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Consuming Punishment in Canada: Law, Crime and Justice in Canadian Prison Cinema

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings from a qualitative study of Canadian films about prisons and punishment over the past 70 years using popular criminology as a conceptual and analytic framework. We show that shifts in cinematic representation of the prison and punishment within Canada reflected both the evolution of professional, legal, and academic understandings of the purpose of punishment in society, as well as government cultural policies that shaped the possibilities for a Canadian national cinema in the shadow of Hollywood. The dominance of documentary cinema within Canadian regulatory and funding frameworks in much of the twentieth century fostered, at times, critical cultural engagements with the prison. More recently, however, regulatory shifts and commercial imperatives in the streaming era and proximity to the US market have spawned less critical and more conventional, generic depictions that reproduce Hollywood tropes and stereotypes while neglecting the social costs of prisons and the colonial roots of mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Keywords: popular criminology, prison films, corrections, law, crime, punishment

Introduction

Media and culture offer opportunities to pleasurably — and sometimes critically — consume images and narratives about crime, law, and punishment. Cultural criminology has analyzed the myriad ways that media, popular culture, and capitalism work to commodify punishment, pain, crime, and victimization (Ferrell et al., 2015; Hayward & Presdee, 2010; Kohm, 2009; Presdee, 2000; Schofield, 2004). Nicole Rafter (2007) referred to these mediated encounters as popular criminology — a popular discourse about crime and punishment that

intersects and intertwines with academic criminology. Criminologists have since heeded Rafter's call to make cultural depictions of law, crime, and punishment central to understanding the broader meanings of law and order in society (Kohm, 2017; Kohm & Greenhill, 2011, Page & Goodman, 2020; Rafter & Brown, 2011). To date, much of this work has focused on US representations of crime and justice. Notwithstanding the global cultural hegemony of Hollywood, this study examines popular representations of punishment and corrections within the Canadian national cinematic culture to better understand changing views of the legal, philosophical, and moral dimensions of punishment in one settler colonial society. To date, scholarly studies of prison and punishment in film have entirely neglected the Canadian national context. This article therefore provides a unique empirical case study of Canadian cinematic engagement with the prison from the post-World War II period to the present.

This paper reports the findings of a qualitative and thematic analysis of the content, production, and reception contexts of films representing prisons and punishment in Canada from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Using popular criminology as a conceptual and analytic framework, we situate Canadian prison films within concurrent historical, political, and theoretical developments, analyzing films as popular criminological texts that reflect and sometimes contest prevalent ideologies about crime, justice, and punishment in Canada (Kohm, 2017; Rafter, 2007). We argue that national cinematic cultures reflect shifting political and cultural ideas about the role of punishment and the prison in society, as well as the efficacy of punishment as a tool of societal change and progress. Following prior studies of prison films in Hollywood and Britain (e.g., Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004), we analyze the content, production, and reception contexts of Canadian prison films over a 70-year period as a cultural barometer of shifting discourses about the nature and purpose of punishment and the need for penal reform. We analyze shifts in the narrative and thematic content of prison films over seven decades in Canada, which allows us to interrogate the evolution of Canadian penal culture — neglected to date in the broader literature on prison films. We qualitatively analyzed 28 documentary and fictional/narrative films released between 1951 and 2020, made in and about Canada, that focus centrally on punishment and corrections. These films offer

audiences opportunities for what Michelle Brown (2009) calls penal spectatorship — opportunities to be complicit in the infliction of pain upon others as well as offering "a cultural resource for people to make sense of punishment" (p. 5). Thus, we argue that films about the prison in Canada are important sites where cultural work naturalizing punishment plays out. We further ground our work theoretically and conceptually within cultural criminology, viewing crime film as a unique site to explore the reciprocal relationship between crime and culture (Ferrell et al., 2015). As popular efforts to make sense of crime and punishment, films about Canadian prisons constitute an example of popular criminology that can be read alongside and in tandem with academic and professional discourses about punishment (Rafter, 2007). Furthermore, the longstanding emphasis within Canadian cultural policy on documentary film has imbued much of the postwar Canadian cinematic output with an air of realism and authenticity unique among English-speaking nations (Druick, 2007; Gittings, 2002). This was particularly evident in early government-produced documentary films that emphasized "citizen training and national unity" (Boyd, 2016, p. 86). Consequently, Canadian prison films represent a clear instance of direct government social engineering through cultural output designed to change public ideas about the prison in Canadian society. Therefore, Canadian cinema is a rich site to analyze seven decades of ideological work positioning the prison as an essential social institution of national importance.

