

## **The Politics of Carceral Spectacle: Televising Prison Life**

### **Introduction**

On Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2011, Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke released an article in *The Guardian* newspaper holding the ‘legacy of the broken [British] penal system’ accountable for the actions of a ‘feral underclass’ during the London riots of August 2011. What was striking was that although Clarke described the criminals with highly charged terminology, he held *his* penal system to blame for the circumstances that led to this riotous behaviour. Clark claimed that over 75% of those aged 18 or over who were brought before the courts had a prior conviction, forcing him and the government to think drastically about not just penal rehabilitation, but education, welfare and family policy, all of which can have serious impacts on peoples’ propensity to commit crime.

Clark’s rhetoric is but one example of how prisons have come to be seen not as separate, peripheral sites, but as windows onto, or even organising principles of, modern social, political and, increasingly, economic orders. The intricate relations that connect prisons and their occupants to the ‘outside’ have been noted, for example, in the Million Dollar Blocks project based at the Justice Mapping Centre at Columbia University,<sup>1</sup> which identifies areas where states spend in excess of a million dollars a year to incarcerate the residents of single city blocks, firmly placing prisons in the context of housing policy and state budgetary priorities more generally. Reports on gang activity point to strong links between incarcerated gang members and those on the outside, and

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<sup>1</sup> See (Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation of Columbia University New York 2006)

suggest that prisons are instrumental as recruiting stations (Spergel 1990), while religious groups, as well, find rich sources of converts within prison walls (Johnson 2004).

The principle aim of this chapter is to discuss this relationship between prison and society using notions of visibility and punishment in contemporary media, with particular reference to how the 'spectacle' of the incarcerated subject operates within television. With the abolition of the spectacle of visible punishment, such as public hangings, trial and torture, the penal system vanished behind prison walls (Foucault 1977/1991, 231), a displacement that served to nurture all manner of popular imagery concerning the nature of prison life (Turner, forthcoming). That is, although there was a physical distancing of the criminal from the rest of society via incarceration, as well as limited access to prisons, concerns over the criminal body were displaced into other arenas such as architecture and literature. As television increased in its popularity, so the prison programme replaced the public gallows of old (Mason 2000a). Criminals are now hidden behind the walls of the closed world of the prison, but the apparatus of penal mechanisms still remains at the forefront of popular geographical imaginations.

Although there has been research into both prisons (Gilmore 1999, 2007; Gregory 2006, 2007) and the constructions of 'otherness' in television representations (Horschelmann 1997), there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific construction of a carceral spectacle and subsequent identity constructions. One explanation for this, Mason observes, 'may be that programmes concerning prison do not fall neatly into one specific genre; it is not like discussing, say, game shows: prisons appear across genres

and as such seem to have been overlooked' (1995, 186). Furthermore, the subject matter of prisons and media spans several disciplines. Criminologists or media scholars may separately decipher how fictional depictions of crime are presented (Boda and Szabo 2011; Clarke 1990; Kort-Butler and Hartshorn 2011; Mason 2003), or news is reported (Bjornstrom *et al.* 2010; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). But, the marriage of the two is relatively unquestioned (Mason 1995, 186).

In the following I look first to discuss the persistence of the spectacle of punishment from public displays to global media such as film, news, but more specifically the television image. I want to consider how this spectacle contributes to a 'politics of amnesia,' which presents criminals in certain ways that can often be concurrent to strategies of penal reform or rehabilitation. In order to ground this discussion, I draw both upon the recent BBC situational comedy (sitcom) *The Visit* (2007) and the Channel 4 documentary film *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* (2009), each indicative of how television as a visual medium allows for certain absences and presences to emerge.

