to ascertain how criminological knowledge can be expanded by examining pop culture is certainly warranted, as research has shown the importance of popular media on public perception (Kappeler and Potter 2005). As might be expected given their widespread permeation of pop culture, films have the important characteristic of being able to shape attitudes about various subjects, including crime and incarceration. This characteristic is especially salient given that, in most cases, films are reflective of the ascendant ideas in society (Welsh Fleming and Dowler 2011). As it relates to crime films and tv shows, dominant perspectives of crime and punishment are usually present. However, though these ideas may be popular they do not always line up with reality. Crime films often warp the reality of crime and punishment or fabricate certain elements
in an effort to provide more appeal to viewers (Rafter 2006). A well-known example of this is
the “CSI Effect”, whereby viewers of popular media about crime come to have false ideas about
how the criminal justice system operates (Hayes and Levett 2012).

Kappeler and Potter (2005) examine how falsehoods regarding crime and criminal justice
are used by both news and fictional media to create and disseminate certain narratives. For
instance, one theme among crime-related media they found is “Exaggeration” (Kappeler and
Potter 2005:18). That media often exaggerates for effect will come as no surprise to anyone who
has ever watched shows like Nancy Grace, where “criminals” are cast as the worst types of
people while cops and prosecutors are portrayed as heroic bulwarks against lawlessness. While
these exaggerations may appear trivial or unbelievable at times, Kappeler and Potter (2005)
argue they are quite effective at persuading large sections of the public to form false opinions
and beliefs about criminal justice. In terms of the exaggeration theme, they note that it is usually
conservative in orientation in that what is exaggerated is the threat posed by crime and criminals
to the general population or law and order. Another theme they identify is the “Theme of
Difference” (Kappeler and Potter 2005:23), which is the perpetuation of the idea that “criminals”
are not like “us”. This narrative is similar to the “good vs. bad” dichotomy in Carceral Realism.

While crime films garner much attention, prison films are less likely to do so given that
they are fewer in number (Rafter 2006). The nature of prisons makes popular media about them
perhaps more consequential, however, than is the case with other subjects in the area of crime.
As Bennett (2006) mentions, prisons are by design places most people never visit or see beyond
a glance at the exterior. This means that notions of what prisons and the people inside of them
are like rarely ever comes from first-hand knowledge. This increases the importance of narratives
and images presented in the media, including films, about prisons (Freeman 1998; Wilson and
Research into the content of prison films has focused on aspects such as their portrayal of the media (Bennett 2006) and the themes present in them that give them appeal to wide audiences (Rafter 2006). Ideology is rarely examined, as is the effect of these films on public opinion. In fact, American public opinion about prisons has not received much scholarly attention (Wozniak 2014). As a result of this, it cannot really be said exactly how prison films shape public attitude. However, based on what is known about the impact films have in general on the attitudes and beliefs of the public, we can reasonably say films play an important role in informing how people think about and imagine prisons.

The demographics of the audience for prison films is not specifically known, because like their effect on public opinion this is an area where research has not been conducted. Prison films in general, are mostly male centric (Rafter 2006). Thus, the intended audience for prison films is men. Furthermore, the majority of people who watch movies in theatres are white (Goldstein 2017). This is an example of how ideologies, in this case Carceral Realism, do not target all groups in a population equally. This does not mean that Carceral Realism is aimed only at men, or only at people who are white. However, it does indicate that the message from these films is directed at men, particularly in the realm of popular culture.

CONCLUSION

The US relies on incarceration as can be seen in the expansive nature of the carceral state. Though a lot of work has been done on the carceral state, little has focused on the ideological aspect that supports this arrangement. To fill this gap, I have laid out my theory of Carceral Realism, based on the works of Althusser (1970) and Fisher (2003), the reality principle of which is the absolute necessity of incarceration as a form of crime control. Carceral Realism is
also characterized by the punishment ontology, which puts forth the notion that transgressive acts must be met with punishment, and that the prison is the ideal form of punishment. In order to further examine Carceral Realism, I have argued that films are a useful medium for studying its operation. In the next chapter the methods for this process and their theoretical bases are reviewed.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

The main point of this dissertation is to investigate Carceral Realism as an ideology. In order to explore the construction and reproduction of the ideology of Carceral Realism in prison films, this work employs theoretical frames that serve to guide the research by studying both the language/discourse and imagery of the films. Every cultural product, film included, is rooted in ideology and has some sort of ideological message (Zizek 2006). Working from this assumption, focusing on prison films is a perfect way to explore Carceral Realism because research has shown films have a significant influence on public sentiment, and that they generally reflect dominant stereotypes and attitudes (Bennett 2006). This project will use multiple theoretical frameworks which serve to guide the research. Specifically, the dialectical relation approach (DRA) of critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be used to examine the language of the films in terms of how ideology operates under the surface to perpetuate the notion that prisons are necessary and the people in them are underserving criminals. The imagery of the films will be primarily examined through utilizing the field of visual criminology (Carrabine 2012; Brown 2014). By employing an analysis of both imagery and language, this research aims to gain a deep understanding of how these films produce ideological notions of prisons/jails and the people forced to occupy them. Examining both the language and imagery of the selected films will serve to provide a full understanding of how the perceived need for prisons as the ultimate form of crime control is created and distributed by popular media. I begin below with a brief discussion of my own subjectivity as it relates to this project.
A NOTE ON SUBJECTIVITY AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This research project will be accomplished by using qualitative methods that involve subjective interpretation on my part as the researcher. This is not to say that there are other research methods that do not involve any subjectivity, as all forms of knowledge production rely on human interpretation in some form (Silverman 2010). However, this project will likely involve greater subjective interpretation than many, and it is worth noting my own biases and subjectivities as a researcher. To start, there is my explicit subjectivity, which refers to “the kind of subjectivity that we are conscious of and recognize…as such” (Cruz 2015:723). As a cisgender white man, I fully recognize that I will bring my own explicit subjectivity into this project. As a prison abolitionist, I also carry into this project the explicit belief that prisons themselves should be done away with. I do not view this as a hindrance in my ability to complete this project, however it will certainly influence how I view and process these films. I cannot set aside my own personal beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions, and neither can any researcher no matter if they are doing qualitative or quantitative work. Furthermore, setting aside my subjectivity would not be desirable were it even possible, as the focus of this project is my interaction with the subject matter.

I will also be bringing to the research subjectivities that I am not aware of, or implicit subjectivities (Cruz 2015). This type of subjectivity is harder to reckon with and understand, as it often goes unnoticed. Because of this, it will be important for me to constantly question my decisions throughout this project. There will undoubtedly be a number of themes that come out during the analysis phase from these films, and the ones I gravitate towards will be influenced by my implicit subjectivity as well as by my intended objectives. Thus, I will need to reflect on my own subjectivities throughout this process to try to confront how I interact with these movies.
VISUAL CRIMINOLOGY

Beginning in the early 2000s there developed a push among a number of criminologists to rethink the importance of images and visuals to criminology (Carrabine 2012). From this initial push has developed a broad research program now known as visual criminology. As the name suggests, visual criminology is interested in aspects of crime, crime control, carceral studies, etcetera, that relate to or involve seeing and perception (Brown and Carrabine 2012). There are many reasons for this turn towards the visual by criminologists, one being time and place. It is no coincidence that visual criminology emerged at a time of the ubiquity of visual media, which often takes crime and punishment as its subject, and imagery. If a person simply sits down on their couch and flips through channels on the television, they will no doubt encounter numerous depictions of crime in some form, whether it be fictionalized versions such as CSI, or “true” depictions on news channels.

One of the main theoretical assumptions of visual criminology is that humans are inherently visual creatures (Brown and Carrabine 2012). This assumption is in part rooted in the work of Jacques Lacan, who argued that the visual field is the primary way we come to reckon and identify with our surroundings during “the mirror phase”, which constitutes our early existence as children (Zizek 2007). The implication of this is that people learn either primarily or in large part from what they can see. A central interest in images and how they saturate our world also indicates that visual criminology is invested in going outside of the “ivory tower” of academia and thus falls under the broader umbrella of public criminology.

Visual criminology is concerned not only with what we see, but how we see it as well. Visuality cannot be separated from its social context in which power and authority constitute largely what is seen and how it is recognized. Thus, one of the primary aims of visual
Criminology is to interrogate how ideology works to present reality, and what role it has in defining social deviance. This reveals the dialectic at the heart of the theoretical underpinnings of criminology; what is seen and what is not exist in relation to one another, and each subsumes parts of the other. In other words, what stays hidden only does so because of what is seen. This reasoning, taken to its logical conclusion, demonstrates that the carceral state is not just a physical system of control, but a logic which governs society as well.

Important to visual criminology’s research aims is countering what is seen, specifically our current social arrangement of the carceral state. In this respect, visual criminology seeks to be more than a simple research program, but also a call to action to “make strange what has been naturalized into the landscapes and logics that surround crime and control” (Brown and Carrabine 2017:6). Seeing and visualizing new ways society can deal with “crime”, and even redefining what that word means, is one of the core tenets of this trend. Imagining ways past injustice is also a key aspect of the DRA subset of CDA, which we will turn to now.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

While CDA occupies its own space as a subset with the broader discipline of discourse analysis (DA), it contains within it numerous methodological approaches and theoretical concepts that can at times be at odds with one another (Machin and Mayr 2012). Following from various trends within discourse studies (DS) that coalesced in the 1960s-70s, critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed into its own as a “research programme” in the early 1990s (Wodak and Meyer 2009:4). CDA draws from a host of disciplines/areas of study including (among numerous others) philosophy, cognitive science and linguistics (Machin and Mayr 2012). The key word “discourse” lacks a singular definition within this paradigm, and it is usually left up to
the researcher as to what definition of the word they use (Wodak and Meyer 2009). In spite of this, there are general rules and principles which roughly define CDA.

Language is, for CDA, a social artefact that must be considered within the context it is used in order to be properly analyzed and understood (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). The implication of this is that structural factors affect and inform how and what language is used, and vice versa. All forms of language, which is to say the context or manner in which they are used (conversation, written text, film), fall under the realm of study by CDA. However, there are varying opinions on what exactly constitutes key language terms such as “discourse” or “text” (Wodak and Meyer 2009:6), though the exploration or discussion of these differences is outside of the scope of this project. For the purposes of this project, the text is defined as the dialogue spoken by the film’s characters, while discourse indicates the socially constructed forms of knowledge within which the text exists (Reisigl and Wodak 2009).

CDA is seen as a useful tool for interrogating history/historical processes (Machin and Mayr 2012). This makes it of particular relevance to this research project, as it includes films ranging in release from the 1960s to ones closer to the present day. The importance of understanding the historical process is that themes can change or disappear over time, and conversely may continue on over many years or decades. The concept of “intertextuality” is key to investigating the historical process, as it holds that “texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present” (Wodak and Meyer 2009:90). Using intertextuality to link the various themes within these films helps to give them proper context and analytical understanding.

The term “critical” in CDA is indicative of the fact that the school falls within the broad confines of Critical Theory (Machin and Mayr 2012). This means that CDA views society as something to be critiqued and radically changed rather than simply understood. Furthermore,
CDA acknowledges that, as language cannot be said to ever be out of context, neither can the researcher. Rather than drawing on objectivity or a position outside of the object of study, CDA is in keeping with general qualitative methodology in that it recognizes the subjectivity and social position of an analyst. The main point of such an approach is that “self-reflection” is critical to the demystification of ideology and “to root(ing) out a particular type of delusion [i.e., ideology]” (Wodak and Meyer 2009:7). This is in keeping with Althusser’s (1970) assertion that subjects are “always already” engrossed in ideology and must operate within it to free themselves from it.

Another central point of interest for CDA is the concept of ideology (Machin and Mayr 2012). This comes as no surprise given that language and discourse are inherently ideological (Habermas 1967). As with discourse, CDA claims no authoritative power over what constitutes ideology as such. In general, though, it can be said that CDA takes ideology as a set of beliefs that has been transmitted from a group (or groups) to another group (or groups), and which involves some sort of power dynamic (Wodak and Meyer 2009). CDA differentiates between what we might call explicit and implicit ideology, which is simply ideology that people notice and do not notice daily. It is the implicit type of ideology, the Zizkian (Zizek 2008) ideology-as-fact that operates under the surface of everyday life and which “appear[s] disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies” (Wodak and Meyer 2009:8) that CDA is invested in analyzing.

Since CDA recognizes that all discourse takes place within a social context, there is always some form of power at play influencing what is said, written, or visualized and which informs the meaning of communication (Machin and Mayr 2012). The specific form that power takes for CDA is the Foucauldian notion of power, which is an integral, invisible element of
society that guides the “souls” of its subjects and directs them towards certain ends (Wodak and Meyer 2009). Power, in this sense, is multi-directional, and from this follows CDA’s view that texts or works are not produced by a single author. Rather, texts are reflections of the multi-faceted power struggle that emulates from a society’s particular social structure.

Lastly, it is worth discussing here the methodological nature of CDA. There is no defined methodology with CDA. Rather, there are a widely accepted number of research methods, mostly qualitative, that make up CDA’s program. In the same vein, though CDA is heavily theory-driven, it is not characterized by a unified theoretical approach. It can be said that the researcher has as much to do with what particular form or shape a CDA-oriented project will take, as the research aims and theoretical leanings of the researcher greatly inform methodology and theoretical grounding (Wodak and Meyer 2009). The different theoretical approaches that are used in CDA range from Discourse-Historical Approach, which is favored by Symbolic Interactionists, to Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA) often employed by Marxists or conflict theorists. Since this project will employ the DRA, it will briefly be discussed below.

The DRA is being used for this project primarily because of a synergy with CDA in terms of research aims and theoretical assumptions. Within CDA, the DRA is most oriented toward the analytical impulse of the investigation of social wrongs/injustices due to its theoretical underpinnings of Marxism and, much more broadly, radicalism (Fairclough 2009). Since the primary purpose of analyzing the films from this study is to identify the ideology that operates in a discreet manner to perpetuate injustice, this trend within CDA is most fitting for this project.

While within CDA “discourse” can take on a wide range of meanings depending on which orientation a researcher subscribes to, for the DRA, discourse has a specific meaning. In this approach, discourse is taken to signify “semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world
(physical, social or mental) which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors” (Fairclough 2009:164). An aspect of this quotation that warrants further discussion is that discourse in this sense falls within the broader confines of semiosis. As the term “dialectical” in the DRA suggests, semiosis exists in a dialectical relationship with the social structure. Generally, this means that “…social relations, power, institutions, beliefs, and cultural values are in part semiotic; they internalize semiosis without being reducible to it” (Fairclough 2009:163). The implication of this is that discourse is in a dialectical relation to the social field and that each draws on the other in the production of meaning.

The methodological aspect of the DRA is, in keeping with CDA, fluid and not affixed to any particular method or set of methods (Fairclough 2009). However, there is a general outline provided by the DRA and which will be employed for this project. There are four steps on the DRA methodology, which broadly move from zeroing in on an injustice from a semiotic perspective to working out a way to move past the social wrong. In this way, the DRA transitions from negative to positive critique in that there is some attempt to actually “fix” the issue rather than just to call it out. These four steps will be discussed further in the analytical section of this project.

SAMPLE

As Hedges (2014) states, despite the fact that the US has for some time been home to the largest incarcerated population in the history of the world, there is a dearth of films that explore or are set in prisons and jails. Though more films on incarceration have come about in the past decade, many of these are documentaries, a type of film not included in this study as it is
different in composition and character from fiction films. In addition, numerous television shows set in prisons or jails such as Orange is the New Black have achieved notoriety. These were also excluded because episodic shows provide a different format than films and viewing them in their entirety would require a much different process than will be used with the selected films. Though prison films are not as common as those in many other genres, there exists an adequate number for this study, and many prison films such as The Shawshank Redemption are known and have carved out a spot in American popular culture.

One of the key questions surrounding prison films concerns the exact nature of the genre itself (Hedges 2014). For the purposes of this study, prisons films are those that are set primarily in a prison or jail, or that use incarceration as a main theme (Bennett 2006). Films like O Brother Where Art Thou? which feature escaped convicts but are not set in prison, and which do not feature incarceration as a main theme, have been excluded from consideration. In total, there are twenty prison films that meet the criteria for this study, all of which are included in the analysis. The n of twenty has been chosen because it is commonly agreed upon as an appropriate amount for qualitative research of this kind (Silverman 2010).

The majority of the films in this study are popular and high-grossing by industry standards. This was purposeful in that the goal is to analyze films that have had a noticeable impact on pop culture. A few movies from the sample did not experience great success at the box office yet were still included due to their status as cult films. Films from the sample like American History X have gained significant critical acclaim, and often cult followings. While cult films may not meet typical standards of box office success, they still reach wide audiences and carve out their own places in popular culture. Also, it might the case that many important themes can be found in less popular films that are not present in the higher-grossing variety.
There are a few different genres\(^1\) represented by the films from this sample. Based on the nature of the prison as a place of isolation and punishment, most films from this sample have a serious tone and fall within the genre categories of “drama” or “thriller”. However, a few of the films such as *The Longest Yard* (2005 version) and the more recent *Get Hard* attempt to take a light-hearted approach to incarceration and are considered comedies. While the latter group does not fit in with the more dramatic or thriller-oriented films in terms of style, they meet the stated criteria for inclusion in the study.

The selection of the films for this project was not based solely on my own opinions. Rather, multiple sources such as O’Sullivan (2001) and Hedges (2014) were utilized in order to identify films that are mentioned by numerous authors as agreed-upon prison films. This is particularly important for the selection process of this project, as there are varying ideas and definitions of what constitutes a prison film (Bennett 2006). To be clear, these sources do not themselves define what constitutes a prison film, and there does not seem to be any consensus among academia about what exactly a prison film is. Most sources that discuss prison films do so from the perspective of analyzing or simply mentioning films that portray prisons, if only briefly, or analyzing popular movies that are considered by most to be prison films. Beyond academic resources, the International Movie Database (IMDb) was used in the selection process. IMDb is, though non-academic, a useful tool because it provides a measure of a film’s popularity and impact on pop culture, which is important for my project as I am researching how prison films construct ideas and narratives which are transmitted to the public.

An important note to make about the sample of films for this project is that they are overwhelmingly male-centric. The main characters for nearly all the films are men, and most of

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\(^1\) Because there are far fewer prison comedies than dramas, each genre is not represented with the same number of films.
those men are white. This reflects larger cultural biases and attitudes about women as well as people of color. Given that people of color make up such a large segment of the incarcerated population, and that incarceration rates for women have outpaced those of men by nearly double in the past few decades (Kajstura 2019), one would perhaps expect them to have more representation in prison films. This is, however, not the case, as people of color are often background or secondary characters in these films who are not given near as much screen time as the white male lead. Female characters in these films are mostly pushed to the background in favor of male characters, and often exist mainly to be brutalized by violence.

Out of the films selected for this study, only two have lead characters that are women. One is *Madea Goes to Jail*, and the other is *Dead Man Walking*. Importantly, *Madea Goes to Jail* does have multiple leads, so even though two of the main characters are women, they still share the main stage with a male main character. It is also important to note that there is an entire subgenre of prison films that is generally known as “women-in-prison” films (Kehrwald 2017). None of these films were selected for inclusion in this study primarily because they constitute a niche subgenre that is not representative of the larger genre of prison films generally. Having viewed a number of these movies in preparation for this project, though they do take place in prison, they are quite different than the majority of prison films. They fall into the “sexploitation” genre, often being pornographic, and the themes of these films tend to coalesce around gross male sexual fantasies. Further, they do not deal with the larger criminal legal system, while most of the films included in the study do in some way. None of this is to say that these types of films would not be important to scholars, as researching them could help to untangle the interplay between gender and Carceral Realism or other ideologies. Rather, in this
project the focus is on films that fall within the general category of prison films rather than those within a niche subgenre.

The films that were included are listed in the table below, along with a few bullet points for each as to why they were picked. Most of the films were picked due to their popularity and clear impact on popular culture. These include *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*, among others. The popularity of a given film was determined primarily by their box office earnings. The films that are marked as “popularity (box office)” in the table made at least double their production cost at the box office. How well a movie did critically was also considered. If a film had a 70% or higher score on the review aggregate website Rotten Tomatoes, then it was considered to have “critical acclaim”. Additionally, if a movie had been nominated for or won an award at a major award ceremony (e.g., The Oscars), it was considered to have “critical acclaim”. Another measure of popularity was a film’s cult status. For instance, although *American History X* did not do well at the box office, it has since gained a cult following through the secondary rental market and repeated showings on television.