Cinematic Representation of Crime, Justice, and the Prison

Criminology, sociology, law, sociolegal studies, and film studies have spawned a rich and varied literature on Hollywood films about crime and criminal justice (e.g., Bouclin, 2021; Greenfield et al., 2001; King, 1999; Leitch, 2002; Robson et al., 2014; Yar, 2010). Rafter's (2006) groundbreaking study of crime and criminal justice in film is the most comprehensive criminological work on Hollywood crime film to date, spanning criminal etiology, cop films, courtroom and law films, and prison and execution films. Conversely, scholarly work on Canadian crime film has been mostly limited to film studies and Canadian studies — often preoccupied with the cinematic representation of the Mountie (e.g., Gittings, 1998; Grubin, 2014; Pearson, 1998). However, there is an emerging interdisciplinary literature ex-

amining criminological and sociological dimensions of Canadian crime film and society, including representation of policing in urban contexts (e.g., Bookman, 2018; Braithwaite, 2017; Kohm, 2022; Kohm et al., 2017; Kohm & Richtik, 2018; Lam, 2017). To date, however, this emerging Canadian scholarship has overlooked films examining prisons and punishment in Canada.

A considerable international literature on Hollywood and British prison films has taken shape over the past two decades. Analyses demonstrate that prison films tend to reflect and rely on dominant tropes about punishment, such as reform, rehabilitation, and escape (Mason, 2006a, 2006b; O'Sullivan, 2001). Rafter (2006) argues that most Hollywood prison films present audiences with morality tales about the restoration of justice after long periods of suffering. She asserts that prison films are "essentially fantasies, films that purport to reveal the brutal realities of incarceration while actually offering viewers escape from the miseries of daily life through adventure and heroism" (Rafter, 2006, p. 163). Because of its relative invisibility in the lives of most people, the prison — rather ironically — provides filmmakers considerable freedom to explore a range of subjects not possible in other settings. For example, Griffiths (2014) points out "the same-sex sociality of incarceration creates ample narrative possibilities for stories of male or female friendship and bonding, homoerotic desire, and the cult of hyper-masculinity" (Griffiths, 2014, p. 175).

Hollywood prison films are numerous, with examples extending back to the early 1900s. Griffiths (2014) claims some of the earliest silent films were "more effective at evoking prison's discombobulating effect than the classic prison films of the 1920s and 1930s" (p. 163). Nevertheless, the 1930s saw the solidification of the prison film genre in Hollywood and has been dubbed a "golden era" (Dowler 2020: 141). Tepperman (2019) identified 43 Hollywood prison films released in the 1930s making it "a decade with more filmic depictions of prison life than any other in history" (p. 27). Stock characters in the classic Hollywood prison film genre include "convict buddies, a paternalistic warden, a cruel assistant warden or guard, a craven snitch, a bloodthirsty convict and the young hero, who is either absolutely innocent or at most guilty of a very minor offense that does not

warrant prison" (Rafter, 2006, p. 164). Some scholars have contested Rafter's claims about the prison film genre, pointing out that considerable diversity and subgenres exist, and many films have moved away from fantasies about the restoration of justice (Dowler, 2020; Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004). Indeed, Rafter (2006) notes the emergence of critical and alternative prison films and new prison documentaries since the 1980s that subvert genre conventions and contest the very idea of justice itself within the penal context.

Patricia Gruben (2014) asserts that crime films "both reflect and affect the values of the cultures that produce them" (p. 275). However, the exact impact of films on a particular nation's cultural values is complex (Kohm, 2022). Wilson and O'Sullivan (2004) argue that prison films act as a "social barometer registering the concerns of their era" yet have a "dual and contradictory nature" (pp. 55–56) contributing both to public misperception about prisons and punishment while also at times demonstrating the need for reform. Griffiths (2014) echoes this sentiment, pointing out that films in her study both "constructed and paradoxically questioned certain aspects of penality" (p. 176). Most scholars agree that prison films influence popular perceptions about punishment "because direct personal experience is relatively low" (Bennett, 2006a, p. 269). However, there is some disagreement in the literature about the potential of films to contribute meaningfully to prison reform as opposed to simply "reinforcing existing, conventional penal policy" (Bennett, 2006a, p. 269; see also Mason, 2003; Jarvis, 2005). For Nellis (2005), some prison films may even encourage audiences to embrace the idea of increasingly repressive penal regimes and "fun fascism" (p. 226). Rafter (2006) argued prison films ultimately fail to critique the institution, instead focusing on corrupt individuals in the system and those wrongfully or disproportionately punished. While the precise cultural effects of prison films are open to academic debate, prison cinema remains an object of much productive discussion in criminology. However, to date, there has been no systematic study of prison films in the Canadian context. This study addresses this gap in the literature while speculating about the cultural effects of prison films on the Canadian penal imaginary by examining the way these films foster a popular criminology of punishment and facilitate pleasurable viewer encounters with the prison.