### **From Old London Bridge to Living Rooms**

For the purposes of this chapter, I understand the term spectacle to relate to events that create memorable experiences, particularly with regard to the visual experience. The term has ancient, cultural origins in the Roman staging of circuses and came into Old English through an amalgamation of the French *spectacle* and the Latin *spectaculum*, of 'to view, watch' (Debord 1978). Initial spectacles were freak shows or folk drama, providing wonder and pleasure from strange sights and ridicule (Daston and

Park 2001). Certainly in regard to corporeal punishment, the enactment of brutal activities was highly spectacularised. Crowds gathered at sites such as Tyburn Fair or the Old London Bridge to act as both witnesses and guarantors of punishment (Parry 1975; Pratt 2002). However, within Anglo-American penal systems, the trend towards retribution against the body diminished, and by the twentieth century all penal activities were removed behind the walls of the prison.

Displaced into literature and art, as well as architecture, carceral imaginations were to be stimulated by the emergence of film, presenting to a large and far-reaching audience sights they now rarely saw in everyday life. Since the first prison film in 1919, more than 300 were produced over the course of the twentieth century (Mason 2000b, 33). Prior to the Second World War, it is true to say that few prison films were produced in Britain. In the US, however, films such as *Convict 99* (1938) and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) reflected the contentious issue of corporeal punishment and attempted to provide the public with some kind of insight into prison life, although *Convict 99* was subsequently viewed as too ‘soft’ a portrayal. However, a period of post-war financial optimism which lasted until the 1960s saw an increase in the number of prisons films being produced; *Good Time Girl* (1949), *The Weak and the Wicked* (1953) and *Now Barabbas* (1948) all highlighted concerns about potential rises in delinquency following a feared ‘post-war crime wave’. Prison films of the 1960s such as *The Criminal* (1960), *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) began, however, to reflect some of the most pressing carceral issues of the decade, including the abolition of hanging in 1965, an expanding prison population and the thorny question of how the penal system could prevent

recidivism. Subsequent releases clearly positioned prisons within the social crises and concerns of their time, such as human (prisoner) rights in the 1970s with *Scum* (1979) and a Thatcherite society of polarisation and racial inequality in the 1980s with *Burning an Illusion* (1981). As the twentieth-century wore on, prison film (or films with prison scenes) began to fall into more post-modern categories, either reflecting a nostalgia for ‘crime free’ days or an attempt to tell moral tales, such as *Greenfingers* (2000) and *Tomorrow La Scala* (2002). Although prison films are in no way the largest genre within the film industry, many of them have been popular and critically acclaimed, no doubt because of their ability to open up the prison world to the audience. *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) was rated number four in *Empire Magazine*’s ‘The 500 Greatest Movies of All Time’ and number one in the IMDb’s Top 250, whilst *The Green Mile* (1999) reached 74th, *The Great Escape* (1963) 109th, and *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) 137<sup>th</sup> place.

With the displacement of a carceral coporeality, the notion of ‘spectacle’ has become fundamentally tied up with its technological mediation. A useful commentary on this broad process and its creation of particular forms of subjectivity is provided by Guy Debord, in his influential *The Society of the Spectacle* (1978) (*La Société du spectacle*). Here, Debord follows up Marx’s arguments on alienation by applying commodity fetishism to contemporary mass media. Debord contends that authentic social life, and genuine relations between people, is being replaced by its representation in what he terms the ‘degradation of life,’ such that, ‘all that was once directly lived has become mere representation’ (Debord and Sanguinetti 2003, 1). Here, people relate to spectacular events, which the media represents, and use these to construct their

everyday identities, shaping their daily activities and building relationships around commodities. As Debord writes, 'the spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (1978, 4). In the process, popular culture displayed by the mass media creates a sense of 'amnesia' by over-riding genuine events, such as historical episodes that are abhorrent to contemporary ideologies (ibid, 192). For Debord, radical action was thus required that 'woke up' the spectator 'drugged' by spectacular images, allowing individuals (no longer mere consumers) to reorder their lives, recreating a more self-conscious existence within their world (Ford 2005).

