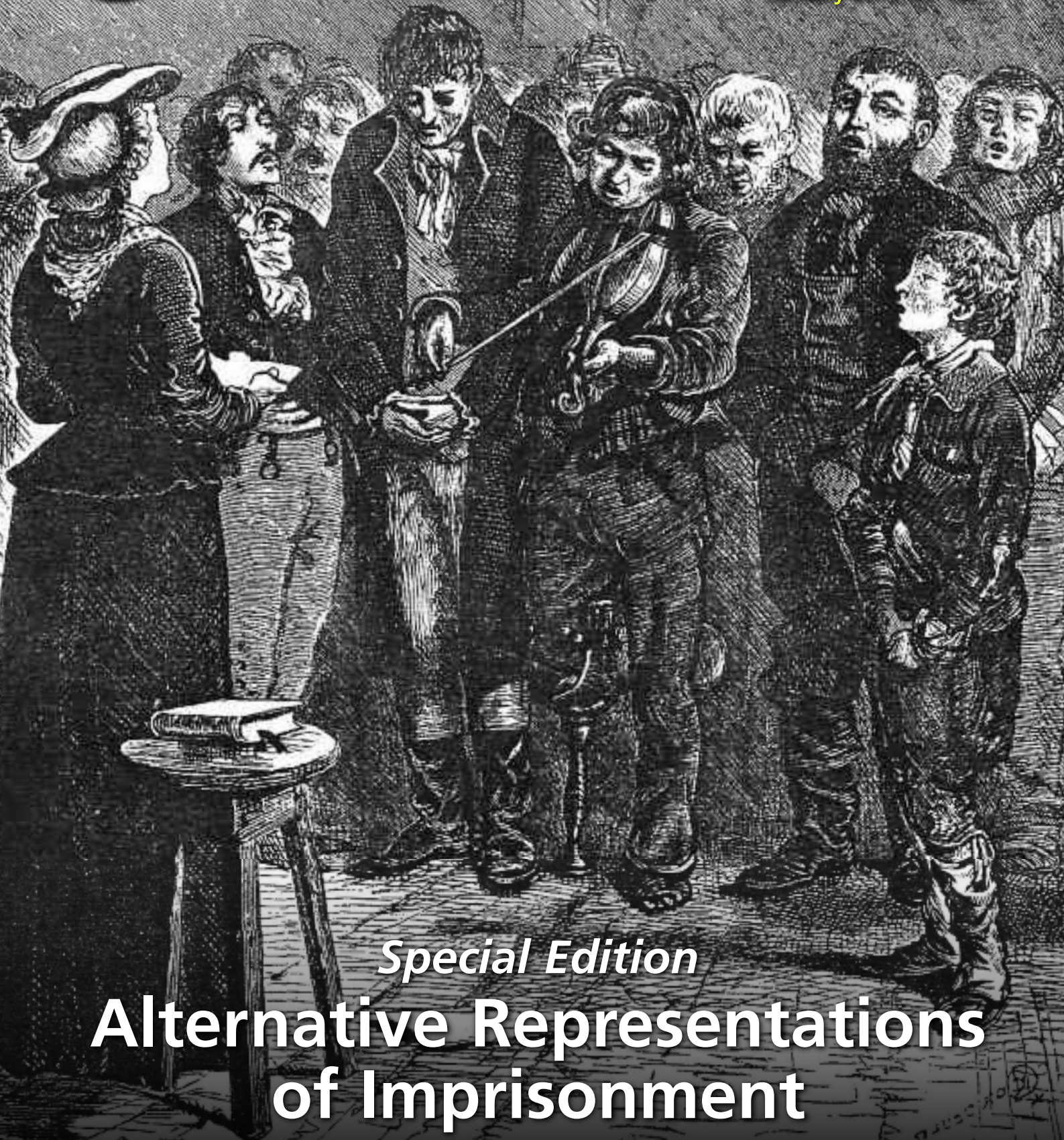


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**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

