

Legitimating the Prison – Reproducing Cultural Hegemonies: The Case of American Prison Movies

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Résumé: *Je me suis attaché à démontrer que la plupart des films américains qui traitent de l'univers carcéral suivent le même modèle, à savoir ils dressent une barrière qualitative entre la souffrance du dernier arrivant condamné à tort et le reste des individus qui peuplent la prison. Plus exactement, les films sont l'histoire de la victimisation injuste d'un type innocent qui appartient à la classe moyenne des blancs hétérosexuels et à qui le spectateur devrait s'identifier. Récurrence remarquable, le héros-victime tombe sur un ramassis de vrais criminels méchants qui sont fréquemment des afro-américains et quelquefois homosexuels. Circonstance aggravante, le héros connaît d'habitude le processus symbolique de la «féminisation» (les gardiens violents et sadiques, les viols «homosexuels» et le temps passé «au trou» jouent un rôle important). Le film s'achève d'habitude sur l'évasion de cette figure d'identification et le traitement perfide prend fin.*

Mon but était d'argumenter que ce scénario récurrent ressort clairement à des démarcations culturelles plus larges. En d'autres mots, dans la majeure partie des films américains du genre, la prison est conçue comme un espace où se reproduit l'homophobie de la société et l'hégémonie culturelle de la classe moyenne: à l'issue de ces narrations, la masculinité du héros et, par voie de conséquence, le pouvoir phallique de la classe moyenne blanche sont restaurés. Qui plus est, vu que d'habitude la figure d'identification finit par s'évader, le problème qu'on est en droit de se poser c'est de savoir quels sont «les clients de droit» des prisons: l'argument subliminal des films en question c'est que les membres de la classe moyenne blanche et hétérosexuelle ne devraient pas se retrouver en prison alors que les «déviants» (les afro-américains et les homosexuels) sont bons pour.

Keywords: *prison, film, ideology, United States of America, minorities.*

1. Introduction

This article illustrates that most American prison films follow (more or less) the same pattern. To begin with, they tend to focus on one prison newcomer who is wrongfully convicted and then suffers under a brutal system. In a second step, American prison films typically draw a qualitative difference between the suffering of this prisoner-hero and the rest of the prison population who are represented as “real” criminals. In other words, while the fate of our unique identificatory figure is represented as being terrible and unjust, the attitude towards the mass of ordinary prisoners is complicit with the view that “real” criminals have to be imprisoned.

And these delimitations are then linked to wider cultural demarcations. Our newcomer is typically a member of the white and heterosexual middle class, and has to go through a process of symbolic “feminization” that threatens his masculinity.¹ The dehumanizing induction process, violent and sadistic guards with long batons, “homosexual” rapes, and time in the “hole”, i.e., solitary confinement in complete darkness, normally play an important role. Furthermore, the galleries of “real” criminals that surround our prisoner-hero and deserve what they get, are frequently African-American or prison rapists who are coded as homosexuals. The ill-treatment of our identificatory figure is then usually countered by means of his escape so that the manliness of our hero and, by extension, the phallic power of the white and heterosexual middle class is restored.

In what follows, I will illustrate this pattern by providing a close reading of some scenes from Frank Darabont’s film *The Shawshank Redemption*, which was released in 1994. I will discuss this movie because it is one of the most well-known prison films. On the Internet Movie data base of the top films of all times, female voters rated *The Shawshank Redemption* as the best film (<<http://www.imdb.com/chart/female>>) and male voters as the second best film of all times (<<http://www.imdb.com/chart/male>>). I would also like to stress that roughly the same pattern can be observed in other American prison films such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain-Gang!* (1932), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Papillon* (1973), *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), or *Down by Law* (1986).²

2. A Close Reading of The Shawshank Redemption³

Our identificatory figures in American prison films are usually prison newcomers who are wrongfully imprisoned or they are convicted for apparent transgressions or accidents. For example, in *The Shawshank Redemption* the city banker Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) is wrongfully convicted for murdering his wife and her lover and descends into the hell of the Shawshank State Prison, where he is exploited and raped.⁴ As Joe Włodarz has shown (2001), the film plays upon a retroactive establishment of Andy Dufresne’s innocence. That is to say, at the beginning, we think that he is guilty of the crime and we gradually learn that he is actually innocent.

At first glance, one may feel that this almost essential erasure of criminality on the part of the central protagonist correlates with an attempt to construct a fictional counter-discourse to society’s strategies of stigmatising prisoners. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes that the innocent hero is almost always constructed as an exception within the prison world. He is normally surrounded by galleries of guilty or “real” criminals who “belong where they are”. Most American prison films question the legitimacy of the central protagonist’s incarceration but tacitly accept imprisonment when it comes to the other prisoners.