Clearly, the spectacle of the prison persists with the emergence of global media images, and particularly the produced television image, which deploys landscapes of crime, punishment, even simply sublime terrors, as everyday, even banal, spectacles (Garland 1990; Lumby 2002; Nellis and Hayle 1982; Sparks 1992). Thus, the mediated world renders the apparent hidden body of the prisoner much more visible than ever since the removal of public punishment in 1868. In Britain, programmes such as *Dispatches: The Thief Catcher* (2011), *Louix Theroux: Miami Mega-Jail* (2011) and *See Hear: Deaf Prisoners* (2009), alongside documentaries such as ITV's *Holloway* (2009) and *Strangeways* (2011), and the BBC's *Girls Behind Bars* (2011), 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 what I may loosely term the 'prison show' - a wide genre reflecting penchant for situation comedies (sitcoms) such as *Porridge* (1974-1977) *Angry Boys* (2011) and *Let's Go to Prison*

(2006); and more hard-hitting drama such as *Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979-1986), *Bad Girls* (1999-2006), *Oz* (1997-2003) and the US show *Prison Break* (2005-2009), which has witnessed its popularity migrate to the UK. Indeed, in 1999 *Bad Girls* achieved an average of 8 million viewers and has arguably ‘done more than any other prison drama to advance the cause of penal reform’ (Wilson and O’Sullivan 2004, 135). The prevalence for crime-related television is now estimated to make up 25% of the most popular British television programming (Reiner 2002, 312).

Wilson and O’Sullivan argue that television and film representations are ‘an important source of people’s implicit and commonsense understandings of prison’ (2004, 8) and in the same way have acted as the voice of the prison itself; or, as ‘moral fables’ (Sparks 1992), warning of the negative aspects of societal transgression. Wilson and O’Sullivan (2004, 35) suggest that since the 1930s, prison films have been indicative of events and background for the time period – in other words, programmes are shaped by the political mood at the time of broadcast. Thus one of the outcomes of (prison) drama is that it ‘translates or transcodes ideas and arguments from specialist sources (official reports, social scientific research, experiential writing) into accessible popular forms’ (Wilson and O’Sullivan 2004, 14). According to the British Crime Survey (Home Office 2000), 75% of people get their information on the criminal justice system from the media, but worryingly only 6% consider it inaccurate. Such media representations therefore ‘exaggerate the threat of crime and promote policing and punishment as the antidote’ (Reiner 2002, 327).

Simultaneously, and likely reactionary to this, there have been marked attempts by prisoners to construct media representations to make their own stories and experience of the prison public. Carnochan (1998) highlights the vast autobiographical literature of prisoners; whereas Churcher (2011) exemplifies inmate-produced media such as The Angolite newspaper, KLSP radio station and LSP-TV television channel based in Louisiana State Penitentiary; which converts simply entertainment through prison television and radio into journalism (ibid, 388). Similarly using examples from Northeastern USA, Novek contends that these types of media give agency to ‘people who are marginalised and despised by society’ in order to give transcendence and transformation to the places they inhabit (Novek 2005, 299).

In light of this, it is all the more urgent for scholars working on prisons and carceral spaces more broadly to become attentive to the construction and affective capacity of such imagery. In the next section, I pursue one such line of inquiry, looking to the politics of amnesia.

### **Spectacle and the Politics of Amnesia**

As noted above, media representations are profoundly influential in shaping people’s views of prison life. This poses an interesting spatial problem, ‘not only because media representations are part of individual and societal conceptions of the world but also because of media’s power to conceptualize and spread political ideas and reinforce hegemonic orders’ (Zimmerman 2007, 59). In our postmodern world, space-time distancing between crime and reporting in the media is eroding rapidly (Giddens 1984; Thompson 1995). Thus, ‘the present trends indicate a growing symbiosis

between media images, criminality, and criminal justice' (Reiner 2002, 328). How, then, do we as social scientists proceed to 'intervene' in this process? In the past, issues of mimeticism, ideological display, or textual deconstruction have been explored (Cresswell and Dixon 2002) – all of which have, arguably, privileged the message rather than the medium – a more recent post-structural attentiveness to ontologies of becoming have pushed geographers particularly to consider how images are constructed with particular affective capacities, such that they 'work' in various ways (Aitken and Dixon 2006). Alongside this, engagements have begun with cultural forms and practices beyond literature and the visual arts that include creative fields such as dance, theatre and music (Cresswell 2006; Leyshon *et al.* 1998; Malbon 1999; Thrift 1997, 1999). This has paid new attention to our corporeal existence; of particular value here is the observation that visual media is not just optical, but haptical (Crang 2002). How can film, for example 'touch' us, physiologically and emotionally? How is it that film makes us feel? How does it manifest 'the non-representable that churns [our] stomach or makes [us] smile' (Aitken 2006, 492; Deleuze 1994).

