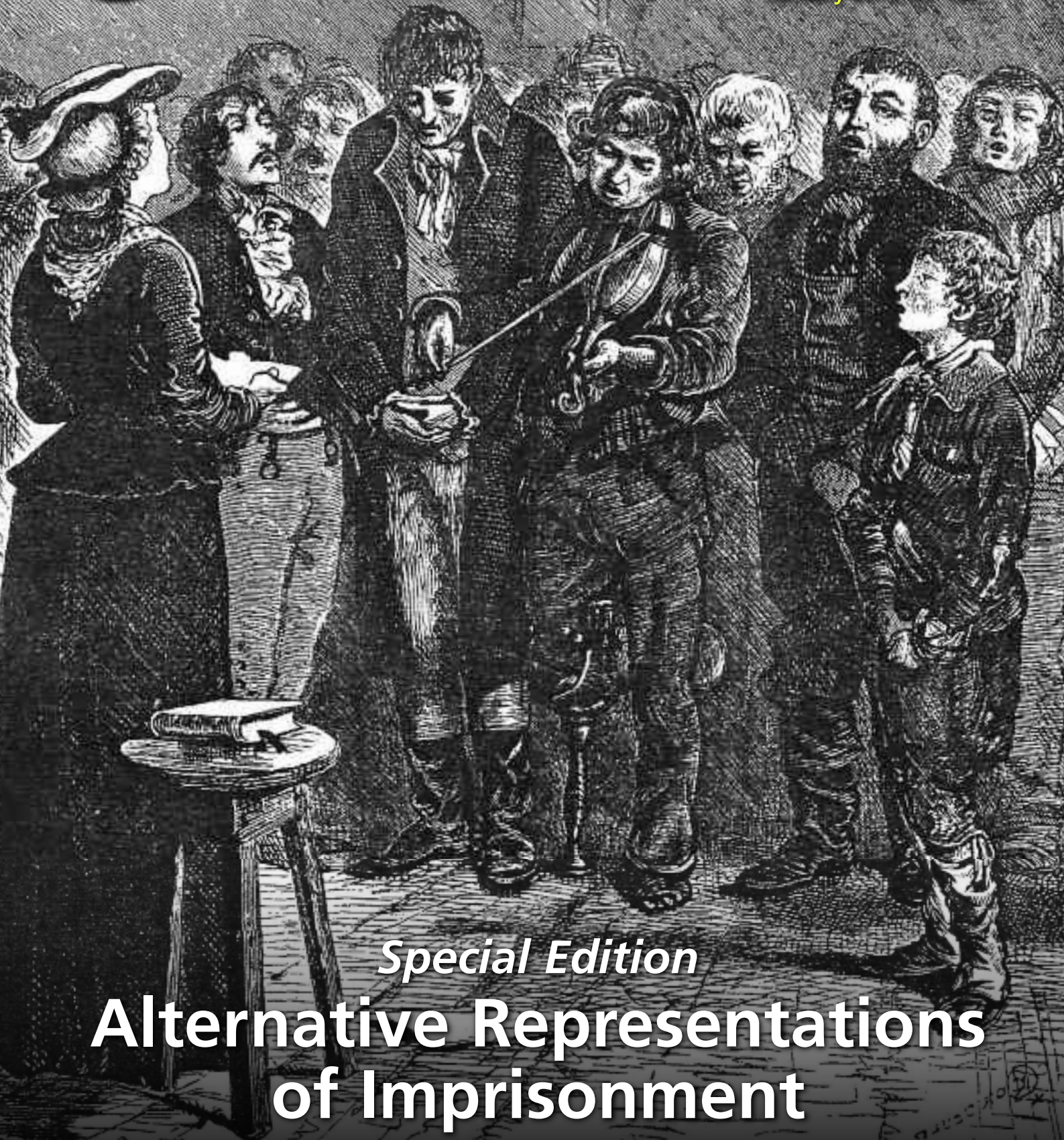


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*Special Edition*

**Alternative Representations  
of Imprisonment**



# Editorial Comment

## Alternative Representations of Imprisonment

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Contemporary representations of imprisonment, be they cinematic or literary, tend to be remarkably consistent. There are a series of recurrent characters and tropes that one can reliably expect to see. To give a decidedly partial list, there is the naïf, the kindly old-timer, the threat of (often sexual) violence or the dank darkness of 'the hole'. A useful exercise in this regard is to look at the ways in which a remake of a particular prison film reuses these visual themes. The 1974 film *The Longest Yard* (dir. R. Aldrich) starring Burt Reynolds as a disgraced and subsequently imprisoned American football player was remade in 2001 (dir. B. Skolnick) and 2005 (dir. P. Segal) as vehicles for Vinnie Jones and Adam Sandler respectively. The UK version, renamed *Mean Machine* to match the original UK release title of the 1974 film, owes much to key British television and film where prisons and imprisonment play key roles. The peak-capped officers, for example, are direct relations to *Porridge's* Mr Mackay. Likewise, there are echoes of *The Italian Job* (1969, dir. P. Collinson) and *Escape to Victory* (1981, dir. J. Huston). *Mean Machine* is clearly located in a British cinematic and televisual tradition of prison drama. It is a fantasy played out within a cinematic fantasy of imprisonment. An unkind critic would argue that the most fantastical element of the film sees Vinnie Jones playing a former England football captain. I digress. The US remake similarly taps into the recurrent themes of American prison drama. Although the 'Big Houses' of the original are gone, instead we have throwbacks to films such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967, dir. S. Rosenberg). The mirrored sunglasses of the wardens recall the implacable threat of Morgan Woodward's portrayal of 'Boss Godfrey'.

The social theorist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup> argued that cinema cannibalises itself. This is no more clearly demonstrated than those cinematic versions of imprisonment outlined above. We see the same ideas plagiarised, repackaged and repurposed. However, what of differing representations that exist outside of popular television and film? The purpose of this special edition is to highlight those readings of the prison, prisoners and staff that exist more on the periphery. To what extent do they too draw upon this standard stock of images? As such, our gaze here will shift from Polish cinema to 'trash fiction', 'dark' tourism to Victorian prison song. Broadly the pieces here can be read in three parts. We initially explore the role of these primary representations as

