



Displacing Criminal Bodies

Spectacle, Crime and Punishment

in the TV Sitcom *The Visit*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transition from 'visible' to 'invisible' modes of penal punishment via the shifting spectacle of a heavily disciplined, corporeal incarceration. It is broadly acknowledged that the emergence of prisons in Britain marked the disappearance of punishment from the public eye. This paper argues that despite this physical distancing, concerns over crime and punishment were displaced and translated into other realms of society. This displacement has continued with the emergence of global media sources, which deploy landscapes of incarceration as entertainment. In order to ground this discussion, this paper focuses upon the manner in which television media allows for a representation of British prisons by drawing upon the recent BBC sitcom *The Visit*. By examining the implications of events within the programme, discussion reveals a careful negotiation of 'inside' and 'outside' identities and behaviours that, together, render prisons an essential, visible, if particular and distinct, part of society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

ON THE 13TH DECEMBER 1867, Republican Michael Barrett positioned a wheelbarrow with a bomb in it against an exterior wall of London's Coldbath Fields Prison in the belief that it would allow fellow political activist Richard O'Sullivan-Burke to escape to his freedom. The explosion demolished a large section of the wall as was intended, but a number of tenement houses opposite in Corporation Lane were also destroyed. Twelve people were killed and a further fifty were injured to varying degrees. Barrett alleged during trial that the evidence against him was false but, after two hours of deliberation, the jury found him guilty. As his body dropped from the gallows outside the walls of Newgate Prison on 26 May 1868, *The Times* reported that two thousand people in the crowd booed, jeered and sang *Rule Britannia* and *Champagne Charlie*. All of this for a man whom one of the trial lawyers William Montague described as a, "square-built fellow, scarcely five feet in height and dressed like a well-to-do farmer" (Quinlivan and Rose 1982: 113). John Barrett's execution was the last public hanging to take place in England.

The end of public executions in Britain can be seen as a crucial moment in the development of punishment in the 'civilised' world. Essentially, there were two key changes. Firstly, punishment in general, here exemplified by the death penalty, was to become a private affair. Up until 1783 in London, the Execution March from Newgate Prison to Tyburn Gallows had lasted two hours, "to the accoutrement of tolling bells and all the paraphernalia of spectacle and crowd participation along the way" (Pratt 2002: 16). By the nineteenth century, fewer executions were being performed with this degree of spectacle and were certainly less 'carnivalesque'. Rather, "from the entry of the hangman into the cell till death occurs, is usually a matter of from sixty seconds to two minutes" (Parry 1975: 113). Secondly, the death of Barrett marked the first step on a long journey towards a veto on bodily punishment, which culminated in Britain around 1970 (Pratt 2002: 15). Torture and brutal executions had rested on the *body* of the condemned man – this was the point at which the application of sovereign power was manifest (Foucault 1977: 55). Indeed, punishment was deemed a "quantitative art of pain" (*ibid*: 34). With the opening of Pentonville model prison in London in 1842, the process of 'civilising' punishment began in earnest, with punishment being concentrated upon the mind rather than the body. Furthermore, the punishment-body relation was transformed. The prison reduced the diversity of punishment, as incarceration was often practised as the resulting sentence for all crimes (Foucault 1977: 116).

This paper explores the transition from what is loosely termed 'visible' to 'invisible' modes of punishment via the shifting spectacle of a heavily disciplined, corporeal incarceration. There are three aspects that I would like to address in this paper. Firstly, I would like to note how the disappearance of public, bodily punishment for the most serious criminal transgressions marked the exponential use of incarceration of criminal bodies. Secondly, this paper argues that as part and parcel of this process, concerns

over crime and punishment were displaced and translated into other realms of society. I will briefly discuss examples such as the eighteenth century penchant for gothic architecture, literature, and art, which served to illuminate some of the 'darker' histories of British penal justice. Thirdly and finally, I would like to argue that this displacement has continued with the emergence of global media sources, which deploy landscapes of incarceration as entertainment and serve to spectacularise the punished body in order to illustrate many concerns surrounding the prison system.

In order to ground this discussion, this paper focuses upon the manner in which television media allows for a representation of British prisons by drawing upon the recent BBC sitcom (situational comedy) *The Visit*, which ran from July to August 2007. An examination of this case study and its narrative, events and conversations serves, I want to suggest, to highlight the careful negotiation of 'inside' and 'outside' identities and behaviours, that, taken together, render prisons as an essential, visible, if particular and distinct, part of society as a whole. In order to provide a context I begin, however, with an historical outline of penal punishment in England, emphasising how the spatialities of the punished body have been transformed in line with government policy and public sentiment.