It is at this point, I want to argue, that the term spectacle, as it relates to a political amnesia, can be usefully reworked once more. Previous dialogues relating to amnesia have traditionally concerned themselves with obliterated and 'forgotten' narratives, such as those of colonised indigenous peoples. After the 1960s and decolonisation, a new kind of memory discourse emerged which searched for alternative and revisionist histories (Huysen 1999, 22). National memory, it was argued, had become overly influenced by the global media's focus on certain themes, which contributed towards a politics of amnesia. Thus, 'we do know that the media do not

transport public memory innocently. They shape it in their very structure and form' (ibid, 30). As Rogin suggests, in many cases the cultural form for spectacular displays makes them 'superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable' (1990, 106), turning domestic citizens into imperial subjects via a forgetting not only of alternate narratives, but of the active construction of narrative forms. Whilst acting in a sometimes voyeuristic way, there is an equal and opposite story to be told about the disadvantages of keeping prisons and spaces of incarceration hidden from public view. Invisibility from the public gaze can render prisoners precarious and exploitable; just has been experienced with media neglect of other marginalised and concealed social groups such as migrant workers and illegal immigrants (Dejanovic 2008; Kihato 2007).

There is considerable scope here to query the way in which media representations provide, as entertainment, a carceral spectacle relating to crime and punishment. But, I want to suggest, there are some subtle twists to how this is accomplished. Spectacle produces a kind of emotion that 'side-steps or forgets (through amnesia) ... and is pulled primarily towards the heroism of characters and context' (Aitken and Dixon 2009, 197); and, we can certainly think of viewers as absorbed in the fictional world presented on screen. Yet, television and film as mediums can also present us with a knowing, ironic, self-referential take on the production of visuals. What this allows for is the destabilising of spectacle via spectacular means; in other words, media provide for a particular distribution of exposure and denial, reveal and hide.

In order to ground this more subtle play of spectacle I would like to attend to two different examples of carceral media imagery. The first is a BBC sitcom called *The Visit* (2007) and the second a documentary film broadcast by Channel 4 in the UK entitled *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* (2009). Unlike many of the aforementioned programmes which locate characters within prison, *The Visit* is set in a prison visiting room - the only space which 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 both examples are not totally representative of all types of prison programme, or indeed the wider cultural phenomenon of media spectacle they can nevertheless 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. In this vein, *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*, although different in genre, more practically and less subtly presents the prison (and more specifically the prisoner-body) as a site for spectacle, replicating the fascination for the gallows of old. The analysis that follows is based on deconstructions of both programmes. This involved observation of the context of production, 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 and the themes and issues which the programme makes visible. I have also considered audience feedback where it has been offered on both social

networking and television/film review websites, in order to illustrate evidence of affective influence upon viewers.

### *The Visit*

*The Visit* sets itself in a low-security prison visiting room, and the characters it centralises are identified as petty crooks, while the friends and family who visit them are portrayed as typical working class citizens. During visiting time prison officers, who offer varying attitudes to the penal system and their role within it, observe them. In *The Visit* there are many occasions where there is the ironic recognition that prison is represented as a spectacle for entertainment purposes. Prisoner Clint's brother, Glen, for instance, who is visiting the prison for the first time, reveals our own feelings as an audience in a comment in episode five:

**Glen:** Hiya! Here, it's not like *Prison Break* in 'ere is it?!<sup>2</sup>

This intertextual reference highlights what Debord (1978) highlights as shaping of our knowledge and assumptions by media consumption. *Prison Break* is a recently popular US prison show that dramatises the prison as soap-opera, with a multitude of characters, including popular pin-ups, on its main cast list. There is an acknowledgement by *The Visit's* characters that visitors to the prison would bring with them an image of the penal environment that was created predominantly on the basis of images and representations constructed by the media.

