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From Alcatraz to Dannemora: 'flights from' and 'flights to' in prison escape stories

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'In the newspapers, on television, in the whole range of media, the prison is simply not recognised as a fiasco, but as a necessary if not always fully successful method of reaching its purported goals. The prison solution is often taken as paradigmatic'

Mathiesen's complaint has been echoed by many criminologists and prison campaigners. If, they argue, there has been an evident swing during the last thirty years towards a more punitive, emotive political rhetoric in discussions about prison — sometimes called penal populism — it is at least partly to do with a parallel trend in the mass media towards more sensational depictions of crime and prison.² We know from studies of crime news and fictional representations of crime that there has been a gradual shift in the last fifty years towards greater coverage of serious, violent crime.³ Pratt, in reviewing the role of the mass media in the rise of penal populism, highlights too the tendency for contemporary crime news to over-simplify complex social problems, over-rely on anecdote and testimonial account, and focus on high-profile, exceptional crime-related incidents.⁴ The compound effect of all this is that the mass media depiction of crime and criminal justice has come to diverge markedly from empirical reality (however problematic this 'reality' may be).

This is an especially pertinent problem when it comes to media stories about prison and incarceration because, as Fiddler points out, the relative public inaccessibility of the modern prison means that

representation is especially likely to come to stand in for reality.⁵ The small body of writing about media depictions of the prison tends to trace similar patterns to those noted above. Discussing films of prison release, Bennett observes that '[t]he representation of release from prison in popular cinema can be described in general terms as a movement from a mainstream concern with humanity and social justice to a default position where those released from prison are dangerous, violent and unreformed'.⁶ Marsh notes the tendency in contemporary media accounts for the prison to be depicted as variously a 'too soft' holiday camp or a place of unrelenting violence.⁷ And for others, the dominant cultural representation of the prison in the twenty-first century has become the Hell-hole. Deploying Dante's *Inferno* as an analytical framework, Jewkes convincingly argues that media depictions of prison draw upon culturally-entrenched ideas about Hell and its inhabitants.⁸ Her broader point is that this cultural representation of prison works to confirm that certain people — the poor, ethnic minorities, the socially-marginalised — belong there, and that this in turn lends legitimation to the political project of mass incarceration in the late twentieth, early twenty-first century.

So, too, do these depictions work to confirm that other sorts of people *don't* belong in prison — that some people, by dint of social background and personal attributes, have a particular and undeniable desire for freedom. This article is interested in this idea.

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1. Mathiesen, T. (2000) *Prisons on Trial*. London: Waterside. P. 144.
 2. See, for example, Mason, P. (2006) 'Prison Decayed: Cinematic Penal Discourse and Popularism 1995-2005', *Social Semiotics*, 16(4): 607-26 and O'Sullivan, S. (2001) 'Representations of Prison in Nineties Hollywood Cinema: From *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(4): 317-34, 321.
 3. See, amongst others, Reiner, R., Livingstone, S. and Allen, J. (2003) 'From Law and Order to Lynch Mobs: Crime News Since the Second World War' in P. Mason (Ed.) *Criminal Visions: Media Representations of Crime and Justice*. Collumpton: Willan. Pp. 13-32.
 4. Pratt, J. (2006) *Penal Populism*. London: Routledge.
 5. Fiddler, M. (2007) 'Projecting the Prison: The depiction of the uncanny in *The Shawshank Redemption*', *Crime, Media Culture*, 3(2): 192-206. 193.
 6. Bennett, J. (2008) 'Reel life after prison: Repression and reform in films about release from prison', *Probation Journal: The Journal of Community and Criminal Justice*, 55(4): 353-68, 358.
 7. Marsh, I. (2009) 'Representations of prisons in the British media — or are we being fair to holiday camps?' *Criminal Justice Studies: A Critical Journal of Crime, Law, and Society*, 22(3): 367-74.
 8. Jewkes, Y. (2014) 'Punishment in Black and White: Penal "Hell-Holes", Popular Media, and Mass Incarceration', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 22(1): 42-60.

I have two key aims: to identify key features of the prison escape narrative in fiction film and television and, by way of a focussed discussion of three such narratives, to tentatively consider some of the ways that these representations have changed over the last fifty years.