Some films were included because of their setting. The films *Bad Boys* and *Gridiron Gang* both take place in juvenile prisons and were included in the study primarily for this reason. The point of purposefully selecting movies set in juvenile prisons was to see if the ideological message of Carceral Realism was similar or different from films that were set in adult prisons. Other films were included because they were set in prisons that are well known. For instance, *American Me* was chosen because it is largely set in Folsom State Prison, a prison popularized in part by Johnny Cash’s live performance there. Including films because of their popular setting was done to examine if the location of a particular movie had any bearing on its ideological content. *Midnight Express, Get the Gringo,* and *In Hell* were all chosen because, though they are
American films, they are set in foreign locations. The purpose of their inclusion was to examine if their ideological messages were different than films that depicted locations within the US.

Lastly, a few films were included because of the themes they try to explore. For instance, *The Last Castle* and *Law Abiding Citizen* are both more overt in their ideological content than most prison movies from this sample, and they were included to examine if their overt messages reflected Carceral Realism.

**List of Films**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Year Released</th>
<th>Reasons for Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Madea Goes to Jail</td>
<td>Tyler Perry</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>• Popularity (box office)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus on morality and incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Setting (women’s jail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gridiron Gang</td>
<td>Phil Joanou</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>• Juvenile prison setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Focus on morality and incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Shawshank Redemption</td>
<td>Frank Darabont</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>• Popularity (critical acclaim, considered a cult classic, popular on tv and rental market)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Green Mile</td>
<td>Frank Darabont</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>• Popularity (box office, critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cool Hand Luke</td>
<td>Stuart Rosenberg</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>• Classic prison film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Popularity (box office and critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape from Alcatraz</td>
<td>Don Siegel</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>• Infamous setting (Alcatraz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Popularity (box office and enduring legacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Boys</td>
<td>Rick Rosenthal</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>• Cult status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Juvenile prison setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con Air</td>
<td>Simon West</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>• Popularity (box office)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film Title</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Key Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law Abiding Citizen</td>
<td>F. Gary Gray</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Explores “justice” and revanchism within a carceral setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Last Castle</td>
<td>Rod Lurie</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Focus on morality and incarceration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Hard</td>
<td>Etan Cohen</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Focuses heavily on prison mythology (particularly regarding rape rape myths)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American History X</td>
<td>Tony Kaye</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Classic cult film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Hell</td>
<td>Ringo Lam</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Foreign setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get the Gringo</td>
<td>Adrian Grunberg</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Foreign setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birdman of Alcatraz</td>
<td>John Frankenheimer</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Infamous setting (Alcatraz) Popularity (critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Longest Yard</td>
<td>Peter Segal</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Popularity (box office) Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brubaker</td>
<td>Stuart Rosenberg</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Popularity (box office and critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Me</td>
<td>Edward James Olmos</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Infamous setting (Folsom Prison)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Man Walking</td>
<td>Tim Robbins</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Popularity (box office and critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midnight Express</td>
<td>Alan Parker</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Foreign setting Popularity (box office and critical acclaim)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ANALYSIS**

The viewing process involved multiple viewings of each film for analytical purposes. All films were watched four times. The first round of viewing for each film took place without taking any notes or doing any type of documentation about the content of the films. When I finished the first round of viewing, I re-watched the films, breaking each one down into shorter
segments while documenting and taking notes focusing on spectacle and imagery, as well as language and dialogue. With respect to spectacle and imagery, particular attention was paid to how the people who are incarcerated are portrayed. This included examining how they were shot, such as what type of camera angle was used and what type of lighting was used. With respect to Carceral Realism, a core tenet is that prisons are a necessary aspect of crime control. Thus, it was important to see if the people who are incarcerated in these movies were consistently portrayed as if they have to be in prison for the good of everyone else. I also looked for how the people in the films who are not incarcerated are portrayed visually to see if there is any noticeable contrast in comparison to the people that are incarcerated. I also paid attention to how the main characters in these films were shown, as they are often incarcerated but portrayed as more sympathetic than the rest of the prison population because they are either innocent or being overly punished for a “small” offense (Rafter 2006).

With respect to language and dialogue, there were a few different things that I looked for. I examined how the people who are incarcerated are talked about, both by others and by themselves. A central concept of Carceral Realism is the belief that people can generally be split into “good” and “bad” camps. So, it was important to see if this sentiment was reflected in the conversations in these films. I looked for what kinds of words were used to describe the people who are incarcerated. The background of the people who are incarcerated and the discussion of it was also something I paid close attention to. Based on my own anecdotal experience, movies and tv shows about crime and prisons tend to decontextualize their subject matter, so this was something I anticipated to see in these movies. This is important because connecting an issue to the larger social context helps to explain it and make it more understandable. Lastly, I watched for how these films engage the prison as a concept. I did not expect many, or perhaps any, of
these films to have an overt message about what prisons are for, although I did expect a narrative about what prisons do or are supposed to do.

Although there were specific things I was looking for going into this project, I used an open-coding scheme. For the first round of viewings, I did not take notes, although I had ideas from that viewing of what my main themes would be. I originally identified five main themes that chapters could be organized around. These five were narrowed down to the three themes that occurred the most. For the first two themes that will be discussed below, the “undeserving criminal” and rape, I began by making a simple count of how often each theme occurred in the films. I had to define the underserving criminal to have proper parameters for the theme. For the theme of rape, I made a count of how many times it was shown, implied, or referenced in the films. For the final theme, which explores what prisons are for, I wrote down what the overall ideological message was for each film individually and looked for similarities between them once I had watched them all.

Once I had a count of how often each theme occurred in the films, I used the third viewing to explore how each theme was occurring. For example, for the underserving criminal theme, I began to look for what traits were common among the characters who portrayed the underserving criminal. This process allowed a few subthemes, such as the “born criminal” (discussed below) to emerge. It was also during this part of the analysis that I recognized that the undeserving criminal often contrasts with a “good guy” character who serves as the moral protagonist. For the theme of rape, I used the third viewing to analyze how rape and sexual assault were framed within the narratives of each film. Doing this allowed me to notice that the portrayal of rape in these films is often couched in popular myths about rape (e.g., it is often
committed by a stranger). Each time a rape myth popped up, I coded it in my notes with a
different numerical value assigned to a certain myth.

During the third round of viewing, I began to look more specifically at how each movie
presented the purpose of prisons theme. Analyzing this theme was more difficult and time
consuming than the prior two, as most of the films do not overtly present a message about the
purpose of prisons. Thus, I had to look for various subtleties and nuances within the films to
tease out this theme. For example, I began to notice that most of the films that present the
purpose of prison as incarceration often have what might best be called “rough-looking”
incarcerated persons in the background of each scene. This seemed to subtly indicate that prisons
are full of violent “criminals”. Lastly, the fourth round of viewing for each film was used to
synthesize what I had already observed in the movies, to check for things I had missed, and to
see if there were any parts of the movies that I felt I had misinterpreted.
CHAPTER IV
WHO “BELONGS” IN PRISON?

In the mind of the American public, prisons are brutal, violent locations populated by the dregs of society (Wozniak 2014). Looming beneath the surface of this perception is a Weberian ideal type, “a set of essential qualitative features which, when combined, constitute a logical whole” (Balzacq 2015:103). The analysis of the films found that this ideal type, which I term the “undeserving criminal”, appears in sixteen of the twenty prison films in this study. The underserving criminal is deemed “undeserving” in that they are not worthy or capable of reform or rehabilitation due to their wicked nature. It assumes many of the characteristics which popular notions of incarceration map onto incarcerated persons in general: a penchant for violence, a lack of remorse or acceptance of responsibility, an intimidating physical presence, indulgence in the worst aspects of human nature/desires. The undeserving criminal exists completely outside of the accepted norms and values the of the rest of society. In discussing his conceptualization of the universal adversary and the increased desire for securitization, Neocleous (2011) says “bourgeois modernity is oriented around the imagination of an Enemy” (1). The same can be said generally of the prison films in this study, most of which have one or more characters who embody the “The Enemy of all Mankind” (Neocleous 2011). Perfectly at home within the confines of the carceral setting, the undeserving criminal as shown in these films is a chaotic evil that would unleash untold havoc upon society were it ever allowed release.

The construction of this evil is consistent with two of the core tenets of Carceral Realism. There are “good” and “bad” people, and we need prisons as a form of crime control to keep the good safe. The analysis indicates that the undeserving criminal is not always represented by one particular character in these films. Rather, in many of them, multiple characters contribute to the
construction of this ideal type. In fact, there are multiple occasions throughout these films where an entire group of incarcerated persons is meant to embody the malevolence of the undeserving criminal.

In this chapter, I will explore the nature of this ideal type as it is represented in prison movies. The chapter begins by discussing how the films portray the undeserving criminal. This will be done by examining the visual components of how the characters that embody the undeserving criminal are portrayed, as well as how they talk and act. Specifically, the actions and “crimes” committed by the undeserving criminal are often decontextualized or self-indulgent, being done for no apparent purpose other than to cause harm. As we will see, the idea of the undeserving criminal is also bound up with notions of punishment and revenge, particularly regarding what type of people “should” be punished. The representation of the undeserving criminal is also accomplished by portraying prisoners as born criminals, as well as by the films playing on popular notions of psychopathy. The undeserving criminal is also marked out by the use of violence, and can be mapped onto multiple characters in the background of a film. Lastly, the undeserving criminal is highlighted by the presence of its antithesis, the moral protagonist, the character with which the audience is meant to identify.

THE “CRIMINAL” AS BORN AND UNDESERVING

It is probably easy for the average person to conjure images of prisons and prisoners in their imagination. Although most people never set foot inside a prison, jail, or any other type of carceral setting, our society is saturated with images of crime, punishment, and incarceration. These types of images tend to sensationalize the subject (Kappeler and Potter 2005), which is much in keeping with the production of the ideal type of the undeserving criminal. Prison films,
being a key part of this saturation of imagery, most often portray the undeserving criminal in such a way as to stoke the anxieties of the viewer, while at the same time providing some amount of entertainment value. The undeserving criminal sometimes appears as a foil for the stock “good guy” character with whom the viewer is meant to identify as they are either innocent or guilty of some small offense for which they are being overly punished. In these instances, the undeserving criminal is usually represented by one or a few prisoners who are, as the judge in the trial of Ted Bundy put it, “extremely wicked, shockingly evil, and vile” (Berlinger 2019). The particular incarnation of the ideal type is meant to shock the sensibilities of the viewer. This type is beyond evil and only able to be described by an abundance of false modifiers. The stock image of the undeserving criminal is reminiscent of Lombroso’s concept of the born criminal (West 2017), as well as popular myths about psychopathy.

“All these monsters on one plane”

Starring then-recent Academy Award winner Nicholas Cage during the prime of his career in Hollywood, Con Air is a blockbuster film meant to attract a wide audience. To this end, the analysis found that the film relies heavily on popular notions of prisoners in terms of who they are, how they appear and behave, and what their background might be. We are convinced of the evil nature of the characters we see on screen by a superfluity of imagery and expositional dialogue. The first shot the viewer sees of the prison in Con Air shows a bleak, cold, harsh looking set of buildings rising above a concrete wall and a guard tower, common sights in prison imagery. The sky above is cloudy, and the camera appears to be using a blue, saturated lens to highlight the dark, depressing nature of the setting. Here, in this desolate looking prison, incarcerated persons are kept under lock and key, and are prevented from wreaking havoc on the
outside world. The tone presented by this shot contrasts with vibrant aesthetics we see later in the film after the prisoners gain their freedom by taking over the prisoner-transport plane they are riding on.

The first ten and a half minutes of Con Air serve as set-up. The protagonist does his time in prison, is subsequently granted parole, and is set to be sent home on a prisoner transport airplane run by the US Marshals. It is at this point that the film takes a unique approach to introduce us to what one Marshal refers to as “the worst of the worst”, criminals who are “pure predators, each and every one of them”. After a bit of exposition where a Marshal explains for the audience how the prisoner transport system works, the film presents us with a literal line-up of prisoners, all of whom are varying incarnations of the undeserving criminal. First, we are introduced via more exposition to William “Billy Bedlam” Bedford (played by Nick Chinlund), a mass murderer. As Special Agent Larkin (played by John Cusack) explains to the audience, after Bedford caught his wife in bed with another man, he murdered her entire family, “her parents, her brothers, her sisters…even her dog”. The inclusion of the dog is purposeful in that it is meant to exaggerate how evil Bedford is. During the narration there are various shots of Bedford walking onto the plane. He is physically imposing, appearing taller and more muscular than the guards around him. He has a constant scowl on his face, with a scorpion tattoo on his neck so that the audience can be sure of his malignant nature.

After Bedford walks onto the plane, the next prisoner off the bus is Nathan Jones (played by Ving Rhames), aka “Diamond Dog”. Jones was a general in the Black Guerilla Family, a militant black power group originally founded during the Civil Rights Era by George Jackson and others. Larkin explains to us that Jones bombed a National Rifle Association convention because “they represented the basest negativity of the white race”. Jones also has written a book
about his life while being in prison, and Larkin smarmily remarks that Denzel Washington is in talks to play the lead in the film version. As Jones enters his cell on the plane, he is shot from below to appear large and imposing, a tactic used by other films like *The Green Mile*. Along with the imagery of his body, the portrayal of Jones depends on a decontextualization of who he is. Jones is a racist depiction of a black militant or freedom fighter, drawn from a stereotypical imagining of real-world figures like Huey Newton and George Jackson, and groups like the Black Guerilla Family and the Black Panthers that were founded in response to the systematic exploitation and oppression of Black people in the US (Murch 2010). Decontextualized, Jones becomes a member of a chaotic murderous street gang that is racist against white people. The depiction of Jones and the Black Guerilla Family in this manner plays on the notion that Black people are more likely to be violent criminals than white people, a trope that has become a common part of the mythology of crime in popular culture (Kappeler and Potter 2005).

Wright (2013) says that, “following the…transition from physical to moral monstrosity that Foucault has described, images of the body must be re-inscribed with meaning” (127-128). Emblematic of this re-inscription is a particularly repugnant tattooed character in *Con Air* named Johnny Baca (played by Danny Trejo). His requisite nickname is “Johnny 23”, which is a reference to the 23 women he has been convicted of raping. Johnny 23 has 23 heart tattoos on his right arm for each conviction, a conspicuous aspect of his criminal body, as the tattoos represent not only physical but moral transgression. The meaning they inscribe is that of the undeserving criminal. Tattoos are common markers of criminality in the films selected for this study, and a tattoo related to a crime as horrific as rape marks Johnny out as the worst kind of criminal. This is echoed by one of the other criminals on board, who tells Johnny, “I despise rapists. For me,
you’re somewhere between a cockroach and that white stuff that accumulates at the corner of your mouth when you’re thirsty”.

The use of tattoos to signal Johnny 23’s evil nature is in keeping with a history of their conflation with criminality. In relation to criminology, the linking of tattoos with deviance can be traced to the discipline’s founder Cesare Lombroso and his theorization of the born criminal. According to Lombroso, criminality is an in-born biological trait, and criminals can be identified by abnormal physical characteristics (Rafter and Brown 2011). While Lombroso identified numerous classifications of criminals, the most malicious is the born criminal who is unable to prevent themselves from committing crime and is beyond any hope of reform. Lombroso also argued that other factors that are not inherent, especially tattoos, could be used to identify born criminals (Jacques 2017). Thus, Johnny 23’s tattoos serve as a form of stigmata, signaling his status as a born criminal undeserving and unworthy of redemption.

Another character to emerge from the line-up is Cyrus “The Virus” Grissom (played by John Malkovich), who might best be described as the worst of the “worst of the worst”. The first shot we see of Grissom is from below, with the camera pointing up from around knee-level height. As was the case when Jones was shown in the line-up, this shot is meant to make Grissom appear menacing and imposing to the audience. As Grissom walks towards the plane Larkin reads off his rap sheet which includes “kidnapping, robbery, murder, extortion”. We are told that since he has been locked up, Grissom has killed 11 incarcerated persons, caused 3 riots, and made two briefly successful escape attempts. According to Grissom himself, he has “killed more men than cancer”. This line conveys the morally reprehensible nature of Grissom, and subsequently people like him. Here is a person who has seemingly committed every type of
serious offense, shows absolutely no remorse for any of his actions, and even brags openly about them.

Grissom represents the undeserving criminal *par excellence*. Like Johnny 23, he is reminiscent of Lombroso’s born criminal, though in this case physical features are the focus instead of tattoos. Grissom’s various evil facial expressions are meant to accentuate his physical “otherness” to set him apart from what might be considered the norm, an attempt by the movie to use physical features to portray criminality. Agent Larkin even nods towards Lombroso’s conception of the born criminal when he says that Grissom is “39 years old and 25 of them [have been] spent in our institution”.

*The Psychopath*

Although Grissom fits into the category of the born criminal, he has other characteristics like high intelligence that make him emblematic of a popular fixation and anxiety regarding crime in general: the psychopathic serial killer, another character type in the prison films reviewed for this study. As the countless number of books, movies, and documentaries attests to, our society has an obsession with serial killers. Psychopathy, often conflated with serial murder, is also an object of popular obsession, although its nature is often misunderstood by or completely misrepresented in the popular imagination (Leistedt and Linkowski 2013). Its popular conception is played upon to construct the undeserving criminal *par excellence*. A psychopath as portrayed in *Con Air* (and countless other films) is characterized by an “inability to identify with others, remorseless cruelty, manipulativeness, deceitfulness, irresponsibility, constant search for stimulation, and criminal behavior” (Brown and Rafter 2011:51). As a result of the narration of Agent Larkin, we can notice each of these traits in Cyrus Grissom before his character utters a
single word. To make sure the audience understands, Larkin hammers it home by saying Grissom is “a poster child for the criminally insane”.

The spectacle of psychopathy is on display in the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, which *Con Air* was influenced by and draws numerous elements from, such as an innocent white male protagonist yearning for freedom. In this film, the innocent protagonist is Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins), a banker who catches his wife in bed with her golf instructor. After the latter two are murdered, Andy is found guilty and sentenced to life in Shawshank Penitentiary. Late into the film’s second act, the truth about the murders is revealed.

Andy befriends a new incarcerated person named Tommy (played by Gil Bellows), who has been transferred to Shawshank from another prison. After learning about Andy’s situation, Tommy confides in him that he believes he is innocent because he knows who the real killer is. At the prison that Tommy was previously incarcerated in, he had a cellmate named Elmo Blatch (played by Bill Bolender), who he describes as “a big twitchy fucker. The kind of roommate you pray you don’t get”. Here, is the first clue of psychopathy, which is given by Tommy’s use of the word “twitchy”. Popular notions of psychopathy indicate a type of person who is unable to control themselves, and as a result engages in dangerous and/or criminal behaviors (Leistedt and Linkowski 2013). Though it is subtle, the audience is meant to imagine someone who has ended up in prison as a result of this twitchiness.

Tommy goes on to describe Blatch as a “talker”, taking every possible chance to brag about his various criminal activities, including people he murdered. One day, Tommy jokingly asks Blatch about the people he has killed, to which he obliges. Here is the second clue of psychopathy; a lack of remorse. Blatch not only does not feel any regret or guilt about his past actions, but, like Cyrus Grissom, he brags to others about them openly.
We are given our first look at Blatch as he tells Tommy about the people he has killed, and the image we get of Blatch is just as resonant as the dialogue. He is shot slightly from the left side and is the only person in the frame. He is sitting in a corner of the cell with a concrete wall making up the right side of the background and bars constituting the left.

The camera shoots him close-up, with the frame just above his head down to right below his chest. In addition, *Shawshank* often employs contrasting light and shadow in its visual repertoire, a strategy which Fiddler (2007) describes as “uncanny” (192). This duality is perfectly on display when the film uses chiaroscuro, a lighting technique common in film noir (Manon 2007), to provide a low key shot of Blatch’s face, the left side of which is completely obscured by shadow. The right side of his face contrasts starkly with the shadow as it is illuminated by the light coming in through the cell bars. While perhaps not intentional, this marking of Blatch’s head as a liminal space brings to mind the popular fictional psychopath “Two Face” from the Batman mythology. Draping half of Blatch’s face in darkness has the effect of making him appear menacing and unknowable, and instills a sense of unease in the audience, as if we are not sure what he is capable of. The image of Blatch also depicts a simplistic notion of human behavior. There is a “light” side of behavior, and a “dark” side of human nature. The dark half is encompassed by the base desires that drive the war of all against all referred to by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (Hobbes 1651/2011), which Blatch has embraced, or which have embraced him.

As the flashback goes on, Blatch describes his murder of Dufresne’s wife and her lover. He says that he picked out “this guy” (referring to the lover) because he was wealthy and decided to rob his house during the night. The use of the phrase “this guy” is strategic, as it plays on a popular myth of violent crime, which is that it is random and most often perpetrated by a stranger
(Kappeler and Potter 2005). The writers of *Shawshank* could have had Blatch refer to the lover by name, a scenario which would have been plausible considering he worked at the country club which “this guy” often frequented. However, Blatch calling him “this guy” implies that he picked his target on a whim, another hint that we are dealing with a psychopath.

