

***Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and Prison
in Early Twentieth-Century America, by
Alison Griffiths. Columbia University
Press, 2016, 440 pp.***

Gwenda Young

Carceral Fantasies offers an exploration of the significance of the prison, in representations on screen and in relation to concepts of alternative/non-traditional exhibition spaces. As Alison Griffiths notes, prisons are indisputably real, concrete entities, but ones that the majority of citizens will never physically enter; instead, our contact with them is structured and mediated by an array of visual and literary representations. The result of such accumulated exposure is the cultural formation of what she terms, a “carceral imaginary” (1).

The prison as a site-within-film may immediately be invoked as a defining constituent of such an imaginary. The establishment of thematic conventions, a well-defined aesthetic and, frequently, the sculpting of material to suit a particular star, may be assumed to have emerged in the early sound era, in a series of narrative films released by Warner Brothers, including Mervyn LeRoy’s seminal, *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) and Michael Curtiz’s hard-hitting *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932), but as Griffiths points out, the entertainment potential of prison-set films was identified almost as soon as cinema began. *Carceral Fantasies* deftly traces the diverse lineage of the prison film, from early trick films and slapstick comedies that relocated their generic lampooning of authority to a specific penal setting, to earnest melodramas and social justice films that engaged with Progressive-era debates regarding crime, punishment and rehabilitation. That early cinema should take an interest in the visual and narrative potential of the individual body, contained, constrained and punished, should come as no surprise, given its emergence from a popular culture that had a veritable obsession with the body pushed to its limits, in spectacles of “ideal” incarnations or death-defying encounters or conceptualised as a vulnerable site subject to manipulation and transformation. Consider, as Griffiths does, the centuries-long appeal of carnivals and circuses; of scientific expositions that treated attendees to live demonstrations of animal vivisection or to experiments that showcased the effects of electricity on a restrained human body; of atmospheric magic lantern events, Hale’s Tours and “Necromancy Shows” that immersed and stimulated spectators, visually, aurally and corporeally (the latter, pioneered by Johann Halles in 1784, used mild electric charges to shock an audience that was simultaneously viewing ghostly apparitions created by means of a modified magic lantern).

Central to this story of the cinema and prison is the technological revolution of the nineteenth century, one that profoundly shaped the developmental trajectory of photography and film and, it turns out, state-sponsored incarceration. Griffiths offers a fascinating account of how Thomas Edison, the “inventor” of cinema (at least, in America), was financially

invested in the emerging industry of film production/exhibition and, more tangentially, in a penal sector that was striving for greater efficiencies in the maintenance, surveillance and ultimate containment, through execution, of inmates. As she notes, “as peripatetic devices, early cinema and electric chairs could become mobile deliverers of spectacle” (49). Indeed, Edison found ways to combine his interests when, in 1901, his company released *The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*, a reenactment film of the electric chair execution of Leon Czolgosz, the man convicted of the assassination of President William McKinley.

In mapping out its history of the cinema and prison in early twentieth-century America, *Carceral Fantasies* furnishes textual analyses of specific examples of films featuring prison life. Of more significance, though, is Griffiths’s exploration of the context in which such films were screened and received. A substantial portion of the book is devoted to examining how prisoners responded to filmic representations of the state of incarceration and here the author draws from first-person accounts and extensive archival sources, including in-house publications such as Sing Sing (Ossining) prison’s *Star of Hope*, to elucidate the powerful hold that cinema exercised over a truly captive audience. As she notes, the privilege of watching films made many prisoners feel less disconnected from the outside world and, in some instances, more receptive to the rehabilitative measures designed to expedite their reintegration back into it. Not all prisoners were equal, however: Griffiths reveals the gender bias in operation in the penal system of the early twentieth century, with female prisoners more likely to be offered “domestic” activity, such as sewing, to pass the time and help them prepare for their expected roles on the outside.

Prison inmates that did attend movie nights were generally treated to carefully curated programmes, especially in the early Progressive era when the majority of films were religious in theme and didactic in approach (many having been donated by well-meaning benefactors, anxious to bring the “uplift” movement to those judged most in need). If prisoners of the early 1900s were forced to sit through several sermons a week—in chapel and on screen—by the mid-1910s some authorities were adopting a more relaxed approach, permitting the screenings of comedies, dramas and star vehicles. By then, too, the relationship between the film industry and the prison industry had become closer and more strategic, driven by a recognition of the mutual benefit that such a link could bring. Several progressive prison governors, such as Sing Sing’s Thomas Osborne, facilitated production companies eager to film on location and to use inmates as “authentic” (and presumably, cost-neutral) extras. In 1915, Osborne even made an appearance in one of the earliest examples of a prison/heist film, Maurice Tourneur’s *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, which also featured several shots of real prisoners on drill in the prison yard. In time, the film was given its “penal premiere” at the facility, much to inmates’ delight (a variation of the long-established tradition of filmmakers producing participant-driven content, if you will). For Osborne’s part, allowing Tourneur to shoot in the prison brought very tangible benefits, including the promotion of his own efforts to reform conditions and to create an image of Sing Sing as a model (and modern) military-style institution. Governors of other prisons soon followed Osborne’s lead in fostering good relations with the film industry, cognisant of the likelihood that donations of prints and equipment would result. More importantly, though, prison authorities came to realise that screenings could play a part in helping them to achieve the fundamental imperative of the penal system: the smooth regulation of prisoners’ time and space. A cinema show could also foster goodwill between prisoners and their wardens; defuse tensions in the powder-keg atmosphere of the penal environment; encourage the incarcerated—by exposure to redemptive narratives—to be receptive to rehabilitation initiatives; and allow the toughest of prisoners to be affected by sob stories, safe in the knowledge that the darkness of the exhibition space would conceal their tears.

In its exposition of the multifaceted relationship between cinema and prison—as real and imagined spaces—*Carceral Fantasies* is a provocative and engrossing read. Griffiths’s study also makes a significant contribution to histories of cinema-going and early twentieth-century visual culture, and to our understanding of the complexities that underpin the dynamics between spectator and spectacle.

References

- Alias Jimmy Valentine*. Directed by Maurice Tourneur, World Film Company, 1915.
- The Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison*. Directed by Edwin S. Porter. Edison company, 1901.
- I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Directed by Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Brothers, 1932.
- 20,000 Years in Sing Sing*. Directed by Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers, 1932.

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Gwenda Young is a lecturer in Film Studies in University College Cork, Ireland. Her most recent publication is *Clarence Brown: Hollywood’s Forgotten Master*, published by University Press Kentucky, 2018.