

Book Review

Alison Griffiths. 2016. *Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and Prison in Early Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Patrick Brian Smith

The rapid expansion of carceral populations and infrastructure over the last half century has brought about a “punitive turn” within the humanities and social sciences, concerned with exploring “the historical, political, economic, and sociocultural roots of mass incarceration, as well as its collateral costs and consequences” (McDowell, Harold, and Battle 2013, back cover). Understanding the infrastructural and spatial transformations wrought by this expansionary development of the prison industrial complex has become a chief concern across a range of disciplinary formations over the past twenty years (Moran, Gill, and Conlon 2013, Turner and Peters 2016, Moran 2015). Indeed, this research has developed into a subfield of its own, carceral geography. Most broadly, carceral geography—as an area of theoretical and political enquiry—involves an engagement with the spaces, practices and experiences of confinement. In addition, scholars working within this field attempt to situate the carceral within wider social, economic and geopolitical infrastructures, aiming “to counter the imagination of a closed-off and sealed carceral institution, discussing instead the liminal spaces ‘betwixt and between’ the inside and outside of prisons” (Gill et al. 2018, 184). This broadened definition of what constitutes the carceral attempts to throw into sharp relief “the overlaps and synergies between these spaces, their functional and post-functional lives, and also their porosity... recognising that

techniques and technologies of confinement seep out of ‘carceral’ spaces into the everyday, domestic, street, and institutional spaces” (Moran 2017). This attempt to shift the study of carceral spaces outside the physical boundaries of the prison or camp has been driven by several interrelated factors, including “mutations in the neoliberal landscape, [the] inclusion of criminal justice systems in industrial systems for the generation of value, [the] criminalization of poor and othered communities, the mobility and agility of finance capital and the expedient generation of surplus populations” (Gill et al. 2018, 184).

While the current fascination with the prison as an infrastructural, punitive, political and economic apparatus often remains resolutely focused on its contemporary mutations (and understandably so, given its deep interconnections with current late-capitalist economic rationality and neoliberal political hegemony), scholars across a number of disciplines have attempted to re-examine the histories of such punitive infrastructures and spaces—seeking to write the unwritten histories of internment and incarceration. Allison Griffiths’ *Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and the Prison in Early-Twentieth Century America* is a crucial contribution to this historical mapping of the carceral. It is a volume that recognises the fecundity of looking back to try and understand the social and political foundations of a system that is now deeply structured by myri-

ad forms of economic, racial and gender inequality and violence. *Carceral Fantasies* takes the moving image as its central object of study, examining the various ways this form has interacted with carceral infrastructures across the twentieth century. Griffiths is interested in two distinct, yet interrelated, forms of such interactivity: how prisons and punishment have been represented cinematically and how the moving image has been exhibited historically within carceral institutions. For her, this dual focus on the representational and the exhibitory results from the prison's paradoxical status: it is a space that is "unknown to the vast majority and yet resolutely imagined through popular culture" (Griffiths 2016, 1). For Griffiths, this paradox constitutes what she terms the "carceral imaginary," which builds from Angela Davis' claim that carceral spaces are "present in our lives, and, at the same time... absent" (Davis 2003, 15). The moving image thus becomes a mediator of sorts for Griffiths' exploration of the carceral, as she examines the prison as both cinematic subject *and* a material site of exhibition.

The book is divided into three sections. In section one, "The Carceral Imaginary," Griffiths further develops this conceptual notion of the *imaginary*, examining the diverse representations of carceral spaces across a range of moving image practices—actualities, non-fiction and narrative films. Her opening analysis of Thomas Edison's 1901 film *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* is particularly striking in this regard. This "phantasmagorical" re-enactment of the execution of Leon Czolgosz by electric chair at Auburn Correctional Facility (following his conviction for the assassination of U.S. President William McKinley) is for Griffiths indicative of a long-held desire for audiences to see into the "darkest recesses of the penitentiary" (Griffiths 2016, 54). Here, she suggests that *The Execution of Czolgosz* is an early example of the "death penalty film," a historically diverse body of works that have shaped crucial facets of our collective carceral imaginary over the twentieth century—and which have led to prisons remaining, as Angela Davis asserts, "one of the most important features of our image environment" (Griffiths 2016, 55). For Griffiths, these films are representative of a desire "not just to see

life extinguished but also to penetrate the walls of the penitentiary" (Griffiths 2016, 15).