Alternative Representations of the Prison and Imprisonment

— Comparing Dominant Narratives in the News Media and in Popular Fictional Texts

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Introduction

During the course of our lives we will see countless crimes being committed, watch police interviews with suspects, observe trials, witness murders and eavesdrop on heated interactions between criminal justice professionals. We will also get to see the inside of the prison on a regular basis, in the process witnessing everything from parole hearings to riots, bullying and sexual assaults. But for those of us who do not work in the criminal justice system or have never been one of its 'clients', these experiences will be vicarious — read on the pages of a book or newspaper, viewed on a screen, and shared in conversations with others. Perhaps not surprisingly, the possible relationships between popular cultural representations¹ of criminal justice and public attitudes and perceptions have been a significant and continuing source of both popular and academic debate². For much of the 20th century there was a significant criminological focus on the possibility of 'media effects' — the assumption that public attitudes, beliefs and behaviour are significantly influenced by cultural representations of crime and criminal justice³. While criminologists are increasingly embracing a more nuanced conception of the relationships between popular cultural representations of crime and criminal justice and the attitudes and beliefs of members of the general public, the idea that these popular cultural representations 'do things' to us is one that still resonates with politicians, the media and many sections of the public. This perceived relationship has been used to try to identify significant causal factors for everything from gun and knife crime and other examples of

supposed 'copycat' violence, to increasing levels of fear of crime and punitive attitudes amongst the general public. I do not have space in this article to unpack the complexities of the media effects debate as it has been applied to crime and punishment. However, I do wish to focus on one particular aspect of the representation of criminal justice — the depictions of prisons and imprisonment in popular culture, and the possible relationships between these depictions and wider attitudes to prisons and imprisonment amongst those sections of the public who hold punitive views.

Prisons and the Punitive Public

There are many reasons for examining representations of the prison and their possible relationships to public attitudes. For most of the developed world imprisonment is the most severe penalty available, and as such has assumed significant symbolic power in public debates about crime and punishment⁴. The last 20-30 years have also seen a significant increase in the use of imprisonment alongside an apparent crisis of public confidence in the rehabilitative ideal.⁵ But this is also a period in which a range of ongoing challenges to the certainties and predictabilities of the lives of the socially included have apparently led to the emergence of an increasingly punitive public,⁶ associated not just with growing support for the use of imprisonment, but also attracted to the notion that the experience of imprisonment should be as unpleasant as possible. The apparent existence of this punitive public is routinely and regularly reaffirmed in opinion polls suggesting not just widespread support for the use of imprisonment but also for 'tougher' prison regimes.⁷

1. Throughout this piece I use the term 'popular cultural representations' to refer to the broad range of representations of the prison and imprisonment, including both popular news media coverage and fictional representations.
2. For an extensive discussion of these trends, see Jewkes, Y (2011) *Media and Crime* (2nd edition) London: Sage.
3. Ibid.
4. Wacquant, L (2008) 'Ordering insecurity: Social polarization and the punitive upsurge' in *Radical Philosophy Review* 11:1 p.9-27.
5. Garland, D (2001) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* Clarendon: Oxford University Press.
6. Ibid, see also Wacquant (2008) Op cit; Young, J (1999) *The Exclusive Society: Social exclusion, crime and difference in late modernity* London: Sage.
7. Daily Telegraph (2011) *Prisons must be tougher, says survey*. 2nd April.

To what extent can we demonstrate that these apparent public attitudes to imprisonment are reflected in the (mis)representation of the prison in popular cultural texts? An emerging body of recent literature has linked popular representations with popular public sensibilities regarding imprisonment. For example, the routinely pessimistic representation in prison cinema of the experience of imprisonment as dangerous, brutal, bleak and violent has been linked by a number of commentators to the apparent crisis of public confidence in the ability of prisons to rehabilitate inmates.⁸ The representation of punishment in popular culture, with an emphasis on a narrow range of apparently simple and unproblematic explanations for criminality and solutions to crime has also been associated with the perceived public susceptibility to 'sound bite' politics, with politicians and the electorate apparently locked in a spiral of offering and demanding simplistic 'quick fixes' to the problem of crime.⁹

But the examples outlined above also raise a number of issues about the representation of prisons and imprisonment in popular culture. One of the first challenges to any assumption of an unproblematic relationship between representations of the prison and public attitudes to imprisonment is the fact that, perhaps more than any other aspect of the representation of crime and criminal justice in popular culture, representations of the prison appear to be fragmented and often contradictory. Various attempts have been made to construct typologies that link representations of the prison in particular historical periods with dominant discourses of imprisonment

during that period¹⁰. As Mason¹¹ has pointed out, attempts to associate the representations of imprisonment produced in a given historical period with dominant attitudes to imprisonment during that period are routinely problematised by the existence of alternative, contradictory representations of the prison produced during the same time frame. However, there is one set of typologies for differentiating representations of imprisonment which do seem to account for a majority of examples. Rather than attempting to impose chronological divisions in cultural representations of the prison, I would argue that a significant set of distinctions begin to emerge if we differentiate between the representation of the prison in popular news media and in fictional popular cultural texts.