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<sup>2</sup> All direct references to script within *The Visit* and *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* are my personal transcriptions. Therefore any errors or omissions are also my own.

The programme presents a comic stance upon many fundamentally serious issues, such as prisoners struggling to maintain relationships with their friends, wives and children on the outside. And, as a sitcom, and despite their transgression, the audience find the characters likeable, particularly as the absence of any genuinely threatening characters contributes to a lack of representation of the ‘ugly’ or violent aspects of prison life. This absence can in turn, of course, present a portrayal of prison as ‘easy’ or ‘overly-privileged’. Indeed, for viewers, for most of the series, the view we are presented with most often is a high-angle shot of the prison waiting room. This shot, used as both the opening and end credits roll, becomes the emblem and indeed the *only* emblem of prison life - the lack of view of the inner world of the prison environment further contributes to the forgetting of any truly hardened criminals. There is no mention of any violent or sex crimes in *The Visit*. Inmates are portrayed as ordinary people with regular difficulties and problems – the only prison-related problems which the audience are made to consider are those which provide entertainment purposes, particularly Splodge Costello’s ‘dirty protest’ against a lack of toilet roll. Subsequently, audience feedback has been directed towards an ambiguity of the programme. Forum reviews of *The Visit* are unclear as to the allegiance with the genre, with criticism that the ‘soft style’ nature of the comedy presents unreal characters, which do not comply with the harder messages with which the programme may comply ideologically:

**GedC:** Enjoyed this, some great gags and a decent story ... the “safe and gentle” style is becoming the norm in BBC sitcoms ... However I think this “gentle” style is perfect is perfect for *The Visit* because it’s not what you expect. What you’re expecting from a sitcom set in a prison visiting room is something full of chavs, smack heads and dodgy twats ... this show doesn’t bother with the obvious, it is played from the point of view of the family.

(Forum member of The British Comedy Guide 2007)

Yet, there are many instances where the characters are rendered as ‘others’. The visit itself is confined to limited space, which would be similar to the cells in which they spend most of their time. Visitors pass through different levels of security including sniffer dogs and metal detectors. Figure 2 illustrates how 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, which are numbered to ensure that each prisoner remains bound to their own assigned territory. These actions promote a particular type of ‘forgetting’: one which makes the audience (and people more generally) overlook these people as citizens. For Hacking, individuals react to the name or label given to them. He suggests that categorisation may ‘change the ways in which individuals experience themselves – and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behaviour’ (1999, 104).

And, the same can be observed in the categorisation of prisoners portrayed in *The Visit*. The protagonist Michael claims that his fellow prisoners belong to two categories: ‘Smack heads’ and ‘Knob heads’.

[insert figure 1 here – portrait]

**Figure 1:** Inmate and visitor – Michael and his Dad

**Source:** *The Visit* DVD 2007

Nevertheless, many viewers perceived the dominant hegemonic message of the text, which was to enjoy *The Visit* as a form of entertainment:

**Mike:** Bit delayed I know but I just want to say bravo on an awesome series, best one we have had since *Early Doors* I think ... if rubbish like *Tittybangbang* and *Grownups* can get second series then *The Visit* will have no bother.

(MySpace user comment 2007)

These forum activities also illustrate the consumption of a television programme as an active process, whereby people no longer simply accept the dominant messages that are presented by the text. This provides a contrasting opinion to Debord's (1978) contention that there is a lack of active human participation in the creation of meaning.

Aside from the notion that society has forgotten their status as citizens, one of the biggest impacts of incarceration presented to us is the breakdown of relationships. Inmates worry that people on the outside will forget them, or that they will become dispensable, replaceable. With their criminal records, the prisoners are rendered economically undesirable. In social terms, inmates also become expendable. Indeed, we learn that Michael's girlfriend has left him for his best friend. The council has also replaced him with another tenant: his brother Stevie. This being forgotten becomes a long-running joke, as Stevie is now wearing his underpants and his Dad has commandeered his trainers. They seem oblivious to the fact 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?

**Dad:** Saved me a couple of quid, eh? Tell you what; they're nipping a bit though.

**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:** Anything left?

**Stevie:** Chloe's left.

**Michael:** I know that.

**Stevie:** But the good news is she's moved back into your flat.

**Michael:** You what?

**Stevie:** Well she's sharing the spare room with Swifty. Dead cosy, or what eh?

**Michael:** Is that my watch?!

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

**Michael:** I'm not dead!

### *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*

This spectacular amnesia is also a predominant thread in the documentary film *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*. This documentary details the training and performance of women from the Eddie Warriors Correctional Center at the 2007 Oklahoma State Penitentiary Rodeo held on August 17<sup>th</sup> – a tradition since 1940 and one of only two rodeos in the world held behind prison walls. Inmates from twelve different prisons across the state compete. As part of the rodeo, inmates participate in dangerous events such as bull riding, team calf roping, bareback riding and the spectacular finale of 'Money the hard way,' where players attempt the perilous task of retrieving a \$100 bill attached to a string which is in turn tied to a bull's horn. The female inmates, or 'sweethearts', are very much constructed as heroic characters, brave and determined – exhibiting perfect prisoner behaviour in order to participate. With 30 women trying out for 13 lots, demand is high and the opportunity is viewed as a privilege.

With danger being the pay-off of this privilege, it is not surprising that the dominant rhetoric of this programme provides little comment upon the rodeo as an extravagant, special treatment for prisoners not enjoyed by the ‘outside’ world. The chosen prisoners are role models for their cohort and even beyond. They are glamorised by the special treatment that being on the rodeo team affords them: whole days spent outdoors, extra exercise, additional recreation and even the heightened sense of comradeship and increased hierarchy that the inmates receive through the wearing of their customised pink rodeo uniform (see Figure 2). On the night of the rodeo, the rest of the facility line the route to the transport, cheering and clapping as the rodeo team parade through waving. They are even given the accolade of being ‘just as tough as the men’. It is undeniably not uncommon for positive relationships to be constructed in the prison environment - emancipated spaces of incarceration have been documented by the likes of Wilson (2000) and Baer (2005) for example.

[insert figure 2 – portrait]

**Figure 2:** Female prisoner wearing her pink rodeo uniform

**Source:** *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* 2009

However, all of this serves to gloss over the crimes for which they have been committed. Indeed, throughout the narrative such issues are treated with a studied nonchalance. The very name of the programme takes its influence from the wholesome American Country music duo of sisters Janis and Kristine Oliver, entitled *Sweethearts of the Rodeo*. Brandy ‘Foxye’ Wittle, for example, lists her felonies which include ten charges, two drug trafficking offences, two possession of firearms and further charges

including possession with intent whilst the camera pans over a backlit sunset view of 'Foxye' on a horse claiming 'I'm not that bad'. The rodeo is presented as an opportunity for change, which further contributes to this amnesic spectacle:

**Rodeo captain:** We've got a lot of girls here who I call role models. They've figured out how to do their time. We can take someone like 'Foxye' here, they've got a career. They've got a lot of confidence now.

The criminality of these women is loosely recorded, with references portrayed as a result of extenuating circumstances such as lack of family ties; Oklahoma's Methamphetamine problem; its status as the number one state to lock up women; or merely the naivety of youth. 'Foxye' goes as far as to admit that she 'took the rap' for her boyfriend, while Jamie explains how she got into a bad situation when she was 17, which started as a basic robbery but turned into her shooting a man in the head and her receiving a 30-year sentence. Indeed, the programme goes on to provide a narrative for Jamie as reformed character, centralising her parole hearing as part of the documentary.