The book's second section, "The Carceral Spectator," shifts gears to examine how film was one amongst a wider constellation of media and entertainment forms that entered carceral spaces at the beginning of the twentieth century. More specifically, Griffiths examines how the establishment and growth of media repositories (libraries, education centres) and other forms of entertainment in the prison (concerts, vaudeville, radio) interacted with—and often structured—cinema's own entry into carceral space. The third section, "The Carceral Reformer," examines moving image media's crucial role in penal reform practices, particularly in relation to women's prisons. For example, chapter 6 devotes significant time to examining how film was taken up as a political tool by reformers like Katherine Russell Bleecker. As Griffiths suggests, "in 1914...Bleecker was commissioned to make films to accompany a touring exhibit organized by the Joint Committee on Prison Reform," a group which brought together several reformist institutions in New York State (Griffiths 2016, 238). Griffiths examines how Bleecker's staged reenactments of prison brutality formed a crucial part of a wider multimedia exhibition by JCPR in 1916, which aimed not only to visualise the atrocious realities of prison life, but also aimed to draw the material environments of carcerality outside the bounds of the prison walls. For Griffiths, these early reformist works were important examples of the "convergence of penal discourse and popular entertainment" which "marshalled a kind of 'cognitive cognition' where cinema and prison reform could be mutually informing" (Griffiths 2016, 266).

Across both the case studies highlighted here—and more broadly across the whole book—Griffiths continually emphasises the diverse ways moving image media interacted with carceral space, drawing it out of the prison walls and into public view. In many ways, Griffiths' approach to examining moving image media's relationship to and interactions with carceral space across the twentieth century dovetails well with the current carceral geographical emphasis on resisting an imagination "of a closed-off and sealed carceral institution," emphasising instead "the liminal spaces 'betwixt

and between' the inside and outside of prisons." In Griffiths' mapping of moving image media's diverse interactions with prison infrastructure, she forces us to perceive how carceral space has always existed—conceptually, imaginatively and materially—beyond the physical boundaries of the prison. Griffiths' book resonates across a number of disciplines and areas of study, including nontheatrical moving image histories, media archaeology, carceral studies, human geography, and media ethics. As shifts towards ever subtler (yet, simultaneously structurally violent) forms of disciplinary governmentality—both juridical and biopolitical in nature—are leading to large increases in contemporary incarceration rates, it is crucial to examine of the historical foundations of these systems of control and violence and the ways public discourse towards them has been shaped. Griffiths' *Carceral Fantasies* undertakes this crucial work.

References

- Davis, Angela Y. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Gill, Nick, Deirdre Conlon, Dominique Moran, and Andrew Burrige. 2018. "Carceral Circuitry: New Directions in Carceral Geography." *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 2 (April): 183-204.
- Griffiths, Alison. 2016. *Carceral Fantasies: Cinema and Prison in Early Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McDowell, Deborah E., Claudrena N. Harold, and Juan Battle, eds. 2013. *The Punitive Turn: New Approaches to Race and Incarceration*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Moran, Dominique. 2015. *Carceral Geography: Spaces and Practices of Incarceration*. Burlington: Routledge.
- . 2017. "CfP: 2nd International Conference for Carceral Geography." Oxford Law Faculty. Last modified September 8, 2017. <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/news/2017-09-08-cfp-2nd-international-conference-carceral-geography>.
- Moran, Dominique, Nick Gill, and Deirdre Conlon, eds. 2013. *Carceral Spaces: Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention*. Burlington: Routledge.
- Turner, Jennifer, and Kimberley Peters, eds. 2016. *Carceral Mobilities: Interrogating Movement in Incarceration*. New York: Routledge.