PUNISHING THE CRIMINAL BODY

Issues surrounding bodily punishment have haunted social imaginations. Physical punishment reached its peak in Britain during the Tudor and Stuart periods where torture was commonly used by administrators in the name of the law. This frequently included, "the stake and burning, crucifixion, stoning, throwing from a height, the rack, flogging with leaden balls, mutilations, the use of barbed hooks to tear the flesh, and of cords to compress the limbs" (Parry 1975: 104). Yet, the key aspect for this discussion is not in the method of torture itself, but in its public manner. Jackson (2000) describes how most were condemned to die as a lesson to those watching. Indeed, Foucault suggests that this type of punishment was a form of publicity – a representation of public morality, which would 'school' the people (1977: iii). Indeed, a fascination for blood, guts and gore was apparent in many spectrums of society, and continued well into the Hanoverian period. The bodies or parts of executed criminals were often placed in public view; the Old London Bridge, for example, was a favourite spot to hoist up the heads of traitors. As accounted by Horace Walpole, new heads made a good living for any man fortunate enough to own a spyglass, for he could charge a halfpenny a look (Cunningham 1906).

The execution itself could never be described as mundane, and the notion of it as a spectacle was generated by the lengthy publication of the process. "The execution," notes Parry, "was a long drawn out affair. The prisoner was drawn on a hurdle or driven in a cart to the scaffold, often a considerable distance: crowds, always ready to watch and jeer at the gruesome sight, lined the route. The whole procedure was public" (Parry 1975: 112).

It was not uncommon for those with a view of the execution from their homes to make a premium selling their seats for viewing (Pratt 2002: 125); “every window and roof which could command a view of the horrible spectacle was occupied” (Griffiths 1884: 240). Official days for hangings became almost as prolific as public holidays. Indeed, the designated day for London executions came to be recognized as ‘Tyburn Fair’ or ‘the Hanging Match’ (Radzinowicz 1948: 171). *The Philanthropist* (1812: 207-8), on the occasion of a group execution, made the point that, for the general public, “to see five of their fellow creatures hanged was as good as a horse race, a boxing matching or a bull baiting” (Pratt 2002: 20). Furthermore, as infrastructure improved and technologies such as railway travel were made easier, crowds at nineteenth century executions became bigger (Laqueur 1989: 352).

After the 1779 Penitentiary Act, which for the first time provided for the building of government funded prisons, there was a change in the form and presence of punishment. This reflected a drive towards a greater civilisation of punishment, as well as a humanity for the condemned, which rendered crimes against the body less acceptable to public taste. Amongst the newly emerging middle-class intelligentsia, as well as penal reform groups, there was a growing disdain for what Spierenburg (1984) terms ‘spectacles of suffering’. The public execution appeared to violate the standards of correct conduct in the civilised world (Pratt 2002: 18). The changing economic nature of the society also saw petty offences grow as social polarisation increased, thus resulting in a necessity for punishments that were in proportion to the crime committed (Foucault 1977: 89). Pentonville model prison (London) opened in 1842 and marked the moment of a ‘civilising’ of punishment. As Foucault suggests, “one no longer touched the body” (1977: 11).

The prison reduced the diversity of punishment, as incarceration was often practised as the resulting sentence for all crimes (Foucault 1977: 116). Public, bodily punishment and the ‘lessons’ of the scaffold were gradually dissolved and the carnival of punishment that was deemed so raucous, distasteful and ineffective in an increasingly mobile population was replaced by the prison, which subsequently closed off the penal world from most forms of public scrutiny. At first, prisons exhibited a threatening exterior, which was often decorated by gargoyles or figures pictured behind bars. This meant that although the bricks screened what was taking place within, the public could still be reminded of the sombre nature of the building, and the detrimental aspects of committing crimes (Pratt 2002: 37). Dartmoor prison in Devon remains as one of these examples, as does Peterhead Prison, a lonely granite fortress in Scotland towering above a crag into the North Sea many miles from the nearest town.

However, as they became more commonplace, prisons were to become ‘invisible’. Often housed within aesthetic buildings set within acres of green land, one could be driving up to a school or a stately home. As Pratt writes, “the penal authorities across the civilized world were attempting to draw a more attractive veil across what they now thought to be the unnecessarily Spartan exterior of their own institutions. It was as if

the functional austerity of the late nineteenth-century prison had become distasteful, as if the utter drabness of its cheerless walls in itself began to be seen as offensive, in just the same way that extravagance and ostentation in prison design had previously been" (2002: 48). What is more, many prisons were built on old sites such as army camps, schools, country houses and (into the twentieth century) abandoned airfields or other socially redundant spaces. There were also attempts to 'hide' prisoners, as the chain gangs were increasingly replaced by the police carriage as a means of transporting prisoners between sites (Foucault 1977: 257). However, I would argue that, although there was a physical distancing of the criminal from the rest of the society via incarceration and limited access to prisons, concerns over the criminal body were displaced into other arenas such as architecture and literature, taking hold of the imagination of the public in a manner that reflected the medium through which various images of crime and punishment were presented.

DISPLACING CRIMINAL BODIES

Although the physical body of the criminal was removed from view, such that it could no longer provide a direct lesson regarding the fate of prisoners; architecture, words and art were mediums through which there was an attempt to forewarn of the negativities of criminal deviance. Criminals were now hidden behind the walls of the closed world of the prison, but the apparatus of penal mechanisms still remained at the forefront of geographical imaginations.

Many literary and visual media produced in the eighteenth century drew attention to the grotesque, or the absurdity of punishment and the legal system, reflecting societal attitudes which typically stimulated the so called 'birth' of the prison after the 1779 Penitentiary Act. One example is Jonathan Swift's pamphlet *A Modest Proposal* (1729), which calmly advocated that the Irish poor should eat their children in order to solve Ireland's economic troubles. The gothic macabre of the old public punishment also permeates novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721) and Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) where the gallows and prison occupy a central place in the narrative. In art, there are numerous examples of imaginings of prison as a space of labyrinthine nightmares. In Figure 1., an etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, there is machinic visioning of incarceration, sublime in its evocation of a complex yet horribly efficient prison-scape that overshadows the actual inmates.

As Eamon Carrabine (2010) has suggested, gothic treatments of imprisonment pervade art during this period, alongside ancient ruins, dark forests, inaccessible castles, and raging thunderstorms, each providing a key reference point for a Romantic sensibility. Think, for example, of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Edward Munch's *The Scream*; all of these display the tangible threat of a world out of kilter, riddled with an inhuman cruelty, and the emotive impact of this upon those of a more sensitive disposition. They spectacularise not prisons but things

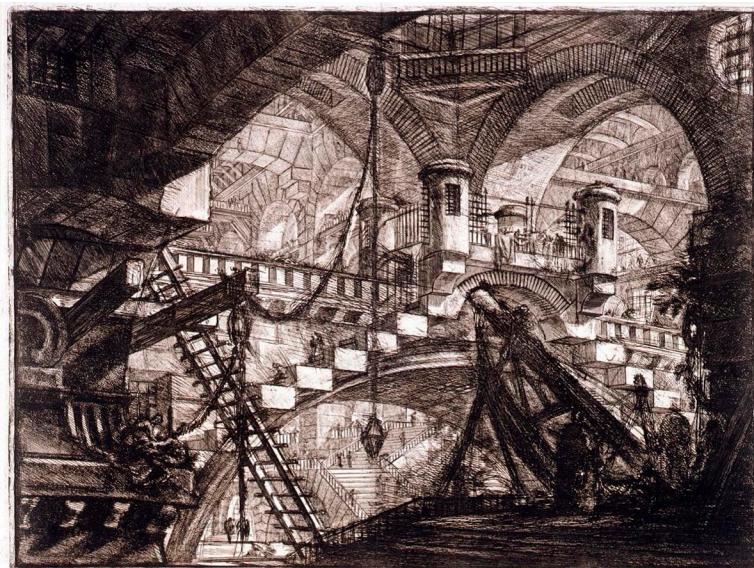


Figure. 1
Giovanni
Battista Piranesi
(Mogliano,
1720–1778)
Carceri
d'invenzione:
Plate XI:
The Arch
with a Shell
Ornament
(Later State),
1749–50 and
1761. Source:
Artadox.

that could threaten society such as population growth, urban sprawl, industrialism, the unfamiliar and new with an imaginative view of how to change and counteract them – a theme central to Romanticism and to the vindication of the reinforcement of the emerging penal system.

This displacement, I want to argue, has continued with the emergence of global media sources, and particularly the produced television image, which deploy landscapes of incarceration not as sublime terrors, but as everyday, even banal spectacles. Thus, the mediated world renders the apparently hidden body of the prisoner much more visible than ever since the removal of public punishment in 1868. Prisons have been the focus of a great deal of scrutiny from the media in recent years, particularly as they appear to act as a scapegoat for the failures that our economy is facing under a neoliberal Penal State (see Gilmore 2007; Peck 2003; Wacquant 2001a; 2001b). Programmes such as *History's Hardest Prison* and *America's Most Wanted*, alongside documentaries such as ITV's *Holloway* and the BBC's *Panorama – Smuggler's Tales*, serve to both illuminate, and in many cases, criticise the hidden world of the penal system as well as providing for audience entertainment through the presentation of punished bodies as a spectacle. Furthermore, there has also emerged in the UK particularly, however, what I may loosely term the 'prison show' – a wide genre reflecting penchant for sitcoms such as *Porridge* and more hard-hitting drama such as *Bad Girls*, *Oz* and the US show *Prison Break*, which has seen its popularity migrated to the UK. In the following, I analyse the show *The Visit*, which is set in a prison visiting room. Unlike many of the aforementioned programmes, which locate characters within prison, the presentation is of only the space that the 'outside' visitors are given access to. The visiting room is the interface where we can explore the disjointed lives of the prisoner and their families; a

space where different kinds of worlds collide. In many cases this space highlights more profoundly the various repercussions of life in a prison by locating the characters in juxtaposition with their visiting friends and relatives, thus mediating to a degree the relationship between the inside and the outside. Whilst *The Visit* is not representative of all types of prison programme (or indeed the wider cultural phenomenon of media spectacle) it is nevertheless a unique example that can be used to display and discuss how, following the apparently complete incarceration of prisoner bodies, the television media seeks to render this hidden world visible. Spectacles are things of unconventional character, arranged on a large, impressive scale and are set before the public gaze with several different intentions. These may be curiosity, contempt or admiration, or simply as a warning to others and in the analysis that follows, we can clearly observe how *The Visit* serves to present punished bodies for these particular purposes.

In order to discuss visibility of punishment in the British television media, I have employed a detailed appraisal of the genre of sitcom, which the programme exists within, and carried out a deconstruction of *The Visit* itself. This involved observation of the context that enabled the text to be produced, considering the ideologies of and limitations imposed upon the programme-makers, and how these relate to specific neoliberal circumstances in Britain. This alludes to the kind of spectacularisation that the programme displays and the kinds of themes and issues that the programme makes visible.

A 'text' can be simply defined as anything that communicates meaning from one person to another, and television programmes are powerful devices used by the media to deliver wider social messages, as well as to fulfil their entertainment purposes. Analysis of such a text can usually be founded in discourse analysis, directing attention to such things as gestures, speech, sounds, rhetoric, meanings and other aspects of interaction that exist within the programme. *The Visit* itself is an interesting example for many reasons. Hörschelmann claims that social exclusions and marginalisations are not only 'reflected' in, but also actively produced by the media. The media, unlike most other entities, exists on the boundary between inside and outside of hard-to-access environments. There is an acknowledgement that, "television reports and films, rather than simply representing 'reality', take an active share in the construction and reconstruction of hierarchical differences" (1997: 397) which may have certain implications upon the creation of identities. In this case, my attention is towards the construction of the prisoner as the 'Other', by highlighting fictional, televised criminal bodies as something of a 'spectacle'. A representation of the 'Other' serves to promote a more positive identity of the 'Self' and, as JanMohamed (1995) acknowledges, fear of losing this identity is key to the resurrection of the 'Other' in television and other media.

Hooks (1996) argues that certain types of media are 'magical' because of their ability to change reality into something else. She contends that what we are presented with on a screen is a re-imagined reality, which removes us from familiar settings,

pulling us “away from the familiar and journeying into and beyond the world of the other” (1996: 1-2). This is the type of process used by the media to create a sense of the spectacular. By highlighting the different ways in which this spectacle is created, it is apparent that there are many relationships between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the penal environment.

As I show below, often the spaces of *The Visit* are contradictory. Firstly, the prison appears as a closed-off, threatening environment which provides a fundamentally, discernible division from the ‘outside’ world, thus imposing a social hierarchy upon the inhabitants of both sides of the physical divide. However, the programme also presents the boundary between the inside and the outside as an interface. This suggests a series of interconnections between the two ‘worlds’, as well as addressing conscious similarities between the individuals who inhabit them. Within the show, therefore, the prison boundary exists physically, metaphorically, or simply not at all. I will now move on to introduce *The Visit*, its characters and main storylines and illustrate these arguments about mediatized spaces and the penal environment through this specific case-study.

CREATING THE MEANING FROM *THE VISIT*

The Visit is a BBC sitcom set entirely in the visiting room of the fictional Her Majesty’s Prison Radford Hill – a prison in England designed to hold individuals who have been categorised C prisoners (those who cannot be trusted in open conditions but are unlikely to try to escape). Category A and B prisoners present the greatest security risk, but the characters *The Visit* centralise are identified as those with more petty offences, such as drug users or opportunist thieves; and the friends and family that visit them are portrayed as typical working class citizens.

TV sitcom was designed to be a form of light, family entertainment with its aim towards the amusement of viewers, generally through their diversion from reality. Its primary intention is the creation of comedy. For Medhurst and Tuck, immediacy is imperative. Characters must be “a recognisable type, a representative embodiment of a set of ideas or a manifestation of a cliché” (1982: 43). The comedic elements are often created through a deviance from reality. It is argued that sitcom offers “the enjoyment of disruption” (Swanson 1982: 32) and pleasure in “transgressing boundaries” (Andrews 1998: 51), creating a reliance on deviant aspects of society that would be deemed offensive elsewhere. Thus, the easy-watching, reality-diverting nature of the sitcom has rendered it as one of the few major genres that has maintained its popular cultural position (Mills 2005: 4). Subsequently, the sitcom now commands a great market share, making it an important potential business opportunity, in terms of both financial gain as well as industrial power (Gitlin 1994: 132). Mark Thompson, then Director General of the BBC, stated that more effort should be spent on comedy because it “builds genuine public value” and “plays a critical part in reflecting our national culture and the way we live now” (BBC 2004, no page). It is true that, in the UK, many sitcoms have generated large audiences

from particular individual programmes or episodes in a series, but have been beaten to the corner by the sustained success of the Soap Opera.

The Visit was scheduled for BBC3, which has a specific channel remit that attempts to “bring younger audiences to high-quality public service broadcasting through a mixed-genre schedule of innovative UK content featuring new UK talent” (BBC 2011: no page) and therefore is a common presentation ground for ‘small-time’ comedy. In terms of key characters, Michael is the central figure around whom most scenes revolve. He is imprisoned for his involvement as a getaway driver in a jewellery robbery, something that he claims he was unaware of at the time. He has the choice to gain his freedom by confessing the identity of the real culprit, but as it is his younger brother Stevie, his duty to his family is much more of a priority to him. During the visits, he also sees his Dad, who perpetually cheats at card games and moans about the introduction of speed bumps in his neighbourhood; and his Nana, who bent on saving his soul, brings him a crucifix every week.

Clint is an aspiring hard man, although is very unsuccessful in maintaining this image. Giving himself the nickname ‘Frisbee’, he hopes to give the illusion that he always returns to prison. However, as his more intelligent wife Bev realises, ‘Boomerang’ might have been a more suitable choice. Clint’s hard luck is also highlighted when we learn that he was actually incarcerated for trying to hold up a Post Office with a banana, a piece of personal history that he desperately tried to avoid telling his fellow inmates. He is prone to saying the wrong thing on many occasions, and only his personal denial keeps his dreams alive. In a serious undertone, Clint often displays his gambling addiction and his fear that his wife will leave him in prison and that his son Jamie, who is already developing a penchant for dolls and dressing up, will suffer without a male role model in his life. Other inmates include Splodge Costello, who campaigns fiercely for extra toilet roll, and Blind Pete, whose blindness is certainly suspect. The prison officers portray polar opposites of the penal regime. Mark Bamford dominates with severity, treating all inmates as lower-class citizens. In contrast, Russell and Rachael attempt to keep a low profile, doing only what is barely necessary to get jobs done.

The prison wall and cell bars are emblematic of the physical distancing of criminals, which generates a distinct division between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ world. *The Visit* itself is confined to delimited space and visitors pass through different levels of security including sniffer dogs and metal detectors. Inmates are also distinguished and divided from visitors by their clothing (a light blue shirt, jeans and standard black trainers), a yellow bib, as well as being made to sit at opposite sides of the table. The tables are also numbered to ensure that each prisoner remains bound to their own assigned territory.