Meanwhile, Danny had so far served 13 years of a 30-year sentence for first-degree murder. Instead of paying attention to this detrimental fact, the Master of Ceremonies at the rodeo instead welcomes this '13-year veteran' to take a bow centre stage while the whole crowd around him cheer. Another inmate admits that he 'consider[s] it an honour to be his friend'. Not only are these prisoners constructed as role models, but they are also winners. 'Foxye' enjoys the dizzy heights of two consecutive years placing first in the bareback riding explaining that the rodeo has become 'the best of times in the worst of times'. As the following user review

illustrates, this alludes to a kind of empathy with the prisoners, which can be contentious for those who confess the need for prison to be a very punitive place:

It achieves a number of worthwhile things, among them introducing us to criminals so we come to see them as human beings with hopes and dreams in an age where portraying all criminals as monsters is more the rule ... Also, some darker aspects of this world are touched on, but not explored. For example, the fact that Oklahoma has almost twice the normal rate of women in prison. (User review of *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* from IMDb 2012)

In documenting this spectacle, however, the film also provides a more critical commentary on spectatorship, as evidenced by the rodeo-goers; the issues raised, it is implied, are just as relevant to the film's TV audience. When asked why they come to watch the rodeo, for the most part people respond that it was an opportunity for families to see their friends and relatives taking part in the deep and fairly prestigious rodeo tradition of Oklahoma State. Yet, for others, the reason is both stark and much darker:

**Rodeo Visitor:** It's a gladiator-type thing. We want to come and see people do this who haven't got anything to lose ... You'll see people trying to get a hold of something they can't really have and they're still reaching.

**Danny:** A lot of people just come here to see us get hurt. You know, gladiators, and we go out there to bleed for them.

The audience seem to forget that these are real people. Rodeo audiences in general admit to enjoying the thrills and particularly the spills of these dangerous events, but having prisoners participate gives some an added expectation of those risk-taking non-citizens whose 'lives have less to lose' (Prisoner, *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo*). Their status as mothers, fathers, siblings, children, citizens, is forgotten in the narrative of the spectacle of risk and danger:

**Danny:** I've seen guys get messed up pretty bad, you know, it's not just broke[n] arms, broke[n] legs, jaws broke[n]; I mean all kinds of stuff, we're talking about injuries that's gonna be forever.

The camera technique further spectacularises these harrowing events for us as TV-viewers. Fast cutting, close range shots of the activities in the bull ring connote chaos and replicate the real-life pace of the action (see Figure 3). In other parts of the film, prisoners are frozen mid-air to intensify the force of the bulls' horns and these shots are directly juxtaposed with others of prisoners with blood injuries, facial disfigurements or being attended by medical staff. Some of the most risky activities are even repeated several times throughout the film, much like a goal scored in a football match, inviting the audience to view these occasions as highlights in the documentary.

[insert figure 3 – portrait]

**Figure 3:** Chaos in the rodeo ring

**Source:** *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* 2009

This drive to provide audiences with media coverage of criminal behaviour and its punishment has, of course, also become a key feature of TV news reporting. Recent examples include the live coverage of gunman Raoul Moat's stand off with police on 9 July 2010 after the shootings of three people including a police officer. News channels broadcast the events 'as they happened' right up until the moment when Moat was shot by police. Barbara Ellen (2010) of *The Observer* wrote that everything that happened '(hiding out, taunting police, blowing your own brains out) could double as a scene from a Bruce Willis action drama'. The television footage, with its carnival atmosphere, leads me to question why it has come to be that the media can now make