My point of departure is that prison escape narratives are often about something 'more' than the daring feat of a prison-break — even as they might be about this too. Clover makes a similar point about trial movies when she argues that they tend to have a 'double trial structure'.⁹ That is, they follow a specific court case and, at the same time, put certain values or cherished beliefs 'on trial'. The classic trial movie *12 Angry Men*¹⁰ is a case in point: the film is just as interested in a specific instance of jury deliberation as it is the deeper problems with the jury-system.

I want to suggest that we also see the prison escape narrative as having deeper, or broader concerns — we might call it, after Clover, a 'double escape structure'. Below, I suggest that prison escapes might be thought of in terms of two distinct narrative structures: as 'flights from' institutional structures and 'flights to' imagined-futures. As such, prison escape stories give shape and content to an otherwise abstract belief that freedom is a fundamental human good. They ask us to think variously about what we need freedom from, and what we need freedom for — and, I'm going to argue below, in such a way as to reflect (and in some rare cases take aim at) deeply held fantasies about escape. This article explores this idea through a focussed and comparative discussion of three popular prison escape stories from across this time-frame — the films *Escape from Alcatraz*¹¹ and *The Shawshank Redemption*¹², and the seven-part television series *Escape at Dannemora*.¹³ Before that, though, some more thoughts on how we might conceptualise prison escape stories.

Conceptualising the Prison Escape Story

The prison-break is an enduring feature of Hollywood prison movies. Take, by way of example, *The*

*Big House*¹⁴, released in 1930. The central protagonist, Morgan, is serving a long and entirely unproductive sentence in an over-crowded prison characterised by the constant jostling of inmates for privileges, power, and safety. He escapes, falls in love, and when he is recaptured he returns to prison more civilised by the promise of intimacy he has found in the outside world. When a prison riot and mass escape is planned, he refuses to take part and instead protects the prison guards from the ensuing violence. Morgan gets his freedom eventually, and the film asks us to think of this as the *right kind* of freedom, one that is appropriately directed towards building normative relationships in the outside world. Here, an original 'flight from' becomes a more meaningful — and enduring — 'flight to'.

Big House alerts us to the fact that some escape-routes are more culturally-permissible than others. In turn, cultural treatments of escape can tell us something about how our culture thinks about incarceration, and particularly who we incarcerate, and why. What they suggest, time and again, is that some people — quite beyond any crime of which they've been convicted — have a predisposition for freedom, whilst others simply can't be free, or wouldn't know what to do with freedom if they had it. In many instances, these are pernicious ideas — even more so, given that

we are living in an era of mass incarceration.

This is my point of departure for examining prison escape narratives in the post-1970s era. This is a period marked by the renewed popularity of fictional accounts of prisons and incarceration meant for a mass market. Within this, there is a marked interest in the prison escape narrative — and here we find great variety, from the brutal escape-quests of *Cool Hand Luke* and *Papillon*, to the dystopian vision of a prison state in *Escape from New York*, and thriller-prison escape hybrids, such as the hit television series *Prison Break*.

It's worth pausing here to reflect upon the possibility that the prison escape narrative is one that in some senses belongs to the period under review. Certainly, whilst prison films of the 1930s included prison-break as a plot device, the films and television

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9. Clover, C. (1998) 'God Bless Juries!', In N. Browne (ed.), *Refiguring Film Genres*. USA: University of California Press. Pp. 255-77.
10. Lumet, S. (dir.) (1957) *12 Angry Men*. USA: MGM, United Artists
11. Siegel, D. (dir.) (1979) *Escape from Alcatraz*. USA: Paramount Pictures.
12. Darabont, F. (dir.) (1994) *The Shawshank Redemption*. USA: Columbia Pictures.
13. Stiller, D. (dir.) (2018) *Escape at Dannemora*. USA: Michael de Luca Productions and Red Hour Productions.
14. Hill, G. (dir.) (1930) *The Big House*. USA: MGM.

series discussed below are ones — in common with other prison escape stories of this period — where there is a sustained focus on the planning, process, and/or experience of escape. Where the protagonist of *The Big House* makes opportunistic escapes in a matter of minutes, today's escapees spend impossibly long periods of time plotting and digging. To some degree this reflects changing ideas about what the prison is — more specifically, that, as a matter of course, the prison is an institution with almost total control over its inhabitants' lives, so that escape, when it happens, is a monumental feat. It reflects, too, the degree to which films and television series about prison intersect with cultural forms that have become especially dominant in the post-1970s period, most notably the Action Film genre, with its emphasis on the lone male protagonist's demonstration of extreme physical robustness against all odds.¹⁵ This is to think in very general terms about prison escape stories in the post-1970s period, and their relationship to broader socio-cultural currents. The article turns now to offer a focussed account of three prison escape narratives, each of them in some sense way-markers in the cultural treatment of the prison.