In addition to the divides illustrated in Figure 2., an imagined division also reinforces the physical boundaries between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. Even linguistic categorisation of people by others promotes social, and even political and economic division (Tallack 1995: 27). The theoretical identification of the inmate with the label of ‘prisoner’ is a socially



Figure. 2 Inmate and Visitor. Michael and his Dad. Source: BBC (2008)

enforced measure of the self-regulation of moral society. The classification of individuals can affect lives. Certain identities inscribe different statuses, which ultimately creates hierarchy and division. It is the reliance upon a human desire for personal aspiration, commonly uppermost in the hierarchy of human need (Maslow 1987) which has contributed to a desire to marginalise those individuals associated with crime.

It is in this very environment that comedic situations are generated for audience entertainment. *The Visit* clearly displays some of the main characteristics of the sitcom genre, to the effect that it creates successful comedy. However, although there are general overtones of entertainment, *The Visit* does nevertheless disguise both serious themes and contemporary concerns within its narrative. One of the dominant subject matters is the binary between the strictness and leniency of the penal environment. Consider the following exchange:

Longleaf (into Walkie-Talkie): K - I - 7...K - I - 7.

I've got a situation...you know where I am, Over.

Russell: What's happened?

Longleaf: Another one's topped himself on E wing.

Russell: I know, I heard yeah...bummer...

Longleaf (interrupts): Oh yeah...and the machine's out of Crunchies.

Russell: Oh, you are joking! Get maintenance to pull their finger out!!

Indeed the theme of measure of discipline and the effectiveness of prison as punishment is carried on in other parts of the narrative by other characters. Ruth Wilson-Gilmore (2007) highlights societal concerns about the penal environment including the increasing population of inmates, as well as a lack of care and progress for these inmates. These concerns are satirised here in the comedic spectacle with several passing comments by prisoners, staff and visitors alike. For example:

Bamford: If so many people are killing themselves, why are we so overcrowded?

Although the characters are portrayed as 'small time' crooks, having committed various low category crimes, there are several instances that serve as a reminder of the primary purpose of prison – an institution for the punishment of persons who have committed crimes against society. As Michael correctly reminds his father, there are many dangerous people confined to their cells, and although they may provide comic entertainment for the viewer, the reality of their release back into society would result in an ineffective outcome by the penal system. Again, a satirical approach is taken by *The Visit*:

Dad: You know, if he wasn't in here, he'd be mugging you.

Nana: Best he's in here then, isn't it?

In this vein, *The Visit* portrays the prison as a success. It is true that the programme highlights negativities such as some of the bureaucracies and inefficiencies of the system. Concern derives from the presentation of the physical border as an exchange point. The prison walls also act a border for other transactions, both legitimate and illegitimate. A prison sentence does not usually equate to complete isolation. Ties to the outside world are genuinely allowed, and are promoted by the flow of both people and objects such as gifts, letters and photographs. However, there are also many other illegal interactions such as the presence of contraband mobile phones or drugs, recruitment of gang members and even escape attempts, which illustrate that the border is neither as solid, nor regulated as the directors of the penal system would hope:

Maintenance man: They say the average criminal would earn just as much in his lifetime from having a normal job.

Splodge: Oh right, but you work nine 'til five. I work nine 'til five-past.

Maintenance man: Yeah ... and end up in here.

Splodge: Uh no, hey, hey. I gave myself up as it happens ... it's easier to get smack [Heroin] inside.

Another additional concern is the lack of communication between officers as well as the increasing number of government-enforced measures such as health and safety. In many cases, the prison is described with disdain. Inmates describe boredom and loneliness, as well as physical degradation by poor, bland diets and pests such as cockroaches. Further to this, the appeals process is genuinely described as lengthy, and the emphasis placed by the legal system upon the remorse of the criminal is apparent throughout the series.

However, concurrent to these themes is the contrasting discourse presented about the leniency and privileges offered by the penal system. There are several scenarios that encompass a 'New Labour' move away from 'locking-up' criminals to the rehabilitation

of offenders. For example, there is literature that describes how religious groups may find rich sources of converts within prison walls (Johnson 2004). Within *The Visit*, Clint's newfound interest in Buddhism advocates this. Classes in positive thinking and behaviour run by prison officers also extend Clint's opportunities, and it is these that are emblematic of wider concern for the benefits that prisoners receive over regular citizens. Gilmore describes how prisoners have always fought against the conditions in which they live in prison (2007: 89). However, a latter resurgence stemming from post-World War II civil rights movements has further influenced prisoners to campaign for adequate food, recreation, health care, education and safety (Cummins 1994). Here, the programme creates a spectacle of concern over the privileges of the prisoner by creating a comic element to this criticism. For example, Clint describes how they are experiencing overcrowding within the prison, as there are three inmates sharing his cell. However, his disgust is not for the number of people in the cell. A greater, more consequential concern for Clint is that there are only two Playstation controllers between the three of them. The programme is also critical of other opportunities appreciated by inmates, which may not be enjoyed by members of the 'outside' community. For example:

Clint (moaning to wife Bev): There's nowt to do in here.