The remainder of Blatch’s monologue drives home the earlier hints that he is in fact a psychopath. As the camera slowly moves in on his face, Blatch says “I go in one night, and do his place. He wakes up… and gives me shit. So, I killed him. Him and this tasty bitch he was with. And that’s the best part. She’s fucking this prick, see, this golf pro, but she’s married to some other guy…And he’s the one they pinned it on”. The use of the term “tasty” to describe Dufresne’s murdered wife plays upon the theme of sexual violence, which is common in prison lore and prison films (Fleisher and Krienert 2009). Halfway through the monologue, Blatch begins laughing uncontrollably as he describes what he did, taking great joy in recounting his actions. When the camera zooms in at the end of the monologue, we are shown Blatch’s full face. With his head taking up most of the frame, he wears a deranged and sadistic expression. The meaning the audience is to attribute to Blatch is written all over his now visible face. It is at this point that he fully becomes a visual expression of the psychopath. We as the audience see what a psychopath should look like.

This segment takes up only around 48 seconds of the film’s run time. In spite of its brevity, the scene is one of the most striking in the film because of its visual display of psychopathy, as well as its verbal content. The visual display of Blatch is not necessary to the film. As the only flashback in the film, the scene sticks out from the rest. The plot point that is useful in driving the story forward - Tommy telling Andy about who killed his wife - could have been accomplished simply by having Tommy recount his experience. However, seeing Blatch
recount the event serves is to provide a visceral representation of what type of evil it takes to senselessly murder two innocent people.

The born criminal/psychopath character also finds form in another popular prison film, *The Green Mile*. *The Green Mile* takes place in Great Depression-era Louisiana at the state’s death row facility. Similar to Shawshank, a central aspect of the plot concerns a man who has been wrongly convicted of murder. In this case, however, the innocent character is a black man who has been wrongly convicted for the murder of two young white girls. In keeping with *Shawshank*, we will eventually learn of this man’s innocence while finding out who the real killer is.

About an hour into the film, we are introduced to William Wharton, a new death row incarcerated person whom the prison warden refers to as a “problem child”, a nod to the concept of the born criminal who is beyond reform. Wharton is being transferred to death row from a mental asylum having been convicted of murdering a pregnant woman. When he first steps off the paddy wagon and begins his walk towards death row, Wharton appears to be going in and out of consciousness, as he requires help walking, and his mouth is agape with slobber running down his chin. We soon find out that this is all an act though.

As Wharton is brought inside the walls of death row, he springs to life, chokes one of the guards, and makes an attempt to kill or maim the other guards, all with a big smile on his face. He eludes capture for a while before finally being restrained and thrown into a cell. Here, Wharton displays a popular trope of psychopathy, in that he is smart and cunning (Leistedt and Linkowski 2013). Like Grissom, he combines elements of the born criminal and psychopath to form the undeserving criminal *par excellence*. 
Throughout the film, Wharton repeatedly does things to remind the viewer that he is truly evil and belongs in prison. During the execution of another death row incarcerated person, Wharton is wildly running and climbing around his cage, cheering it on. As the execution, which is gruesomely botched, carries on, Wharton shouts, “he’s cooking now!” In another instance, when a guard stands with his back turned close to his cell, Wharton grabs him around the neck and holds him up against the bars. While doing this, he sexually assaults the guard, repeatedly groping him and threateningly whispering “ain’t you soft…like a girl”. After he lets the guard go, Wharton says he was only kidding and laughs maniacally, echoing the cruel cackle of Elmo Blatch in Shawshank. The scene does nothing to advance the plot or story. It reminds the viewer, however, that Wharton conforms to the popular notion of a psychopath, reinforcing the central idea of Carceral Realism, that cages are necessary and the only way to deal with someone like him.

Wharton does serve as a vehicle for the audience’s voyeuristic enjoyment of pain on two occasions, one of which proves to be fatal. In the first instance, after Wharton urinates on a guard who stands too close to his cell, another guard grabs a firehose and repeatedly douses him with it at close range. This is meant to be a moment of enjoyment for the audience, an instance where we as viewers can revel in other people’s pain (Brown, 2009), specifically in this case the pain of Wharton. It is almost as if simply being behind bars is too good for someone like him, so a more direct form of punishment is warranted. He is deserving of what he gets. In the second instance, Wharton is shot and killed in his cell by a sadistic prison guard named Percy.

This part of The Green Mile is particularly resonant because, as Garland (1990) writes, “the ways in which we punish, and the ways in which we represent that action to ourselves, make a difference to the way we are” (276). In addition to this, punishment also reveals something
about the way we already are, and this of course applies to popular representations of punishment. William Wharton is not a nice person. He revels in hurting people and in watching other people be killed. He is an easy target for the type of punishment he receives because he is deserving of it. For much of the film, we have watched Wharton do bad things without any proper kind of reckoning.

The punishment that he is subjected to is meant to provide a sense of closure and justice for the viewer. The “justice” we see meted out is a simplistic representation of a complex philosophical concept. It is an artifact of a black and white reality where people get what they deserve, especially “bad” people. Such a notion of justice is reflective of the good/bad dichotomy that is a central concept of Carceral Realism. So, the performance of this punishment is not about the actual punishment itself, but about communicating a cultural ideal to the audience regarding the nature of justice and the need for bad people to be dealt with in a harsh manner. In the case of Wharton, he is murdered, his life taken as he took the lives of others. He was of course scheduled to be executed at some point in the future, a fate which in the minds of many viewers would likely seem appropriate. However, the death he is subjected to by Percy is much more immediate, disallowing him to carry on with his sadistic antics. The choice to give Wharton a straightaway, visceral, bloody death speaks to a revanchist idea. A cell was not punishment enough for him; murder was the more appropriate punitive act.

_Violence for the Sake of Violence_

Another common aspect we can pick out of the undeserving criminal type in these films is the self-indulgent nature of their offenses. The undeserving criminal often does horrible things not for any pragmatic or rational outcome, but rather as part of some evil wish fulfillment. Such
is true of the menacingly named “Wolf”, the undeserving criminal character who acts as the foil for Clint Eastwood’s Frank Morris in *Escape from Alcatraz*. Not long after Morris arrives at Alcatraz, he is approached in the shower by Wolf (played by Bruce M. Fisher), who tells him he is looking for a “new punk” (i.e., a submissive sexual partner), indicating his intention to rape. Morris says, “good luck”, to which Wolf replies, “you don’t understand, I just found her”. Morris rebuffs this advance and proceeds to beat Wolf severely in front of the other incarcerated persons and guards, who do not intervene.

As the undeserving criminal, Wolf responds to the beating with revenge on his mind. In a scene a little later on in the film, Morris is hanging out in the yard. While he mills around unsuspecting, Wolf approaches him from behind with a shiv. Right at the last second Morris turns around and is able to defend himself. The guards step in this time and break the fight up, though not before Wolf slashes one of them in the face. After Wolf is taken away, an incarcerated person asks Morris if he’s scared of dying, to which he replies, “I don’t think so”. The incarcerated person tells him, “you better be. You hurt Wolf. Wolf’s gonna hurt you”. Later on, after being let out of solitary confinement, Wolf does set out to hurt Morris again, although he is stopped by members of a prison gang whose leader Morris has befriended.

*Escape from Alcatraz* is a film concerned with issues of freedom and corrupt authority. It does not present the black/white picture of morality that most prison films do. Evidence of this is Frank Morris, who is not presented as the typical morally righteous protagonist vulnerable to the harsh nature of prison. Because of this, it is odd for the film to have a character like Wolf who acts as the undeserving criminal, and indeed his time spent on screen is comparatively brief. However, his role is important to the film. Wolf serves as a reminder of the danger of prison for both Morris and the audience. Many of the incarcerated persons whom Morris interacts with
garner some amount of sympathy or likeability. They may be criminals, but they do not seem overtly evil. The exception is Wolf, the film’s dangerous other who would undoubtedly do horrible things were he allowed freedom. The idea that evil people lurk in prison is materialized when Wolf tries to exact revenge even after he has been beaten by Morris. Thus, even in a film that does not follow many of the more common prison film elements, we can still notice Carceral Realism through the representation of the type of person who truly belongs in prison.

A different representation of the undeserving criminal comes from *Madea Goes to Jail*, which unlike the other films from this study features a women’s jail. A little past the hour mark in *Madea*, the main character Candy (portrayed by Keisha Knight Pulliam) is sent to jail, and shortly after encounters the film’s incarnation of the undeserving criminal. The first shot we get of the undeserving criminal is in the mess area of the jail. Shortly after Candy sits down to eat, a large, muscular woman comes over and intimidates the women sitting next to Candy, making them move so she can have the seat. To convey how tough she is, the woman has cut off the sleeves of her denim jail fatigues and has multiple tattoos on her arms and neck. When the woman, who we learn is named “Big Sal”, sits down, she rubs her hand on Candy’s shoulder and says “ain’t you a cute little thing”. Her voice is deep, a deliberate choice made by the film to conflate too much masculinity from a woman with criminality. It is also of note that Big Sal is white while Candy is black, a choice made by the film that goes against the typical stereotype of black women sexually abusing white women in prison. This reversal of a stereotype could be because the film is made by a black director (Tyler Perry) and is targeted at a black audience.

Candy rebuffs Big Sal; however, the advances continue until another woman steps in to stop it. Big Sal tries to force herself on to Candy again later in the film, this time in the laundry room. However, she is again stopped by the appearance of another person. The presence of Big
Sal is strategic, and her reason for existing within the movie is similar to what we see with the undeserving criminal in other films; she represents danger for the main character. Also, like Wolf in *Escape from Alcatraz*, Big Sal’s danger to Candy is amplified by *Madea* portraying her to be a sexual predator, something which is conflated with an excess of masculinity on her part. The portrayal of Big Sal is in line with how women offenders have often been viewed by criminology. Beginning with its founder Cesare Lombroso (Lombroso and Ferrero 1893/2004), the field has traditionally seen women who commit violence as especially bad and overly masculine, “the rationale being that since normal women are passive, the few women who do commit violent crime must be sick” (Islam Banarjee and Khatun 2015: 1). Big Sal’s portrayal as a deviant lesbian also has similarities with the works of Lombroso, who argued that lesbians are less biologically developed and more prone to criminality than what he considered “normal” women (Woods 2015). Further, the framing of Big Sal’s physical features and deep voice as being outside the acceptable norm, and the combination of these factors with her perceived criminality, is a representation of the criminalization of queer expression by this film (see Mogul Ritchie and Whitlock 2011).

*The Undeserving Criminal in the Background*

In some films, the undeserving criminal appears only briefly, existing mainly in the background. However, their presence is significant, and they are often portrayed in such a way as to make it seem that prisons are full of people like them. In this case imagery is primarily used to convey what type of people belong in prison, though dialogue is employed to a lesser extent. The film *American Me* employs this portrayal of the undeserving criminal. In the multiple prison locations we see in this film, the background is often filled with large, physically imposing men,
many with multiple tattoos and scowled expressions on their faces. Their presence gives the feel that these prisons are filled with people who belong there. This is also the case with the movie *American History X*, which foregrounds the presence of violent criminal gangs in such a way as to make it appear that the majority of people in its prison belong to one.

The three films from this study that are set outside of the US, *In Hell*, *Midnight Express*, and *Get the Gringo* also use this tactic in depicting the undeserving criminal. In all three films, an American national is the main character and is incarcerated in a prison in a foreign country. As such, these films tend to focus on the American main character. When these films do focus on the incarcerated persons who are not American, they often are depicted as a large unruly mass. For instance, in the movie *In Hell*, there are various staged fight-to-the-death scenes that take place in the prison yard. During most of these scenes, the few Americans who are incarcerated stand by idly and watch while the rest of the incarcerated persons, who are Russian, crowd around and watch and place bets. They cheer on wildly while the fights take place, with some fights even breaking out in the crowd. Similar scenes occur in *Midnight Express* and *Get the Gringo*. In these films, as well as the others that use such a portrayal, the undeserving criminal is mapped onto all of the people in the prison outside of the main character.

In the movie *Law Abiding Citizen*, though a significant amount of the runtime takes place in prison, we mostly only ever see the main character, Clyde (played by Gerard Butler). Outside of him, we are briefly given a view of the arms of various incarcerated persons that hang out of their cell bars during the arrival scene. We never see their faces but hear their voices as they call out threats to Clyde and the guards as they pass by. Like the arrival scene in other films like *Con Air*, this particular arrival scene gives the impression that only violent criminals exist in prison. The only other incarcerated person whose face we see for any sustained amount of time is
Clyde’s cellmate, who goes unnamed. Our first shot of him frames him as a large, rough looking
guy with unkempt long hair and a beard. He is tall, appearing bigger than Clyde, and his neck
and arms are covered in various tattoos. A couple minutes later, when Clyde is given some food
in his cell, the cellmate tries to threaten him into giving it up, saying “if you don’t get the fuck
up…I’m gonna split your whole fucking skull in two”. The framing of the random threatening
incarcerated persons, as well as portraying Clyde’s cellmate as a violent murderer, appeal to the
Carceral Realist notion that prison are necessary because they contain and incapacitate bad
people.

Jordanova (1990) says that we “search for the meaning in people…with the surface
holding the key to it” (571). Much of the constructing that these movies do of the undeserving
criminal is at the surface level, which is to say imagery. Visually, the undeserving criminal is not
supposed to be like “us” in prison movies. The meaning expressed by the visual representations
of the undeserving criminal reveals a dangerous other that can easily be identified as being
outside of the acceptable boundaries of appearance and behavior. The undeserving criminal also
expresses a cultural desire for us to not see ourselves in certain characters in prison films. More
specifically, we do not wish to see ourselves as worthy of punishment. This exists in a dialectical
relationship with the protagonists and moral centers of prison films, with whom we readily
identify (Rafter 2006). The ability for the viewer to separate themselves from the undeserving
criminal is a key aspect of the films in this study, as the conflation of revanchism and justice
relies on an othering of the subject of punishment, as well as the creation of a hierarchy of who
deserves to be punished the most. The process of othering requires the person or group that is
doing the othering to view the person or group being othered as fundamentally different, even
sub-human (Jensen 2011). The undeserving criminal presents a narrative about crime and
punishment for us as the audience. As Barthes (1982) writes, “the function of a narrative is not to represent, it is to constitute a spectacle” (294). Thus, the spectacle of the undeserving criminal performs the dual role of drawing support for punitive attitudes about crime, while also speaking to a cultural desire ingrained in moviegoers.

THE MORAL PROTAGONIST

The demarcation between who belongs in prison and who does not is a necessary aspect of Carceral Realism. In terms of prison films, for the general audience to know who belongs in prison, we must also know who does not belong. The undeserving criminal who belongs in prison is constructed upon representations of born criminals and psychopaths, as well as their polar opposite, which is usually one but sometimes multiple characters that serve as the film’s moral center. Such a character is common in the prison film genre and is usually occupied by a given movie’s protagonist (Rafter 2006; Kehrwald 2017). Of the twenty films from this study, the moral protagonist character appeared in fourteen. The character acts as a vehicle to transport the viewer behind the prison walls, and also gives them a morally just character to root for in an immoral setting. The analysis indicates that there are various examples of this moral protagonist in the films from this study, and although they differ from one another in certain respects, they share similar traits.

One type is the moral protagonist as flawed. Another is the moral protagonist as innocent, brought to prison by some sort of injustice. If they are not innocent, the moral protagonist will be guilty of some type of offense that is not considered serious, and for which they are being punished too harshly. Finally, within the category of the moral protagonist, we also find the sub-category of the moral authority, which is a character that is not incarcerated, but is usually in a
position of authority in a prison or jail. The purpose of this character is still to provide a moral center for the audience and to highlight who is *not* deserving of prison. A key difference between the moral protagonist and the moral authority is that the latter is often trying to act as a paternalistic figure to help the incarcerated persons, who usually are framed as not being able to help themselves.

Though there are variations of the moral protagonist, they are all marked out in similar ways by the movies. These films use dialogue, imagery, and framing to signal to the audience that the moral protagonist is different from the majority of the people who are incarcerated in the prison. Often, a combination of these elements is used, though one may be more prominent than the other two in a given film. For instance, as I will demonstrate, imagery is heavily used by some of these films early on to establish the difference of the moral protagonist relative to the rest of the incarcerated person population. This is accomplished through what I call the “arrival scene”, which involves the film’s portrayal of the main character arriving to prison. The films that have this type of scene use particular types of camera shots, such as point of view (POV) shots that often show a raucous crowd of incarcerated persons from the moral protagonist’s perspective as they are walking into the prison yard for the first time. Imagery is also evoked during the arrival scene by shots that foreground the moral protagonist, usually possessing a calm demeanor, against a backdrop of incarcerated persons forming a chaotic mass.

*The Innocent Protagonist*

Perhaps the purest embodiment of the moral protagonist from this study’s sample of films is Andy Dufresne from *The Shawshank Redemption*. A clean-cut white man who works as a banker in Portland, Maine, Andy represents an every-man figure whom anyone watching the
movie is meant to be able to identify with in some way. He has a kind, gentle-hearted personality, and treats others with respect. Throughout the film, even as he is faced with one hardship after another, Andy refuses to resign himself to his fate. This attitude contrasts with his friend Red (played by Morgan Freeman), a likeable character who has become something of a cynic during his time spent in Shawshank. Andy continually maintains his innocence and asserts to his fellow incarcerated persons that one day he will gain his freedom. The audience’s intended attitude towards Andy is put into words early in the film by Red, who says, “I think it would be fair to say that I liked Andy from the start”.

Andy’s innocence is not readily apparent to the viewer until long into the film, although it is hinted at. In spite of not revealing Andy’s innocence, the movie signals to the audience early on that he does not belong in prison. Andy arrives at Shawshank via a prison bus shortly after being convicted of the murder of his wife and her lover. As the bus is arriving, we are given an overhead shot of the prison yard. As the camera moves overhead, we can see that the yard is heavily populated with incarcerated persons, all wearing blue prison issue fatigues. The prisoners begin to flock, almost as one, towards the gate at the far end of the yard as the prison bus Andy is on approaches. We then get a brief shot of the inside of the bus, full of other new arrivals, with Andy sitting in the back, a shell-shocked expression on his face.

The bus pulls through the gate and into a fenced-off area of the yard, and a group of guards await the incarcerated persons. Outside of the fenced in area, the incarcerated persons have all gathered, shouting at the new arrivals and reaching through the links in the fence to try to grab them. The weight of the crowd causes the fence to sway back and forth. As the new arrivals walk towards the yard, one prisoner remarks, “I never seen such a sorry-looking heap of maggot shit in all my life”. We get a brief close-up of Andy, who looks cold and scared. He
stands in contrast to most of the other arrivals, most of whom are not showing any emotion. Others are acting tough so as not to present themselves as easy prey. It is made clear that Andy, the film’s moral center, is about to enter a place he does not belong in. The “arrival scene” is prominent in various other prison films because it serves as a way of initiating the audience into a given film’s particular representation of the prison through the main character. It is also strategic in that it foreshadows the violent and chaotic nature of prison while contrasting it with the morally righteous nature of the protagonist.

Cameron Poe serves as the innocent protagonist character in *Con Air*. Similar to Dufresne, Poe has been sent to prison after being wrongfully convicted of murder, although in his case he was defending himself and his wife from a group of drunk men at a bar. In an early section of the film, we are given a montage of Poe where he is immediately made to stand out from the other incarcerated persons. He goes through the arrival scene, albeit in the hall of his cell block rather than the prison yard. As Poe walks down the hall towards his cell, the camera frames from him from his right side so that the audience has a clear view of the cells on his left as he passes by. Every prisoner he passes comes to their cell door to shout at and berate him. Some of them reach through their cell bars to try to grab him. Most of the prisoners we see during this sequence are large and physically intimidating. Several of them catcall after Poe; he is repeatedly called a “bitch”, and one of the incarcerated persons menacingly remarks that Poe looks like a “pretty girl”, a comment seemingly directed at his long hair.

After the arrival scene, the next several minutes of *Con Air* consist of a montage of Poe’s time spent in prison. The montage is narrated in the form of letters he is writing to his daughter, who was born after his incarceration began. Most of the scenes that comprise the montage are relatively tame and consist of Poe performing mundane tasks like reading, writing, or exercising
in his cell. However, one sequence contrasts with the rest of the montage and, like the arrival scene, serves to set up the image of the prison.

Beginning at the 6:37 mark of the film, as Poe narrates, we get a sequence of events on his cell block that shows us what can happen when people who should be confined in cages are able to get out from behind them. The shot starts in the hallway of the block, and we immediately see multiple cell doors flung open in disarray. Bunk beds from numerous cells have been pushed out into the open and their sheets have been set on fire. What appear to be bed sheets have been tied to light fixtures and hung down from the ceiling, accentuating the chaos of the event. A lifeless body is spread out on the floor. In a point of view (POV) shot, the camera swiftly moves down the hallway, dodging past and around the various beds and items which litter the ground. During the scene we hear constant screaming and yelling by unseen incarcerated persons who are rioting around the prison.

Though this scene is short within the larger scope of the film, it sets the tone early for the audience in terms of what prisons are and what type of people inhabit them. The riot sequence breaks through the calm of the earlier scenes in the montage, exposing what for this film is the reality of prison, which is that it is largely inhabited by the worst kind of people who do not belong in society. It is also quite telling that this scene, fleeting as it is, illustrates the random violence carried out by the undeserving criminal. It ignores the fact that like the infamous Attica revolt of 1971, riots are often a response to oppression and exploitation, and the refusal by prison authorities to respond to legitimate grievances (Useem Camp Camp and Dugan, 1995; Camp 2016). The riot in this scene is meant to provide a brief scare for the audience as it has no cause. It is simply random violence carried out by the dangerous other.
During the riot, Poe narrates a letter he has written to his daughter, saying “here I am, in maybe the worst place on Earth, and yet, somehow, I feel like the luckiest man alive”. Here, Poe displays a defining feature of the moral protagonist found in the analysis of these films - the strength to carry on under difficult or seemingly impossible circumstances. Poe makes no attempt to engage with the riot happening a few feet from him, instead lying in bed reading a letter with his cell door shut. The implication is Poe does not belong here. We as the viewer are already meant to know that, as we were shown that he acted in self-defense in the beginning of the film when he committed murder. However, this short scene is a stark reminder that for people like Poe (like us), prison is not the place to be, and his best chance for survival is to stay unnoticed and keep his head down.

The Flawed Protagonist

The next type of “good” character in the films from this study is the flawed individual who is guilty, but whose crime was either not that serious or committed under circumstances that make it palatable to the audience. This incarnation of the moral protagonist is common in prison films (Rafter 2006) and we can look at the example of The Longest Yard to see how it contrasts with the undeserving criminal.

A 2005 remake of a 1974 film of the same name which starred Burt Reynolds, The Longest Yard was a large budget early summer release like Con Air. The movie stars Adam Sandler as Paul “Wrecking” Crewe, a former NFL quarterback who ends up in a Texas prison after being arrested for driving around LA intoxicated. Though he is clearly guilty of breaking the law, the movie casts Crewe as a likeable, easy-going person who is out of place in prison.
This image is enhanced by the fact that Crewe’s instance of driving drunk did not hurt anyone and that the car he wrecks belongs to his girlfriend who is wealthy and vindictive.

Like many other prison film protagonists, Crewe is also a “clean-cut” white man, which is our first sign that he is a fish-out-of-water. Most of the actors used as extras in this film appear to be people of color. While we do not always see their faces, when we do, they appear menacing, often staring Crewe down with a hardened expression. A scene that serves as an example of this is the first time Crewe goes to the mess hall after arriving at the prison. When Crewe walks into the hall, we get a POV shot from his perspective. The camera pans from left to right over the mostly faceless mass of prisoners either eating lunch or sitting on a stairwell. There are two prisoners in the foreground while the rest of the crowd is mostly out of the camera’s focus, although we as the audience can pick out details about them. All of the prisoners shown are people of color. The two men in front stare at Crewe menacingly as if trying to let him know he has come to the wrong place. One of them has ripped his prison-issue denim shirt off at the shoulders, exposing his biceps and a tattoo on his shoulder. Since this is a POV shot, they are also staring at us, the “penal spectator” (Brown 2009:51), letting us know that we are also entering a place we do not belong. Although this camera pan is only a little over two seconds long, it entrenches both the audience’s identification with Crewe, and the dangerous nature of the environment that he is (and vicariously we are) stepping in to.

Crewe is also marked as being out of place aesthetically by the use of tattoos. Tattoos are a staple of the prison films used for this study. Their use is strategic, playing on the popular conflation between tattoos and criminality (see Adams 2009) to mark out the criminal bodies that fill these prisons. Crewe, as the clean-cut white protagonist, has no visible tattoos. One could attribute this to Adam Sandler’s lack of tattoos in real life. But the same cannot be said for a
character named “Cheeseburger” Eddie, a black incarcerated person who Crewe interacts with at various points in the film. Eddie is portrayed by Terry Crews, who like Sandler does not have tattoos in real life. In the film however, Crews’ character has many tattoos, and even wears a prison-issue shirt that has been ripped at the shoulders to make them more visible. Comparing the way Sandler’s and Crews’ characters are marked and not marked, it becomes clear that, for *The Longest Yard*, tattoos are conflated not only with criminality, but with blackness as well.

*Moral Authority*

The 1980 prison drama *Brubaker* provides a different take on the moral protagonist, seen in these films, in that the main character is not an incarcerated person. *Brubaker* is a dramatization of the true story of Thomas Murton, who was made warden of two Arkansas prisons with the goal of reforming them. Set in rural Arkansas in the late 1960’s, *Brubaker* follows the efforts of Henry Brubaker (the Murton analogue), played by Robert Redford, to reform Wakefield Prison, which he has recently been appointed warden to. Brubaker does not enter the prison on his first day of work as one might expect. Rather, he chooses to pose as a new arrival so that he will be treated as an incarcerated person, so that he can see the conditions of the prison first-hand. The viewer does not know this at first, as Brubaker does not reveal himself until around half an hour in. Still, during this first 30 minutes, the film presents a striking sequence of events that cement Brubaker as the moral center and protagonist.

The first we see of Brubaker is when he is on his way to prison via the transport bus. As the bus makes its way down a secluded country lane it is hailed down by four men with rifles. Two of the men are carrying a limp body. The bus driver, apparently used to this kind of thing, stops and allows the men to load the body on the bus. It becomes clear at this point that the man
they loaded on has been shot to death. As this is happening, a man sitting behind Brubaker whispers to him, “those guys with the guns [are] convicts…Wakefield prisoners same as us”. At this point we realize that the incarcerated persons are running the prison at Wakefield; hell is loose, and the devils are here.

After this brutal introduction, Brubaker witnesses several more atrocities before revealing himself as the warden. There are repeated instances of rape and sexual assault, mostly carried out by incarcerated persons like the ones we saw earlier who have been given positions as guards. There is a shortage of beds, so new arrivals are forced to sleep either on the floor or the metal skeleton of a bunk. A prisoner-guard tells them “we talk about beds when somebody gets out of here or dies.” Various forms of physical torture are carried out by the prisoner-guards, such as a particularly brutal punishment known as “the bars” where an incarcerated person is made to put their hands on the cell bars while they are beaten repeatedly with a leather whip. In one instance this is carried out to punish someone for fighting, although it is used as an intimidation tactic on the part of the prisoner-guards. Importantly, all of these atrocities are witnessed from Brubaker’s point of view so that the audience sees them as he does.

After revealing himself as Wakefield’s new warden, Brubaker stands on a hill to address the incarcerated persons in the yard below him. The physical separation is reinforced by a tall chain-linked fence topped with barbed wire that stands between Brubaker and the mass of incarcerated persons in the yard. Though he lived among them for a short time, Brubaker is now separating himself in an effort to cement his authority and garner respect. As he speaks to the incarcerated persons, Brubaker becomes the film’s moral authority: “Let’s get something straight. I figure most of you guys belong here. I figure basically you don’t have any respect for other people or yourselves. [If] you want more from me, you’re going to have to earn it”.
Speaking to a crowd that is largely comprised of black men, Brubaker takes on the persona of the white savior (Hughey 2014), a messianic authority figure who rescues people (most often people of color) who are incapable of helping themselves. Brubaker also positions himself as the moral authority by casting the incarcerated persons as undeserving criminals who “belong here” due to their moral failings and lack of “respect for other people” or themselves.

The Brubaker type character who occupies a position of authority is also present in the 2006 film Gridiron Gang, which like Brubaker is a dramatization of real events. The film’s moral protagonist is Sean Porter, a correctional officer at Kilpatrick Detention Center, a juvenile jail outside of Los Angeles. At the start of the film, a monologue by Porter informs the viewer that Kilpatrick is harsher than other juvenile facilities. He does this by musing about the type of person who gets sent to Kilpatrick: “most 16-17 year old kids, [if] they make a bad choice, something gets broken. They screw up in class, hurt somebody’s feelings, show up at the prom drunk…Then there’s kids, they make a bad choice, somebody ends up shot dead in the parking lot. Those kids get sent here”. Porter is setting up for the viewer the notion that this is a different type of “kid” we will be seeing in this film. The monologue provides essentialized meaning for the audience as to what kind of “kids” (i.e., “criminals”) Porter is referring to, and why they are less deserving than a normal teenager or young adult. Here, Gridiron Gang, as with many of these films, relies on the audience’s preconceived notions of particular groups of people while at the same time adding to and reinforcing them.

The meaning in the monologue is made visually explicit early in the film. During lights out one night, a youth named Roger sneaks over to another person’s bunk and begins violently attacking him. Fights of this nature occur frequently in Gridiron Gang and serve as a reminder for the audience why places like Kilpatrick exist. After this fight, Roger is put into solitary
confinement for the night. Early the next morning, Porter walks into the solitary cell while Roger is still sleeping. With a mixture of anger and sympathy on his face, he rolls up a magazine and repeatedly hits Roger with it. It is clear from Porter’s facial expression that he does not really want to do this, but he deems the “tough love” to be necessary since it is the only thing this type of “kid” will understand, respond to, and respect. Porter then yells at Roger, asking him why he committed the attack, to which the reply comes, “he dissed my hood!” Here, another layer is added for the audience as to why these “kids” are less deserving; they are gang members from “the ghetto”, which is supposed to make them scary to white viewers. This sequence marks out young black men as unruly and in need of authoritarian moral regulation (see Hunt 1999). Just as importantly, it establishes Porter as the moral protagonist, as he is the authority figure trying to instill values in the youths who are sent to Kilpatrick.

In a scene that takes place shortly after this, Roger is released and subsequently gunned down by rival gang members after returning to his old neighborhood. Upon learning of this, Porter despairs of the nature of the juvenile system, saying “we put ‘em right back out on the street where they get slaughtered…we’re not even making a dent”. While he admits that the system is failing, Porter’s words carry the baggage of a Catch-22. Although the way things are being done in the prison is not working, the incarcerated persons cannot be let out. The underlying principle of Carceral Realism holds true, as even though incarceration may not be working how he wants it to, and he does not necessarily like it, these “kids” need it.

In order to try to address the problem he has identified, Porter starts a football team consisting of the youths at Kilpatrick. He presents it as a simple solution that will teach the youths good life skills and morals, including “being punctual, responding to authority, being a member of a team, and accepting criticism”. Where the “kids” at Kilpatrick have failed morally,
Porter will fix it by instilling moral regulation via football. The rest of the film follows the efforts of Porter and his assistant coach as they try to get the team to come together and instill their brand of morality in the players. For the most part, the movie presents this as a success. We are told by a postscript that most of the players (at least those that are prominently featured in the film) go on to lead good lives. A few do not, but of course we cannot expect Porter to reach all of these “kids”.

Henry Brubaker and Sean Porter, in their status as the moral protagonist, are meant to be people who the audience can identify with based on the actions they take. They are both faced with difficult circumstances and in those circumstances are doing the best they know how to effect change; Porter is charged with rescuing a group of youths from a morally inferior subculture of violence, while Brubaker must reform a prison that has been overtaken by violent, sadistic incarcerated persons. As with Con Air and Cameron Poe, Brubaker and Gridiron Gang convey that their respective protagonists are acting as we the audience want to imagine we would in similar situations. By playing on a desire to be morally just, these films connect with the audience while at the same time reinforcing popular ideas about crime, prisons, and morality.

It might be said that the true purpose of the moral authority is to allow the audience to feel a sense of superiority in relation to the “lesser” characters from prison films. This desire plays out in a racialized way in The Green Mile. As discussed above, one of the main plot points revolves around John Coffey, an illiterate black man presented as being child-like and simple. In addition, he appears in the form of a common Hollywood trope, “the magical black man” (Kehrwald 2017:94), as he possesses various supernatural powers. Coffey’s primary utility to the film is to elevate the character of Paul Edgecomb (played by Tom Hanks), the death row guard who is the moral anchor for the audience. Making a person whose job it is to oversee executions
the moral center of a film might seem odd; however, Paul’s decent treatment of his fellow guards and the prisoners he oversees, as well as his strict professionalism, serve to endear him to the viewer.

While Coffey is a likeable character, his status as the “magical black man” is meant to make him strange, unknowable, and scary to the majority white audience. Coffey also takes part in a murder, and while it is presented as justified by the movie, it serves to reify his separation in the moral hierarchy from Edgecomb. Beyond the moral separation between the two characters, Coffey’s execution is used as a turning point in the life of Edgecomb. After the former is executed in spite of his innocence, Edgecomb puts in for a transfer to work as a guard at a juvenile jail. As Kehrwald (2017) writes, this is presented as a good job for Paul where he can help out kids who need it, and “his shift from necessary work to good work validates him as a good man who has lived a serviceable life” (96). In this case, the feeling of superiority the audience is supposed to derive from their identification with Paul is firmly grounded in whiteness, and a disregard for the film’s main black character, however likeable he may be.

The analysis of the films indicates that the undeserving criminal and the moral protagonist are both selectively portrayed in prison films. We typically see them in a certain light, as the challenges they face, the types of decisions they make, and the conflicts that are manufactured for them to deal with are similar. This does not mean that what might be called the collective brain (writers, directors, producers, studio executives, and so on) of prison films are actively trying to portray or support a particular ideology. On the contrary, the primary motivation of all the actors involved is probably to make a movie that the audience will like, or at least just to earn a good income. The consistent portrayal of these two types of characters is an artifact of the widespread and pervasive logic of Carceral Realism. Even if the collective brain
does not consciously “know” and actively pursue it as an idea, it functions as if bad criminals are rampant, as if certain types of people are more deserving of punishment than others, and as if we as a society need prisons.
CHAPTER V
RAPE IN PRISON FILMS

In the previous chapter we saw that the portrayal of the people who occupy prisons and jails in prison films contributes to Carceral Realist ideology. Such portrayals are accomplished through imagery and framing, as well as dialogue. In this chapter, the focus will be on how those three concepts are used to portray rape in prison films. Rape is a prevalent theme throughout the prison films used in this study. As indicated by the analysis, it is either shown, discussed heavily, or referenced in nearly all of the films. This hardly comes as a surprise, given that rape is associated with prisons and jails in the popular consciousness (Fleisher and Krienert 2009). It is also unsurprising because rape is common among mainstream Hollywood films (Bufkin and Eschholz 2000). Projansky (2001) argues that rape is so ingrained in American film culture “that one cannot fully understand cinema itself without addressing rape and its representation” (63). The same might be said of American society in general, in which rape is an all-too-common occurrence which often goes unnoticed by official crime statistics (Yung 2013).

The following will examine how rape is portrayed in prison films, as well as why it is portrayed at all and how it relates to Carceral Realism. The discussion will be foregrounded by a brief examination of the purpose of general violence in prison films. The chapter will then move on to explore the various depictions of rape in these films. Altogether, the depictions of rape in the films from this study provides support for Carceral Realism. One way this is done is through the consistent portrayal of certain kinds of people as rapists, portrayals which are consistent with the imagery of the undeserving criminal seen in the previous chapter. Another way this is accomplished is through the films feeding into rape myths which themselves promote certain
conceptions of crime and draw support for the idea that prisons are necessary. The prisons films in this study rely heavily on certain myths in their portrayal of rape.

THE PURPOSE OF VIOLENCE

Violence is a common occurrence in prison films. Generally, there are four purposes to the portrayals of violence in the movies used for this study. First, violence serves the teleological function of portraying people in prisons and jails as violent, and repeatedly marks out the undeserving criminal as sadistic and evil. This type of portrayal often involves the undeserving criminal committing some type of over-the-top violence, such as when Cyrus from Con Air mercilessly kills multiple prison guards while smiling and spouting one-liners. It can also be a form of collective violence committed by background characters, driving home the nature of prisons as being full of violent criminals. An example of this can be seen in Brubaker, where various background characters seem to exist only to commit acts of violence.

Second, oftentimes physical violence is used by these films to portray cruelty for one or two reasons. It can establish a character or characters as cruel or psychotic. For example, Byron Hadley, the infamous sadistic guard in The Shawshank Redemption, beats incarcerated persons viciously, even killing one, for minor infractions. Alternatively, the act of cruelty serves from a filmic standpoint to drive the plot forward, with the violent act serving as a defining event for a particular character. This happens in Law Abiding Citizen, when the main character’s wife and daughter are brutally murdered to set up a revenge narrative.

Third, violence is also employed as a random event to make the prison setting feel dangerous and chaotic. An example of this is the numerous fights and attacks that occur between the juvenile incarcerated persons in Gridiron Gang. Violence that is presented this way occurs
out of nowhere, and as routinely decontextualized, it appears as violence for violence’s sake. This portrayal of randomized violence conveys to the viewer the idea that prisons are important locations of crime control, as they are able at least to contain the violence shown on screen. Lastly, of course the spectacle of violence is also meant to provide entertainment to the viewing audience. This is one way that prison films rely on and reinforce popular notions about prisons. People who watch prison films expect there to be violence because they imagine them to be violent places, and the films reinforce this expectation with gratuitous displays of violence that do not have any substantive value and do not drive the plot forward.

In whatever form it appears, the violence in prison films is inextricably linked to Carceral Realism. One way this is apparent is that the frequent use of violence suggests that the people we see carrying it out, who are most often incarcerated persons, are evil. Beyond this, the saturation of violence that we see on screen sends the message that prisons and jails are full of people who have been sent there for violent crime. Such a notion contributes to the othering of people who are incarcerated and perpetuates the idea that people who are in prison or jail did something bad in order to end up there. The abundance of violence also portrays the prison as an inevitable space, as it begs the question of what society would be like without it. If there were no places to contain violence, then it could run rampant, with the “good” people as its targets. Violence in prison films feeds into the Carceral Realist notion that we do not have to like prisons so long as we accept that we need them to control crime.

RAPE IN PRISON: PSYCHOPATHS, HYPER-VIOLENCE, AND MASCULINITY

While violence and the threat of it pervades prison films, one type of violence that sticks out due to the audacious and voyeuristic manner in which it is portrayed is rape. In the pages that
follow, I will be discussing films in which rape is a common theme, is frequently referenced, or is implicitly and/or explicitly depicted. It is worth noting that rape is at least referenced or discussed in most other prison films that do not fall within these criteria. What this reveals is that sexual violence is pervasive when it comes to popular notions of the carceral.

Given the prevalence of rape in this study’s films, it is important to examine how it is represented, and why it is represented at all. It is also important to identify what the portrayal of rape says about Carceral Realism and how it supports the notion of bad people in prison and conceptions of violence in general. Although it is the case that rape is a common prison trope, this alone cannot explain why it occurs and is frequently referenced in prison films. Rather, the representation of rape and sexual violence in prison films, whether depicted, referenced or simply discussed, is strategic in terms of what it conveys to the audience. The portrayal of rape in prison films supports the conception that prisons are full of born criminals and psychopaths. It also holds out the notion that prisons are hyper-violent spaces, and that society would be a much more dangerous place if prisons did not exist to contain violence and harm. Lastly, the portrayal of rape in these films supports popular myths of rape that feed into the need for prisons.

In the films, depictions of rape and sexual violence break down along three different lines, each of which will be discussed in turn in this chapter. First, often, rape exists, whether graphically depicted or through frequent references, as an overarching threat conveying the danger of prisons and the incarcerated persons in them. In a second line of presentation, rape is employed as a “challenge” or masculinity test that the main character must overcome. In some instances, the masculinity test is used to explain a character’s change or development. Third, rape is used as a motivating factor. Most films that do this use rape as motivation for revenge, while in one instance it is used as fodder for “jokes”. Across these different types of depictions,
essentially all the films discussed rely on popular notions or myths about sexual violence and support the Carceral Realist notion of the necessity of prisons.

*Rape and the Danger of Prison*

Prison films use various tactics to try to convey to the audience that prisons and jails are dangerous. In one particular story line in the films used for this study, rape is one such tactic that these films employ to present the overarching threat of prisons. Rape serves to set a tone of danger, especially for the main character, for the rest of the film. Prison films that depict rape in this way do not make it a central aspect of the story or plot. Instead, rape is either heavily referenced though not portrayed, or happens on the periphery to a secondary character.