Free as a bird in *Escape From Alcatraz* (1979)

Released in 1979 and directed by Don Siegel, *Escape from Alcatraz* is an adaptation of a 1963 novel about a real-life prison escape. The film's opening scene is set in the plush, wood-panelled office of the Prison Warden. A newly admitted prisoner, Frank (played by Clint Eastwood) is being lectured by the Prison Warden (played by Patrick McGoochan). Unlike Frank, inscrutable and unflinching (the casting of Eastwood is crucial here), the Warden is a man of considerable affectation. He delivers his monologue whilst variously cutting his nails, sitting back to fill his handsome leather chair, and pacing round his office. A large table-model of Alcatraz Penitentiary dominates the office-space. The camera cuts at various points to a long-shot of the office, providing an over-head view of the model prison. It serves to reinforce the Warden's key message: Alcatraz is the USA's top maximum security prison, a perfect, unbreachable fortress, 'built to keep all the rotten eggs

in one basket' he explains, whilst playing meaningfully with his caged bird. Frank, by implication, must accept a similar fate.

By the late 1970s, the inescapable-prison and the indefatigable escapee had become such established conventions of the prison escape narrative — set up by films of the 1960s, such as *The Great Escape* and *Cool Hand Luke* — that the audience fully expects Frank to confound the Warden's expectations. We all know that birds aren't meant to be caged. In this respect the opening scene of *Escape from Alcatraz* sets up the terms of Frank's escape: this prison, so conceited in its pretence at sophistication, is no match for a man like Frank, with his natural will for freedom. As if to dispel any doubts we might have on this matter, as the scene closes the camera pans down sharply (as the Warden takes-up his nail clippers once more) to show the words 'I.Q. SUPERIOR' on Frank's official record. The stage is set for a 'flight from', or what Bennett calls 'escape as a form of resistance'.¹⁶

We follow Frank as he befriends inmates and makes enemies of others, including the prison guards. It's soon clear that Frank won't accommodate himself to prison-life and, more than that, is willing to be openly critical of the mistreatment of vulnerable prisoners. When the ageing Doc has his painting equipment permanently confiscated due to a minor infraction and has a break-down, Frank marks his absence from the meal-table by placing one of his much-loved chrysanthemums in his place. The on-duty prison guard takes considerable satisfaction in meanly squashing the flowers.

All of this lends considerable justification to Frank's desire to escape. In a set of scenes that have become typical of prison escape movies, we see Frank and his associates refashioning prison spoons and working out that the dilapidated prison walls could aid an escape. In one sense it is obvious that the prison's resources should become the means of escape — the very condition of imprisonment means that little else can be used to achieve this end. All the same, it is notable how frequently the prison as an institution is turned back upon itself to facilitate escape in prison escape stories. The forced routines of prison-life make planning an

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15. For some, the hybridity of the prison movie means that it is not quite a genre in its own right. This debate is beyond the remit of this article, but for readers interested please see Mason, P. (2006) 'Relocating Hollywood's Prison Movie Discourse' In (ed.) P. Mason (2006) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*. London: Willan. 191-209.
 16. Bennett, J. (2018) 'Representations of Prison Escapes in Film', In. (Eds) T.M.Martin and G. Chantraine. *Prison Breaks: Towards a Sociology of Escape*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp 265-290. P. 274.

escape possible (as inmates and guards are reliably to be found in certain places, at certain times). Skills taught simply for the sake of keeping prisoners occupied — in the case of *Escape from Alcatraz*, it's metalwork — become purposeful when directed towards escape. And unloved facilities and spaces, as well as guards who are inattentive to the needs and idiosyncracies of inmates, provide the means for escape.

These narrative conventions in prison escape narratives tend to direct us to see prison itself as implicated in not just the means, but the motive for escape. In most cases, though, this turns out to be a soft critique. More often than not, it is the specific prison — rather than imprisonment per se — that comes into critical focus. This is the case in *Escape from Alcatraz*. If Alcatraz is an uncaring and uncared-for environment, that's because it's Alcatraz. The final scene of the film is telling in this respect. In the aftermath of Frank and his associates' audacious escape, the Prison Warden discovers a chrysanthemum planted on the edge of the island, beyond the prison walls. It's a 'kiss off' moment — another convention of the prison escape movie — that takes aim at Alcatraz specifically.