For instance, at first glance one may feel that *The Shawshank Redemption* condemns the prison system because the prison world is upside down. The Shawshank State Prison houses innocent inmates like Andy and is run by sadist criminals like Warden Norton (Bob Gunton) and Captain Hadley (Clancy Brown).⁵ However, the movie also represents the prison as a societal necessity because wicked murderers like Elmo Blatch, who committed the crime for

which Andy is incarcerated, exist. The representation of this devilish criminal, who is once shown, laughing insanely with stereotypically bad teeth, demonstrates that prison films may also stigmatize criminals and justify the existence of prisons.⁶

Interestingly, the other inmates of the Shawshank State Prison – such as the African-American Red (Morgan Freeman), the voice-over narrator, or Brooks Hatlen (James Whitmore), the old prison librarian, Floyd (Brian Libby), and the stuttering Heywood (William Sadler) – frequently make jokes about the fact that they all claim to be innocent. To my mind, the message is obvious: they are all guilty of the crimes they were convicted for. Like most other American prison movies, *The Shawshank Redemption* participates in a discourse of subtle pro-prison propaganda that tries to persuade its recipients of the existence of evil criminals and thus of the necessity of prisons.⁷

During the course of the induction process, the film visually illustrates the transformation of Andy Dufresne into prisoner #37927. All remnants of his former identity are taken away. His naked body is hosed down in a steel cage with high pressure water spray. After that, the inmate's body is covered with white delousing powder. As part of the degrading induction process, the newcomers are given prison uniforms and a bible, and are marched exposed and naked to their individual cells. It is also worth noting that the prison in the film is “laden with morose colors and foreboding shades of gray” which set the tone for Andy’s “feeling of despair and isolation”. The cinematographer Deakins said that “the whole approach [...] was a sort of cool, gray light and cool, gray exteriors” (qtd. in Probst 1995: 63).⁸

In the days that follow the induction process, our prisoner-hero normally has to go through a number of rituals that correlate with a process of passivization and symbolic “feminization”.⁹ For example, the prison in *The Shawshank Redemption* puts the newcomers' masculinity on trial from the beginning on. The hardened cons take bets on who of the new inmates will break down crying during his first night. While the new inmate called “Fat Ass” proves to be too unmanly to survive prison, Andy passes the first test of his manliness because during the whole night, he “never made a sound” (as Red, the voice-over narrator, tells us). “Fat Ass”, on the other hand, breaks down crying and the sadist Captain Hadley beats him to death with his night-stick. The violence establishes the prison as a hellish testing-ground for masculinity, and our sympathies are directed toward Andy who turns out to be a “real” man.

The other important ritual in American prison films is normally the rape. Three things are noteworthy about these rapes. First, they are coded as homosexual acts because they normally constitute the only existing form of homosexuality in these movies. Most American prison movies ignore the wide range of consensual types of homoeroticism that exists in real prisons. Second, the rapists are always guilty of the crimes they were convicted for and thus clearly belong where they are. Third, these sexual assaults, which are coded as homosexual acts, are exclusively enacted upon our white prisoner-hero and never upon African-Americans.

Let me illustrate these points with regard to *The Shawshank Redemption*. (1) To begin with, *The Shawshank Redemption* codes the rapes by Bogs Diamond and his gang, the so-called ‘sisters,’ as homosexual acts by ignoring the various consensual types of homosexuality that are mentioned in Stephen King’s novella “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption” (1982) on which the film is based. When Andy Dufresne in the film learns that the prison’s rapists

have taken quite a liking to him, he states that he is “not homosexual”. Red replies: “Neither are they. They’d have to be human first. They don’t qualify. Bull queers take by force. It’s all they want or understand”. While O’Sullivan believes that the film “tries to make clear” that its rapists “are not intended to be a representation of gay sexuality” (2001: 332; fn 8), Joe Włodarz comments on this statement in a more insightful way. For him, such “nods of tolerance basically acknowledge” a “dangerous slippage [from rape to homosexuality, J.A.] [...] and yet fail to curb that very slippage” (2001: 79). Indeed, like most American prison films, *The Shawshank Redemption* codes rapes as homosexual acts because they constitute the one and only existing form of homosexuality in prison. The narrator of King’s novella distinguishes various forms of homosexuality which he contrasts with homosexual rape. Surprisingly, these two consensual types of homosexuality are left out in the cinematic version:

Homosexuality, like straight sex, comes in a hundred different shapes and forms. There are men who can’t stand to be without sex of some kind and turn to another man to keep from going crazy. Usually what follows is an arrangement between two fundamentally heterosexual men, although I’ve sometimes wondered if they are quite as heterosexual as they thought they were going to be when they get back to their wives or their girlfriends. There are also men who get ‘turned’ in prison. In the current parlance they “go gay”, or “come out of the closet”. Mostly (but not always) they play the female, and their favors are competed for fiercely. And then there are the sisters. They are to prison society what the rapist is to the society outside the walls. (King 1995: 29–30)

For some strange reason, Kermode, who compares the novella with the film, does not address the interpretive consequences of this omission, and merely argues that Red’s “discussion is compacted and clarified somewhat by Darabont’s adaptation” (2003: 25).¹⁰ In contrast to Kermode, I argue that this omission is significant because it codes rapists as homosexuals.

The representation of the rapist Bogs enhances this coding of rapes as homosexual acts. Bogs is a rather bizarre synthesis of attributes that are stereotypically associated with effeminate gay men and qualities that are typical of rapists. His ‘feminine’ facial expressions and gestures clearly turn him into a “faggot”. It is also worth noting that the film feminizes the prison’s rapists by calling them “sisters”. This is significant because rapists in real American prisons practise a perverse cult of masculinity, and their nicknames (“stud”, “old man”, and so forth) never allude to any feminine qualities (Büssing 1990: 61).¹¹

(2) Furthermore, Bogs and the other “sisters” are represented as criminals who have to be imprisoned. They clearly deserve what they get. Interestingly, the film even sanctions a harsher type of punishment for Bogs. Once Andy has endured a number of rapes, the sadist Hadley and another guard brutalize Bogs so severely that he is a cripple afterwards. Red and the other inmates do not care about this brutalization at all. As if this were not enough, the inmate Heywood is shown smiling when he witnesses the bandaged Bogs being transferred to another institution. Hence, the film does not only code rapists as homosexuals and homosexuals as

guilty criminals: it additionally sanctions the brutalization of such “deviant” forms of masculinity.

(3) The sexual assaults in *The Shawshank Redemption* are exclusively enacted upon Andy Dufresne, our white prisoner-hero. The film nowhere indicates that the African-American Red was ever raped by the “sisters”.¹² And this is a general tendency in American prison films: African-Americans are significantly distanced from sexual victimization. Hence, it is notably *white* masculinity (rather than masculinity in general) which is threatened by the “homosexual” rapists in American prison movies.

Moreover, our prisoner-hero typically has to spend time in the “hole”. Jarvis argues that “the hole is a fecund symbol [...], connoting not only grave and womb but also the rectum” (2004: 175). Indeed, in the “hole”, the prisoner is typically turned into some sort of “abject”.¹³ In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne is sent to the “hole” when he asks Warden Norton about the possibility of getting a new trial after Tommy Williams told him that Elmo Blatch had killed his wife and her lover. Norton sends Andy to the “hole” because he knows that the former banker runs his various corrupt scams and obviously does not want him to get out of prison. The inmate is shown huddling in dark and painful corners of the “hole”, and he has to shield his eyes from the blinding light when the door is finally opened again: we do get a sense that the prisoner is “washed out” by the full front lighting.¹⁴ After having spent time in the “hole”, our heroes are typically broken men, and it normally does not take very long until they finally leave the prison.

At the end of most American prison films, our identificatory figures fool everyone and break out of prison. It is never the case that one of the guilty African Americans (such as Sebastian [Everett Brown] in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang!*, English [Paul Benjamin] in *Escape from Alcatraz*, or Red in *The Shawshank Redemption* or) or one of the guilty “homosexual” rapists (such as Wolf [Bruce M. Fisher] in *Escape from Alcatraz* or Bogs in *The Shawshank Redemption*) manages to break out of prison. The outbreak is always accomplished by our innocent, white, heterosexual, and middle-class hero.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy escapes through a dark tunnel that leads to a sewage pipe. When he emerges from the pipe in the middle of a rain shower, he extends his arms up to the sky, and the voice-over tells us that Andy “crawled through a river of shit and came out clean on the other side”. The purifying water of the rain shower cleanses the inmate who had to suffer severely from the various types of symbolic “feminization” in prison.¹⁵

3. Conclusion

To conclude: American prison movies present us with fictional stories about the unjust victimization of innocent members of the white and heterosexual middle class, and additionally code African-American and homosexual inmates as “real” criminals who have to be punished. American prison films are primarily sadomasochistic fantasies that allow their viewers to vicariously experience (and enjoy) processes of degradation, dehumanization, and victimization in an exotic setting from the safety of their homes. Luckily enough, at the end of these fantasies, everything is back to normal. The recipients and their innocent identificatory

figures are free, while the “real” criminals are still incarcerated. And average viewers will not care about these “deviant” individuals because they only identified with the “poor” prisoner-hero anyway.