Two films where rape is used to convey the brutality of prisons are *Brubaker* and *In Hell*. These are two films that are quite different in tone and message: *Brubaker* is a movie about a warden’s attempt at instituting reform, while *In Hell* is a hyper-violent self-indulgent spectacle entertaining its audience through violence. In spite of these differences, they both rely on rape to signal to the viewer that the main character is in a dangerous and volatile setting.

In a scene towards the start of *Brubaker*, main character Henry Brubaker is still posing as a newly arrived incarcerated person in the housing block. During this segment, we get a shot of an incarcerated person walking over to a bunk bed. He then pays the guy in the top bunk to leave and gropes the man who is in the bottom bunk. When the man on the bottom bunk struggles, the rapist laughs and says, “is someone playing hard to get?” The rapist then proceeds to force himself on the man, and although the rape is not shown, the implication of what is going to happen is quite obvious. The foregrounding of the trope of the psychotic rapist in prison films plays into Carceral Realism in two ways. First, it holds out the notion that a large number of
people in prisons are rapists. Second, it presents the idea that the prison “works” by incapacitation; even though rape is occurring, it is confined inside prison walls away from the rest of society.

_In Hell_ uses rape in a similar manner. This film follows main character Kyle LeBlanc (played by Jean Claude van Damme) as he is sent to a Russian prison after killing the man who raped and killed his wife. He arrives at the prison with a young and naïve American named Billy (played by Chris Moir). Upon arrival, Billy is immediately targeted by Andrei (played by Raicho Vasilev), a member of the Russian mafia who is this film’s main incarnation of the undeserving criminal. As he is lying in bed during his first night in prison, Billy is taken away by a couple of guards. They take him to Andrei’s cell, and it is revealed that they are corrupt, as Andrei has paid the guards to bring Billy to his cell. In one of the more brutal scenes of any of these films, Andrei beats and rapes Billy. Parts of the assault are shown, though for much of the scene the camera cuts away and shows other areas of the block as Billy’s screams are heard in the background. This occurs multiple times in the film. The rape perpetrated by Andrei adds nothing of value or substance to the film, nor does it move the story forward. It is, then, violence for the sake of violence. Its use only shows that he is evil and beyond redemption. It also serves to mark Billy as the type of person who does not belong in prison. This could have been accomplished without the use of rape, thus its use indicates how intertwined rape is with popular prison mythology.

_Midnight Express_, which dramatizes the real-life ordeal of American Billy Hayes’ (played by Brad Davis) incarceration in Istanbul, Turkey, uses the threat of rape to convey the danger of prison. Towards the end of the film, Billy’s girlfriend Susan (played by Irene Miracle) visits him and is able to slip him some money hidden in a book. Billy then uses the money to try to bribe Hamidou (played by Paul Lawrence Smith), a brutal guard who appears in the film only
to beat incarcerated persons, to allow him to escape. Hamidou takes Billy’s money but does not let him leave, instead dragging him into an isolated room. He then begins to take off his pants, the implication being that he is going to rape Billy. However, Billy shoves him backward, impaling Hamidou’s head on a spike.

Powerful as the scene is, the rape is not integral to the story as a number of indicators suggest. First, rape does not occur at any other points in the movie. Second, we are never given any hints that Hamidou, even though he viciously beats incarcerated persons, is a rapist. It seems that, as with In Hell, Midnight Express employs rape in a way that is tacked on to play to popular prison mythology. Hamidou simply could have tried to beat Billy like we have seen him do at various points in the movie. Third, the scene happens right at the end of the movie, which is not the case with the rape scenes of any of the other films from this study. Finally, it is of note that this film has a claim to authenticity, as it is based on the real Billy Hayes’ memoir of his time in prison. The attempted rape scene, however, is only found in the film version, suggesting its inclusion was a choice made by the filmmakers to entertain the viewer by drawing from prison mythology and to create a truly morally reprehensible villain.

The Masculinity Test and Rape as Character Development

The threat of rape and sexual assault is sometimes used by prison films in this study to “test” the main character, or to provide a trial which they must go through and which can be a source of or motivation for growth. This type of occurrence is inundated with typical notions of masculinity, as well as prisons being brutal places full of people ready to commit rape. As Kehrwald (2017) puts it, “the message [of this type of scene] seems to be that if a character can stave off an initial rape attempt through some demonstration of physical prowess, his masculinity
will be affirmed” (86). Going beyond establishing the violence of prisons, as well as presenting a test of the main character’s masculinity, the type of rape representation found in the films supports certain rape myths which themselves rely on and reinforce particular fears and support the Carceral Realist tenet of the necessity of prisons.

An example of the masculinity test can be found in *Escape from Alcatraz*. This film contains no actual scenes of sexual assault or rape. However, the scene in which rape looms as a threat is clearly marked by popular notions about prisons. When Frank Morris is approached by Wolf, he is in the shower, a location that has entered the popular consciousness as where rape is likely to occur in prisons and jails (Eigenberg and Barro 2003). Also, at the end of the scene, Morris forces a bar of soap, another common element in the popular lore of prison rape, into Wolf’s mouth. Since Morris is able to physically rebuff Wolf, the remainder of his stay in prison is, for the most part, tolerable.

The attempted rape scene stands out in that it has nothing to do with driving the plot forward, and no bearing on any potential escape attempt. It thus appears awkwardly inserted into this film. This is an impression which others, such as Eigenberg and Barro (2003) also point out, saying that it is “out of place and over-done” (65). The rape attempt scene though brings a sense of danger to the prison setting in the film. It occurs early in the film and sets the expectation that danger is lurking for the main character. Here, the movie plays on the popular notion that prisons are violent and dangerous places. The film also plays on the viewer’s acceptance of the popular notion that rape is pervasive in prisons and jails. One way it does this is by having a claim to authenticity, as it is based on a true story. Thus, *Escape from Alcatraz* presents and reinforces popular notions about prison, notions which conform to the tenets of Carceral Realism. It’s main function to the film though, is to provide Morris with a “test”, to initiate him into Alcatraz. It
works as a test of his ability, because it plays into a popular myth about rape, which is the “real man message” (Eigenberg and Barro 2003:65). The central concept of this message is that if a man is tough enough, he will be able to successfully fight off a rape attempt. This specific rape myth, which is told to women, relates to Carceral Realist ideology in that it propagates the idea that prisons are full of sadistic criminals, specifically rapists, and that in order to “belong” and survive a person has to be just as tough and masculine as they are.

Rape as a “test” is also employed by *The Shawshank Redemption*. Not long after main character Andy Dufresne arrives at Shawshank Prison, he is sized up by a group of prisoners called The Sisters. Their intentions become clear from a conversation Andy and his friend Red have a little over 20 minutes into the movie. Red tells Andy, “The Sisters have taken quite a liking to you”, to which Andy responds, “I don’t suppose it would help if I explained to them that I’m not homosexual”. Red responds with a sentence laced with both Carceral Realism and homophobia, saying “neither are they. [You’d] have to be human first, and they don’t qualify. Bull queers take by force. It’s all they want or understand”. Red’s bit of dialogue here is noteworthy for three reasons. First, it plays into the common prison film device of employing homophobia to make a rapist seem particularly evil (Rafter 2006). This representation has synergy with criminology, which has a history of classifying gay men as deviant and depraved. Such a view can be traced back to Lombroso’s conception of the born criminal type (Woods 2015). Lombroso identified gay men, which he referred to as “pederasts”, as a subtype of the born criminal who were uniquely bad and possessed “wicked habits” (Lombroso [1876] 2006:73). Thus, the use of homophobia to emphasize the evil and perverse nature of rapists has commonality with a typology focused on marking out certain groups of people as “natural” deviants. Like other films from this study, it portrays male prison rapists as gay men who prey on
innocent heterosexual men. This is a myth, as most prison rapists identify as heterosexual, while victims often identify as gay (Human Rights Watch 2001). Third, it is perhaps the most straightforward link in these films between a rape myth, that of the psychotic rapist, and Carceral Realism. By holding out the notion that certain people are less than human, Shawshank is using a popular trope to propagate the necessity of prisons for incapacitation.

Not long after Red opines on the sub-human nature of The Sisters, Andy goes into an isolated room in the laundry ward by himself, and a member of the group named Boggs (played by Mark Rolston) steps out from a hiding spot. Two other members of The Sisters then reveal themselves to have been waiting on Andy. The group subsequently surrounds and attacks Andy, who tries to fight back but is unsuccessful. The psychotic nature of The Sisters is driven home when Boggs tells Andy, “You fight. [It’s] better that way”. We see The Sisters beat Andy severely, and the camera cuts away with the implication that he is subsequently gang-raped. It is not clear how many times Andy is raped by The Sisters; however, the movie implies that it happens quite often. Andy is able to successfully stop it from happening in one scene, although he is still brutally beaten. This continues on for some time until Andy is able to get a guard on his good side by offering to help him avoid taxes on some money he has recently come into. The guard proceeds to beat Boggs so bad that he is unable to walk and has to eat through a straw, providing a chance for the audience to cheer on violence in the form of a bad character getting what they deserve.

In terms of the “test”, Andy clearly did not pass it, as he was unable to fight off his attackers the way Frank Morris did. This makes prison life miserable for him for a large section of the film. The movie still uses rape as a test, in a way that is in keeping with Carceral Realist ideology, in that rape conveys the dangers of prison and the people in them. Rape is also used by
the film as a catalyst for character transformation on the part of Andy. As Kehrwald (2017) notes, “when Andy Dufresne enters prison he possesses a stoic detachment, a quality he also exhibited during his murder trial, which helped lead to his conviction” (92). This stoic detachment is also referenced by the movie when Andy talks about how he was cold and distant towards his wife and drove her away. As the film goes on and after Andy endures rape, he is able to put it behind him once the guard retaliates against Boggs. Andy then forms an increasingly intimate friendship with Red, and begins to open up, getting a new lease on life. Such a “therapeutic depiction of rape” (Kehrwald 2017:92) serves to trivialize its consequences while also using it as a significant life event that molds Andy into a new, better person.

Another film where rape is used as a masculinity test, as well as character development, is the 1992 film American Me. This film is an epic which chronicles main character Montoya Santana’s (portrayed by different actors but mainly Edward James Olmos) three decades spent in the Mexican Mafia. Early on in the film, Santana is sent to a juvenile prison. He becomes the target of rape not long after arrival. In a revolting scene, Santana is brutally raped in his bunk bed by another incarcerated person on his first day at the prison. While Kehrwald (2017) remarks that the scene is “quick and lacks significant detail” (89), it is visceral and graphic in its depiction of the rape, which provokes a sense of shock on the part of the viewer. The violence does not end with the rape, as Santana fights back, getting control of the knife that the other incarcerated person is wielding, and killing him with it.

This scene, as with the shower scene in Alcatraz, provides the film’s main character with a “test” of his masculinity that he must pass in order to survive a carceral existence. American Me depicts the rape, as well as how Santana responded to it, as having a significant effect on the rest of his life. After killing his attacker, he becomes respected by the rest of the incarcerated
persons in the juvenile prison. He also has his original sentence extended beyond juvenile prison and is sent to the infamous Folsom Prison upon turning 18. It is while at prison that he becomes involved with and is eventually made leader of the Mexican Mafia. Thus, rape is used by this movie to set a character arc for Santana, using rape as a defining event in his life that drives his motivations.

The real man message in the context of prison films is a representation of key tenets of Carceral Realist ideology. It relies upon the notion that prisons are bad places filled with evil people, and that only people who are also bad and sufficiently tough really belong in them. This is not something we have to like, but rather to accept in the contexts of both actually existing prisons, as well as their representations in films such as *Escape from Alcatraz*. Furthermore, the masculinity test plays upon various prison tropes, such as hyper-violence. It also is linked with various rape myths: that a strong person can fight off rape, that it mostly happens between strangers, that the rapist is easy to mark out as a psychopath or born killer, and that male-male rapes are committed by gay men. There are many implications of such myths, but in terms of Carceral Realist ideology, they provide support for the idea that prisons work as spaces of incapacitation. The portrayal of rape in these films, mediated by myths, indicates that prison is a perfectly suitable institution for dealing with rapists and violent criminals.

*Motivation/Revenge*

Another incarnation of rape-as-motivation found in the analysis involves not the main character, but their significant other. The motivation involved in this particular representation of rape is that the main character is spurred on to exact some sort of vengeance. This particular storyline presents a conservative, “law and order” bend in Carceral Realism. The films do this
first by playing into the myth that rape is usually committed by a born criminal type, someone who is easy to mark out as evil. Second, they feed into the need for a revanchist notion of justice, a notion which is itself linked with prisons. Third, the way rape is presented is meant, either overtly or subtly, to show how normal people can easily become victims when violent criminals are able to roam free outside of prison.

One film that uses rape in this way is the 2009 movie *Law Abiding Citizen*. The central plot in this film involves the main character Clyde Shelton’s vigilante quest. As part of his mission, Clyde purposefully gets himself sent to prison so that he can manipulate and expose a justice system that he views as corrupt and soft on criminals. This is not just the philosophical view of the main character, as the movie itself boasts a “tough on crime” message.

The film starts off showing Clyde as a family man. He lives in a nice house with his wife and daughter (both uncredited), the latter who he lovingly refers to as “pumpkin head”. However, their domestic tranquility is soon to be shattered by a home invasion. After someone repeatedly knocks on their door, Clyde opens it only to be immediately hit with a baseball bat by one of the two men waiting on him. By their appearance alone, we can see that the two men display a few of the popular tropes about “criminals”. They are both dressed in black. The man who struck Clyde with the bat, who we later find out is named Darby (played by Christian Stolte), has a prominent tattoo on his chest, and he is wearing a low-cut black t-shirt to make sure the audience can see it. The other man, Ames (played by Josh Stewart), is wearing latex gloves, and both of them have wrapped their shoes in trash bags. These are professional criminals.

The men proceed to viciously beat Clyde and tie him up. His wife comes in and is assaulted as well. The motivation for the break-in appears to be robbery, as one of the men begins taking random objects from the house and putting them in a bag. The scene then becomes
more violent, as Darby stabs Clyde while his wife screams in the background. At this point Ames urges Darby to leave. However, Darby is not content and instead turns on Clyde’s wife. He stabs her as well and prepares to rape her. Darby’s actions are elevated even further when Clyde’s daughter walks in, staring blankly at the scene before her. Darby looks at her and says, “It’s cool. Kids like me.” He then picks up Clyde’s daughter and takes her into another room. The scene ends, and we shortly learn that both Clyde’s wife and daughter were killed. The remainder of the film is concerned with Clyde getting revenge on not only Ames and Darby, but also the people in the justice system whom he views as responsible for its many problems.

In a movie that is filled with violence, the first scene of *Law Abiding Citizen* stands out. The scene serves an important dual role. The implicit use of rape, including child rape, is clearly meant to provoke a feeling of horror from the audience. This is reinforced by various horror movie style shots that are used in the break-in scene, such as close ups of Clyde’s and his wife’s faces while they are laying on the ground bound and gagged with duct tape covering their mouths.

The implied rape in this scene also stands out because it is used as a driving force for the main character in his quest for revenge. In this way, Clyde’s wife and daughter are completely disposable as characters. We do not know anything about them outside of their relevance to the main character, and both are only given a brief amount of screen time. In fact, we do not see Clyde’s wife at all until she is assaulted, only hearing her voice prior to this. Both are merely stock innocent characters defined by their lack of agency, which in turn makes them vulnerable to sexual violence. This puts *Law Abiding Citizen* in a long line of films that use violence against female characters as both entertainment and to spark a reaction from a male character who is the focus of the movie.
The way rape is portrayed in *Law Abiding Citizen* also draws from general anxieties about crime which are bound up with the Carceral Realist tenet of the prison as necessary, as well as from the archetype of the undeserving criminal. The violence happens during a home invasion, and because a home is typically thought of as a safe place, the seemingly random act of violence disturbs the audience. The rupture of the safe environment is also amplified by the rape being committed by a stranger, something which happens often in these films even though most sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network n.d.). This holds out the notion that bad people, like the undeserving criminal, are lurking close to the places we feel most secure. Such a portrayal lends support to the movie’s “tough on crime” message, and also to Carceral Realism by positing that Ames and Darby were able to rape and kill because they were not where they belong (i.e., prison). The movie points to this directly later on when Clyde’s vengeance storyline is set up in large part because Darby was only given a five year sentence.

A similar use of rape shows up in the 1983 film *Bad Boys*, which stars Sean Penn as main character Mick O’Brien. *Bad Boys* follows Mick during his time in a juvenile prison, which he has been sent to after accidentally running over the younger brother of one of his rivals while attempting to flee from the police. This movie is, like *Law Abiding Citizen*, saturated with violence. Almost every character we see in the film is at some point involved in a prison brawl. Further, while all prison films are violent to some degree, Bad Boys, like Law Abiding Citizen portray the worst incarnation of it using rape as a motivating factor for male characters.

Before Mick is sent to prison, we see that he has a girlfriend named JC (portrayed by Ally Sheedy). JC stands out among the other characters in *Bad Boys* because she is the only person we encounter who is not involved in crime in some way. She is also one of the few women given
any amount of screen time. Just over the hour mark into the film, JC is walking home late at night through the streets of Chicago. She is by herself and walks through many darkened areas where it appears that nobody else is around. Here, the film is setting up JC’s vulnerability, which is rooted in her femininity and choice to walk home alone in a darkened section of a city riddled with crime. As she makes her way down the train platform and out onto the street, the camera leaves JC and pans over to a parked car, inside of which we see two men. One of them is Paco (played by Esai Morales), Mick’s rival and brother of the boy he killed early in the film. His accomplice is Carlos, who is Paco’s fellow gang member. Paco slowly pulls the car out of the parking spot and begins to follow JC as she heads down the sidewalk. The way this segment is shot and the use of shadow is reminiscent of the look of older noir films, a genre in which rape is also common (Read 2000).

Paco and his accomplice follow JC for some time, waiting for her to be at a place that is sufficiently isolated. When she walks under a deserted overpass, Paco and Carlos chase JC down an alleyway, eventually catching up to her. Paco and Carlos brutally beat and rape JC and are only stopped from killing her by the deus ex machina arrival of a couple of police officers.

Setting up women as vulnerable is common in films that depict rape either implicitly or explicitly (Projansky 2001), and in this instance Bad Boys hints at victim blaming in the way it frames the lead up to the rape. The central purpose of the scene however is to give Mick a motive for action, just like the rape in Law Abiding Citizen. The revenge factor for this portrayal of rape is two-fold. First, the rape is committed by Paco as a reprisal for Mick killing his younger brother. In this respect, the rape is not completely decontextualized and random as is the case with Law Abiding Citizen. However, both of these films treat the women characters in them essentially the same. JC exists primarily as fodder to be brutalized so that the movie’s plot can be
driven forward. Beyond being a sweet and seemingly innocent teenager, she is given little characterization. Most of the film follows Mick during his time in prison, thus JC is given little screen time. When, and when she is shown it is only to establish her relationship with Mick and to portray her as the target of rape. Like Clyde’s wife, she is expendable, and the movie presents her assault as more of a violation of Mick’s masculinity than JC herself.

The second way revenge is tied to rape in *Bad Boys* is that it is used as the catalyst for a showdown between Mick and Paco. After Paco is arrested, he is sent to the same juvenile prison as Mick. While at first Mick tries to avoid him, Paco eventually is able to force a confrontation. The climactic fight is full of violence, and Mick is eventually able to gain the upper hand. He beats Paco mercilessly while the rest of the incarcerated persons watch and cheer, exacting his revenge for what happened to JC. Mick does stop short of killing Paco, but only because he does not want to spend the rest of his life in prison.

The use of rape to set the stage for a revenge narrative is disturbing in many ways. For instance, it cheapens the severity of rape and neglects to explore its consequences, focusing most on how the male main character is affected. Rape presented in such a manner is also portrayed by these films as more of a violation of the male character’s masculinity than of the actual victims. Both Clyde’s wife and JC were presented as innocent and vulnerable, devoid of any ability to protect themselves. Since both of these characters were defined primarily by their relationship with the male main character, the danger for them comes in not having a masculine presence for protection. Furthermore, the characters of Clyde and Mick are only able to reassert their masculinity by carrying out what they see as proper revenge.
"Get Hard and Rape as a “Joke”"

The various portrayals discussed above, though they can often trivialize rape, do show it as a serious violent crime. There are instances where rape is used as the premise for comedy however in the films analyzed for this study. The film from this study that is most inundated with rape is the 2015 buddy comedy *Get Hard*. This movie is not a typical prison flick in that it only takes us inside a prison or jail for a few minutes. However, it falls within the genre of prison films because it uses incarceration as an overarching theme, and as the primary motivation of its main character.