prompting and reflecting popular understandings of imprisonment. Secondly, we look to the alternatives before concluding with an analysis of the ways in which the signs of 'prison-ness' persist once a prison has been decommissioned.

We begin with **Tony Kearon's** article that explores the puzzle of how fictional accounts of imprisonment intersect with dominant narratives within news media. As the piece suggests, there is a disconnect between fictional and non-fictional accounts. The key question this raises is how the two intersect to produce a seemingly punitive response in the viewing public. One of the key fictional accounts of imprisonment for British audiences over the last 30 years has been the television comedy *Porridge*. It would, of course, be remiss to produce a special edition on representations of imprisonment, albeit 'alternatives', and not refer to it. **Helen Johnston** uses the 'two-header' episode 'A Night In' to examine the place of *Porridge* within the canon of prison representations. For Johnston, its successful evocation of the everyday life of the prison leads to a representation that is at once 'gritty and witty'.

The second part begins with Krzysztof Kieslowksi's *A Short Film About Killing*, a classic of international cinema, although it too owes much to its television origins in the series *Dekalog*. It offers a markedly different insight into the carceral world to that of *Porridge*. **Jamie Bennett**, in his analysis of a film which renders the typically invisible practice of capital punishment starkly and uncomfortably visible, places it within a broader context. Looking both to the grainy internet footage of Saddam Hussein's execution and the Technicolour of Hollywood, we can begin to unpack the power dynamics in these representations of a complex and contested reality.

The public reaction to the imprisonment and then execution of Ruth Ellis in 1955 is explored in **Lizzie Seal's** article. Where the practice of execution could be said to have become occluded by this time, it was 'spectacular' in many other ways. One of the vehicles of this was the popular press reaction. As Seal reports, there was a fascination in, to use Ellis' mother's terms, this 'bird stripped of its fine feathers in the cage of a condemned cell'.