Canadian Film and Hollywood

While the global hegemony of Hollywood has shaped viewer expectations about prison films, it is important to analyze films made in other national cinematic cultures (Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004). We analyze prison films made within the Canadian cultural context, which is a product of a particular set of interlocking economic, cultural, and political arrangements (Gittings, 2002; Gruben, 2014; Kohm et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to briefly note the ways that Canadian filmmaking has been both constrained and facilitated by internal and external influences on cultural production.

Canadian film production has always been limited by proximity to the huge US market, dominated by Hollywood studios and American distribution networks that have treated Canada as part of their domestic market since the early twentieth century (Gittings, 2002). Canada's small population has meant that that financial success for Canadian films hinges on penetrating the US market (Morris, 1978). However, this was nearly impossible for much of the twentieth century, given the vertically integrated nature of Hollywood film production, distribution, and exhibition. Consequently, most early filmmaking ventures in Canada were financial failures (Morris, 1978). Additionally, Canadian government policy and financing tended to favour informational film, rather than entertainment (Kohm et al., 2022). In particular, the influence of the National Film Board (NFB) cannot be understated. Established in 1939, the government-funded NFB was founded and directed by John Grierson, "an ardent advocate for (and term-coiner of) the documentary" (Kohm et al., 2022, p. 2). The influence of Grierson and the NFB ensured that informational film was prioritized over fictional, narrative film in the formative years of cinema in Canada (Kohm et al., 2022).

Documentary film production in Canada was heavily influenced by World War II. The NFB *Canada Carries On* series was created as wartime propaganda in order to "instill in Canadians a knowledge of and pride in themselves as well as a sense of their promise and importance in the world" (Goetz, 1977, p. 62). The production and distribution of wartime informational film played a key role in the NFB's success, and the use of documentary as an instrument of social engineering led to growth and expansion following the war (Druick,

2007). After 1945, the NFB refocused on social issues of national interest, including crime and rehabilitation.

Lack of consistent government protection and support of feature-length, narrative film production limited cultural output in Canada. While Britain and other English-speaking nations imposed quota systems to protect their domestic film production from Hollywood imports, Canada declined to take action (Kohm et al., 2022). Instead, Canada entered into the 1948–1958 Canadian Co-operation Project, an informal agreement with the Hollywood studios to stay out of the business of feature filmmaking in exchange for vague promises of more US productions in Canada (Gittings, 2002). Unsurprisingly, feature-film production languished in Canada through the 1950s and most of the 1960s.

Independent, feature-length narrative film finally received direct government financial support in 1967 with the establishment of the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC). This spurred a handful of productions through the late 1960s and early 1970s. Generous tax incentives were offered to further stimulate film production in Canada during what become known as the tax-shelter era (1975–1982). The Canadian government allowed up to 100% of the capital costs of film production to be written off. This spawned numerous low-budget, Hollywood-style film productions that used Canada as a stand-in setting for the US, leading Canadian cities like Vancouver and Toronto to become known as 'Hollywood North' (Melnyk, 2004).

Despite these government supports, a true Canadian feature-film industry remained elusive. Even if a film could be financed and produced in Canada, the Hollywood studios maintained a stranglehold on film distribution and exhibition in Canada well into the 1980s. As a result, the CFDC was renamed Telefilm Canada in 1984 to recognize the growing importance of television as a venue for Canadian films. By the turn of the millennium, Canada's film- and TV-funding agencies and cultural policies shifted to emphasize the importance of reaching a larger audience. Consequently, Gruben (2014) noted an increasing number of crime films among the projects funded by Telefilm Canada since 2005, evincing greater institutional support for popular genre films with the potential for international distribution. In

sum, the Canadian national cinematic context is a product of shifting internal and external forces that have impeded and shaped the types of films that were possible. The following analysis of Canadian prison films must be placed within this political-economic context in order to fully understand the changing representation of the prison in Canadian film. We argue that Canadian prison films respond to not only shifting criminological theories and penal philosophies, but also the structural and financial frameworks of Canadian cultural production.