It is somewhat ironic that *Get Hard* is so saturated with rape given that there is not a single scene where it actually takes place in the film. However, rape is constantly referenced as a common occurrence in the carceral setting, often times in ways that play upon homophobic and racist tropes, showing how inundated it is with prisons in popular lore. *Get Hard* uses dialogue to construct a world in which seemingly the only people in prison are sadistic serial rapists, a construction that is in line with Carceral Realism. Such a depiction provides the audience with a reason for the necessity of prisons, while also allowing them a sense of moral superiority through the judgement of the “criminals” who are incarcerated.

Set in Los Angeles, *Get Hard* follows a wealthy hedge fund manager named James King (played by Will Ferrell) who is convicted of fraud and embezzlement. James is subsequently sentenced to prison and given 30 days by the judge to settle his affairs. During this time, he hires Darnell Lewis (played by Kevin Hart), a car wash worker to teach him to “get hard” so he can be prepared for prison life. The inference the movie provides here is that James wants to toughen up so that he does not get raped in prison. Darnell is approached for this “job” because he is a
working class black man whom James wrongly assumes has a criminal past and has been incarcerated before.

James is in many ways a caricature, as are many of the characters in this film. He acts as the central comedic character in the film and is a target for the audience to laugh at. He lives in a large mansion, has a fiancée who is the typical “gold-digger” type (she later leaves him when he loses most of his wealth), and has a small army of servants, all of whom appear to be Latinx. He also appears at many points in the film to be completely oblivious of the plight of the working class people with whom he comes into contact. The setting up of James as a typical rich snob, serves two purposes. First, it allows for him to have a redemption arc which plays out through the main plotline of the story. Secondly, it allows the audience to separate themselves from him even though he is the main character. This is important for this film because, as we will see, James is subjected to constant “jokes” about him getting raped or sexually assaulted in prison. Were James not portrayed this way the sexual assault/rape jokes which the audience is meant to laugh at would not be as funny because the viewer would identify too much with him. However, by setting James up as a rich snob prior to his redemption arc, the movie encourages the viewer to laugh at the prospect of sexual violence.

In Get Hard, the insinuation of rape is used to provide comic relief for the audience in another way as well. This is with the use of the arrival scene and its juxtaposition with a sight gag. Around 15 minutes into the movie, James is busted for fraud, arrested by the FBI, and taken to a local jail. As he enters the jail, he is treated to the “arrival scene”. In a quick shot montage, we see incarcerated persons yelling at him and hanging their arms through the cell bars trying to grab him. After the quick montage, the film awkwardly cuts to James walking into work the next day, and it is here that Get Hard presents its first rape “joke”. As James walks into work, we can
see that he is still wearing the same suit he wore when he was taken to jail. However, the word “BITCH” has been written in large bold letters across the back. This a sight gag (see Watson Matthews and Allman 2007), with the comedic element being grounded in the prospect of James being sexually assaulted.

There are two uses of “bitch” in this film important to note. The word “bitch” is a pejorative term used to refer primarily to women who act or are perceived to act outside of patriarchally-coded norms of “acceptable” behavior. It is also used to designate women as being of a lower status than men (Kleinman Ezzell and Frost 2009). In this case, though, the term is being used to refer to a man. This alters the meaning of the word to connotate an excess of femininity, or a lack of masculinity and toughness on the part of James, as well as to mark him as a target for rape. “Bitch” is a term that is often associated with rape in prisons and jails. Its intertwinements with prison lore has so seeped into the popular conscience that there are websites that will generate a person’s “prison bitch” name (the URL for one such site is, fittingly, www.prisonbitchname.com). This reveals that not only is the word associated with prison and rape, but also that it is viewed as being comedic. It is something that a group of friends might joke about while comparing what kind of “prison bitch” name a website generated for each of them. By marking James out as a “BITCH” early on, the movie is both playing on the audience’s conception of the prison bitch, as well as desensitizing the viewer to later “jokes” about rape. Get Hard refers to rape quite often, thus it is important for the film’s purposes that the viewer be able to laugh about it.

The setting up of James as fodder for rape jokes, as well as the use of rape as a joke, is reliant on a Carceral Realist notion of prisons. It relies on the conception that rape is a common fact of prison because prisons are full of dangerous rapists who need to be separated from the
rest of us. According to this conception, rape just happens in prison. Furthermore, the comedic aspect relies on an othering of the people who are incarcerated and viewing rape as inevitable in prison and thus not a big deal. *Get Hard* presents the idea to the viewer that if it is something that is just going to happen, then rape should not be taken too seriously and can even be laughed at. All of this is rooted in the Carceral Realist tenets of prisons as necessary, and prisons as occupied by a dangerous other who deserves to be there.

Much of the rape-related humor is *Get Hard* is rooted in homophobia. The central concept of the film itself, which is James recruiting Darnell to help him toughen up for prison life, is based on a fear of sexual encounters with men. Around 22 minutes into the film’s runtime, after James has been arrested and sentenced to prison, he encounters Darnell working at his job as a car washer. He admits to Darnell that he has been arrested, and that he has been sentenced to 10 years in San Quentin. James, who is often portrayed as oblivious, seems not to know anything about San Quentin or its reputation. However, Darnell is visually repulsed at the prospect of a wealthy person like James being sent to San Quentin. He then tells James, “oh they fuckin’ in San Quentin. Everybody gets the dick…There’s a 100% chance that you’re gonna be somebody’s bitch”. Clearly, this quotation reveals that Darnell’s revulsion for San Quentin comes from his belief that it is a place where rape is widespread. This bit of dialogue also shows that the premise of the film is rooted in Carceral Realist ideology, which is that prisons (particularly a notorious place like San Quentin) are brutal places full of the worst kind of people.

Darnell goes on to describe the type of people who would rape James in prison, as well as what it would sound like. Darnell relies on tropes about black men as well as gay men to get his point across. After this, James becomes terrified of prison and offers to pay Darnell $30,000 to
teach him how to “get hard” in order to survive San Quentin. It is here that we can notice a similarity with this film and *Escape from Alcatraz*. Although *Escape from Alcatraz* is a serious action film, and *Get Hard* is a buddy comedy, they are united in their presentation of the “real man” idea. In *Get Hard*, James’ main motivation for wanting to “get hard” is so that he will not be raped by a mythical large black man in San Quentin. In *Alcatraz*, Frank Morris is already “hard”, and is able to do what James hopes he will be able to. Such commonality between two prison films that are separated by genre and decades suggest the pervasiveness of the belief that rape is a fact of prison life, and that in order to belong in prison one has to be able to fight and to project masculinity.

The second instance of homophobia serving as a motivator for James comes at around the 40 minute mark. As often happens in films where a character has to train to do something, James’s “training” is not going well, and Darnell is becoming frustrated with him. Darnell tells James that, since he cannot fight and is not fast enough to run away, he is going to have to prepare for prison by learning how to perform oral sex on men. James is repulsed by the idea, but eventually agrees to it. Darnell then suggests they go to what he calls “LA’s number one gay hook-up scene”, where we see a bunch of stereotypical gay men who are presented as overly effeminate and sexually deviant. Darnell forces James to solicit someone for oral sex, however he is unable to do it. After this, James seems to come to the understanding that if he does not learn to fight, he will be forced to, as Darnell puts it, “learn how to suck dick”. He is so repulsed by this that he decides he has to “get hard”. His “toughening up” relies on several common prison tropes: he lifts weights, dresses in a way that is supposed to suggest he is a gang member and tries to learn how to talk tough and use proper prison slang. The movie tries to turn James into a caricature of the undeserving criminal by relying on his fear of engaging in gay sex. This
reveals a deep-rooted anxiety centered around homophobia that Get Hard attempts to tap into in order to relate to its audience, whom it presumes is well-versed in common prison myths and conceptions.

Like other prison films discussed above, Get Hard mediates its portrayal of rape through various myths. The most common one discussed or referenced in the film is the myth of the psychotic rapist. Get Hard also of course portrays the myth that a tough person can fight off a rape attempt, as its main storyline is entirely based on that myth. And as with many of the other films discussed in this chapter, Get Hard’s portrayal of rape, constructed entirely by dialogue, plays into the Carceral Realist notion of the prison as a necessary space full of violence and violent criminals.

Overall, the portrayal of rape in these films feeds into the ideology of Carceral Realism. One way this is accomplished is through the casting of certain types of people as rapists. As with the underserving criminal, the rapists in these films are usually easy to identify and are marked out by obvious indicators of their malevolence. Carceral Realism is also linked to the portrayal of rape in these films through their propagation of various rape myths. These myths include the notion that rape is random, that rape is committed mostly by strangers, and that if a person is strong enough, they can successfully fight off a rape attempt. As demonstrated above, these myths are linked with conceptions and fears of crime that help to promote the prison as an inevitable space for dealing with criminals generally, and in this case rapists specifically. Thus, the way rape is depicted in these films reflects the main Carceral Realist tenet of the prison as necessary, as well as the “good/bad” dynamic of the punishment ontology.
CHAPTER VI
WHAT ARE PRISONS FOR?

All of the movies used for this study are set in prison, feature it as an overarching theme, or both. Thus, the analysis indicates all of them having something to say about the idea of incarceration itself. Most of them do not do so overtly, rather the idea of the prison is baked into the movie itself. In other words, the movie may not actively tell the audience what prisons are for, but the content is there, just below the surface. The content that is there in these films supports the ideology of Carceral Realism. None of these films in any way counter or disrupt popular notions of incarceration. Some of them do suggest that changes need to be made in prison, but these are changes that are still within the ideological confines of the prison-as-fact.

First, this chapter will detail that most of the films, particularly the ones that do not actively engage with the idea of incarceration, convey that prisons are for incapacitation. Second, a few films suggest that prisons can work through incapacitation by instituting rehabilitation in people who are willing to work for it. Third, we will see that others take a more reformist approach to the prison. These films do not question what incarceration is for, but rather posit that small change needs to take place for prisons to be “better”. Lastly, a comparison of the films set in the US with the films set in foreign countries reveals that prisons are linked with how we view civil society in the US.

INCAPACITATION

According to Carceral Realist ideology, the most basic function of the prison is crime control. To this end, prisons at least are supposed to incapacitate, to keep the “bad” people off of the streets so that they are not a threat to the “good” people. To convey prisons as needed spaces
of incapacitation, these films often decontextualize crime and “criminals”. Doing so conveys to the audience that the people in prison are simply “bad” and need to be incapacitated. This ideological tenet is represented in fifteen of the twenty films from this study, one of the most notable being _Bad Boys_.

_Bad Boys_ is set in and around Chicago in the early 1980s. Several scenes of the film take place in the city proper, invoking the feel of the classic 1976 film _Taxi Driver_. The streets are grimy and dirty, with trash blowing around like tumbleweed in an old spaghetti western film. The buildings appear old and decrepit, as if they might collapse in on themselves at any time. There appears to never be enough lighting provided by the streetlamps, as the characters move through near-total dark streets, alleyways, and isolated parking lots. Many of the shots, particularly of the city at night, have a gritty noir feel to them. And, of course, crime is rampant, and the “criminals” are bold in the city. The first time that we see main character Mick, he uses a tire iron to break a window out of a car right in the middle of a crowded downtown.

The framing of Chicago as a dirty, dark, crime-ridden city is certainly a reflection of certain anxieties about crime and disorder that were prevalent at the time. The same is true of _Taxi Driver_. It also serves as set-up material for the majority of the film, which mostly takes place in a juvenile prison. We are not given any context as to why Chicago has come to be in such a state. It is not clear why crime is rampant, and criminals so brazen as to break into a car that is occupied in the middle of downtown. Instead, the crime we see, which always involves some amount of violence, is seemingly random and without cause. Like the brief prison riot sequence from _Con Air_, we see that decontextualization lends itself to chaos.

Foregrounding Chicago as a chaotic city filled with juvenile criminals who conform to the “born criminal” type discussed in Chapter 4 is a strategic choice by this film. It sends the
message that the juvenile prison Mick goes to is where he, and the other youths in *Bad Boys* who are like him, belongs. When Mick is free, he commits various types of crimes. The crime that is the focus of the film, though it is an accident, is when his actions result in the death of a child. When he goes to prison, Mick is still violent, getting in fights with other incarcerated persons. However, because he is in prison, he cannot hurt other “good” people, only the “bad” people who belong there. The prison serves to incapacitate him and the other hyper-violent youth of Chicago. It does not “work” like the prisons in *Gridiron Gang* or *Madea Goes to Jail*, which is to say it only contains violence rather than thwarting it. In this sense, the prison in *Bad Boys* represents, in the most basic sense, one of the core tenets of Carceral Realism.

Two other movies in which prisons are cast as locations of incapacitation are *Con Air* and *Get Hard*, films which for the most part take place outside of the prison. In addition to how *Con Air* uses a decontextualized prison riot towards the beginning of its runtime to convey that prisons are violent places full of undeserving criminals, is its use of a prison transport plane, as a stand-in for an actual prison. There are cages that separate the incarcerated persons from the guards, shackles that keep the incarcerated persons confined to their seats, and there are even lone, tiny cells that mimic solitary confinement where the “worst of the worst” are kept.

Not long after the flight takes off, a group of incarcerated persons led by Cyrus Grissom are able to stage a takeover of the plane. They light another incarcerated person on fire to get the guards to come into the “prison” area of the plane, then overpower the guards and hijack the flight with the intent of escaping the country. With the incarcerated persons having now gained some amount of “freedom”, the remainder of the film serves to give us a glimpse of what happens when the undeserving criminals are allowed to roam “free” outside of their cells; they kill the guards and other incarcerated persons, attempt to rape a female guard, and end up ruining
their escape attempt because they betray each other. What *Con Air* is conveying to the audience is, like most of the film, not so subtle; prisons work to incapacitate, as there is no hope for change or reform for all the “monsters” that are on this plane. While the undeserving criminals were able to gain a little freedom by taking over the stand-in prison, their violence was contained inside it, so it still did its job of incapacitation.

In *Get Hard*, although we only see the inside of a prison or jail momentarily, we are given ample evidence of what the purpose of incarceration is. As we are reminded by the film’s constant references to rape and sexual assault, prisons act primarily to keep the worst sexual predators and rapists away from the rest of society. This is the primary reason that main character James King has to “get hard” so that he can survive inside San Quentin. Beyond that, the movie also leans into the notion that prisons work by keeping violent people locked up. As Darnell tells James early on in his “training”, “you always [have to] be on guard! ‘Cause on the inside [there] is always somebody waiting around every corner to fuck you up!” Like *Bad Boys*, the purpose of prisons in *Get Hard* is to contain violence so that criminals can only hurt other criminals.

The ideal of the prison as primarily a space for incapacitation can be found in other films from this sample as well; among them are *Law Abiding Citizen*, *The Green Mile*, *In Hell*, and *The Longest Yard*. These films do not actively explore the idea of incarceration in the way that some of the other movies do. While a movie like *Get Hard* focuses pretty heavily, albeit in a simplistic way, on what prisons are “for”, these films focus more so on plot, usually in the form of a redemption or revenge arc for the main character. The messaging is still present, however. For instance, in all of these films, the prisons we see are primarily populated by people who are clearly “bad”, and over-the-top violence occurs often. In some films, like *Law Abiding Citizen*,
we are given messaging about crime being out of control, which leads to the conclusion that criminals need to be locked up even if the movie does not come out and say so. While some of these films may not actively convey to the audience that prisons are necessary, the sentiment is still there even if it is presented in a passive manner.

Incapacitation for Reform

While many of the films advocate in some manner for small changes to the way prisons operate, there are other films that seek to demonstrate that prison itself can induce positive change in people. In these movies, the prison acts as a space for people who are willing to become “better” to accept personal responsibility and move away from a life of crime. Three examples of this are Gridiron Gang, Madea Goes to Jail, and American History X. Gridiron Gang and Madea both set up the idea that the people who are incarcerated are struggling because of moral shortcomings and a failure to take charge of their own lives. Once they are able to do this, reform is shown as taking place, conveying to the audience what prisons can do for the “right” people. In American History X, the main character Derek is a neo-Nazi, largely due to his Nazi father and the environment he grew up in. Though American History X does not frame the problems Derek faces as moral failings in the same manner as the other two films, it uses the prison as a space for its main character to accept responsibility and reform himself.

At the start of Gridiron Gang, the main character Sean Porter, a guard at a juvenile prison called Camp Kilpatrick, is talking to an incarcerated person named Roger Weathers who attacked another incarcerated person the night before. Their exchange hints at the need for reform, as well as the necessity of incarceration:

Sean: “Roger, you’re 17 years old. Where you gonna be in 4 years?”
Roger: “Probably in jail”.
Sean: “No, you’re not gonna be in jail. You’re gonna be dead... You’re a good kid Roger. But you’re gonna be back out on the streets tomorrow. Back out in the hood with your homies. You wanna stay alive you gotta make a life for yourself outside of your set. If you don’t do that, if you don’t find an alternative, you’re going to die”.

By saying that he will “be dead” in 4 years, Sean is telling Roger (and the viewer) that he needs to be incarcerated for his own good. Roger can barely handle himself within the confines of the prison, so how is he going to handle himself outside of them? Not long after this conversation, Sean is proved correct when Roger is murdered in a drive-by shooting. The movie thus sets up a central contradiction. All the incarcerated persons at Camp Kilpatrick will eventually leave, however letting them out is no good because they will be a danger to themselves and others. In this sense, the prison exists as an inevitable space, even if it is in need of some reform.

The reform that happens during Gridiron Gang is unique to the particular “true story” this film is based on. Sean, with the help of some of the administration at Kilpatrick, starts a football team with the hope of instilling certain values in the youths that will help them in life once they are released. While starting a football team is a particular “solution” to the issue the movie presents, a larger parallel can be drawn. The football team is akin to various types of programs or activities that are instituted in prisons. Such programs have the ostensible purpose of helping incarcerated persons once they are released. Thus, the argument can be made that the movie’s reformist message holds out the notion that the creation or expansion of such programs is needed in order to make prisons better. This is evidenced by the film portraying the creation of the football team as a success. We are told in a postscript that most of the youths who go through it, with a few exceptions, are able to live successfully once they leave Kilpatrick.

A similar personal responsibility message can be found in Madea Goes to Jail, a movie that frames criminality as stemming from people who are immoral. While there are two main storylines in the film, the one that occupies the most screen time follows an Assistant District
Attorney named Joshua (played by Derek Luke) who encounters an old friend nicknamed “Candy” in court during one of his cases. We learn that Josh used to date Candy, and he despairs at the situation she is currently in. The movie continually casts her as morally deficient due to her status as a prostitute and in need of being saved by Josh, who gives her a place to stay. Candy continually rejects help from Josh and others and returns to prostitution and homelessness. This framing of Candy’s situation casts her troubles, criminality, and drug use as personal failings, and all the troubles she encounters are her own fault. The messaging is driven home when Candy eventually gets busted by an undercover cop for prostitution, as a song begins playing with lyrics that say, “it’s nobody’s fault but mine”.

Once she is in jail, Candy is protected by the titular character (played by Tyler Perry), who also acts as her mentor. Madea’s main function as mentor is to make Candy see the error of her ways and to change her mentality. This happens during a class Candy and Madea attend while in jail. During a segment of the class when the attendees are invited to share their story, one woman begins talking about how she cannot forgive her father because of some things he did to her in the past, and how her life has turned out horribly because of what he did. Madea becomes angry at hearing this, and chastises the woman for her lack of responsibility:

“Honey, you in jail because of what you did. Learn how to take some responsibility for yourself, for your own stuff. I can’t stand folks who wanna be the victim…no matter how good or how bad your life was, it’s up to you to make something out of it”.

The rest of the class, including the teacher, clap for Madea, and Candy is inspired by the speech to adopt a new outlook on life. She begins attending more classes and strives to be a better, moral person. After hearing Madea’s speech, Candy turns into a someone who, in her words, is “not going to be a victim anymore”.
The messaging from *Madea Goes to Jail* represents a conservative orientation of Carceral Realism. The purpose of incarceration is still primarily incapacitation. Beyond that, the notion is held out that going to jail can be good as it has in this instance changed Candy for the better. She no longer blames others for her shortcomings and has learned to take responsibility for her actions. The movie holds out the notion that incarceration “works” as it is now, without any need of reform. Incarceration, according to this film, exists for people who are immoral and irresponsible. Incarceration led to Candy’s change, and once she no longer deserves to be in jail, she is let out.

A similar-in-nature character arc centered around prison-time as reform can be found in the 1998 film *American History X*. The main character in this film is Derek Vineyard (played by Edward Norton), an open and unapologetic neo-Nazi. Derek is instilled with racist Nazi ideology as a child by his father, and his hatred of people of color becomes more acute the older he gets. One night as he is leaving his home, Derek murders two black men during a shoot-out and is sent to prison. Upon arrival in prison, Derek joins the white supremacist Aryan Brotherhood prison gang. However, after some time he decides to leave the group because he does not approve of the gang’s drug dealing with other non-white gangs. Derek’s decision to leave does not sit well with the gang, and they eventually trap him alone in the prison shower where they brutally beat and rape him.