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The Prison in 'fact' and 'fiction' — Alternative representations?

As Cheliotis¹² argues, while there is an established tradition in 'quality' journalism of presenting a nuanced and complex picture of prisons and imprisonment, this is significantly overshadowed by

the 'culturally poor but economically rich'¹³ journalism of mass market populist news media¹⁴, whose coverage of prisons (in the UK at least) is structured around the repetition of simplified inter-related narratives of prisons and imprisonment¹⁵. These populist narratives routinely focus on the perceived failure of prison regimes and environments to be suitably *punitive*. In their study of media responses to temporary release schemes, O'Donnell and Jewkes¹⁶ not only chart the pervasive sense of outrage in UK news media coverage of the

8. See for example Cheatwood, D, (1998) 'Prison movies: Films about adult male civilian prisons: 1929-1995' in Bailey, F and Hale, D (eds) *Popular culture, crime and justice* Belmont: Wadsworth; O'Sullivan, S (2001) 'Representations of prison in nineties Hollywood cinema: From *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*' in *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 40:4 p.317-34.
9. Ryan, M (2006) 'Red tops, populists and the irresistible rise of the public voice(s)' in Mason, P (ed) (2006a) *Captured by the media: Prison discourse in popular culture* Cullompton: Willan.
10. See for example Cheatwood (1998), Op cit; Wilson, D and O'Sullivan, S (2004) *Images of incarceration: Representations of prison in film and television drama* Winchester: Waterside press p.35.
11. Mason, P (2003) 'The screen machine: cinematic representations of the prison' in Mason, P (ed) *Criminal Visions: Media representations of crime and justice* Cullompton: Willan.
12. Cheliotis, L (2010) 'The ambivalent consequences of visibility: Crime and prisons in the mass media' in *Crime, Media, Culture* 6:2 p.169-184.
13. Op cit:179.
14. In this context I am referring primarily to the 'Redtop' tabloid newspapers (cf Ryan, 2006 Op cit) although these narratives can also be found in those elements of popular TV news that take a 'tabloid' approach (eg *Sky News*).
15. Detailed analysis of these trends in tabloid coverage of prisons can be found in Ryan (2006) Op cit and Mason, P (2006b) 'Lies, distortion and what doesn't work: Monitoring prison stories in the British media' in *Crime, Media, Culture* 2:3 p.251-267.
16. O'Donnell, I and Jewkes, Y (2011) 'Going home for Christmas: Prisoners, a taste of freedom and the Press' in *The Howard Journal* 50:1 p.75-91.

prospect of convicted offenders being allowed to spend Christmas with their loved ones, but also identify a number of wider recurring motifs in popular media coverage of the perceived experience of imprisonment; that of pampered, well-fed, leniently supervised prisoners enjoying privileges often denied to their victims and to society at large — a recurring and ongoing popular reaffirmation of the concept of ‘less eligibility’. Popular news media stories of prisons and imprisonment routinely embrace an urban mythology of prisoners who ‘brag’ that the prison is like a hotel or holiday camp,¹⁷ or who allegedly demand luxuries as a right (*‘We’ll sue to get satellite TV sports say convicts’*¹⁸). Particular ire is reserved for perceived overemphasis on the ‘human rights’ of prisoners (*‘Grinning rapist wins votes for lags by 2011’*¹⁹; *‘Jail must call gang boss ‘Mr’*²⁰) or attempts by prisoners to receive compensation for adverse experiences in prison (*‘Lags want £300K for dodgy egg roll’*²¹). These media narratives are also routinely critical of the perceived willingness of prison authorities to acquiesce with the demands of prisoners and of perceived attempts by prison authorities to improve the experience of imprisonment for inmates (*‘Prison cooks told to spice up meals’*²²; *‘£500,000 survey to ask prisoners if they like their life behind bars’*²³). So far, from this brief overview of popular news media representations of the prison, we can see a strong and recurring focus on the depiction of imprisonment as not *sufficiently punitive*. However, when we shift the focus to fictional representations of the prison, an alternative, apparently contradictory, set of narratives can be identified.