Methods

Our data-collection strategy consisted of two phases. First, we compiled a list of films that depicted prisons and punishment in Canada by consulting online databases such as the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb.com) and the *Great Canadian Guide to the Movies* (pulpanddagger.com), as well as secondary literature and Canadian industry contacts. This yielded 61 films spanning 1937–2020. Additional films that subsequently came to our attention were added to this list during the analysis and writing phases. The second phase of the data-collection process involved locating DVD, VHS, or online-streaming copies of the films and viewing each to determine if they met our criteria for inclusion. To be included, films must significantly depict prisons, punishment, and corrections in Canada. This followed Rafter's (2006) approach to selecting crime films, and necessitated some judgment calls on our part. We excluded films made in Canada but explicitly set elsewhere, such as the many 'Hollywood North' productions filmed in Canada to take advantage of low costs and tax incentives. Additionally, we excluded prisoner-of-war films. Several films listed in databases or in the secondary literature were unavailable in any format. Without being able to obtain and view these films, we could not determine if they fit the definitional criteria for inclusion. Therefore, a small number of potentially relevant films had to be excluded. This second phase of data collection resulted in 28 films that were qualitatively and thematically analyzed (Table 1).

Table 1: Canadian Prison Films by Year

Film	Year	Film	Year
Penitentiary	1951	*Johnny Greyeyes*	2000
After Prison What	1951	*15 fevrier 1839*	2001
The Happy Fugitive	1957	*Histoire de pen / Inside*	2002
The Ticket	1958	*Sentenced to Life*	2003
Cell 16	1971	*Life Inside Out*	2005
Fortune and Men's Eyes	1971	*Poor Boys Game*	2007
Caged Men	1971	*A Hard Name*	2009
Les Ordres / Orders	1974	*The Con Artist*	2010
Turning to Stone	1985	*Kids in Jail*	2013
Night Zoo	1987	*NCR (Not Criminally Responsible)*	2013
Malarek	1988	*Waseskun*	2016
The Party	1990	*Nitro Rush*	2016
The Spirit Within	1990	*Conviction*	2019
Chaindance	1991	*The Free Ones*	2020

We utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) template for qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurrent and prominent themes in the data. This approach is well-suited to film analysis because it is flexible and results in a rich description of the data as well as facilitating interpretation. Our analysis approximated the six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. We began by familiarizing ourselves with the data, watching films initially to determine overall suitability. Once we were satisfied that a film was suitable for inclusion, we reviewed the film again, making notes of initial codes and concepts that seemed promising. Initial codes were then organized into broader themes. During this step we were attentive to prior research findings about prison films in general, and we also focused attention on the way Canadian films conformed to and/or departed thematically from the classic Hollywood prison film genre. In this way, our thematic analysis was broadly theory driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the analysis, we met frequently to discuss our evolving thematic interpretation and to ensure consistency in our approach. Following this

first phase of analysis, we shifted analytic attention to the temporal organization of themes and subjects within the films. Our approach was guided by Wilson and O'Sullivan's (2004) 'periodization' in their study of British prison films. Periodization refers to "division into chronological periods" in order to "facilitate discussion of the films themselves and to suggest their relationship to changing penal realities" (Wilson & O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 34). Additionally, periodization facilitates popular criminological analysis whereby cinematic eras are juxtaposed alongside social, theoretical, and professional developments in corrections and penology (Kohm, 2017). We identified five distinct periods of Canadian prison films: 1) post-war optimism (1950s); 2) disappearance (1960s); 3) pessimism (1970s); 4) visibility and alternative justice (mid-80s to 2000); and 5) fantasy and post-prison (2001–2020). Together, our thematic qualitative analysis and periodization provided a framework to analyze the relationship between cultural production in Canada and shifting penal sensibilities. In the next section, we report our key thematic findings in each of the five periods, providing examples from many of the films. Limited space precludes a detailed discussion of all films.

1950s: Reform and Post-war Optimism

Films of the 1950s reflected optimism about the prison's potential to positively change human behavior and society. The era was also marked by the ascendency of a social criminology that rooted crime in a combination of individual psychology and social conditions, and endorsed a rehabilitative philosophy in corrections (Garland, 2001). As governmental efforts to foster social change, NFB films of this era encouraged optimism and deference toward correctional professionals, while sternly chiding the public for being narrow-minded and overly punitive (Druick, 2007). As noted above, the NFB shifted documentary production in the postwar period from wartime propaganda to social issues deemed to be of national importance. The NFB corrections-focused films in this decade reflected shifts in penal philosophy and anticipated correctional reforms interrupted by World War II. These films provided a direct address to Canadian audiences about citizenship, belonging, and the role of the prison in producing a well-ordered Canadian society. In this way, films of the early postwar period facilitated a structured form of penal spectatorship, allowing

audiences to experience punishment at a distance, while being reassuring of the prison's indispensable and socially valuable role in Canadian society (Brown, 2009). While at times borrowing stylistically from Hollywood prison genre films, Canadian films of this era were unique cultural tools of nation building with a distinct ideological function reinforced by their documentary style and presentation.

Penitentiary (1951) was a dramatization of a first-time convict entering the Canadian federal prison system (Figure 1). Written and directed by Ronald Weyman as part of the NFB "Canada Carries On" series, the film contains elements of a semi-documentary (Druick, 2003). *Penitentiary* combined stylized scripted dialogue, striking black and white film *noir*-style cinematography, a dramatic musical score, and voice-of-God narration by Canadian-born Hollywood actor Lorne Green. The opening credits established the authenticity of the film's settings and participants, stating: "Made possible only by the generous co-operation of the wardens, staff and inmates of certain Canadian penitentiaries."

Figure 1: Iconic images of life inside a prison (*Penitentiary*, 1951)

The audience is positioned as a fly-on-the-wall as a first-time prisoner is brought through the gates of the penitentiary. The narrator authoritatively frames these images as the endpoint of the criminal justice process:

> You commit a crime, you break the law, now you must pay the penalty imposed by the law. Stripped, examined, bathed, photographed, and fingerprinted. You get a set of clothes with a number. You're officially one of the country's penitentiary inmates. You'll get to know every crack in the ceiling, every stone in the wall. You have time — time perhaps to mend your ways, perhaps to grow bitter.

Penitentiary depicts a modern approach to corrections, enacted by professional penologists, with the potential to heal men[1] of the troubles that brought them into conflict with the law. The film also imagines a cohesive and inclusive Canadian society where all men are equal before the law and the prison is a microcosm of that ideal. We are assured the prison does not discriminate by social or economic class, or crime type: "With you are men serving sentence for armed robbery, embezzlement, arson, rape — men from every walk of life, from every level of the community — with one thing in common: all have broken the law." *Penitentiary* deftly erased the criminogenic social, economic, and racial divisions in Canadian society. Along with its message of social integration and equality, the film also provides continuity with Hollywood prison films by depicting iconic elements of the prison experience reified through the genre's golden age (Figure 2). In one scene, we see men in the hot sun breaking rock with sledgehammers and working on a prison farm, while in another scene we listen as the warden metes out punishment: "Three days. Bread and water. Solitary." While clearly drawing from cultural tropes about the prison in popular culture, the film is also positioned as factual and with a mission to promote social change.

Penitentiary departs from the generic codes of Hollywood by directly posing questions about the purpose of the prison. The narrator asks: "A man can be punished for his crime, but can he be remade into a useful law-abiding citizen?" In response we are told that behind the foreboding stone walls of Canada's penitentiaries a new approach to punishment is unfolding. Rehabilitation, we learn, involves individual assessment by prison psychologists who "look for the causes of a man's wrongdoing." We look in on a meeting of the prison classification board: "The warden, or his deputy, and the key men of the peni-

[1] Women were not depicted in Canadian prison films until the 1980s.

tentiary staff. They're here to study the case of one individual. To put him back on the rails, if they can." Our young fictional inmate learns that there is no way to beat society — criminals "always lose." The remainder of the film follows the young first-time convict as he adjusts to life inside. We learn about the many progressive features of incarceration in the 1950s. Visits from family, softball games, a prison newsletter penned by inmates, and new training centres, "where the social-worker instructor takes over from the thug and the petty crime boss." The film concludes with an older convict being released to an uncertain future. The narrator directly addresses the audience: "When your time comes, what will you have learnt? Hate, and the skills of the criminal? Or the heart and the means to take a place in the world outside?"