It is also in keeping with one of the film's central themes: the idea that freedom is a natural condition — for certain people, at least. The idea that you can't stop flowers from blooming, irrespective of the experience of terror and pain, might put viewers in mind of the use of the poppy to commemorate those killed during war. In *Escape from Alcatraz*, the flower serves a similar symbolic function, providing a final push-back against an oppressive prison regime that has failed to recognise that human freedom lies in everyday, seemingly small acts of personal choice and expression (in this case, the chrysanthemum draws a connection to the decision to deny Doc access to his painting materials).

All the same, Doc remains in Alcatraz. It is Frank who is free in a material sense. Overall, the film works to confirm that some people in particular have an unquenchable — and unrefusable — instinct for

freedom. You just can't keep a good man down, as the saying goes. Frank — white, attractive, only violent when provoked, highly intelligent, a man of deed — is an embodiment of the 'good man', and it's this set of qualities, just as much as the institution's excessive attempts to control, that render his 'flight from' permissible (in the context of the film, at least). The character of 'Wolf' offers a key point of difference in this respect. Convicted of rape, Wolf is seemingly unable to control his animal-like violence (as his name not-so-subtly indicates), and as a result is recurrently made to spend time in solitary confinement. Wolf represents something very important in *Escape from Alcatraz*: the sort of prisoner who *should* be locked up, who is absolutely beyond rehabilitation, and violent beyond repair. This sort of animal belongs in a cage. Both characterisations — of Wolf and Frank — are, I want to suggest, deeply problematic. If the character of Wolf serves to demonstrate that we need prisons like Alcatraz, the character of Frank asks that we see other, more culturally-vaunted forms of masculinity as inviolable.

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Hope springs eternal in The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

Hollywood prison movies of the 1990s — such as *The Green Mile*, *Con Air*, *The Shawshank Redemption* — were amongst the most widely watched films of the decade.¹⁷ For many criminologists, the prison movies of this era reflect — and to some degree licence — the changing political climate of the late twentieth century, and more specifically, the rise of penal populism in late liberal democracies.¹⁸ Mason makes this point in an article reviewing prison movies from the mid-1990s through to the mid-2000s. He notes two key features to Hollywood prison films of this period: 'the graphic exploitation of violence and sexual assault' and 'the representation of prisoners as dehumanised other and deserving of harsh treatment'.¹⁹ The overall implication, he argues, is that prison is mainly inhabited by people with insatiable appetites for violence — that is, people

17. *Con Air* and *The Green Mile* were both blockbuster films. O'Sullivan notes that *The Shawshank Redemption* had limited success on cinema release, but went on to have very high yields as a video rental. O'Sullivan, S. (2001) 'Representations of Prison in Nineties Hollywood Cinema: From *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(4): 317-34.

18. See, for example, O'Sullivan, S. (2001) 'Representations of Prison in Nineties Hollywood Cinema: From *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*', *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40(4): 317-34 and Mason, P. (2006) 'Prison Decayed: Cinematic Penal Discourse and Populism 1995-2005', *Social Semiotics*, 16(4): 607-26.

19. Mason, P. (2006) 'Prison Decayed: Cinematic Penal Discourse and Populism 1995-2005', *Social Semiotics*, 16(4): 607-26. 611.

who seem like they *should* be there. The central source of drama in these films is the struggle of those who, for various reasons, *shouldn't* be there.

O'Sullivan makes a similar set of observations in his analysis of four prison movies from the 1990s, and here he takes *The Shawshank Redemption* (directed by Frank Darabont, released in 1994) to be an outlier. He points out that the film presents inmates as capable of rehabilitation, is nostalgic in tone (the film is set largely in the 1940s and 1950s) and as such, he argues, might be seen to be 'doing good by stealth'.²⁰ I want to suggest that we look at the film differently — as a quintessential 'flight to' narrative with, I will argue below, just as much of an exclusionary impulse as other prison movies of the 1990s.

Certainly, the film's opening scenes clearly signal that this is a 1990s prison movie. We follow Red (played by Morgan Freeman) as he walks through a busy prison yard. In his voice-over — he narrates throughout — he gently brags about his abilities to smuggle into the prison anything a prisoner wants. A loud siren starts, and it calls Red and others to something — we're not sure what yet. The camera pulls out, up, and sweeps over the prison, taking us outside its walls to show the approach of a prison van. Inside, at the back, sits Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins), looking nervous, smart but dishevelled, and thoroughly out-of-place. As the camera pulls outside of the van and back up

and over the prison, we realise that the siren marks the arrival of this new intake of prisoners. In a panning aerial shot, we watch the inmates — huge in number — slowly making their way to a prison entrance-point.