In general, fictional prison texts do not replicate or reflect these dominant popular news media discourses about prisoners living lives of comfort and ease. There are examples of individuals or small groups of prisoners

in fictional crime texts who appear to enjoy a comfortable existence in prison, but as a narrative trope this is routinely used to indicate the status of the privileged prisoner in organised crime networks rather than a more general comment on conditions in the prison establishment — for example, Henry Hill and his fellow ‘wise guys’ serving their first sentence together in *Goodfellas* (1990), who bribe guards, avoid prison work and spend most of their time preparing gourmet meals. The existence of these privileged prisoners is routinely used to highlight both the impoverished conditions of ‘normal’ prisoners and the inherent corruption of a prison system that would tolerate (or even profit from) these inequalities. But the dominant focus of much popular fictional representation of the prison is on the dangerous, violent, atomised experience of imprisonment, and the constant threat of bullying, physical violence and sexual abuse²⁴ — even if only to create a context against which a ‘prison innocent’ can endure and then overcome the indignities of a brutal prison regime²⁵. From *Scum* (1979) to *Dog Pound* (2010), from *Papillon* (1973) via *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) to *Oz* (1997–2003) and *Prison Break* (2005–2009) and in numerous other similar prison texts, the dystopian representation of the experience of imprisonment has arguably

become the dominant narrative trope in fictional representations of the prison.

This leaves us with something of a puzzle. It is clear that within the wider frame of popular cultural representations of the prison and imprisonment, there are two sets of alternative representations; two equally well established but ostensibly diametrically opposed ways of imagining, constructing and depicting the prison experience in the popular imagination. Does this suggest the possibility of two differentiated audiences ‘out there’, a punitive public enthusiastically consuming

Popular news media stories of prisons and imprisonment routinely embrace an urban mythology of prisoners who ‘brag’ that the prison is like a hotel or holiday camp, or who allegedly demand luxuries as a right.

17. The Sun (2010) ‘Killers pics from ‘holiday camp’ cell’, 30th December.

18. The Daily Express (September 27th 2011).

19. The Sun (24th November 2010).

20. The Sun (6th December 2010).

21. The Sun (13th December 2010).

22. The Daily Express (14th July 2010).

23. The Daily Mail (2nd March 2011).

24. For a much more extensive analysis of the violent, brutal and repressive character of the Prison in popular fiction, see for example Jarvis, B (2006) ‘The violence of images: Inside the prison TV drama Oz’ in Mason (2006a) Op cit; Mason (2003) Op cit; Mason, P (2006c) ‘Relocating Hollywood’s prison film discourse’ in Mason (2006a) Op cit; O’Sullivan (2001) Op cit; Hallsworth, S (2004). ‘Make my day: images of masculinity and the psychodynamics of mass incarceration’ in Lippins, R (ed) *Imaginary Boundaries of Justice* Oxford: Hart.

25. Wilson and O’Sullivan (2004) Op cit:44.

tabloid media narratives of ineffectual prison regimes that agonise over the rights of pampered prisoners; and a less punitive public steeped in the fictional narratives of the violent squalid and de-humanising prison (and as a result perhaps more amenable to the idea of prison reform and the use of non-custodial penalties)? If we discount this possibility, how can we explain how (and why) many fictional representations of the prison apparently contradict widely held beliefs (as evidenced by popular news media coverage) about the contemporary experience of imprisonment, yet still remain genuinely *popular*? Is it simply the case that punitive audiences unproblematically recognise that news media narratives are 'real', while prison films and other texts are fictional and therefore have no effect or influence? Wilson and O'Sullivan argue that the consumption of fictional prison texts is a much more nuanced activity than this, and can be regarded as a process of 'discounting and *unconscious acceptance*':