After being attacked by members of his former gang, Derek begins to question his white supremacist beliefs. Through his work detail in the prison laundry, he meets a black incarcerated person named Lamont (played by Guy Torry). The two begin to form a friendship, causing Derek to further doubt his racist ideology and eventually give it up entirely. Once he is out of prison, Derek is cast as completely reformed, and he tries to live a better life than he did.
previously. One aspect of this involves trying to teach his younger brother Danny (played by Edward Furlong), who was inspired by Derek to become a white supremacist, the error of his ways. Derek gets through to him eventually; however, Danny is killed by a black classmate at school in retaliation for a previous incident.

Derek’s prison-based transformation is more complex than Candy’s in Madea Goes to Jail. This is in part because, for one, American History X does not moralize in the same way as Madea. The reform that Derek goes through still happens in a prison, though, putting forth the notion that incarceration worked by causing him to renounce white supremacy. The film does this by casting the prison as a place where Derek meets people from different backgrounds, thus opening up his mind. Since Derek meets people from different backgrounds while he is outside of prison as well, the film is conveying to the viewer that he had to be in the prison setting in order to actually change. Thus, this film, like Madea, conveys the idea that the incapacitation function of prison can result in positive change for people who are open to it.

All three of these films convey that prison either works or can work to rehabilitate certain people. Within this context, some change may need to take place to the actual prison itself, although it is only small change like starting a football program. The real change, these movies show, must happen within the person, and that is only possible once they are in the prison setting. Such a notion reflects a tenet of Carceral Realism, which is that prisons act as crime control. In these three movies, the crime control happens through both incapacitation and rehabilitation. Holding out that prisons can work as they do on screen entrenches their necessity in the minds of the audience. A final, good example of this is Gridiron Gang.

If the football program that Sean starts and coaches is successful, which the movie tells us it is, then that increases faith in Camp Kilpatrick as well as incarceration and the system in
general. When *Gridiron Gang* starts, we are shown that it is a rundown place that houses the worst juvenile offenders. Even worse, the incarcerated persons will eventually get out where they go right back to gang life and criminal activity. Such a place is likely to draw a lot of criticism, as prisons have in actuality. What the “success” of the football program does is placate dissent while propping up Kilpatrick as a place that “works”. This happens even though no meaningful change has taken place. It still has solitary confinement; the youths sent there are still kept locked up under harsh conditions. Indeed, the only possible change that has occurred is in the case of the youths who went through the football program, which appears to be a minority portion of the total population. However, the movie still communicates that meaningful reform has taken place, and that prisons can work with a few small tweaks.

REFORM THE PRISON

Prison reform, along with criminal justice reform in general, has long been a topic of debate in the political and societal spheres (Sturr 2003). This comes as no surprise, given that the number of people incarcerated or under some form of “correctional” control (e.g., parole) in the US has skyrocketed over the past four decades (Camp 2016). What Wacquant (2010) refers to as “hyperincarceration” (74) has resulted in the US, which is home to approximately 5% of the total global population, holding around 25% of the world’s incarcerated population (American Civil Liberties Union 2021). It comes as no surprise then that the idea of reform is explored in a few of the movies from this sample. While prison reform is an ongoing process that has been taking place so long as prisons have existed (Murakawa 2014), these films use movie/mythology stereotypes, such as the determined man acting on his own to change the system from within, to portray it as an idealistic outcome that can be accomplished by fairly straightforward means. An
acceptance of the prison itself as necessary can also be noticed by how these movies portray critiques of the system, setting them up as straw men that easily crumble. What the films from this section show us is that token reforms, like getting nicer fatigues for the incarcerated persons, fall well within the confines of Carceral Realist ideology in that they do not question the existence of the prison itself, and if anything, result in its entrenchment.

The film from this sample that has the most overt reformist messaging is Brubaker, which came out in 1980 right as mass incarceration was ramping up. As discussed in the fourth chapter, Brubaker tells the story of Henry Brubaker’s attempts to “clean up” an Arkansas prison after taking over as the warden. In telling the story, the film uses several prison movie/mythology stereotypes to make its call for progressive reform. Film critic Roger Ebert noted this in his review of the film, writing that the movie’s main characters consist of “the Idealistic Reformer, the Pragmatic Politician, the Corrupt Administrator, the Noble Prisoner, [and] the Tough Guard” (Ebert 1980).

Henry Brubaker does occupy something of an ideological niche in this film. Acting as the moral center for the audience to identify with, he is in nearly every scene in the movie. What the audience sees is typically from his point of view, and what we see during the first 30 minutes of this movie is Brubaker entering a figurative hell to demonstrate the need for reform. It is important to note how this movie portrays the need for reform to the audience. Wakefield State Prison is a nightmarish place where physical and sexual violence happen near constantly, and where a clique of incarcerated persons is allowed to be in charge as “convict-guards”. Most of the violence we see in the film is carried out by the incarcerated persons. Early in the film, convict-guards throw a man they have just shot onto the transport bus which Brubaker is riding in. There are a few instances of sexual violence that happen during the film’s first 30 minutes
when Brubaker is posing as a new arrival, all of which are carried out by incarcerated persons. A particularly harsh form of punishment, where incarcerated persons are made to stand with their hands on cell bars as they are beaten with a whip, is always carried out by the convict-guards. Other forms of torture are also employed, such as electric shock (referred to as a “phone call”), and always by the convict-guards. While there are people who work at the prison who are not incarcerated persons, we do not really see instances of violence from them like we do with the convict-guards.

What the movie is signaling to the audience during these first 30 minutes of non-stop cruelty and violence is that Wakefield needs reform because it is being run the wrong way. The atrocities we witness are not portrayed as the result of the prison itself, but as the result of who is running it. The issue here is with mismanagement, corruption, and letting bad people, in this case incarcerated persons, have positions of authority. The existence of the actual prison itself is never called into question. Brubaker emphasizes the convict-guards as the central issue that causes most of Wakefield’s problems, thus minimizing the fact that “regular” prison guards are just as capable of brutality (Jacobs 2004). Indeed, prisons themselves are brutal places, as evidenced by the increasing number of incarcerated people who die in them yearly (Quandt 2021; Widra 2020).

This is further evidenced by a bit of dialogue in the film between Brubaker and a woman who works for the governor’s office. As the two are discussing the horrible state that Wakefield is in, he tells her “I’ve never seen anything like this place”, to which she responds, “that’s because there isn’t anything like this place”. In this scene we see a mythological mechanism for portraying the prison as reformable; a good man can change the system from within. As Brubaker tells the woman, “if you’re not in the system you can’t change it”.
The central message of *Brubaker* is the necessity of reform, a message the film does not shy away from. In an attempt to portray the validity of small reforms to the audience, the movie sets up criticism of such efforts as straw men that are put forth by cynics. Not long after Henry Brubaker has revealed himself as the new warden, he has a conversation with one of the convict-guards named Dickie Coombs (played by Yaphet Kotto) about how Wakefield should be run. After Brubaker tells Dickie that he intends to be a “reform warden”, the conversation turns to what being a “reform warden” actually means:

Dickie: “Every warden is a reform warden”.
Brubaker: “Not Renfro” [the prior warden].
Dickie: “Where you think those clothes came from [that] the rankmen’s wearing? You think we got some special factory that makes rags? Renfro got those clothes brand new, just like the ones you gonna be bringing in. They’ll be the same rags the next reform warden is gonna throw out”.

Dickie’s unwillingness to accept Brubaker’s efforts at reform is cast as being a result of his cynicism. His criticism of Brubaker is never allowed to develop. He does not give any specific reasons for why reform will not work, and he does not mention any alternatives to what Brubaker is trying to do. An actual, substantive criticism would point out that Wakefield itself is the issue. Dickie’s critique is being set up by the film as an easy straw man to knock over. It only uses Dickie’s critique to cast him as alienated and to convey to the audience just how tough things will be for Brubaker as the new warden. With the straw man set up, it is easily knocked down later in the movie, when Dickie tells Brubaker, “I’m gettin’ ready to tell you something…you were right”.

One of the assumptions, or perhaps hopes, that Henry Brubaker has about incarceration is that it can, in some sense at least, “work”. He thinks prisons can be good for something other than just locking people up. He expresses this sentiment around an hour and a half into the film when he says he wants to make it so that when prisoners are released, they will not “rape
[someone’s] daughter or murder his son”. This is a low bar to set, but it does show that Brubaker (and by extension the movie itself) thinks that prisons can help to change bad people for the better.

The type of reforms that Brubaker champions are best described as reformist reforms, which do not involve any sort of structural or systemic change (Ben-Moshe 2013). In this case, reformist reforms do not bring into question the nature of prisons themselves. They posit that prisons can work beyond straight-forward incapacitation. This is not to say that Brubaker makes the point that prisons should be particularly pleasant places. Quite the opposite, as the reforms Henry Brubaker proposes do not involve anything drastic. He wants different guards in the guard towers; he allows the death row incarcerated persons to have supervised time out in the yard briefly each day; he fights against corruption. All of his actions would serve to entrench Wakefield without instituting fundamental changes. This is evidenced by the fact that he has been tasked with reforming Wakefield by the Arkansas governor, who wants to use Brubaker’s efforts as good “PR” material. In this case, the actual prison itself is never up for debate. The reforms he tries to institute may be more substantial than what we see in a movie like Gridiron Gang; however, they are still reformist reforms that do not challenge the existence of Wakefield itself.

Brubaker expects the audience to think “as if” prisons are an inevitable part of crime control and safety. This represents what might be called a liberal trend in Carceral Realism. Certain aspects of prisons might be called into question and reform is needed when conditions are beyond what is deemed acceptable. The prison itself, though, is not to be questioned. The types of reforms that are enacted only entrench the prison both in our material reality and the collective psyche.
The Shawshank Redemption speaks to the need for reform as well. However, while Brubaker presented reformist narratives by focusing on the moral authority character’s efforts to make things better in prison, Shawshank instead looks at the consequences of prison life. One of the characters Andy Dufresne meets while he is incarcerated is Brooks, an elderly man who tends to the prison library. Brooks is portrayed as mild-mannered for most of the time we see him on screen. However, one day in the library he snaps and puts a shiv to the throat of a fellow incarcerated person. After Andy and a few others are able to talk him down, Brooks explains that he is going to be released soon, so he was going to commit violence in order to get a longer sentence. As Red later explains, Brooks has become institutionalized: “These walls are funny. First you hate ‘em, then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on ‘em.”

Not long after, Brooks is let out and tries to make a life for himself. He is unable to, though, in large part because he has no support system. He does not seem to know anyone, and he cannot keep up with the demands of his new job. Disillusioned, Brooks soon dies by suicide in his apartment. This is a powerful sequence of events and is one of the most emotionally gut-wrenching moments of the film. Shawshank demonstrates what happens to Brooks to be a partial failure with the system. It seems clear that he was incarcerated for too long and that this was the main factor in his death by suicide. This sets Brooks apart from the majority of characters in prison films who appear to get what they deserve (O’Sullivan 2001). Rather, Brooks is cast among the select few characters in these movies who is shown to be either capable of rehabilitation or in need of it.

While Shawshank does provide a challenge to the system with its portrayal of Brooks’ plight, it is largely superficial. Brooks’ story offers the movie an opportunity to provide a pointed
critique of prisons. Here is a character who seems likeable and harmless, the type of person the audience could readily identify with. His experience in prison, however, has made him so desperate to not be released that he is willing to become violent and murder someone who he was ostensibly friendly with. In the end he is driven to kill himself because of what Shawshank did to him. This could have been a point for the film problematize the prison itself, to view it as the central point of concern. However, this does not happen, and the portrayal of Brooks’ ordeal instead points to the issue of him being incarcerated for too long, so long that he became institutionalized. We also see that Brooks had no help once he got out of prison, and perhaps could have benefitted from some type of release program. Both of these points of concern center around reformist reforms. These types of reforms, like those in the two films discussed prior, would not substantively change anything about the prison itself. Prisons are still viewed as necessary, so long as they are able to help people who are worthy of it.

THE PRISON AS NOT FOR “US”

Of the films selected for this study, three take place in prisons that are not located in the US. Importantly, these are still American films, made by American production companies. This means that they play to the expectations, cultural values, and attitudes of an American audience. They also all focus on the incarceration of an American male in a foreign prison. There are only three films in this category, In Hell, Midnight Express, and Get the Gringo. However, they are worth focusing on here when exploring the idea of what prisons are for. By analyzing how prisons are portrayed in films set in foreign locations, we can get an idea of what prisons are not for, and what separates foreign prisons from their American counterparts. Specifically, in this section I will be focusing on the location of the foreign prisons in these films, on the structure of
them, and who is allowed in them. As we will see, the prisons set in foreign locations are not as closed off as those located in an American setting, indicating an inability to consolidate the prison as a space of incapacitation. I will also contrast the prisons set in foreign locations with prisons as they are portrayed in the majority of films set in the US.

First, let us examine the location of the prisons in a few of the films which are set in the US. Most of the prisons that are located in the US are in spaces that are set apart from the rest of society. In films like *Brubaker, The Shawshank Redemption, Dead Man Walking, The Last Castle*, among others, the prison appears to be located in some far-off rural space. The shots we get of the prisons in these films mark it as being away from society, set apart from the rest of us. Two of the films that take place in the US, *Birdman of Alcatraz* and *Escape from Alcatraz*, are set in the infamous Alcatraz prison. In this case, the prison is located in San Francisco, a large city within the well-populated Bay Area. However, the prison itself is out on an island, set about a mile away from the actual city. *Escape from Alcatraz* emphasizes this physical distance at the beginning, when we see wide, sweeping shots of Alcatraz that emphasize its isolation; it is not part of San Francisco, even if it is located there.

Other films set in the US mark the prison away from society. In *The Longest Yard*, the prison is out in what appears to be the middle of the Texas desert. In *The Green Mile*, the prison juts out from a flat rural space similar to the films mentioned above. The juvenile prison in *Bad Boys* is also in a flat rural space, set apart from the city of Chicago where the movie begins. *Gridiron Gang* locates its juvenile prison in a lowly populated area away from Los Angeles, where most of the youth incarcerated persons are from. Both *Madea Goes to Jail* and *American Me* situate their prisons in larger cities. However, these two movies are the exception to the rule.
We can then compare the rural/isolation setting of prisons in these films to *Midnight Express* and *Get the Gringo*. First there is *Midnight Express*, which is set in Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey, and one of the major cities of both Europe and Asia. The prison that the main character Billy is sent to is right in the middle of the city, and when viewed from high angle shots is nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding buildings. Billy remarks on this, saying that the prison “looks like a cheap hotel”. In *Get the Gringo*, the prison is a mostly open air environment that mimics the large city which surrounds it. If there were no walls it would certainly be indistinguishable from its surroundings.

The way the prisons are built into the cities in these movies is reinforced by who is allowed in them. In both *Midnight Express* and *Get the Gringo*, there are scenes where civilians are allowed in. In *Midnight Express*, when Billy is taken into the prison, there are children playing in the street close by. Later on, when he goes to the prison yard for the first time, there are groups of children running around. When he asks a fellow American incarcerated person named Jimmy (played by Randy Quaid) why the children are in a prison, he responds that they are “little fuckers. Thieves, rapists, pickpockets, murderers. You name it, they do it”. While this line reveals a xenophobic attitude on the part of Jimmy, it also is meant to point out that the children in Turkey are different from what an American audience would expect in their own country.

*Get the Gringo*, set in Mexico, presents us with a prison that resembles a city within a city. The incarcerated persons cannot leave; however, they are allowed to roam anywhere within the walls, and cells are only used for intake. During the day people from the surrounding town come into the prison to sell everything from food to heroin. Children come in and play in the yard, much like in *Midnight Express*. One incarcerated person comments on the setting, saying
“is this a prison or the world’s shittiest mall?” The main character (played by Mel Gibson) even befriends a child who lives in the prison because it is the only place his mother can afford. This type of prison environment is not present in any of the films from this sample that are set in the US. The only time visitors or children are let into prison in those movies is during scheduled visitation time, which is a common occurrence of films set in the US.

Another notable point of comparison in the films set in foreign countries is the prevalence of staged fights. In the movie *In Hell*, set in a Russian prison, fights are staged for money by the Russian mafia and often carry on until one fighter is killed. Although not as frequent as in *In Hell*, staged fights also occur in *Midnight Express* and *Get the Gringo*. In all three movies the fights are done for betting purposes, and members of the public are allowed in to watch and gamble. Fights happen quite differently in the films that are set in the US where the fights are often spontaneous and done to settle some type of score. The only film set in the US that has a staged fight is *Cool Hand Luke*, although it does not involve gambling and the public is not brought in to watch.

Returning now to what prisons are *not* for, the differences pointed out here tell us that prison is not for “us”, which is to say the “good” people. The films set in the US reflect the idea that we as a civilization have progressed further by being able to separate the “good” people from the “bad” people. Even more, we have been able to accomplish this by the use of prisons. Here we encounter a Hobbesian notion of freedom and civil society, where the freedom of the many is accomplished by the mandating of the unfreedom of others. Such a sentiment is reliant on Hobbes’ notion of “war of all against all”. This is to say that the US-based films convey that the US has been able to more completely establish the realm of civil society. The “war of all against all” has been removed from us by removing the “bad” people, as well as locating prisons
in lightly populated spaces. The films set in Russia, Mexico, and Turkey show that they have not been able to do this, and so are not as far advanced as the US. Thus, the films collectively reflect one of the central propositions of Carceral Realist ideology, which is that prisons are an integral part of society.

Though most of the films from this study do not actively engage with the prison as an idea, they all have something to say implicitly about what prisons are for. Collectively, their representations of the prisons/jails and what purposes they serve reflect the tenets of Carceral Realism. Many of the films do so passively, which is to say they do not overtly argue that prisons “work”. This is in keeping with Carceral Realism, as its propagation does not require anyone to make a case for the prison. Rather, its hegemonic dominance can continue on as long as prisons are accepted as spaces that “work” through incapacitation. Some of the films reflected the tenets of Carceral Realism by having overt messages about token reforms. Importantly, the types of reforms that these movies made the case for, such as nicer fatigues or more programs for incarcerated persons, are not in any way a challenge to the prisons. In all reality, programs like those only help to entrench prisons materially and ideologically, thus helping to ensure to continuation of the Carceral Realist idea that prisons are indeed necessary and inevitable. Lastly, the three films set in foreign locations propagate Carceral Realist ideology by depicting prisons as integral in the construction of civil society.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

The anecdote that began this work still comes to my mind quite often. It was certainly not
the first time I had come across the ideas that that particular group of criminologists were talking
about. Growing up in a mostly conservative area of the US, I have heard on more occasions than
I can remember how prisons and police, though they may have their problems, are in essence
good and necessary, and if anything, we need more of them. What struck me most about the
conversation is some of the things my colleagues said were almost word-for-word what I had
encountered growing up. I probably should not have been as surprised as I was to have
encountered this conversation at ASC. After all, it is not a radical or abolitionist organization.
Furthermore, a lot of criminologists are rather conservative, as evidenced by the fact that some of
the most popular theories in criminology are themselves conservative and pro-system. With that
said, the conversation caught me off guard and caused me to think about it so much as to
formulate the idea for this dissertation.

During the couple of years that I have been working on formulating, organizing, and
writing this dissertation, I have run in to what I would consider Carceral Realist thinking on
many occasions, often in the classroom. I teach from an abolitionist perspective, and one of my
main goals is to get students to think about what our current criminal legal system does as
opposed to what we are told it does or is supposed to do. I also try to encourage them to think
beyond what we have now to what we might have in the future. It is here where I often encounter
Carceral Realism. Most students are willing to see that the criminal legal system is racist,
classist, and sexist, among a host of other evils. However, they are often unable or unwilling to
think about prisons being abolished, and usually fall back on reformist arguments to “fix” the
system. Many also say that it is unrealistic to try to abolish prisons, even if it is a good idea in theory. This sentiment is akin to something Fisher (2003) points out in *Capitalist Realism*, which is that students know the problems with capitalism, including that the deck is stacked against them. However, they also “know” that there is really nothing they can do about it, and often sink into a defeatist, “realist” view of the world. None of this is in any way a knock on the students I have had in class. In fact, some of them do disrupt the typical narrative, and are willing to consider abolition and think past the current system. However, what I think it does demonstrate is the power of ideology, and just how ingrained Carceral Realism is in the collective conscious.