Inmate: Up for five-a-side?

Clint: Yeah defo, is it after the film?

Inmate: No! Before the film, after computer club!

The creation of a spectacle for making an example is a key message both in *The Visit* and in other television media depicting penal environments. Our modern-day television screens offer us the same method as the public execution of old. In an attempt to prevent any incitement for crime by other members of society, the criminal was reduced to a spectacle of example. Any notion of the romanticism or heroism of crime was diminished. Despite the fact that the characters in *The Visit* are not publicly physically punished, the negative connotations of crime are still purposefully exemplified in this programme. It would be fair to say repercussions are considerable to the majority of the inmates.

One of the biggest impacts for prisoners and visitors demonstrated/highlighted in *The Visit* is the temporal breakdown of relationships, which creates an imagined division reinforcing the physical boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside'. I propose that the notion of the temporal divide created in conjunction with the prison environment is a powerful way of understanding or reconceptualising how we think about the space of the prison. The length of the characters' sentence binds all of the prisoners. Time is at a premium, and thus, every second of the visit is a precious escape. There are constant reminders of the temporal association of incarceration. On the 'outside' the world progresses – technology develops, children age – but on the 'inside' there are connotations of time standing still, a lack of progress, or even backwardness.

Nana: I've got a mobile Michael. Remind me t'give you t'number.

Michael: What's that Nana?

Nana: Mobile... They're these new phones ... you'll see 'em when you get out.

Dad (interrupts): He knows what a bloody mobile is...he's only been in for a month!

Understandably, inmates worry that people on the outside will forget them, or that they will become dispensable, replaceable. Their criminal records render them economically undesirable, but in social terms, inmates also become expendable. Indeed, in one episode, we learn the council has given Michael's flat to his brother, and his girlfriend has left him for his best friend. The reminder that Michael is being forgotten about is also exaggerated in comic scenarios. His brother is now wearing his underpants and his Dad has commandeered his trainers. They seem to have forgotten that Michael will need these things; need his life back, once he is released from prison.

Michael: Have you got my shoes on?!

Dad: What, yeah. Stevie gave 'em us.

Stevie: Well they was just lying about your flat, you know?

Michael: Got me under crackers on an' all?

[Both laugh]

Dad: No, Stevie wears them ... well, yeah; they're a bit small for me.

Michael: Is that my watch?!

Dad (sheepishly): Well, yeah, it was with your shoes.

Michael: I'm not dead!

Undercutting the comedy—giving it an 'edge'—is the idea that imprisonment can have a detrimental impact upon the friends and families of the individual. Clint's wife, Bev (see Figure 3.), highlights one of the major challenges for many families with incarcerated relatives across Britain. Imprisonment can have serious financial effects upon the livelihoods of any spouses or dependents. Travel costs for visiting her husband every week has put her in financial discomfort, and she is forced to sacrifice her solvency for the sake of her marriage and her children, who may suffer an emotional loss through depreciation of their relationships with their father. Clint worries that his son will not have a male role model whilst he serves his sentence. There are recurring jokes about son Jamie's sexuality and a sketch derives from several satirical 'education' books found in the crèche, which include *Where's Dad?*, *The day they took my Dad away* and *Mum says Dad's gone working abroad*. It is also important to remember that as well as the inmate, relatives also experience the repercussions of punishments that result in visitations being limited or when privileges such as phone calls and letters are removed. Additionally, it is also true that relatives of the 'insiders' may also become attached to the same stigma associated with prison.

Clint: When are you gonna bring Jamie in anyway?

Bev: Aw, ... I dunno, he's at that age isn't he. I don't want him gabbing in t'playground. Not after what you did.

Clint: I don't want you talking to them, embarrassing me. I've got to live here.

Bev: Me ... embarrass you? Our whole street knows what you did!

Clint: Why what have you said?

