

An aerial photograph of a historic castle, likely the Tower of London, featuring a prominent circular tower and surrounding city buildings.

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Understanding from the past

Hollywood Rewrites: Popular Film and Prison Rebellions, 1930-1939

Dr. Alex Tepperman is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of South Carolina Upstate

This article considers the importance of mass media in shaping collective memory and suggests that subtle misrepresentations of the carceral world in popular film may yield significant long-term cultural effects. Following a review of the political radicalism and uprisings that gripped Great Depression-era American prisons, I survey 43 Hollywood films of the 1930s and consider the role of the burgeoning prison film genre in shaping Americans' collective understanding of prisoners as political actors. I conclude that Hollywood writers frequently claimed to reflect real-world prison unrest with journalistic objectivity, only to consistently misrepresent prisoner uprisings as fundamentally apolitical attempts at escape. Only Hollywood's most politically radical screenwriters framed prison rebellions as organized efforts at improving living conditions. The result of most writers positing escape as the dominant motivation for prison uprisings was that Hollywood films minimized real-life prisoners' desires for larger systemic change and exonerated prison administrators of malfeasance. These choices set the trajectory for future prison films to similarly diminish prisoners' historical legacy as political agitators.

Prisons are at once ubiquitous in our political discourse and hidden from public view, a state of limbo that produces a paradoxical feeling of distanced familiarity. The reality that most members of the public will never see the inside of a prison only solidifies this paradox. In questioning why the general public, members of government, and academics alike assume the validity and permanence of the prison as a social institution, Angela Davis singles out the importance of mass culture, noting that 'the way we consume media images of the prison, even as the realities of imprisonment are hidden from almost all who have not had the misfortune of doing time,' is one of the primary explanations for the public's assumption of penal

inevitability.¹ The sociologists David Wilson and Sean O'Sullivan echo Davis's notion, explaining that 'fictional presentations of prison are an important source of [the public's] ideas and understandings,' shaping collective notions of prison life.² These are important considerations for penal historians, as they reaffirm the notion that, if those mass media images of imprisonment that serve as the public's primary *entrée* behind prison walls do not accurately reflect the realities of incarceration, society's subsequent discussions about prison life will filter through an ahistoric gaze.

This article considers the effects of Hollywood mythmaking on popular and academic notions of American prison inmates as political actors. At present, academic discussions of organised penal activism's origins in the United States overwhelmingly focus on the nascent collective agitation of the latter-1940s and 1950s, an era most scholars position as the seed of the more famous American prison radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s.³ The twelve-year period stretching from 1929 to 1941 that constituted the United States' Depression Era, however, was as rife with inmate-led penal radicalism as any in American history. This article considers one plausible explanation for the collective amnesia regarding the 1930s, a decade with more filmic depictions of prison life than any other in history, according to Paul Mason.⁴ Following a content analysis of Depression-era Hollywood prison films and a review of contemporary prison uprisings, I conclude that, inadvertently or not, American moviemakers stripped inmates of their political identities, presenting stories of organised discontent as mere escape attempts, thereby marginalising inmates' critiques of unjust treatment. This practice likely began with the prototypical prison film of the age, 1930's *The Big House*, which reimagined real-world uprisings against intolerable conditions as non-ideological efforts to escape.

This article does not claim that escape itself is apolitical, as it is often spurred by radical impulses in

1. Davis, A. (2003) *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 17.
2. Wilson, D. and S. O'Sullivan. (2004) *Images of Incarceration: Representations of Prison in Film and Television*. Winchester: Waterside Press, 14.
3. King, D. (1995). *Separate and Unequal: African Americans and the US Federal Government*. New York: Clarendon Press, 149, 160-161; Gottschalk, M. (2006). *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America*. New York: Cambridge UP, 171; Berger, D. and T. Losier (2018). *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*. New York: Routledge, 46.
4. Mason, P. (2016) 'Relocating Hollywood's prison film discourse.' In: Mason, P (ed). *Captured By the Media*. Abingdon: Willan, 197.

the real world. Hollywood filmmakers, however, overwhelmingly portray escape attempts as driven by impulse, not philosophy. For the purposes of this study, then, I will use the term 'uprising' to refer to any effort on the part of ten or more prisoners to systematically ease the pains of imprisonment via strikes, riots, or other coordinated efforts. I label such rebellions 'inner-directed,' by which I mean they are acts of resistance that hold substantive changes to living conditions within the prison world, or within the justice system more broadly, as their ultimate goal. This stands in contrast to 'outer-directed' resistance, or acts of agitation based in a desire to escape the prison's physical structure, thereby alleviating the most obvious and immediate pains of imprisonment without challenging the penal system itself in any meaningful way. Hollywood filmmakers almost exclusively portrayed escape as outer-directed, apolitical opportunism, rather than as collective, inner-directed efforts aimed at bettering the conditions of life inside American penitentiaries.

The Forgotten Era: 1929-1941

On the eve of the Great Depression, American prisons grappled with critical levels of overcrowding and administrative instability. Between 1923 and 1930, prison populations expanded 32.4 per cent, thereby destabilising inmate life around the country. In the spring of 1929, New York state prisons at Auburn and Dannemora exploded into full-scale rioting within six days of each other, followed just a few days later by a large-scale uprising at USP Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas, which had more than tripled in population since 1915 and was the country's most populous federal penitentiary. In October, a takeover at Colorado State Prison at Canon City wrought the deaths of seven guards and five inmates. Two months later, Auburn saw another uprising, as state militia killed eight prisoners and an administrator. In all, these revolts involved more than

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7,000 inmates who laid siege to their institutions, razed buildings, and demanded specific changes to their living conditions, all at the cost of 27 lives and millions of dollars in property damages. Furthermore, these were not the only uprisings that year, as prisoners undertook smaller, but still significant, agitations in Arizona, Pennsylvania, California, New Mexico, and Alabama.⁵

The events of 1929, along with a further 13 prison uprisings around the nation in 1930, captured political leaders' attentions. Both the New York Times and the Washington Post covered the events closely, relaying both state and federal government efforts to understand and alleviate the crisis.⁶ President Herbert Hoover, who had already appointed the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement in 1929 to address the nation's ongoing penological troubles, moved for immediate answers in 1930, organising a National Emergency Committee to reform the prison system and stem future violence.⁷ The famously cost-conscious Hoover even pressed Congress to allocate \$6.5 million for federal prison construction to ease overcrowding, joining 37 state governments who, in late 1929 and early 1930, rushed to approve over \$200 million in prison extensions and improvements with the hope of stemming prisoner rebellions.⁸

Heavy public spending and administrative reviews did little to tamp down prisoners' efforts, as the country experienced at least another 75 major incidents of penal destabilisation from January 1931 to December 1941, when the United States formally entered World War Two. Time and again, prisoners organised coordinated efforts to push back against what they considered appalling and monotonous food, occasionally winning real concessions.⁹ Inmate communities also organised against dangerous or unfair working conditions, demanding less work, better jobs, or more pay.¹⁰ Most problematic for administrators

5. Tepperman, A. (2018) *Strange Bedfellows: Convict Culture in the First Era of Mass Imprisonment, 1919-1940*. U Florida (PhD dissertation), 201-212.
6. Five Prison Revolts Make Nation Wonder (1929, December 15). *Washington Post*, M21; Criminologists Vary in Ascribing Cause of Prison Revolts (1929, August 4). *Washington Post*, M13; Riots a Result of Many Causes (1930, April 27). *New York Times*, 135; Governor Lays Prison Riots to Rigor of Baumes Laws (1929, July 30). *New York Times*, 1.
7. Organize to Survey Prisons of Nation (1930, June 21). *New York Times*, 19.
8. McGirr, L. (2015). *The war on alcohol: Prohibition and the rise of the American state*. New York: WW Norton, 201; Drastic Parole System Blamed In Prison Riots (1930, January 17). *Christian Science Monitor*, 1.
9. Prison Camp Strikers Win Food Victory (1941, October 8). *Daily Boston Globe*, 10; Waupun Prison Inmates Strike (1941, July 29). *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, 1.
10. 40 leaders in Prison Mine Riot Face Solitary Cells in Kansas (1935, June 20). *Washington Post*, 1; Prisoners End Sit-Down; Resume Work at Old Pay (1937, June 5). *New York Times*, 19.

and politicians, though, was the fact that prisoners frequently agitated against the system itself, which Edwin Sutherland and C.E. Gehlke described in 1933 as 'an organised expression of resentment against various conditions believed to be unjust, of which the most important is the increased severity of penalties.'¹¹ Mostly, this radical resentment took the form of sit-down or hunger strikes, with rebels frequently numbering in the hundreds or even thousands.¹²

While the inmates of the Great Depression could not, as the famous Attica rebels of 1971 did, draw on the larger organising notions, tactics, and language of the Civil Rights Movement, the political activism of that decade nonetheless spoke indirectly to larger societal questions regarding rights and privileges in a modern multicultural society. When Colorado inmates laid siege to their own prison as a means of lashing out against Ku Klux Klan-inspired chauvinism amongst the staff; when 170 Jewish inmates at USP Lewisburg went on a hunger strike to protest the absence of kosher food during Passover; when convicts at Pennsylvania's Eastern State Prison sat down and refused to work out of sympathy with their neighbors at nearby Graterford Prison, who they believed had suffered unjust administrative rebuke for appealing for greater privileges; or when interracial coalitions struck against dangerous living conditions and low pay at Ohio Penitentiary and USP Leavenworth, respectively, prisoners transcended the immediate pains of imprisonment and declared their actions were tied to concerns larger than themselves.¹³

The Hollywood Prison

It was in this unique moment of inmate radicalism, prison overcrowding, and national economic crisis that Hollywood invented the prison film genre. As the most powerful medium in American popular culture, dozens of silent pictures and animated shorts had shared

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images of penal life on American screens before the onset of the Depression.¹⁴ However, it was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's 1930 feature *The Big House* that set the standard for Hollywood depictions of prisoner rebellions, establishing the stylistic and narrative parameters for future filmmakers wishing to portray imprisonment on screen. The hugely successful work emerged from a short treatment by director George Hill, who was aghast at the 1929 uprisings at Leavenworth, Auburn, Dannemora, and Canon City. He wished to craft a popular film with a reformist message and, along with screenwriter Frances Marion, sought to tell a 'story of only one of thousands of boys whose lives are thrown away on a criminal and ineffectual system which can be righted and will be if the eyes of the world are turned upon present day conditions.'¹⁵ As Hill's own words attest, Hollywood's prototypical prison film began as a reasoned reflection of concerns and interests in changing the system itself, even if the final product strayed from this sentiment.

Ultimately a story about the poisonous social structure of the prison and the difficulties of acting morally in an amoral environment, *The Big House* openly laments the 'dead time' resulting from an absence of productive work for willing inmates; the terrible food and amenities provided to otherwise-redeemable men; and, perhaps most importantly, extreme overcrowding. As the Warden laments 'we have 3000 here and cell accommodation for 1800. They all want to throw people in prison, but they don't want to provide for them after they are in.'¹⁶ In an instance of art deviating from life, however, the crescendo of *The Big House* sees prisoners storming the wall in an attempt to escape, only for the administration to meet them with tanks and gunfire. What the film does not meaningfully explore is inmates' desires to overturn the administrative practices the movie spent two hours critiquing. Setting the model for future filmmakers, Hill and Marion split from prisoners'

11. Sutherland, E. and C.E. Gehlke (1933). *Crime and punishment*. In: Mitchell, W. Recent Social Trends in the United States. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1163.

12. Where Prison Reform Begins (1931, March 20). *Christian Science Monitor*, 16; 14 Eastern State Prison Rioters on Hunger Strike (1935, September 3). *NY Herald Tribune*, 28.

13. Tepperman (2018), 198-246; Convicts Strike In Second Prison (1934, August 29). *New York Times*, 36; Klan Politics Held Prison Riot Cause (1929, November 29). *Washington Post*, 3; Jews Announce Hunger Strike in Federal Pen (1934, March 30). *Shamokin (PA) News-Dispatch*, 2.

14. Querry, R. (1973). 'Prison Movies.' *Journal of Popular Film*, 2:2, 182. Mason, P. (2016), 197.

15. Beauchamp, C. (1997). Without Lying Down: *Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood*. New York: Scribner, 254-255

16. *The Big House*. Dir. George Hill. MGM, 1930.

real-life stated rationales for rebelling, namely securing better food, more privileges, and lighter sentences.¹⁷

Cinema scholar David Gonthier has referred to *The Big House* as the ‘real granddaddy of prison movies,’ while Kevin Kehrwald has characterised the film’s influence as ‘difficult to underestimate.’¹⁸ *The Big House* found both box office and critical success, and it set off a wave of imitators throughout the 1930s. Paul Mason has identified over 80 prison films that American studios released over the course of the decade, even before considering the flood of serials, radio shows, and animated shorts that also graced American audiences throughout the Depression.¹⁹

For the sake of clarity, this study only considers American-made, studio-produced, feature-length films in which life in an adult men’s carceral setting is central to the plot. While this excludes animation; British, Canadian, and foreign-language films; and representations of southern plantations or chain gangs, the resulting group of 43 films provides important insights into the ways in which Hollywood framed prisoner uprisings.²⁰ Within these parameters, one finds near-unanimity in the portrayal of large-scale prison violence or instability as stemming from prisoners’ insurgent desires to escape. Only five films of the period portray a large-scale uprising as based in something other than a desire to escape.²¹

approximately half of prison films claim to have origins in true stories.²³ It does make sense within the context of the studio system, however, as full-time screenwriters frequently relied on prison officials and administrators for first-hand knowledge and source materials. Hollywood scribes constantly turned to media-friendly wardens, particularly Sing Sing’s Lewis Lawes and San Quentin’s James Holohan, to serve as interlocutors between prison life and free society. Wilson and O’Sullivan note that wardens provided ‘screenplay ideas, acted as consultants on films, made their prisons available to filmmakers who wanted to use them and on some occasions even appeared in the films themselves.’²⁴ In the course of writing the script for *The Big House*, Frances Marion even visited San Quentin, modeling her vision of penitentiaries in toto on what she saw within that institution, despite the fact that the major uprisings that inspired *The Big House* erupted thousands of miles away from northern California. In exchange for accepting Warden Holohan’s offer of access to the building and its inhabitants, Marion produced a sympathetic, administrator-centered vision of prison life.²⁵

Lewis Lawes was especially adept at drawing positive attention, in large part because his own best-selling memoir, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, received two high-profile film adaptations in the 1930s and because

Title	Year	Writer(s)	Cause	Result
The Criminal Code	1931	Niblo Jr. and Miller	New warden	Aborted
Penitentiary	1938	Niblo Jr. and Miller	New warden	Aborted
Road Gang	1936	Trumbo	Cruel warden	Success
San Quentin	1937	Bright and Tasker	Favoritism	Quelled
Prison Break	1938	Davenport and Parker	Canceled recreation	Aborted
Prison Break	1938	Davenport and Parker	Poor food	Aborted

Chart 1: Depression-era Hollywood films featuring inner-directed prison rebellions and the nature of each rebellion.²²

This misrepresentation of the broader reality of penal agitation in the 1930s is remarkable insofar as the criminologist Nicole Hahn Rafter found that

he provided the source material for two other major film releases, *You Can’t Get Away With Murder* and *Over the Wall*.²⁶ Like many prison officials and

17. These uprisings often did result in escapes, of course, but they were largely incidental. It was rare for a Depression-era uprising of a thousand or more prisoners to see more than a half-dozen inmates breach the prison’s borders.
18. Gonthier, D. (2006). *American Prison Film Since 1930: From The Big House to The Shawshank Redemption*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 33; Kehrwald, K. (2017). *Prison Movies: Cinema Behind Bars*. New York: Columbia UP, 23.
19. Mason, P. (2016), 197.
20. Please see the appendix at the end of this article for a list of films this paper reviewed.
21. Because *The Criminal Code* was reproduced as *Penitentiary* by the same writing team and with the same beats and set pieces, it is functionally the same film.
22. The film *Prison Break* features two uprisings, with different causes, and hence is cited twice in the table.
23. Wilson and O’Sullivan (2004), 478.
24. Ibid, 478.
25. Kehrwald (2017), 24; Beauchamp (1997), 255.
26. Blumenthal, R. (2004). *Miracle at Sing Sing: How One Man Transformed the Lives of America’s Most Dangerous Prisoners*. New York: St. Martin’s, 254.

politicians, Lawes viewed the media as an important tool for not only shaping policy, but also for burnishing one's own professional reputation.²⁷ Movies based on Lawes' writings characterised the pains of imprisonment as anchored in monotony and sameness, not in cruelty or deprivation. This belief that the worst elements of incarceration came from within stressed the need not for major changes to sentencing or parole policies, or for heavy investment in better food and safer workspaces, but in distractions, such as Lawes' own highly publicised varsity prison baseball and football teams.²⁸

Ultimately, the Hollywood writers accordingly portrayed wardens from California, New York, and other non-Southern states as honorable and paternalistic, capably managing inmates' petty squabbles and personal grudges. This meant that the very informants who were supposed to provide insight into the underlying causes of national prison unrest served only to misdirect filmmakers, intentionally or not, by portraying prisoners who had clearly stated concrete demands for change as undisciplined simpletons, violent thugs, or Faginesque hustlers in need of structure, routine, and occasional frivolity. This view, based in a firm resistance to engaging inmates on their own terms, stressed an ethos of incremental change and, perhaps ironically, left more representative depictions of penal unrest in the hands of Hollywood's most radical storytellers.

Hollywood Radicals and Realists

Of the five Depression-era films that present images of mass prisoner uprisings based in an impulse other than escaping, two came from the writing team of Fred Niblo Jr. and Seton Miller, who received an Academy Award nomination for their 1931 prison drama *The Criminal Code*, which they revised for the 1938 remake *Penitentiary*. In both films, the 'uprising' in question takes the form of inmates heckling their new warden, who they dislike for having previously served as an effective District Attorney. The films stress the importance of a strong, fatherly prison head, as the new warden ends the heckling with a short speech

littered with moralistic platitudes about fairness. Ultimately, Niblo and Miller's scripts communicated the same messages of prisoner impulsivity and shortsightedness as films depicting outer-directed resistance.

Only in the second half of the 1930s, deep within the protracted Depression, did Hollywood screenwriters even begin to depict inner-directed, highly organised strike efforts in prisons. *Prison Break* (1938) featured two such attempts, portraying the planning of a sit-down strike on the recreation yard to protest the cancelation of a baseball game and, later in the film, a campaign to arrange a work stoppage in opposition to intolerable food. While the prisoners abandoned both efforts, the vignettes did reflect some

of the actual stated causes that real-world prisoners offered for rebelling. The presence of these agitations within the plot was likely due to the role Dorothy Davenport played in co-authoring the screenplay. A prolific writer of silent morality pictures in the 1910s and 1920s, Davenport joined other Hollywood reformists in a spirit of municipal housekeeping by authoring scripts that focused on the dangers of white slavery, political corruption, and, in drawing upon her own struggles with morphine dependence, drug addiction.²⁹

Davenport was no radical, but rather an inheritor of the Progressive tradition of vigorously denouncing social ills in the public sphere. Early century middle-class Progressives like Davenport did not tend to look to radicals for moral guidance, and the *Prison Break* script presents a deeply conventional solution to penal strife. She portrays the prison strikers as almost pre-political, unaware of the larger implications of their behavior and destined to fail in the face of administrative power. Her sympathetic depiction of Joaquin Shannon, a humble fisherman patiently serving out his sentence for a crime he did not commit, upholds a liberal, middle-class, Protestant worldview, stressing the virtues of patience over revolution. By having Shannon secure his early release by foiling an escape attempt, she suggests that an inmate may find his deliverance within the strictures of a deeply flawed correctional system by upholding the rules and, perhaps, changing penal failures through legislative reform.

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27. Spillane, J. (2014). *Coxsackie: The Life and Death of Prison Reform*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 239n15.

28. Blumenthal (2004), 197-200.

29. Parchesky, J. (2006). 'Women in the driver's seat: the auto-erotics of early women's films.' *Film History*, 8.2, 182.

30. Dick, B. (2016). *Screen is Red: Hollywood, Communism, and the Cold War*. Oxford: UP of Mississippi, 8; Hanson, P. (2007). Dalton Trumbo, Hollywood Rebel: A Critical Survey and Filmography. Jefferson: McFarland, 18.

Only two Hollywood films of the 1930s depict large-scale, inner-directed mass prison uprisings that also feature identifiable philosophies. The earlier of the two, Dalton Trumbo's *Road Gang* (1936), is an explicitly political commentary on penal authoritarianism, drawing clear inspiration from Robert E. Burns' muckraking memoir and its' celebrated film adaptation, *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, both from 1932. *Road Gang* portrays prison as a totalitarian mini-state in which the cruel Warden Parmenter forces inmates to abide by his whims by working as miners under the threat of physical violence. Jim Larrabee, a Chicago journalist sent to investigate living conditions by posing as a prisoner himself, finds inmates electrocuted, flogged, and otherwise brutally cowed into submission. At one point, Barbara, Jim's colleague and romantic interest, tells Parmenter 'I know how you treat them. You torture, beat, and brutalise them until they're half-mad.'³⁰ As a result of the warden's cruelty, the inmates barricade themselves in the mine, thereby protecting Jim from Parmenter's retribution. Following a pitched battle between the prisoners and the guards, the film ends with the prisoners refusing to return to work or lie about their terrible living conditions on the warden's behalf, thereby reaffirming their rights to humane treatment and helping the journalists expose the savagery of Parmenter's regime.

Road Gang was Trumbo's first major film, as the young playwright and novelist penned the script for Warner Brothers' B-picture division at the age of just ²⁹. Embedded with messages about the importance of free press and social justice, *Road Gang* is occasionally clumsy, but it nonetheless stands as the only prison film of the 1930s to portray a prison population successfully rising up to secure more humane treatment.³¹ In its celebration of grassroots resistance to administrative brutality, the film fit with the socialistic sympathies of both Trumbo and his close friend John Bright, who, like Trumbo, found himself blacklisted from working in Hollywood following the mid-century House on Un-American Activities Committee investigations into Communist influences in Hollywood.

Perhaps fittingly, Bright co-wrote the only other Depression-era film to portray a coordinated, inner-directed prisoner uprising. His script for *San Quentin* (1937) was less overtly political than Trumbo's, instead

portraying inmates organising in the yard in opposition to perceived favoritism when it came to work assignments. The film shows the angry inmates howl with discontentment and clamber on their cell bars to little effect, as the film's firm-but-fair protagonist, Captain Stephen Jameson, handily rides out the strike. In portraying the rebellion as both understandable and of marginal value to changing penal policy, Bright's film was not only decidedly less revolutionary than Trumbo's, but it also had greater fidelity to real life, wherein prison uprisings overwhelmingly failed to force desired changes.

That the glossy, well-financed *San Quentin* was more true-to-life than *Road Gang* may be partly attributable to Bright's co-author and frequent collaborator Robert Joyce Tasker who, along with Robert E. Burns, was one of the very few former prison inmates to serve as a consultant during Hollywood's prison film boom of the 1930s. Arrested in 1924 at the age of 20 for holding up a series of cafes in Oakland, Tasker wrote a short piece called 'The First Day' that attracted the attention of H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*. Mencken mentored Tasker through the publication of the *San Quentin* resident's novel, *Grimhaven* (1928), which received critical and popular acclaim and served as *San Quentin*'s source material.

A personal and critical appraisal of the dehumanising character of life in prison, the novel resulted in the institution banning Tasker from writing throughout the rest of his sentence, lest he bring more negative attention to the institution.³² Within a few years of his 1929 parole, however, Tasker moved to Hollywood and, by 1932, produced the screenplay for *Hell's Highway*, a feature that explored the brutal treatment of Southern convict road workers. His co-writer on that project was Samuel Ornitz, who joined Trumbo as one of the 'Hollywood Ten,' the American film industry's first group of blacklisted suspected Communists, in 1947.³³

Tasker and Bright wrote two other prison films together, *The Accusing Finger* (1936) and *Back Door to Heaven* (1939), both of which focused on the weaknesses and insufficiencies of the American criminal justice system. Collectively, Tasker, Bright, Trumbo, and Ornitz consistently portrayed the prison as a receptacle for society's discarded men, a microcosm of Depression-

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31. Hanson (2007), 16-17.

32. San Quentin Author Freed on Parole (1929, December 9). *Oakland Tribune*, 23; Books Out of Folsom Prison (1931, April 13). *Kokomo Tribune*, 7.

33. Suber, H. (1979). 'Politics and Popular culture: Hollywood at bay, 1933-1953.' *American Jewish History* 68.4, 530.

era society, wherein large portions of humanity struggled to maintain their sense of self within the deadening confines of an environment overseen by a ruling, privileged caste afforded near-total power. This was not the common political tenor of prison films, however. Escape served as a far more common storytelling trope, perhaps because outer-directed explanations of prison rebellion focused on prisoners' moral failures and shortsightedness, a standpoint toward which both ultra-wealthy Hollywood executives and image-conscious prison administrators more readily gravitated.

Conclusion

A soft liberal ethos dominated Depression-era Hollywood prison films, as filmmakers consistently pushed the notion that prison uprisings were attributable to an ennui among inmates who simply wanted to leave the confines of the penitentiary structure itself. This is undoubtedly fair, insofar as prison is nobody's idea of paradise, but it elides the political importance of the national prisoner uprisings of the 1930s by ignoring the fact that prisoners often sought to better their lives behind bars. Hollywood filmmakers readily ignored the fact that riots, hostage takings, and sit-down strikes were political weapons of a class that, in many instances, considered itself wildly over-punished in the aggregate and railroaded by a system that did little to protect them. That it fell to only the most radical of Hollywood's screenwriters to represent

these very real frustrations meant that studio films of the 1930s presented an image of prison uprisings to the public that mostly stripped those events of their larger political meanings.

Such filmmaking choices have had long-ranging consequences. The movies of the 1930s forged tropes and clichés that ripple into present-day filmmaking, a significant fact given that popular film still plays a central role in shaping society's collective imagination of what a prison is or may be in the era of mass incarceration. Wilson and O'Sullivan note that 'people are much more receptive to arguments about things outside of their own experience if they possess a cultural model or metaphor which helps them to visualize it,' and prison films act as 'imaginative resources' which serve to 'set the limits of what we take to be the plausible range of interpretations of the world.' One of the ways they do this is through 'sins of omission,' leaving out those facts about the prison world that they do not want the public to know.³⁴ By leaving out the political dimensions of prison rebellions in the 1930s, Hollywood filmmakers created a vision of a pre-Prisoners' Rights Movement reality in which inmate agitation was almost totally outer-directed, a belief that carries into the present, as the most famous historical prison films of the last three decades — Mrs. Soffel (1984); *Shawshank Redemption* (1994); *Murder In The First* (1995); *The Green Mile* (1999) — have withheld from prisoner communities even the most elementary of political identities.

Appendix: List of films consulted for this study

Title	Released	Studio/Distributor
The Big House	1930	MGM
Up the River	1930	20th Century Fox
Shadow of the Law	1930	Paramount
Pardon Us	1931	MGM
20,000 Years In Sing Sing	1932	Warner Bros.
The Menace	1932	Columbia
Hold 'Em Jail	1932	RKO
Hell's Highway	1932	RKO
The Last Mile	1932	Monogram
The Penal Code	1932	Monarch
Day of Reckoning	1933	MGM

34. O'Sullivan and Wilson (2004), 14-15.

Sing Sing Nights	1934	Monogram
Whirlpool	1934	Columbia
Woman in the Dark	1934	RKO
Circumstantial Evidence	1935	Chesterfield
Daring Young Man	1935	Columbia
Motive For Revenge	1935	Majestic
Hitch Hike Lady	1935	Republic
Bridge of Sighs	1936	Chesterfield
Prison Shadows	1936	Puritan
Road Gang	1936	Warner Bros.
The Accusing Finger	1936	Paramount
The Walking Dead	1936	Warner Bros.
Alcatraz Island	1937	Cosmopolitan
San Quentin	1937	Warner Bros.
The Outer Gate	1937	Monogram
You Only Live Once	1937	United Artists
Over the Wall	1938	Cosmopolitan
Penitentiary	1938	Columbia
Prison Break	1938	Universal
Prison Nurse	1938	Republic
Those High Grey Walls	1938	Columbia
Up the River	1938	20th Century Fox
6,000 Enemies	1939	MGM
They All Come Out	1939	MGM
Behind Prison Gates	1939	Columbia
Blackmail	1939	MGM
Convict's Code	1939	Crescent
Dust Be My Destiny	1939	Warner Bros.
Each Dawn I Die	1939	Warner Bros.
Mutiny in the Big House	1939	Monogram
Outside These Walls	1939	Columbia
You Can't Get Away With Murder	1939	Warner Bros.