*We do not take fictional representations to be literally true, but once we discount the element in them that we regard to be dramatic licence, what remains unconsciously influences our implicit beliefs.*²⁶

As part of a wider research project into punitive public attitudes, King and Maruna examined patterns of consumption of fictional texts by members of the public who held generally punitive views.²⁷ Echoing the work of Garland, Young, Wacquant and others²⁸, they found significant links between personal biographies of anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity, and more punitive attitudes amongst respondents. But they also found some interesting patterns in the preferences for fictional texts amongst this punitive group. Punitive attitudes were in part sustained through engagement with fictional texts which offered the possibility of *order* — a clear distinction between right and wrong and between 'good' and 'bad' characters, an imagined world in

which justice always prevails and the innocent always overcome adversity to ultimately triumph.²⁹ In the accounts provided by participants themselves about the appeal of particular texts, prison texts such as *The Shawshank Redemption* offered punitive respondents this possibility of order — a sense of ontological certainty and reassurance derived from these texts, *apparently* despite the recurring critical depictions of a brutal and brutalising prison environment that routinely feature in these fictional representations of the prison.

But the use of fictional representations of the prison by punitive audiences raises another possibility—not that these texts are consumed and enjoyed *despite* the brutal and violent portrayals of the prison environment, but in part *because* of them. In his classic work on the sociology of deviance, Erikson argued that the shift from public punishment as a collective spectacle to the privatisation of punishment via its disappearance behind the prison wall 'coincides' with the emergence of increasingly popular crime texts which provided morally simplified tales of transgression, punishment and resolution.³⁰ For Erikson, the growing popularity of these crime texts was precisely because they offer a surrogate for the collective moral resolution formally provided by public punishment. This theme is developed by Nellis and Hale, who argue that in the absence of public punitive rituals,

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cultural representations of moral transgression and resolution (in this case the prison film) become 'fantasies of punishment'³¹ in which audiences are finally able once again to see justice being done.

But if the fictional representation of the prison as a violent dystopian space allows the punitive public to indulge their fantasies of punishment, how can we explain the portrayal of prisons in popular news media, which as we have seen, focus on the contention that prisons are not sufficiently punitive? In order to answer this we need to explore further the possible relationships between cultural representations of the prison and the 'identity work' carried out by punitive individuals.

26. Wilson and O'Sullivan (2004) Op cit:16.

27. King, A and Maruna, S (2006) 'The functions of fiction for a punitive public' in Mason (2006a) Op cit.

28. See n6.

29. The appeal of the simple and certain moral resolutions offered by fictional crime texts is explored in detail by Sparks, R (1992) *Television and the drama of crime: Moral tales and the place of crime in public life* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

30. Erikson, K (1966) *Wayward Puritans. A study in the sociology of deviance* New York: Wiley & Sons.

31. Nellis, M and Hale, C (1982) *The Prison Film* London: Radical alternatives to imprisonment p.62.

Representing the Prison — Displacing the Punitive Ideal?

One of the themes which runs through the work of King and Maruna discussed earlier is the extent to which, for these punitive respondents, fictional texts offer a reassuring *ideal*, a view of the social which reflects the norms and values of the punitive individual, which portrays the world as they think it *should be*. This theme can also be traced through into the popular prison narratives that emerge after the decline of public punishment — narratives whose violence and brutality (tempered by the inevitable redemption of the innocent) offers a kind of punitive wish-fulfilment³².

But the idea that a cultural text or artefact can be the embodiment of an ideal, which can be engaged with through the consumption of the artefact, is one which is well established in the sociology of consumption and material objects³³. In his work on the relationships between consumption practices and identity, McCracken highlights the tension between the *real* and the *ideal*, between how we think the world around us is, and how we think that it *could* or *should be*.³⁴ One of the tensions which is most significant in terms of its potential psychological impact on individual identity is the possibility that our ideals, if put into practice, would not have the imagined or desired outcomes. Consequently, a significant component of the mechanisms we use to develop and protect a sense of self-identity is the defence of our ideals from this possible outcome. McCracken argues that there are a number of cultural strategies which are employed to defend the distinction between the 'real' and the 'ideal' in social life, most notably the strategy of 'displaced meaning'³⁵. Displaced meaning strategies are employed by individuals or groups to

remove ideals from the problematic daily social 'reality' within which they might be discredited. This is a strategy which:

... does more than shelter cultural ideals. It also helps to give them a sort of empirical demonstration. When they are transported to a distant cultural domain, ideals are made to seem practicable realities. What is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world is now validated, somehow 'proven', by its existence in another, distant one. With ideals displaced, the gap between the real and the ideal can be put down to particular, local difficulties³⁶.

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We could, for example, construct the ideal of a society in which crime is an easily controlled, marginal social problem, a society in which the experience of imprisonment prevents re-offending and in which the possibility of imprisonment deters individuals from committing crime in the first place. This ideal can be protected from the messy reality of contemporary life by its displacement into a mythical past (where prison was a 'real' deterrent, before 'do-gooders' started to interfere). Or it could be displaced into a possible future (which could be brought about if only politicians and

policy makers would listen to the public and adopt the right policies). Alternatively it could be spatially displaced (we could deal with crime if we copied some other society which apparently does not have a 'crime problem' due to much more punitive sentencing policies). McCracken suggests that once an ideal has been safely displaced in this fashion it can be *recovered* for use by individuals in the construction and maintenance of coherent self-identities:

32. Mason, P (2006d) 'Prison Decayed: Cinematic Penal Discourse and Populism, 1995-2005' in *Social Semiotics* 16:4 p.607-626.

33. Dant, T (1999) *Material culture in the social world* Buckingham: Open University Press.

34. McCracken, G (1990) *Culture and Consumption — New Approaches To The Symbolic Character Of Consumer Goods* Bloomington: Indiana University Press p.104n.

35. *Ibid*: 105.

36. *Ibid*: 106.

Recovery must be accomplished in such a way that displaced meaning is brought into the 'here and now' without having to take up all of the responsibilities of full residence. When displaced meaning is recovered from its temporal or spatial location, it must not be exposed to the possibility of disproof.³⁷

He argues that the consumption of cultural artefacts or texts which embody this ideal is a common strategy for the 'safe' recovery of displaced ideals into the here and now. This could account for the kind of preferences and readings of fictional texts identified in King and Maruna's work on punitive individuals, and it also helps to contextualise the appeal of violent dystopian prison texts discussed earlier. The portrayal of the prison as a profoundly dangerous and violent environment vicariously satisfies the conception of the harsh prison regime as an effective deterrent. But in the process, the innocent are always ultimately vindicated and the truly bad always punished, so any niggling doubts that justice will ultimately triumph are dispelled.

This notion of narratives which protect a displaced ideal can also help to explain the role (and influence on some sections of the public) of popular news media representations of the prison. The routine media representation of prisons as places regarded as 'holiday camps' by their inmates, as environments overly focussed on the comfort, well-being and rights of prisoners, can be regarded as a subconscious strategy to protect the displaced punitive ideal. If this punitive ideal holds that crime would be reduced if only we used imprisonment for a wider range of offences, then the

fact that this has already happened cannot be acknowledged. If it asserts that criminals would be deterred from re-offending if we sent more of them to prison for longer, then it must ignore rises in both the prison population and in average sentence lengths. If the ideal includes an implicit assumption that dangerous, violent prison environments would act as an additional informal deterrent if only we became less focussed on caring for prisoners, then issues of self harm, suicide, bullying and abuse in our prison system cannot feature heavily in popular news media coverage of the prison. The current situation in our prisons poses a profound challenge to the punitive ideal, because in many respects it is already a manifestation of that ideal in operation. Consequently, recognition of this reality has to be all but absent from popular news media coverage of the prison and imprisonment.

So, while we can legitimately characterise the popular cultural portrayal of the prison as fundamentally an interplay between *alternative* representations, this is not necessarily indicative of *oppositional* representations. Rather, we could argue that these two significant alternative representations have served a unifying purpose in the consumption practices (and the maintenance of defensible self identities) of the punitive public. The assumption that a more punitive approach would solve the crime problem *if only it was tried* cannot really cope with the possibility that in many respects this punitive approach has *already* been implemented. As a result, the punitive ideal has to be represented as a desired *future* alternative to an existing prison regime, which is routinely constructed and presented in these popular news media narratives as stereotypically permissive and ineffectual.

37. Ibid: 107-8.