Hence, American prison films legitimate the prison as an institution and they reproduce existing cultural hegemonies. We are not only told that we need prisons because wicked criminals exist; we also learn that the prison is a space for African Americans and homosexuals. Since the many images of the escaped prisoner-hero (like the image of Andy in the cleansing rain shower) correlate with the restoration of the phallic power of white middle-class men, American prison films can be said to openly reproduce, glorify, and stabilize the cultural hegemony of the white and heterosexual middle class.

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- ¹ Since it is certainly reductionist to speak of “masculinity” in the singular, I wish to stress that various different forms of masculinity exist. Gender roles are never stable or fixed but hyper-legible and artificial. Traditional masculinity correlates with a clear preference for heterosexual practices (as opposed to homosexual ones) and sometimes even homophobia. Also, traditional manliness correlates with toughness as well as a stress on activity (as opposed to passivity) and dominance (as opposed to submission).
- ² For further lists of American prison films see Querry (1973), Hale (1982), Nellis (1982), Crowther (1989), Parish (1991), Mason (2003), Alber (2004), and Alber (2007). For more about the relationship between American prison movies and the real situation in American prisons see Alber (2003).
- ³ Parts of this chapter have been reproduced with permission from my *Narrating the Prison: Role and Representation in Charles Dickens' Novels, Twentieth-Century Fiction, and Film* (2007). I would like to thank Cambria Press for the permission to partly reproduce material here. For alternative readings see Pawelczak (1994), Probst (1995), Hampe (1997), O'Sullivan (2001), Kermode (2003), and Jarvis (2004).
- ⁴ The prison we see on the screen is the former Ohio State Reformatory, a century-old prison located in the town of Mansfield, OH, which was closed in the 1980s. When we first see the gothic prison in the film, the camera, mounted on a helicopter, climbs from a low-angle shot of its facade to a bird's-eye view of the yard, picking out hundreds of inmates. The shot then “pans sideways as the camera looms down over a roof-top to reveal the bus [which contains the newcomers, J.A.] turning into the entrance” (Probst 1995: 66).
- ⁵ Hadley beats the inmate “Fat Ass” (Frank Medrano) to death and brutalizes the rapist Bogs Diamond (Mark Rolston) so severely that he is a cripple afterwards. Norton exploits the prisoners as slave labor and uses the ex-city banker Andy to run his various corrupt scams. When the innocent Andy wishes to get a new trial because the new young inmate Tommy Williams (Gil Bellows) told him that Elmo Blatch (Bill Bolender) had committed the crime for which Andy was incarcerated, Norton sends Andy to the “hole”. Since Tommy declares that he would testify that Andy is innocent, Norton orders Hadley to kill Tommy.
- ⁶ For analyses of the ideological underpinnings of prison representations in nineteenth-century fiction see Alber/Lauterbach (2009).
- ⁷ O'Sullivan also argues that most American prison films “actively contribute towards legitimizing prison as a form of punishment” (2001: 321).
- ⁸ For an analysis of a German film clip that uses the prison to frighten potential bootleggers into lawful behavior see Alber/Brandenstein (2008).
- ⁹ For an analysis of how these rituals correlate with increasing levels of bodily awareness see Alber (2004).
- ¹⁰ The general tendency of Kermode's analysis is to merge the novella and the film by frequently pointing out “that Darabont gets what King means” (2003: 34) or noting “an admirable devotion to King's source novella” (ibid.: 74). Kermode does not usually differentiate between the written version and the film adaptation.
- ¹¹ The perpetrators of rapes in real American prisons typically view themselves as heterosexuals. In order to preserve a heterosexual identity while engaging in homosexual behavior, the aggressors ‘feminize’ their victims, placing men who play “female” roles in submissive positions. From this perspective the crucial point is not that they are

having sex with a man; “instead it is that they are the aggressor, as opposed to the victim – the person doing the penetration as opposed to the one being penetrated” (Mariner 2001: 70). The film *The Shawshank Redemption* completely ignores such identity constructions.

¹² Interestingly, in King’s novella, Red is white (we learn that as a kid, he had “a big mop of carroty hair” [55]) and was likewise raped in prison: “[...] am I speaking from personal experience [concerning rapes, J.A.], you ask? – I only wish I weren’t” (31).

¹³ According to Julia Kristeva, the “abject” deconstructs the distinction between object and subject, and threatens to draw us into an abyss where “meaning collapses” (1982: 2). More specifically, the “abject” refers to ways in which we may react (e.g. through horror or vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between “self” and “other”. For Kristeva, primary examples of objects that may cause such a reaction are corpses, open wounds, excrement, sewage, and so forth.

¹⁴ See for example the photograph in Kermode in which “Andy cowers from Norton’s Luciferian light” (2003: 66).

¹⁵ For more on cinematic metaphors in *The Shawshank Redemption* see Alber (forthcoming).

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