Carceral Realism, and ideology in general, can be produced and reproduced in numerous manners. One of the important ways is through popular culture which is the one area where many of the students I have in class do encounter it. This is especially true of prisons and jails as most people never experience them first-hand. I often ask students what type of “criminal justice-related” shows or movies they watch in order to gauge where they get their ideas about the system from, and most say they watch, at least on occasion, popular shows like *CSI, Criminal Minds*, or *60 Days In*. Many of them have also mentioned quite a few of the movies from this study, especially *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Get Hard*. This is not surprising given the popularity of shows and movies even loosely centered around crime or the criminal legal system. It indicates that more work needs to be done to understand the role these media have in producing and reproducing certain ideologies. Criminologists, particularly those within visual criminology, have made an effort lately to study popular culture to make criminology as a whole more relevant. However, criminology generally does not really focus on popular media as an object of study. More specifically, prison films are an area of popular media that researchers have largely neglected (Hedges 2014).
Further to the point of how Carceral Realism is produced and reproduced, it is also worth further exploring who, or what audience, pieces of pop culture are “for”. I have noted that the films from this study are mostly targeted at white men, something which is largely reflective of the demographics of moviegoers. There are a few exceptions to this, such as *Madea Goes to Jail*, which was made by prominent black director Tyler Perry and targeted at a black audience. It is worth noting that *Madea*, although it was not targeted at a white audience *per se*, still reflected numerous tenets of Carceral Realism. However, it seems clear that most of these movies were made for white men, and thus it would seem that in a way Carceral Realism has been “made” for white men. This does not mean that it is only for white men, as that certainly not the case. However, it does mean that the racial dynamics of Carceral Realism warrant more attention, and one way to do that is to understand not only who it is targeted at most, but also who pieces of pop culture, specifically pieces that are about crime, prisons, etcetera, are targeted at.

The purpose of this research has been to add to the growing body of literature on popular culture, addressing specifically the lack of focus on prison films. A few questions have been central to this research. These questions have guided my research on this project. My purpose in pursuing answers to them has been to create a work that others can build upon to further understand a neglected area of research.

First, are the tenets of Carceral Realist ideology present in the prison films that were used in this study? The main tenets of Carceral Realism are that we as a society must have prisons as a form of crime control, that people can be divided into “good” and “bad” categories, and that transgressive acts have to be met with punishment (the punishment ontology). Having seen all these films at some point before this project began, I suspected the answer would be “yes”, and as the analysis chapters show, this has been the case.
Second, how are imagery and language used to portray Carceral Realist notions in these films? The analysis has shown that both of these factors are often used selectively in a decontextualized manner that supports Carceral Realism. An example is from The Shawshank Redemption when we are shown Elmo Blatch, the man who murdered Andy Dufresne’s wife. The image we get of him is that of the psychopath. The camera casts him as malevolent by framing him in shadow, an outward indicator of his dark nature. In terms of language, Blatch describes for the viewer how he murdered Andy’s wife and her lover, at first uttering the words in a cold manner before beginning to infuse them with the joy he gets from recounting his actions. This presentation of Blatch is important because it is what we often see of the “criminals” in these films. We do not get much information about them, and what we do get tells us that they are just a violent criminal. As Carceral Realist ideology would suggest, these are people who are just “bad”.

There is also the issue of narratives that are counter to, or at least do not completely conform with, Carceral Realism. Most of the films did not present these narratives, though some did. In some instances, the narratives are used strategically. As the analysis showed with Brubaker, counter narratives are sometimes set up as straw men that are easily knocked over. Beyond that, quite a few of these films portrayed at least one, and sometimes more, prison guard(s) who were sadistic and brutal. Examples are The Green Mile, The Shawshank Redemption, and In Hell. Such a presentation is not completely in line with Carceral Realism, though it is not exactly counter to it either. One component of Carceral Realism is that prisons are brutal places, and we do not have to like them. Rather, we must passively accept their necessity. The brutal prison guard plays into this component. Also, the brutality of the prison guards is never shown as an example of the violence of the criminal legal system generally.
Instead, it is presented as the work of one psychopathic individual who is taking advantage of the power they have been given. So, the system is not called into question, even if the people in it might need to be replaced.

Third, why is the message of Carceral Realism reflected in these films in the first place? At the most basic level, films are influenced by and reflect societal conditions. Thus, if Carceral Realism is “out there”, we would expect to find it in prison films, as the way we think about prisons in reality is likely to be reflected in fiction. Beyond that, in that these films are fantasies, they have a general purpose of showing us what we want to see. Generally, we do not want to see ourselves in the undeserving criminal, or really any of the people in prison or jail beyond the moral protagonist. The fantasy element of these films plays into Carceral Realism by presenting us with what “we” are not, thus reinforcing the essential “good/bad” categorization.

Lastly, how does the ideological content of prison films create and reproduce a general understanding of the prison as necessity? One way this is done is passively, which is to say that these films do not question the prison itself. The prison setting is taken for granted, with the movies proceeding “as if” it should be there. Of the films, *Brubaker* focused on the idea of incarceration the most. However, as the analysis showed, its shallow reformist message did not call the prison itself into question. Rather, the focus was on making the prison more humane. Another way in which this is accomplished is by the characters who inhabit the prisons in these films, particularly the undeserving criminal. The undeserving criminal is highlighted by most of the films from this study, and its mere existence indicates that prisons are necessary to contain people who cannot exist out in society.
THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE REALLY BAD

The dichotomy between good and bad can often be seen in popular media. Many times when this dichotomy is depicted, the good is shown to clearly be good, and the bad is quite obviously bad. Perhaps the most popular example of this type of portrayal is the Star Wars franchise, which goes so far as to call the “good” side the “light” side, and the “bad” side the “dark” side. In Chapter Four, we saw that this dichotomy is present in multiple depictions of the prison films from this study. The dark side of human nature is depicted through the ideal type of the undeserving criminal, a person so bad as to be beyond all hope of reform or redemption. The undeserving criminal, by their very existence, is evidence of the need for prisons. Such a person as they represent could never exist out in society. Specifically, the undeserving criminal is mostly depicted in one of two ways. First, they are depicted along the lines of Cesare Lombroso’s conception of the “born criminal”, which he theorized as a type of person who is genetically inferior, can be identified through certain physical manifestations, and will commit crime throughout their entire life. An example of this depiction is Cyrus “The Virus” Grissom from Con Air, who is depicted as being in and out of prisons and jails since he was a young teenager.

The born criminal is also portrayed through the use of imagery. Con Air does this during the line-up scene, where the incarcerated persons are shot from particular camera angles to accentuate certain physical features to make them appear menacing and intimidating. Other films portrayed the born criminal as well, some of them which do not even focus on the undeserving criminal theme all that much. An example of this comes from The Shawshank Redemption when camerawork and lighting are used to highlight the physical features of murderer Elmo Blatch. The use of physical features in popular films to convey ideas about how a person will act shows
that, while the theory of the born criminal has long been discredited in criminology, outward appearance remains a popular way of assigning criminal status, as well as determining who “belongs” in prison (see Wright 2013).

The second common portrayal of the undeserving criminal relies on popular notions about psychopathy. *The Green Mile* displays this subtype of the undeserving criminal through William Wharton, a serial killer who has been sent to death row. Wharton combines nearly all of the popular elements of a criminal psychopath, as he is smart and cunning, enjoys breaking the law and inflicting violence on others, and is completely remorseless in his actions. He is also an example of a combination of the born criminal and psychopath, being described by the prison warden in *The Green Mile* as a “problem child”. Both depictions decontextualize the idea of the undeserving criminal. We as the audience are most often never given any background information or context of the characters who embody the undeserving criminal in these films. When we are given such information, it is usually brief, and only serves to tell us what type of crime they have committed in their past. Decontextualization is an important aspect of Carceral Realism, as simply casting someone as “bad” or “criminal” can serve to justify their imprisonment, and to make the case that prisons protect us from people like them.

The “good” side of human behavior is routinely portrayed in these films by the moral protagonist. This type of character is meant to serve as a guide for the audience, an anchor for them as they explore the prison setting. Just as the undeserving criminal conveys to the audience who is most deserving of prison, the moral protagonist is supposed to show who does not belong there. This position can be occupied by a character who is sent to prison but is either innocent and wrongly convicted or is being harshly punished for a minor offense, both common features in prison films (Rafter 2006). The role may also be filled by the moral authority type, portrayed...
by someone who is not incarcerated and paternally tries to make prison or the people in it “better”.

PRISON RAPE

Chapter five explores how prison films portray rape. Rape is a common theme in the majority of the films from this study. Of the twenty movies used, only *Cool Hand Luke* and *Dead Man Walking* do not portray, discuss, or reference it. In the eighteen films in which rape is portrayed, discussed, or referenced, the depictions break down on three lines. First, rape is shown on the periphery, happening to someone other than the main character. It is not central to the plot of the movie in this depiction as it is in other movies. Rather, the point of this type of depiction is to stress the danger of the prison environment that the main character has entered. A poignant example of this depiction is *Brubaker*. This film shows rape happening to multiple unnamed characters during the movie’s first thirty minutes as Henry Brubaker is being initiated into prison. The rapes that we see do not play any role on the story, and they are not later referenced by anyone in the film. They are shown to portray to the audience how bad this prison is, and to show that the main character has walked into a violent and treacherous space.

Secondly, rape is portrayed as having an important impact on the main character. This line of depiction of rape has some interplay with the first type, in that it also plays on popular notions about prisons being full of violent criminals and rapists, thus reinforcing Carceral Realist ideology. Beyond this, rape is either used as a catalyst for character development, or as a “test” of a character’s masculinity. This test is based upon traditional notions of masculinity, with the underlying message being that if a character can fight off a rape attempt, he will have proven himself as being tough and will be able to endure incarceration more easily (Kehrwald 2017).
Such a portrayal also relies on certain rape myths, such as the notion that a person who is strong enough cannot be raped because they can sufficiently fight back. This myth conforms to what Eigenberg and Barro (2003) refer to as the popular notion of the “real man message” (65). The use of this rape myth is not surprising in a genre of films that is male-centric, as rape myth acceptance has been found to be more common among men (Chapleau Oswald and Russell 2008).

A prime example of the masculinity test, as well as the real man message, comes from *Escape from Alcatraz*. A character named Wolf tries to force himself onto the main character Frank Morris. Frank is able to fight off the attempt and beats up Wolf in the prison shower. After this, Frank’s time in Alcatraz is relatively easy for him, as he has proven his masculinity and shown that he is tough enough to tolerate the rigors of prison life. Rape as character development occurs prominently in *American Me*, when the main character Santana is raped by another youth while in a juvenile prison. During the rape, Santana is able to grab the knife from his attacker and uses it to kill him. Like *Escape from Alcatraz, American Me* uses rape to test the masculinity of its main character. Though he is not able to prevent the rape from happening, Santana asserts his masculinity by murdering his attacker, thus asserting his masculinity and ability to survive in prison like Frank Morris. The rape is also shown to be a significant moment in Santana’s life in that it establishes him as someone worthy of respect from his fellow incarcerated persons, placing him at the top of the prison hierarchy. In addition, the murder he commits in response to the rape causes his original sentence to be extended, and he is sent to Folsom Prison upon becoming an adult.

The real man message and masculinity test in this sample of prison films both rely on Carceral Realist ideology. They play into the conception that prisons are rough places because
they are filled with violent people, and that in order to survive inside a person has to be able to
fight for themselves. Beyond the real man myth, these films also play on the myths that rape
usually happens between strangers, and that rapists are psychotics who are easily distinguishable
from the rest of society. By relying on such myths, these films play into the Carceral Realist
tenet that prisons are bad places, something we do not have to like, but rather to accept as they
work at keeping us safe from violent criminals and rapists.

Lastly, rape is used as a form of motivation for a character. Most often when this
happens, it serves as a motivating factor for revenge. Examples of this can be seen in the films
*Bad Boys* and *Law Abiding Citizen*. In both of these films, the male main character is motivated
to carry out retribution because of the rape of his girlfriend or wife. This depiction casts the
women in these films as disposable, existing mainly to be brutalized to set the male main
character on a revenge arc. Furthermore, through the way they are framed, these depictions
signal to the audience how easily innocent, “normal” people can become targets of rape when
rapists are not incarcerated. In the comedy genre, rape as motivation appears in *Get Hard*, where
the main character’s fear of being raped in prison leads him to try to get tough enough to fight
back against perceived rapists. Overall, this portrayal of rape also plays on rape myths,
particularly that of the psychotic rapist.

THE PURPOSE OF PRISON

The sixth chapter ends the analysis of the prison films from this sample. The chapter
explores how the movies engage with the idea of incarceration, specifically how they portray
what prisons are for. The majority of these films do not overtly present a narrative about what
purpose prisons serve. However, they all put forth content that signals to the viewer what purpose prisons serve, and this content largely supports Carceral Realism.

The vast majority of the films from this study put forth the purpose of prisons as incapacitation. Most of the films that fall into this category do not actively make a case for prisons being needed to incapacitate people. Rather, the films proceed “as if” this is what prisons are for. One way this is done is through the decontextualization of crime and prisons. For instance, the film Bad Boys foregrounds its main character getting sent to prison by showcasing a Chicago that is riddled with crime and gang violence. There is no exploration of why such violence is occurring, rather the film presents it as something that has just happened. This sort of framing signals to the audience the need for prisons like the one we see later in the film, as they can at least contain violence within their walls and keep the rest of society safe. Decontextualization is also in line with Carceral Realism, as it presents the essentialist view that people in prison are just “bad”.

Some of the films that present incapacitation as an important purpose of prison are more overt about it. In particular, the films American History X, Gridiron Gang, and Madea Goes to Jail all overtly frame incapacitation as the primary function of prison. Further, they also signal to the audience that incapacitation can be positive in that it can have a rehabilitative effect on people who are willing to change. In American History X, the main character, an open and avowed Nazi, gives up on his racist views after his time spent in prison. In Gridiron Gang, a juvenile prison guard starts a football team to try to instill respect for authority in the youths of Camp Kilpatrick. Lastly, Madea Goes to Jail shows a “prostitute” who goes to jail because of her poor life choices, and who can change once she finds a positive mentor inside. All of these films present an acceptance of personal responsibility as the primary reason their characters were
able to change while incarcerated. According to this narrative, nothing about prisons or jails needs to fundamentally change, as they already work in a Carceral Realist sense as crime control. The only thing that needs to change is the attitude of the people who are incarcerated.

Other films had reformist messages about prisons. The most prominent of these was *Brubaker*, which chronicles a warden’s attempts to reform Wakefield Prison in Arkansas. The reform narratives presented by this film and others do not disrupt the Carceral Realist tenet that prisons are necessary. Prison reform is an ongoing process (Murakawa 2014) and is not a threat to the existence of prisons. This is evidenced by the reforms that Henry Brubaker advocates for: better guards in the watchtowers, nicer clothes for the incarcerated persons, better facilities. None of these changes threaten the existence of Wakefield, and in fact would only serve to entrench it. In this case, prisons themselves are not questioned, and are only framed as needing to be “better”.

The final section of Chapter Six examines how the films from this study that are not set in the US contrast with those that are. The three films that are not set in the US, *Get the Gringo*, *Midnight Express*, and *In Hell* all present their prisons in different ways than is the case with the vast majority of films set in the US. One aspect of this is location. While nearly all the films set in the US locate their prisons in isolated rural spaces, *Get the Gringo* and *Midnight Express*'s prisons are situated in highly populated cities and are in many ways hard to distinguish from their surroundings. There is also a dichotomy of who is allowed in the prisons. All of the films set in foreign locations contain scenes where civilians are allowed into the prison. In *In Hell*, people are allowed in to watch the staged fights-to-the-death between incarcerated persons. In *Midnight Express* and *Get the Gringo*, there are numerous scenes where children are allowed in
and run around and play in the prison yard. This never happens in the films in the US, in which civilians are only allowed in during visitation time.

The contrast between the films set in the US and those set in foreign locations shows prisons as not for “us”. The films set in the US largely portray prisons as being capable of separating the “bad” people from the “good”. This framing presents prisons as integral to the consolidation of civil society. In the films set in foreign locations, the prisons are not nearly as closed off, with the “bad” often being in proximity to the “good” even when they are incarcerated. Thus, the foreign countries in the films are presented as not having been able to develop in the realm of civil society to the extent that the US has in large part because of a failure to consolidate prisons as spaces of incapacitation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Films are an important medium in popular culture that can create and reinforce particular ideas and narratives. With this in mind, this research has sought to explore how prison films convey the message of Carceral Realism. Overall, the analysis has shown that Carceral Realism is present in the majority of the films from this study, and is conveyed through framing, dialogue, and imagery. By selectively portraying the type of people in prisons, by focusing on particular acts of violence such as rape, and by presenting the purpose of prisons primarily as incapacitation, the films from this study collectively present the ideology of Carceral Realism. While this research has shown the presence of Carceral Realism in prisons films, it is only one part of the process. Prison films have been largely ignored by criminology, and more work needs to be done to properly examine the ideological messages they present to viewers.
There are a few notable limitations to this research. First, there is the limitation that comes with my subjectivity as a cis-white man. It is possible, and I feel that it is likely, that my positionality led me to focus on some films over others. Some of the films I focused on and wrote about a lot, such as The Shawshank Redemption and The Green Mile, are films that are known for having a white male audience. Second, there is a limitation which this project has revealed may be inherent to Carceral Realism itself: it is aimed at white men. This is evidenced by the main characters of these films, who are often middle or upper class white men. Further, prison films themselves are male-centric and aimed at a male audience (Rafter 2006). This could be in part because the majority of moviegoers are white men (Goldstein 2017). However, it does present an issue when we consider the reality of prisons. A large segment of the incarcerated population in the US is BIPOC. Further, the rate of incarceration for women has increased almost 700% since 1980 (The Sentencing Project 2019). This increase has been racialized, as black women are locked up at almost double the rate of white women. In spite of this, few prison films focus on women’s incarceration, with only one film from this study taking place in a women’s jail. Thus, the male-centric focus indicates that Carceral Realism itself has an intended audience of white men. This is a drawback, as it leaves us to wonder what types of prison-related ideologies are aimed at other groups of people. Future research could address this by focusing more on how factors like race, class, and gender play out in prison films.

Third, many prison films were left out of this study. Of particular note is the sub-genre of “women-in-prison” films. These films were left out due to their nature as a niche subgenre. Being that they are sexploitation films that objectify women, they are clearly aimed at men. However, it could be the case that an analysis of them could reveal certain aspects about Carceral Realist ideology that are not present in the films chosen for this study.
There are also other categories of films not chosen for this study that disrupt Carceral Realism. An example could be the recent legal drama *Just Mercy*, which portrays the real-life wrongful conviction, death row imprisonment, and eventual exoneration of Walter McMillian. The films from this study do often portray issues like corruption and show that innocent people can be wronged by the system. However, none of them actively call into question the actual existence of prisons or jails. It is certainly the case that there are categories of films that deal with prisons and crime that do not conform to Carceral Realist ideology, like *Just Mercy*, and they warrant further research in order to understand the nature of ideology.

Lastly, this project focused exclusively on films, which are only one medium by which portrayals of prisons and jails are transmitted to the public. Television shows about prisons have gained immense popularity among US viewers, among them *Oz* and *Orange is the New Black*. Beyond this, there are a number of TV shows that focus on crime and the criminal legal system that could reveal important details about Carceral Realism, as well as ideologies of crime and punishment generally.

In the future, there are several ways that I will try to research (and that others could research) Carceral Realism as an ideology. Beyond prison films, crime films in general would likely be an area that warrants research. Other forms of popular media, such as the aforementioned TV shows, are also an area I plan on exploring, particularly “procedural” crime shows like *NCIS* or the various incarnations of *CSI*. Other than in popular culture, I argue that there are also “real world” areas where research on Carceral Realism should be done. In particular, examining what is said about crime, prisons, and the criminal legal system (among other things) by prominent people in society like politicians would be a fruitful area for research.
Engaging in future research and trying to fully understand Carceral Realism, as well as ideology in general, is an important smaller goal within the larger goal of prison abolition. As Reed (2017) points out, the way people think about the carceral state, as well as why they desire it, has gone relatively understudied and warrants attention. In order for prison abolition to counter the narratives that help to reinforce the status quo, those narratives and ideologies have to be fully understood, and I hope that this research contributes to that understanding.

The emergence of visual and public criminology has resulted in an increased scholarly interest in films in recent times. Such a development is encouraging, as films are such an integral aspect of society. However, the need for further research is important if scholars are to understand the ideologies of crime and prison movies. The prevalence of mass incarceration, as well as the carceral state generally, demonstrates the necessity of more scholarly work. Ascertaining the effect that popular media has on how we think about the carceral state is an important criminological issue which future research must address.
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Selected Presentations

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Publications