As with *Escape from Alcatraz*, then, the opening scene of *The Shawshank Redemption* offers us a bird's eye view of the prison building. In the earlier film, it's as a table-model in the Warden's office. Here, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, it's aerial shots of the building itself. The point, in both cases, is to emphasise the fortress-like qualities of the prison. In another, important respect, our early bird's eye view of Shawshank Penitentiary is different: this prison is peopled. In fact, the prison population is integral to

what makes this prison deeply threatening and overwhelming. As the van enters a holding bay area, cordoned off from the prison yard, the inmates crowd and rattle the wire mesh fence, jeering at the newcomers as they file out of the van. As O'Sullivan points out, this vision of the prison population has become part of the *mise en scène* of prison movies — and, it might be added, the cacophony of barely decipherable shouted taunts has become part of its distinctive soundscape — and it works to homogenise this population and make them seem like a built-in feature of the prison.

Wilson notes that the hero-protagonists of 1990s prison movies are often placed in stark contrast to the primordial prison population; they are the 'exceptional individual', wrongly-convicted or serving an overly-harsh sentence.²¹ We already know from the opening scenes of *The Shawshank Redemption* that Andy is a fish out of water. As the film progresses we learn that he has been wrongly convicted of the double-homicide of his wife and lover. His first years in prison are absolutely gruelling. He's raped, he's beaten, he's (almost) friendless.

What comes to save Andy — in the first instance, at least — is his middle-class education. In return for protection, the head guard (Captain Hadley, played by Clancy Brown) recruits Andy to do his personal accounts, money laundering and all. Andy is duly moved to the prison library, both

a safer and more suitably cultured environment. The other key source of support in Andy's life is Red, an old-timer who is variously incredulous at Andy's naivety about prison life and impressed by his refusal to put up and shut up. Early in the film, we see Red source a small pickaxe and a poster of Rita Hayworth for Andy. We only learn of their significance much later in the film — 19 years later, in narrative terms — when Andy is discovered to have escaped his cell. A guard furiously throws a rock at the poster (we've seen it be replaced with posters of other glamorous women over the years), only for it to pass right through, revealing an exit-route that Andy has been painstakingly creating over the years.

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20. O'Sullivan, S. (2001) 'Representations of Prison in Nineties Hollywood Cinema: From Con Air to The Shawshank Redemption', *The Howard Journal*, 40(4): 317-34. 326.

21. Wilson, D. (1993) 'Inside observations', *Screen*, 34(1), 76-9. 79.

Fiddler convincingly argues that Andy's escape is framed as a re-birth in the film, and that Shawshank Penitentiary constitutes a space akin to purgatory.²² By implication, Andy's escape requires an extraordinary leap of faith. What makes Andy's escape possible is his highly-developed understanding of freedom as something that requires a deep personal responsibility to ceaseless, existential hope. The means of Andy's escape is a neat demonstration of this. Through all the mundane, daily drama of the prison — the narrative focus for the film — Andy has been quietly burrowing away for 19 years. The fact that the process of escape is hidden from the audience's view reinforces the sense that this is a feat of great *inner* strength. This is the 'redemption' that the film's title refers to, and by implication the connection between hope and freedom is spiritual in character. That is, the film suggests that to be free — really free — is first a state of mind, and then a material state.

Throughout the film, we are asked to see hope and freedom as aesthetic experiences. In one of the film's most famous scenes, Andy barricades himself into the Warden's office and plays Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* over the prison tannoy system. Leaning back in the chair, eyes gently closed, Andy enjoys this short-lived moment of bliss. In the prison yard, the men stand still and silent, faces turned up to the tannoy, seemingly entranced by the operatic score. Still, the effect on them is short-lived. Returning from a stretch of solitary confinement in the 'hole', his punishment for taking over the airwaves of the prison, Andy — pale-faced and bleary-eyed — joins his fellow inmates at lunch. They tease him about whether it was worth it. A non-diegetic string score starts up as he explains to the men the importance of music in reminding him that 'there are places in the world that aren't made out of stone...that there's something inside that they can't get to...hope'. Red finds Andy's idealism irritating. The other men are nonchalant. The film's position on all of this is clear: hope, personally cultivated, is the only route to true freedom. This is what sets Andy apart from his fellow prisoners. This is what makes (real) escape possible.

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This message is especially clear in the film's closing scenes. Red is now out on parole and staying in a halfway house. We watch him packing in his bedroom. We've been in this room before — earlier in the film, when the elderly prisoner Brooks was released after serving a 50 year sentence, and, unable to cope with the outside world, committed suicide in this very bedroom. Red's voice-over draws this connection too: 'Get busy dyin', or get busy livin'....That's damn right', he says decisively. The camera travels upwards and settles on some graffiti carved into the wooden beam in the ceiling — 'Brooks was here', it reads, and next to it, 'so was Red'. Red won't fail at freedom like Brooks did, is the implication, and as the film closes, we see him join Andy on the postcard-perfect shores of a far-flung Mexican beach, by the pure blue of the Pacific Ocean. It is a deeply familiar cultural fantasy of the idealised 'flight to' — the stuff of dreams.

Fantasies of Escape in *Escape at Dannemora* (2018)

Rapping points to the steady proliferation of television dramas about the prison from the 1990s onwards.²³ Her focus is *Oz*, the hugely successful US television drama series set inside a fictional

maximum security prison, and Rapping suggests that the show contributed to a powerful cultural mythology that prison is a necessary storing-house for the unredeemable. Central to this, Youssman argues, is *Oz*'s depiction of its inhabitants — particularly its African American inmates — as superpredators engaged in 'constant, bizarre, spectacular, and sadistic violence'.²⁴

Looked at from this perspective, 1990s television series about prison seem to be doing much the same thing that prison movies of the same era do — that is, revive a retributive instinct and direct it in such a way as to entrench ideas about criminality and a carceral class. All the same, it's worth thinking about how television might be distinct in its effects as a medium. One thing that's important is the serial format of television programmes.²⁵ They're not unique in offering us stories in episodic form. Early novels tended to be serialised. Radio shows and podcasts, too, often have this feature.

22. Fiddler, M. (2007) 'Projecting the Prison: The depiction of the uncanny in *The Shawshank Redemption*', *Crime, Media Culture*, 3(2): 192-206.
 23. Rapping, E. (2003) *Law and Justice as seen on TV*. New York: New York University Press. Chapter Three.
 24. Youssman, B. (2009) 'Inside *Oz*: Hyperviolence, Race and Class Nightmares, and the Engrossing Spectacle of Terror', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 6(3): 265-84. 273
 25. I'm indebted to Alex Clayton for this set of observations — see, for example, Clayton, A (2013) 'why Comedy is At Home on Television'. in: J Jacobs and S Peacock (eds) *Television Aesthetics and Style*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York & London. 79-92

Serialisation offers up certain narrative or dramatic possibilities, particularly when it comes to repetition, the routine and the everyday. Sometime this works to show us what's comforting, peculiar, or amusing about the familiar — sit-coms work in this way — and sometimes serialisation can show us that routines can be oppressive, that cycles repeat, and that particular behaviours are horribly predictable and unchanging. To take *Oz* as a case in point: each episode, the same character types act out on the same base instincts and with the same brutal outcomes. The effect is to make violence seem inevitable — and, by implication, so too the maximum security prison.

Serialisation can achieve other effects, of course. In *Escape at Dannemora*, a seven-part television series broadcast in 2018²⁶, seriality instead works to depict prison-life as boringly repetitious and lacking in purpose. The story revolves around the relationship between prison sewing workshop supervisor Joyce 'Tilly' Walters (played by Patricia Arquette) and two inmates with whom Tilly is sexually (she thinks romantically) involved, convicted murderers David Sweat (played by Paul Dano) and Richard Matt (played by Benicio del Toro). Right from the start, we know things are going to end badly — that this is going to be in some measure a failed escape. The first episode opens with Tilly, cuffed and wearing prison uniform, being brought in for an interview with the Inspector General. Through this exchange we learn that there's been a prison-break, two men are on the loose and, it seems, Tilly is implicated. She asserts her innocence in all of this, but her petulance gives cause for wonder. She seems childish, naive and prone to self-delusion. As the story unfolds, it soon becomes clear that Tilly is a fantasist — that *Escape at Dannemora* more broadly, is centrally concerned with the fantasies of escape that emerge under conditions of social stasis.

We move from the present day back in time to watch Tilly travelling into work with her put-upon husband Lyle (played by Eric Lange). Like many of the locals, they work in the town's maximum security prison, Clinton Correctional Facility. There's something decidedly half-hearted about life at the prison. Guards buddy up with inmates. Staff bicker. Routines are followed, but not with much commitment. Tilly supervises the prison's sewing workshop. It's boring work — the same old routine, day in, day out — for

Tilly as well as the inmates. We watch them, too, trudge from 'home' to work (and this spatial association of prison with 'home' is reinforced by the vertical shots of the prison cells arranged like high-rise flats). Tilly barks out some orders and switches on the radio — she has a fondness for old-fashioned pop and rock — and all fall in with the familiar routine of the working day. When Tilly asks for inmate Sweat to join her in the storeroom, eyebrows raise. Everyone seems to know what's going on here. Furtive sex in the backroom is only part of it, though. Tilly imagines herself to be having a love affair with baby-faced Sweat — the sort of love affair that pop singers croon about. One moment she's petulantly scolding him, the next she's dotting on him and ragging about her inferior husband. When Sweat is moved out of the sewing workshop, his

mate Matt steps in to take his place as Tilly's favourite. He's more long in the tooth than Sweat — and more menacing and plainly manipulative, too. He easily co-opts Tilly to help him and Sweat escape so that the three of them can disappear to Mexico and set up home together.

It's the same 'flight to' fantasy that Andy dreams of in *The Shawshank Redemption* — the ocean-side get-away, and a new life without material constraint. In *Escape at Dannemora*, though, these escape-fantasies are quickly

punctured by reality. Like Andy, Sweat and Matt's moment of freedom, when it eventually comes, involves scrambling through a pipe into the outside world. Andy emerges from the sewer on the far side of Shawshank's walls to stand triumphantly, arms outstretched to the sheeting rain. Sweat and Matt instead emerge unspectacularly from a manhole into a quiet street in Dannemora. They've been stood up by Tilly — the plan was for her to be the get-away driver — and almost immediately panic sets-in. They roam around aimlessly, bickering quietly about where to go. As the final episode unfolds, it's clear that neither has the skills needed for escape, or indeed, life beyond the prison. Matt quickly unravels, starts drinking excessively, and is eventually gunned down and killed. Sweat, younger and fitter, more ready to try, makes it as far as the Canadian border before being shot and recaptured.

The problem is that Sweat and Matt haven't thought too seriously about what lies on the 'other side' of escape. Life on the run is exhausting, squalid,

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26. Stiller, D. (dir.) (2018) *Escape at Dannemora*. USA: Michael de Luca Productions and Red Hour Productions.

and dangerous. Matt ends up holed-up in an abandoned caravan-trailer. It's a decidedly unfree life of freedom. In other ways besides, *Escape at Dannemora* wants to draw a connection between life on the outside and life inside the prison, and in such a way as to suggest that there's something fundamentally inescapable about life in Dannemora (this is, after all, *Escape at Dannemora*, rather than *Escape from Dannemora*). Tilly is stuck in here. No amount of daydreaming can change that. The whole town — economically dependent on the local prison — feels like it's stuck in a rut or, at least, in an odd symbiotic relationship with the prison and its inmates.

In other ways besides, *Escape at Dannemora* suggests that the heart of the problem lies in late capitalism. Take, for example, the scenes set in the prison sewing workshop, where inmate labour is used to mass-produce clothes. It's monotonous work, driven by strict deadlines to meet orders rather than any strategy to rehabilitate. It says as much about the nature of work in post-industrial societies characterised by a decline in meaningful employment, as it does about the failure of the prison. Or, at least, we're urged to see the latter as inextricably linked to the former.

Take, too, the series' persistent suggestion that popular culture peddles sentiment — cliched, over-done, unoriginal, incoherent, and devoid of any real meaning. Escapist pop music — so beloved of Tilly — is a case in point, and so too are Matt's paintings. Like Doc in *Escape from Alcatraz*, Matt seems to find some solace in painting. Unlike Doc, Matt finds a way to trade on his creative talents, and these art-works — made for transaction, rather than pleasure — are exact copies of photographs of people and pets (ordered through a prison guard in return for privileges and favours). It's painstaking work, but totally inexpressive, and the finished goods have a mawkish, uncanny quality (they are, after all, copies of a copy of real-life).

It's tempting to conclude from all this that there's a fundamental fakeness to life at Dannemora, despite — or maybe it should be 'because of' — the soundtrack's persistent suggestions about finding 'real' love, Matt's attempts to faithfully replicate, and the characters' desire to escape the prison for a better life. On closer inspection, the deeper problem is the impossibility of progress, or simply moving on. To copy a photograph,

follow the same old sewing pattern, recite the words of a pop song, rehearse dreams of escape — all, crucially, practices promoted by late capitalism — is to rehash. The long-term economic stagnation of Dannemora and the institutional inertia that besets the prison contribute, too, to a troubling sense of stasis. *Escape at Dannemora* wants to suggest that all of this is interconnected. If, here, the prison is a failed institution, and if Matt, Sweat and Tilly are deluded by fantasies of escape, that's largely because they are products of a culture that has become denuded of purpose and meaning.

Conclusion

It has always been the case that freedom has to be earned in the prison escape story. That is as true of *The Big House* in 1930 as it is of *Escape at Dannemora* in 2018. There is, across all of these cultural treatments, a persistent suggestion that some people, by virtue of outlook, personality, and attributes, have a stronger claim to freedom than others. There are deep cultural structures at work here. It is, for example, no accident that escapees are almost always white men. There are also more historically-specific patterns evident in prison escape stories. Above, I described the prison escape stories explored in this article as way-markers in the cultural representation of the

prison and incarceration. It might be more productive to think of them not as distinct cultural 'moments', but rather as indicative of different strands of culturally-dominant thinking about incarceration in the late twentieth, early twenty first century.

Take, for example, the idea that Frank in *Escape from Alcatraz* is 'born to be free'. This owes much to the cultural motif of the indefatigable, freedom-loving 'good guy' and a historically-specific conception that individual autonomy is a good in and of itself. It's a distinctly modern idea, and it achieves particular cultural purchase in the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century, finding expression in such varied cultural forms as the Hollywood Western and the Action Film genre. In many 'flight from' prison escape stories of the post-1970s period too, the implicit idea is that external, institutional constraints place too great a burden on certain forms of privileged masculinity and, in turn, that those who belong in this category have a natural and irrefutable desire for freedom.

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This is one culturally-dominant idea about prison escape — and, beyond that, about who we think prison is for — but it's by no means the only one. Andy, in *The Shawshank Redemption* is, too, a product of his time, and his escape-route points to other cultural currents at work in prison escape stories of the post-1970s period. This 'flight to' story is concerned with freedom as an internal, emotional state of mind. The implication here is that it is up to the individual to cultivate the right emotional disposition for freedom. People have to *really* want to be free and work tirelessly towards this end. It's a convenient idea in the era of mass incarceration, implying, as it does, that prisoners in some sense choose to be unfree.

In this way, and others besides, the film chimes with the distinct brand of penal populism that had by the mid-1990s become a key feature of political debate. If, as others have pointed out, penal populism is characteristically emotive and punitive in tone and calls for more visceral, spectacular forms of justice, fantastical stories of personal redemption are surely its corollary. Both rely upon a manichean worldview, where (very) good people are perceived to be under attack by (very) bad people. When it comes to cultural treatments of the prison, the effect is to confirm that prison simply isn't for some people — men like Andy, in *The Shawshank Redemption*. It's for *other* men (and, like many other post-1990s prison movies, we get plenty of indications of what these 'other' men are like in *The Shawshank Redemption* — they're

members of the deeply violent carceral class, depicted as the prison-horde).

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, popular treatments of the prison reflect a situation where high-security mass incarceration has come to seem like a normal, self-evident criminal justice response to crime. So it is that the super-maximum security prison is presented as a highly unusual carceral arrangement in *Escape from Alcatraz*, appears unremarkable in *The Shawshank Redemption*, and in *Escape at Dannemora* seems like a matter of tired routine. In this 2018 television series the prison is akin to a residential complex — vast and somehow, too, a 'way of life'. *Escape at Dannemora* provides a critical perspective on this. In focussing on the symbiotic — and deeply toxic — relationship between the prison and local town, the series wants to suggest that the prison is part of a broader political economy that hinders social mobility and meaningful change. The fantasies of escape that grow up in this context are variously distracting and self-destructive, and they are part of the problem in *Escape at Dannemora*. No one gets to be free here, and the institutional inertia of the prison — far from being an exceptional response to a specific problem of crime — is taken here to be an epiphenomenon, linked to a broader problem of economic stagnation and cultural stasis. It asks of us a critical question — and it's the one I want to end on: why do we spend so much time imagining the condition of freedom and so little time scrutinising its material reality?