Bev: Do you really think I'd tell anyone?!

We can see here in Clint's powerlessness and Bev's concern for her son and neighbours, how carceral punishment simply exerts its power over individuals in different ways to the scaffold. Thus, as a form of television entertainment, *The Visit* now fuses the two modes of punishment. The comic spectacle that is generated does not entirely dissolve this notion, and so the programme becomes a powerful reminder of the negativities of crime.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Visit is just one example among many other prison shows that reveals broader perspectives of societal culture and illustrates how mediated representations of prisons are contributing to the gradual erosion of the concept of the hidden, 'closed-off' world of penal correction. This paper has argued that following the apparent disappearance of public, bodily punishment, the penal system represents the greatest physical and imagined division of people in the urban environment. However, in the face of this, the mediated world has contributed to the increased visibility and spectacularisation of punishment in Britain.

The boundary between the 'inside' and 'outside' is created by bars, walls and legislation, and hardened by societal stigma, which ultimately results in the creation of a social hierarchy based upon this binary. The negative construction of the prisoner as being on the 'constitutive outside' (Derrida 1978: 132) positions residents of the prison as quite apart from the rest of society. There is clearly a metaphorical division between the 'inside' and 'outside' through the linguistic categorisation of people by others, which promotes social, and even political and economic division that can affect lives through a desire to marginalise those individuals associated with crime through connotations of wrongdoing, immorality and danger. People on the 'outside' are not connected to these same signifiers. Derrida's idea of the 'constitutive outside' may also be implied here. There is a claim that every object is inscribed with something other than itself. This suggests that the identity of an object is formed by that which it is not, by its environs, constructed by its negative, by its outside, in opposition. Subsequently, that which is excluded from the definition is also a part of the construction of that same identity – which makes the inside/outside boundaries less clear cut.

A social hierarchy is also imposed by negative perceptions of the place of the prison, and the connotations that surround these perceptions. Metaphorical division



Figure. 3
Clint and Bev.
Source: BBC (2008)

is also examined by the notion of the temporal divide, generated by the sentence that prisoners receive, causing those on the 'inside' to become out of touch from the 'outside'. However, in contrast, it is arguable that the prison environment is indeed well connected to the outside world. The psychological effects of prison sentences are also apparent upon friends and families and the prison walls act as a border for many legitimate and illegitimate transactions.

I also want to highlight in this concluding section how changing attitudes towards the purpose and methods of punishment also call into question the interdependence and consequential relationships between the prison environment and the outside world. Gilmore (2007) highlights three dominant explanations for prison growth. Firstly, the concern for crime connects prison growth to a moral panic and public desire for social order. The use and trade of illegal substances and the exploitation of benefit entitlements also reasonably accountable for the vast increase in prison populations. Crimes such as these can be attributed to the aforementioned changes in employment opportunities and the financial restraints of the depressed economy, which challenged people to find other sources of income – often illegally. Secondly, in these challenging times, released prisoners were less able to exist as corrected individuals within the economy. A spectacle for concern is also created for our wider society. This can be seen in *The Visit* where Clint describes himself as unlucky, and blames his incarceration on extenuating circumstances. His story reveals family poverty, which he attempted to solve by taking the self-destructive route of gambling. When this failed, he feels he was forced to crime. This example highlights wider connotations about the economic issues raised by our increasingly capitalist society.

Socio-economic polarisation is not the only concern raised by the programme. For example, Michael is serving a prison sentence unjustly, because he is afraid that by telling the truth, his family may be threatened by the true culprit. Gilmore's third reason for prison growth suggests that the demand for jobs rendered many ex-convicts undesirable and the nature of society produced high levels of re-offence and subsequent

re-incarceration. Her final commentary intimates that, social and economic division can be reinforced in the metropolitan areas where ex-convicts cluster on release, having vast impacts on entire neighbourhoods. Therefore, despite attempts to educate and inscribe morality into the minds and bodies of the prisoner, the success of the prison itself is undermined by the society within which the system exists. Although society is driven by a desire for social order, the capitalist regime that has developed has subsequently forced circumstances that have increased crime levels. These instances make real suggestions about the loss of power of the criminal justice system, as well as the power of the state in a more general sense. Without the sitcom mask of comedy, the series could make some very stark points about the realities of British society. The combination of the spectacle created by the comedy and the seriousness of the sitcom makes *The Visit* a good example of how the contemporary media makes a contribution to the social imagination in order to make statements about the world we live in.

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