The spectacle of punishment is central to Dante's depiction of the hell with its descending circles, each of which offering cruelly and imaginatively 'appropriate'

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1 . Baudrillard, J. (1981/1994) *Simulacra and Simulation* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

forms of suffering for its victims. Since its completion in 1314, the 'Inferno' has provided both a language and set of imagery with which to describe 'Hell'. In this regard, **Yvonne Jewkes'** article argues for its continued importance in discussing the contemporary spectacle and practice of punishment.

It is perhaps facile to make the link, but it is difficult not to be reminded of Dante when reading of the events of 2nd October 1992 in Carandiru prison in São Paulo. Some 111 prisoners were killed in the operation to quell a prison riot. Both the riot and the everyday life of the prison were detailed in the book 'Estação Carandiru'. Written by the prison's doctor and subsequently adapted into a well-received film, the book addresses the complex social world that existed within and around Carandiru's walls. **Sacha Darke** explores this text, which is yet to be translated into English, and its fascinating insight into a radically different experience of working within prison.

**Ben Hunter's** contribution likewise examines the depictions of imprisonment within 'true-life' accounts. In this instance his focus is upon the prison autobiographies of white-collar offenders. Within their descriptions there is a reliance upon the shared language we see in the other representations discussed here. Yet, their writing describes a carceral world that is rather different to the cosiness of *Porridge* or the omnipresent threat of *Carandiru*. For some, prison is a site of refuge distinct from their experiences pre-incarceration. There are some interesting overlaps in this respect with **Abigail Rowe's** analysis of Pat Arrowsmith's novel 'Somewhere Like This' and its examination of the intimate relationships that can occur within a penal setting. Within the novel, the characters find 'a degree of respite from social pressures and normative values that stigmatise and undervalue them'. It provides rather more nuanced depictions of such close relationships than perhaps is the norm.

The transformative power of song within prisons has been explored before in this journal<sup>2</sup>. In **Helen Rogers'** article, however, we are taken back to Yarmouth

Gaol in the nineteenth century to look at the role that singing and song writing (both within and about the prison) could offer in instruction and transgression. The piece goes on to illuminate 'the anomalous status of prisoner communication in the age of silence and separation.'

It is the curious (in)visibility of the prison that **Alana Barton** and **Alyson Brown** address in their article on 'dark' tourism and which begins the final part of this edition. Taking Robben Island and Eastern State Penitentiary, as well as the operational HMP Dartmoor, as examples, they unpack the ways in which both former and current prison sites can be used to inform the public about the nature of imprisonment and define those who are punished.

The photographer Donovan Wylie's images of the decommissioning of HMP Maze allow us to perform a virtual form of 'dark' tourism. His internationally exhibited work<sup>3</sup> depicts the demolition of the prison site. We can 'walk' the empty corridors or trace the inside of the crumbling perimeter wall by studying these images. The project raises a fundamental question: when does a prison cease to be a prison? Or, rather, **Michael Fiddler** asks, does it continue to project the messages associated with prisons and imprisonment within the collective public imagination even when the physical buildings have been removed?

This special edition concludes with an interview with **Catherine Yeatman**, project architect on the Mal Maison Oxford project. This saw the former Oxford gaol and castle site being repurposed as a 'boutique' hotel and restaurant complex. As such, an area in the centre of the city that 'had been locked away from the public for over 1000 years' was given back to Oxford. In many respects this reflects one of the main themes of this edition: the ways in which the invisible is rendered visible. The articles presented here challenge the messages projected by standard representations of imprisonment. They force us to look anew.

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2. Wilson, D., Caulfield, L. And Atherton, S. (2009) 'Good Vibrations: The long-term impact of a prison-based music project' in *Prison Service Journal* 182 p.27-32; Digard, L., Grafon von Sponeck, A. & Liebling, A. (2007) 'All Together Now: The therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme' in *Prison Service Journal* 170 p. 3-14.

3. In 2010 Wylie was nominated for the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize.