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# "Prison Voyeurism and the Consumption of Cultural Texts: Deceit and Denial in the Production of Collapsed Distance"

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*The sun was shining*

*The palm fronds fluttered obligingly in the wind*

*'Till Someone mentioned*

*WAR*

*Then they all started giggling*

*And ordered more drinks.*

*-War Darlings, Willy Bach*

## Introduction

In the United States, mass incarceration has reflected and maintained the horrors of racial oppression, human rights violations, community decline, and, more generally; suffering. Millions of citizens are excluded from participating in the democratic process, barred from employment and freedom and kept from raising their children. Only about one quarter are imprisoned for

violent crimes. Most suffer from a mental illness or drug addiction. A plethora of television shows and movies offer to import us into the complexities of the criminal justice system by making us sympathize with an inmate who has been falsely accused.

Reality television shows that purport to offer a sneak-peak into the lives of inmates are unique from these other representations of criminal justice and are the most compelling case studies of the commodification of criminality. The dramaturgy of criminal violence and acts that unfold within the narrative of these shows are a form of false empiricism that is created from and is made to appear as a truthful actuality. These shows make claims to reality by showing images of prisoners that they market as exclusive. This transparency lends legitimacy and authority to these show's narratives and allows language, rhetoric and the omission of explanations of the social and political causes of criminal behavior.

By claiming to provide a transparent and accurate account of criminal justice and incarceration, shows like "Caught" and "Jail" push political forces and policies behind a curtain. A stage on which law enforcement takes the role of hero and the prisoner or accused is always the villain and never the victim is set. In these cultural texts, the men and women who are caught, jailed or imprisoned are never framed as the unfortunate or the sufferer. The suffering of prisoners, their families and their communities is denied when the spectator is fooled into believing it is either deserved or necessary when in fact,in most cases, it is neither.

By collapsing the distance between inmate and spectator, these shows are able to enforce denial and build new layers of deceit. The suffering that comes into view with the collapse of distance is made digestible by adding a cacophony of ominous music, stock images of jail cells and prison fights, smoke and mirrors.

These shows do not deny suffering by hiding it but by repackaging it into a deceitful performance more easily digested by the consumer. By enforcing existing beliefs, stereotypes and denials these shows help make the culture of punishment possible politically and socially. After viewing an episode of "Jail", the viewer is meant to feel like they have been introduced to a hidden world to which an alternative need not be imagined. Dehumanizing euphemism and rhetoric is used to cast people as criminals or inmates rather than living beings whose actions should be understood as part of a larger political system of racial and economic stratification that has shaped them and their actions. No external forces are ever mentioned. The story told by the focus on individual violence and noncompliance is not meant to engender sympathy or pity toward the inmates.

This paper will explore how the collapse of distance between inmates and those on the "outside" is commodified and opened to voyeurism. Close studies of the way in which images of suffering are shown and related to the viewer in "Jail" and "Caught" will be contrasted with the ways in which activists have used a letter from the child of a prisoner to generate sympathy and incite action. A piece of artwork by a prisoner will allow us to visually recognize the animalization of those deemed criminal. In the context of the carceral state, images of suffering can be framed for profit, to dehumanize and reinforce negative views or to inspire sympathy and change. This paper will analyze the roles of distance, deceit and denial in the manipulation of sights and the resultant reactions to coming to know the conditions of prisoner's suffering within different cultural texts.

Cultural Texts: Art vs. Entertainment

For the purposes of this paper, a cultural text is a form of entertainment, writing or art that through its existence institutionalizes a certain belief, practice or idea that could either potentially reinforce existing beliefs or inspire questions or a new dialogue. Though this paper recognizes that whatever is expressed through cultural texts is sometimes external to the various psychological states of members of the viewing population, it assumes that these texts have the potential to shape an individual's experience of reality beyond how they might feel. Texts can also define and provide the actions and behaviors available for any individual to take within any given situation.

This paper does not differentiate between the distance collapsing value, virtue or purpose of art versus that of entertainment nor does it attempt to decide whether or not a television piece should be considered art. Whether it is art or entertainment or both, as Susan Sontag concludes in Regarding the Pain of Others, the true effects of images in their ability to change someone's mind or actions are contingent on their context. If anything, it is the accompanying narrative that gives the image its meaning and power, especially in regard to images of suffering. Though Sontag acknowledges that seeing suffering is a powerful experience, she also laments the jading and overwhelming effect that the repeated delivery of horrific images to the eyes of the viewer has on action. Sontag writes, "To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames" (114). Just because cultural texts that portray the suffering of prisoners, whether or not it is framed as deserved, are available for consumption, does not mean that that consumption will lead to change, action or even disgust or outrage.

Seeing Suffering and Action

*Man on NJ Transit Train: I was watching "Modern Marvels" last night about electric stuff. There was a part about electric fences in max security prisons. When they try to escape the fence toasts 'em like marshmallows.*

*Woman sitting next to him: (emphatically) Good!*

*(overheard, 12/12/11)*

Ursula Le Guin offers an account of a volatile reaction to seeing the effects of a simulated incarceration in her science fiction novel The Dispossessed. On the planet Anarres, prisons do not exist. The idea of imprisonment fascinates a group of young Anarreste citizens who have just learned about the concept in school. They decide to bring this idea to life and simulate the conditions of imprisonment by locking a classmate in a closet for an amount of time unknown to the prisoner. At first, the main character Shevek, feels his friend has "asked for it" and does not feel guilty. He even takes some pleasure in the newfound power he holds over his comrade. However, when the prisoner comes out the next day soiled and harrowed looking, the main character, Shevek, becomes physically ill and vomits. This seems to be an example of what should happen when a viewer is confronted with the idea of imprisonment and its inherent suffering and appearance. A look at the experiments outlined in Obedience to Authority by Stanley Milgram, however, reveals a much more grim alternative to what occurs when the average person is given the personal opportunity to control the pain of others.

Largely to answer questions about why the average German citizen followed orders to exterminate Jews and other groups deemed undesirable during the European Holocaust of WWII,

Milgram set up a series of experiments in which “teachers” were told to administer shocks to a “learner” as part of an experiment to test teaching techniques. Unknown to the “teacher”, the shocks were fake. The “learner”, who knew the real intent and nature of the experiment, screamed in agony when the shocks were administered. Most “teachers” continued on with the experiment beyond the first moment at which the “learner” vocalized his pain. The authority of the doctors conducting the experiments assuaged the “teachers’” conscious.

Authority and Deceit and Denial in “Jail”

*“The ACLU people are always comin’ in here tryin’ to get us for somethin’. They don’t understand these guys are bad. They need to be here. Most of ‘em in here are in for drugs and stuff. But ya can’t be fooled. They all probably have killed someone.” –Sergeant, Passaic County Jail*

*(personal conversation, 4/12/11)*

The show “Jail” applies appeals to authority consistently by interviewing guards and allowing the show’s context to rely on their testimony and experience of the suffering being witnessed. As Michele Brown observes about documentaries that explore imprisonment in her work The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society and Spectacle, “Through a heavy reliance upon individualized frameworks, often following an inmate or guard through the daily routine of incarceration, the films rarely effectively create sociological connections between structure and agency, but instead pivot precariously from the mundane conditions of prison life to pure spectacle” (74).

In episode 219 of "Jail", a Spike TV production made by the same producers of the "reality" crime show "COPS", a 20-year-old white male who we are told has been in and out of California's Stanislaus County Jail since 2004 for drug related offenses is found lying face down on the floor of the general population holding cell about five inches from a dirty toilet. He is awakened with smelling salts by Deputy Monty Sanders and teased by guards for being a "Daddy's Boy" who is able to get away with any trouble his drug problem gets him into. The arrestee is forced to stumble into a small detox cell (maybe 4'X 7') that contains a small wooden bench (definitely not large enough to lie on) and a hole in the ground. When Deputy Sanders locks the door the arrestee threatens that he will shoot the guard as revenge the next time he sees him in the street. Sanders turns to the camera, looks the viewer in the eyes and says, "look what happens when you try to help them out. Look how they treat you. I don't even get upset anymore. I just deal with it."

Once the distance between the viewer and Stanislaus County Jail is collapsed, Deputy Sanders becomes the authority on suffering. The viewer is given the choice between sympathizing with a drug addicted "Daddy's Boy" or the kind and wizened Deputy who "sees this sort of thing every day". According to Luke Boltanski in Distant Suffering, once a spectator determines a victim, in this case the guard is made to seem like the victim of the "people normal people don't want to deal with" (Jail, episode 220), the spectator begins to resent the persecutor. Thus, the inmate is not the sufferer, he is the persecutor and sympathy and pity are eliminated from the observance. By denying the viewer, "recourse to the 'forms of expression'… in which in particular we find descriptions of the internal states of other people to which we can have no direct access and which by that fact nourish the imagination of spectators when faced with distant suffering" (Boltanski, 51), these shows craft forms of deceit and denial out of the distance

they have demolished by creating a new distance between the viewer and the humanity and preexisting life chances of the person who is imprisoned.

The viewer is not told that a 2004 (the year the arrestee became involved in the criminal justice system) report by The Center for Applied Research Solutions conducted for The California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs found that Stanislaus County is ranked among the counties most "at risk for drug and alcohol abuse" in the state. This report was based on risk factors like unemployment, availability and quality of drug rehabilitation programs for adults and juveniles, funding for rehabilitation programs and education quality.

Also not made available for consumption within this product's narrative is an article written for NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness). Denise Hunt, Director of Stanislaus County's Behavioral Health and Recovery Services explains that since 2000 reductions and barriers to county funding created by state and federal bureaucratic limitations and restrictions have caused a reduction of beds in hospitals and treatment facilities as well as community based recovery and outpatient programs. This reduction in resources has led to a surge in the number of mentally ill and drug addicted persons who are arrested and jailed or imprisoned. The show "Jail" uses stigmatizing rhetoric to detract from the biological roots of mental illness and the crisis of community resources that allows the mentally ill to be jailed rather than treated.

Sergeant Augusto Santos of Orient Road Jail in Tampa Florida opines to the viewer that, "Everybody is given a chance to act like human beings when they come in here regardless of what they do on the outside. If they can't follow directions they go into holding cells." Santos' statement ignores the fact that many people who come into intake, due to the drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness that led to the behavior that got them arrested in the first place, are

incapable of following directions at the time and for that reason belong in a treatment facility. Their temporary inability to follow instructions is made to seem like evidence that they are not humans. Guards use language that makes it seem like holding cells count as a treatment facility and frequently refer to inmates as "these people" or "all kinds" as if they were members of a separate species. Suffering is meant to be visually consumed with excitement and judgment by voyeurs rather than pitied or related to by sympathizers.

## The Role of Rhetoric and Humor in "Jail" and "Caught"

*"That's the psychiatric cell block. There are about 200 men living there currently. But it's more like 500 because they all have at least one imaginary friend." Lieutenant, Northern State Prison (personal conversation 3/18/11)*

Symbols and euphemism produce an emotional response that can allow an offensive or brutal action to be ignored or minimized. In A Language Older Than Words Derrik Jensen describes accounts of the massacre of Indians by Colonel John Chivington. Jensen posits that the massacre was no surprise as, according to the language used by Chivington and his troops, the Indians were never human. They were "sqaws" and "bucks" whose "nits made lice" (29). Euphemism is powerful enough to permit travesty and acts as a tool for ensuring that the collapse of distance does not inspire pity for those meant to be kept from "making lice", as Chivington would say. At the same time, according to James C. Scott, upon closer evaluation, the preponderance of euphemism in any given cultural text would seem to be "a nearly infallible sign that one has stumbled on a delicate subject. It is used to obscure something that is negatively

valued or would prove to be an embarrassment if declared more forthrightly" (Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 53).

As has been shown, episodes of "Jail" contain dehumanizing language. This conversation continues onto the comment pages of YouTube, where clips of episodes of the show are available. For example, "Jail The Sound of Music Rocker Spike TV" is a four-minute clip that has received 13,524 views. It shows a man in a state of psychosis who has just been brought into intake. He keeps talking nonsensically about being a rock star and the guards tease him and instigate him to sing. As was the rare case in most other "Jail" episode YouTube video commentaries, one of 58 comments challenges the practice of incarceration. One viewer commented "This is modern day slavery. Obama and the communist dictators want to imprison minorities." Immediately after, however, another viewer responded, "you're absolutely right. Why don't YOU run in the next presidential election so that you can do everything perfect." Despite this exception, which seems to have derived from a preconceived notion of a political wrong and is not a direct reaction to the man's suffering (the man was white), most make fun of the inmates' physique, haircut, intelligence or, in many cases, their suffering. A few comments mock quotes from the inmate such as "I hate it when guys come riding up on butterflies and punch me in the face only because I ask them to help me take out the trash!". Most say things like "hahahahaha crazy" or "get a haircut you crazy faggot." Here, the label "crazy", reducing the man's personhood to his psychotic ramblings and labeling him "faggot" or other derogatory names discourages thoughts like "this man needs treatment, how can we help him and those like him?"

This euphemism is not necessarily the type that Scott describes, where the language has been made to seem less threatening or offensive by the state as part of a dialogue of subterfuge

meant to heed off resistance to shocking or inhumane practices. In fact, it is quite explicit. However, it still serves the same purpose, which is to replace words that would point to suffering with words that encourage stigma and discourage resistance and forms of action against suffering. As Scott explains, "At every occasion in which the official euphemism ['crazy', 'faggot', 'psycho'] is allowed to prevail over other, dissonant versions, the dominant monopoly over public knowledge is publicly conceded by subordinates." (Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 53). In the case of this "Jail" clip, the dissonant version would be that this man's psychosis and subsequent arrest should inspire pity and insight the type of questions that would lead to action. Since "Jail" profits from the collapse of distance and the viewers desire to consume it, this sort of hateful euphemism which is used as a shield against pity and as justification for apathy ensures that the viewer will not become an agent of change. Allowing viewers to be transformed from voyeurs to activists would mean a potential end to incarceration and essentially an end to the show.

The viewer is able to comfortably come in contact with suffering as long as he or she is permitted or encouraged to laugh about it rather than react with the outrage, sadness or sympathy that might engender action. This is why when "Jail" markets itself on its webpage it invites the viewer to "view the harsh and humorous reality of what happens to criminals after they're caught". If one is laughing at the person who has been named delinquent, criminal or inmate, one need not identify with him or her. In States of Denial Stanley Cohen lists identification with the victim as a determinate of sympathy and empathy (72). If one imagines themselves to be in the same position as the victim, one becomes inspired to help. Laughter creates a new form of distance that avoids identifying with the predicament of the sufferer. This new form of distance makes the sufferer into an object. Luc Boltanski posits that distance between the sufferer and the

spectator is necessary to inspire a politics of pity but that it also threatens to make suffering fictional.

"The fact remains that viewing suffering is especially problematic when the object of suffering is presumed to be real… In fact, when the spectacle of the unfortunate and his suffering is conveyed to a distant and sheltered spectator there is a greater likelihood of this spectacle being apprehended in a fictional mode the more the horizon of action recedes into the distance" (Boltanski, 23)

Transforming the unfortunate into a laughable spectacle is a strategic device used to make Boltanski's "horizon of action" not only recede, but become annihilated. Humor is a staple in the show "Caught". These shows are all between three and seven minutes each. They show footage of crimes being committed, prisoners rioting, arrests being made and criminals being chased. All clips are accompanied by a sarcastic or joking type commentary done by a Caucasian male host (in a similar format to "America's Funniest Home Videos"). This short and shock-jock- esque format leaves no room for background, discussion or intelligent questions. It attempts to turn suffering and desperation into a twisted form of slap- stick comedy and animalizes those whom it has caught on tape. A description of the episode "Bad Girls #9" is as follows, "These dames are extra bad, like the playmate who got busted for stealing, the scene in which a woman, who is already hog tied and screaming is tasered by three large, armed police officers the viewer is meant to laugh at her distress. Also, the viewer is not told what crime, if any she is responsible for, what factors led her to commit it, or if she even represents a danger to the officers' safety. At no point in this episode or any episode of "Caught" is the viewer told about the circumstances that led to the crimes committed.

Cultural texts that frame suffering as humorous or entertaining collapse distance to be consumed. Because in this case suffering represents an opportunity for profit, the sight of it is not meant to inspire pity or action. Other cultural texts, however, attempt to collapse distance by offering a different perspective on the suffering of those deemed criminal by filling in and emphasizing the blanks that shows like "Jail" and "Caught" leave empty.

## The Pitiable Picture of Children of Prisoners: Action and Denial

*"Other day one of the guards asked me if I had any kids. I says, "Yeah, five." He says, "Good, that's my job security." – Inmate, Somerset County Jail*

*(personal conversation, 11/3/10)*

Advocacy groups and publications focused on ensuring the well- being of children of prisoners sometimes acknowledge, as a side note in their literature and mission that the only way to truly ensure the future of children of prisoners is to reduce rates of incarceration. However, by focusing on programming that only puts a metaphorical band- aid on the source of the problem, the images and texts do collapse distance and incite action but at the same time generate a new type of denial.

A letter, found in journalist Nell Bernstein's book All Alone In the World: Children of The Incarcerated presents a convincing and pitiable case of the suffering inflicted on children of prisoners. The letter is from nine-year-old Phillip Gaines to the Judge who sentenced his mother to 19 years in prison for conspiracy to distribute cocaine. The only evidence linking her to this crime were a few phone calls she answered for her boyfriend who had been involved in a small drug ring. The letter reads:

“Dear Judge, I need my mom. Would you help my mom? I have no dad and my grandmom have cancer I don’t have innyone to take care of me and my sisters and my niece and nehew and my birthday’s coming up in October the 25 and I need my mom to be here on the 25 and for the rest of my life. I will cut your grass and wash your care everyday just please don’t send my mom off. Please Please Please don’t!!!” (187)

Bernstein’s book has sold around ten million copies and has been on several bestseller lists. The “Children of Prisoner’s Bill of Rights” which was the end result of Bernstein’s research for this book, has been republished in documents by the American Civil Liberties Union and used by several states to inspire projects like mentoring programs for children of prisoners, new arrest protocols for when children are in the home of the arrestee, and mother- child visitation programs. While these have all been nice interventions for the time being, they deny the root of the problem, mass incarceration, which has been brought on by the normative sentiment that nonconforming citizens deserve to suffer. Despite this attempt to collapse distance and question the power and legitimacy of bureaucratic processes, Phillip’s Mom and the mothers and fathers of about 2.4 million other children in the United States remain in prison because the action taken by the spectator becomes focused on temporary and simple solutions to a more complex problem that demands a different form of resistance. As Boltanski laments in his chapters on “The Question of The Spectator”, just because a spectator is faced with an unfortunate whom he or she feels pity toward does not mean the spectator will be motivated to take action. Taking action also does not always mean that the action is correct or helpful.

New Jersey’s Amachi Break The Cycle Program, which has recently been dissolved due to funding issues, was a mentoring program for children of prisoners. The program collapsed

distance between the spectator and the unfortunate by enlisting the spectator to come directly to the aid of the unfortunate and offer wisdom and a model to which the unfortunate might aspire. The program was sponsored by the North Western Community Action Program and staffed by AmeriCorps VISTAs. Under the HATCH Act, neither of these parties are permitted to run for office, take part in any political campaign or publicly express any political views. The highly politicized nature of mass incarceration made it illegal for staff to convey to volunteers the necessity of lobbying against policies that would end mass incarceration, policies that would decrease recidivism or any other political solution that might help aid the population being served.

Mentoring, though proven to be a partially effective intervention, cannot stand alone as a method of ending the suffering of children of prisoners. The cultural texts put forth by Amachi Break The Cycle, however, were forced to deny this. Mentoring is marketed as the best and only way the viewer might help his or her community. Images and language on the web page shown below convey this call to action. Profit, similarly to the production of "Jail" and "Caught", plays a role here in the way in which distance is able to be collapsed. If the organization did not deceive spectators and volunteers into believing the politics of mass incarceration could be denied, the organization would not receive funding from the federal government. Sadly, mentoring, which was framed as the best and only practice, denies reality.

## After the Collapse: Denying Effective Solutions

The Michigan Prisoner's Creative Arts Project was founded in 1990 as a program that would act as therapy for prisoners, reduce rates of recidivism and help prisoners put together

portfolios of artwork for parole hearings. Recidivism is proven to be destructive to families, communities and local economies. The piece seen below is an illustration by a Michigan prisoner for the front cover of a book called “Is William Martinez Not Our Brother: 20 Years of The Prison Creative Arts Project” by Buzz Alexander. It gives an important visualization of imprisonment as a revolving door and points to the limited community resources available to ex-convicts upon reentering their communities. It also seems to protest the animalization of prisoners. Hallow eyed men are caged away while others wait in line, as if headed toward the slaughter. All of the men wear prison- like uniforms pointing to the reality that once one becomes a prisoner, even when he or she is on “the outside”, he or she remains a prisoner in the eyes of law and society. Rather than displaying the name of a prison, the sign above the door reads “MDOC” for Michigan Department of Corrections. Instead of simply showing us an image of the suffering that occurs within prison walls and allowing us to draw our own conclusions about whose fault it is, the artist is pointing us directly toward bureaucracy as the perpetrator.

While the artist may be correct in pointing out the power bureaucracy holds in maintaining the systematic perpetration of mass incarceration, The Michigan Department of Corrections might be able to lead the way toward a model of justice. This year The MDOC was praised for having one of the largest rates of decline in recidivism and parole revocation rates due to changes in how technical rule violations were enforced and by working with community partners.

A U.S. Marshal’s program called “Fugitives Safe Surrender” allows non-violent offenders, on a periodic basis, to report to law enforcement and gain immunity (sometimes by paying a small fine, most times with no consequence) for their outstanding warrants. This program has been effective in reducing rates of recidivism in about twenty cities. Though this

program saves state money and resources, conservatives in many state governments have been rallying against it. If evidence that recidivism is a problem that can be solved by simple policy changes and community partnerships exists, then why haven't other states followed suit? The answer might be found within the production of shows like "Caught" and "Jail" that market suffering as deserved and institutionalize the idea that individual behavior is solely responsible for criminality.

## Conclusions

Exposing suffering through the creation of visual cultural texts and images might appear a logical means of inciting viewers to come to the aid of the unfortunate. In the case of those who have been victimized by the carceral state, however, this is not the case. Images of suffering are exploited and objectified for public consumption and for profit. Camera crews and television production equipment may have the tools to collapse distances, but deceitful narratives act as powerful tools in generating and maintaining the notion that suffering and punishment are necessary. The use of humor and euphemism creates new distances. Efforts to humanize the sufferer engender sympathy but inspire action that, though compassionate, is far from revolutionary. The collapse of distance has been shown to not necessarily equate to the implementation of solutions, even when these solutions are identifiable and easy to implement. Appealing to viewers' tendencies to avoid relating to criminals, the animalization of subjects of shows like "Caught" and "Jail" replaces whatever barriers capitalist profiteers have destroyed. In these case studies, the prison cell, normally hidden by walls and electric fences, becomes the zoo.

Here, people are gawked at, their pain transformed into entertainment. Dignity and conscionable action and resistance are trapped within cages to which no one seems to hold the key. Studying the cultural texts that capitalize on the phenomenon of mass incarceration does not necessarily yield answers to questions regarding the power of images of suffering. However, by exposing the experience of suffering and the ways in which it is framed, reproduced, belittled and institutionalized culturally, we can be led to an account of crime and punishment that is inclusive of all the factors necessary to a complete and well- rounded understanding of imprisonment.

## Recommendations for Future Study

The case studies in this project could be important in encouraging social scientists to recognize that the study of imprisonment should be conducted through an understanding of both macro and micro levels of power dynamics and experience. A combination of theory and empirical research that does not objectify its subjects would be the best method to prevent generating deceit and denial within the way the academy accounts for criminality and punishment. As Criminologist Eamonn Carrabine wrote in "Discourse, Governmentality and Translation: Toward a Social Theory of Imprisonment, "accounts of prison life should not be divorced from questions that relate to the role the institution performs in society," but also, social science literature should not leave out "how imprisonment is experienced at particular times and places." (312) By studying the cultural texts, images and popular sentiments that capture society's understanding of incarceration, social scientists and change agents can develop improved strategies and mechanisms for generating a collapse of distance that does not inspire new denials or deceptions.

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