(tragic) heroes from criminals – a version of reality television that pushed the boundaries of a genre we are becoming more obsessed with (Hughes 2006). As Ellen (2010) notes, ‘Moat’s sickness met our sickness and we were locked together in a deathly embrace, broken only by adverts’. Clearly a desire to witness punishment has not disappeared with its displacement behind prison walls. Whether it is also a desire for voyeurism or a fascination with the performance of transgression and violence, ‘the combination of topicality and limited knowledge of the audience make prisons a suitable subject for the [media]’ (Mason 1995, 187).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that, following the disappearance of corporeal punishment from public space to the ‘closed world’ of the prison, spectacle of punitive measures has instead been displaced into other cultural constructions such as architecture, literature, and more recently to the visual imagery produced by television and film. Although the spectacle has been well addressed its collaboration with the politics of amnesia make it a key discussion point for scholars interested in emotion and ‘affect’. Representations such as TV and film exist as ‘more than representations’; they shape popular imaginations and, in turn, have a profound import for policy and intervention. Both *The Visit* and *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* provide important examples of how the television media can spectacularise prison life for a variety of different purposes. In *The Visit*, the absence of any concrete visual representation of the inside of the prison, combined with a creation of likeable characters, performs an amnesiac affect that hides the danger or grim reality of prison life and replaces it with notions of soft prison, or at the very least a nonchalant attitude to the harsh realities of incarceration. In contrast, although

*Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* paints some of its subjects as heroic pictures, the spectacle of the rodeo environment is made explicit, raising questions around our views of the body of the criminal transgressor as a suitable vessel for brutal, gladiatorial punishments. It is fair to say that the differing attitudes towards the penal system may be attributed to the genre of the programme; however, what is evident is television's powerful capacity, through its constantly-developing visual technologies to generate spectacle that are far more emotive or 'affecting' than anything we have seen before.

In considering the affective nature (in this case the amnesia) of carceral spectacles we can open up the political (prisons and society) at a personal level, learning to critically reflect upon how geographies of inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, prisoner and civilian, come to be variously ordered and disordered by a contemporary media that fascinates us.

## **Programmes**

In order of appearance in text:

*Convict 99 (1938)* Gainsborough Pictures

*I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932)* Warner Brothers

*Good Time Girl (1949)* Sydney Box Productions

*The Weak and the Wicked (1953)* Marble Arch Productions

*Now Barabbas (1948)* De Grunwald Productions

*The Criminal (1960)* Merton Park Studios

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962)* Woodfall Film Productions

*Scum* (1979) Berwick Street Productions

*Burning an Illusion* (1981) British Film Institute

*Greenfingers* (2000) Boneyard Entertainment

*Tomorrow La Scala* (2002) BBC

*Prison Break* (2005-2009) Fox 81 Episodes

*The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) Castle Rock Entertainment

*The Green Mile* (1999) Warner Brothers

*The Great Escape* (1963) The Mirisch Corporation

*Cool Hand Luke* (1967) Jalem Productions

*Dispatches: The Thief Catcher* 13 June 2011 C4 20:00

*Louix Theroux: Miami Mega-Jail* (1) 22 May 2011 BBC2 21:00

*Louix Theroux: Miami Mega-Jail* (2) 16 July 2011 BBC2 21:00

*See Hear: Deaf Prisoners* 13 November 2009 BBC1 01:35

*Holloway* (1) 17 March 2009 ITV1 21:00

*Holloway* (2) 24 March 2009 ITV1 21:00

*Holloway* (3) 31 March 2009 ITV1 21:00

*Strangeways* (1) 9 May 2011 ITV1 21:00

*Strangeways* (2) 16 May 2011 ITV1 21:00

*Strangeways* (3) 23 May 2011 ITV1 21:00

*Girls Behind Bars* (1) 1 March 2011 BBC1 23:20

*Girls Behind Bars* (2) 8 March 2011 BBC1 23:20

*Girls Behind Bars* (3) 15 March 2011 BBC1 23:20

*Porridge* (1974-1977) BBC 20 Episodes

*Angry Boys* (2011) Australian Broadcasting Corporation 12 Episodes

*Let's Go to Prison* (2006) Carsey-Werner Company and Strike Entertainment

*Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979-1986) Reg Grundy and Network Ten 692 Episodes

*Bad Girls* (1999-2006) ITV 107 Episodes

*Oz* (1997-2003) HBO 56 Episodes

*The Visit* (2007) BBC 7 Episodes

*Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* (2009) 13 November 2009 C4 22:00

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