Figure 2: The Young Convict and the Old Timer (*Penitentiary*, 1951).

Petitionary provided an optimistic portrait of the penal and criminal justice system that worked ideologically to naturalize punishment and urge Canadians to take their place in the social order. The film clearly embodied the mission of the NFB to promote "citizen training and national unity" (Boyd, 2016, p. 86). *After Prison What?* (1951) —

also by Ronald Weyman — picked up where the first film left off. The film reflected calls for penal reform from the Canadian government's Archambault Report (Canada, 1938) sidelined during the second world war and anticipated the new federal *Parole Act* (1959) at the end of the decade. Entirely scripted and dramatized, the film encouraged empathy for fictional released prisoner Charles Brown, struggling to find employment and acceptance. Brown is repeatedly rejected by employers who fail to live up to the promises of a liberal and tolerant society. One prospective employer explains: "Sure the company is sympathetic to guys like you, but we gotta protect the public too." Unable to find work, he revisits his old criminal haunts and flirts with a return to crime. During these scenes, Brown reflects on his misspent youth. The camera pans to show a young person reading "Supercrime Comics" (Figure 3), providing a visual reflection of midcentury criminological theory locating criminal offending in the corrupting influence of delinquent peers and popular culture. In the end, Brown seeks the help of the John Howard Society, and finds stable employment. The film offers a clear plea for tolerance and acceptance, while expressing faith in the professionals of the justice system, furthering the ideological function of the early prison film as citizen training.

Fergus McDonell directed a pair of scripted dramas for the NFB later in the decade that further explored parole and the reintegration process. *The Happy Fugitive* (1957), part of NFB's "Perspective" series, was based on "a case in the files of the John Howard Society of Ontario." Upbeat and with a polka-style musical score, the film was said to be based on the true story of Joe Sands, who was returned to Kingston Penitentiary (KP) after violating the terms of his ticket-of-leave issued 28 years earlier. The film used Sands' long absence from prison to illustrate Canada's penal reform efforts. Among the changes noted by Sands is the removal of the women's prison wing from KP and the new prison classification officer. Reflecting on a friendly conversation he shared with a guard, Sands remarked, "In my time, if you tried to talk, you got five days in the hole." Additionally, he noted, "There's no more rule of silence, no more ban on tobacco, no more of this marching in drill formation every step you take." In this way, the film showcased Canada's new progressive approach to punishment and modern parole process. The investigation of Sands' past

by the John Howard Society provided a revealing portrait of a Canadian urban underclass largely forgotten amid postwar prosperity. We learn that Sands lives in a rooming house in Toronto's Cabbagetown — a run-down ethnic enclave also home to Sands' closest friend Maxwell Spivak — a junk collector who speaks with a heavy Yiddish accent and claims to be only 50 cents away from starvation. Spivak attests to Sands' good character and provides helpful information that allows the John Howard Society to provide a positive report for a new ticket of leave. In the end, Sands thanks the warden of KP for his hospitality upon release and the narrator remarked: "Justice proved itself flexible. In this case, consistent with justice for all, justice for one." Guided by the NFB's mission of nation building, *The Happy Fugitive* exemplified the ideological work of postwar Canadian prison cinema, facilitating positive viewer encounters with the state's carceral apparatus.

Figure 3: Criminogenic Comics (*After Prison What?*, 1951).

A second scripted NFB production directed by McDonell, *The Ticket* (1958), built on the same themes. The film portrayed Joe Farber, a fictional paroled prisoner trying to make it in the community in the face of outrage by the victim of his crime. Imprisoned at the age of 19

on a charge of theft with violence, Farber learns a trade and earns his ticket of leave halfway through his sentence. He has steady employment and an understating employer, but his life unravels when confronted by the victim he robbed years earlier. The man wants Joe to serve the full six years of his sentence, but Bill Dexter from the John Howard Society takes the time to explain the importance of supervised release. Through flashbacks, we observe Joe's time in prison and his journey to rehabilitation under the careful supervision of prison authorities. Underscoring the film's pro-rehabilitation message, we are told by the John Howard representative:

> 98% of the prisoners come out of prison. Now we think it's better and more logical that they be released into a situation of supervision and help rather than be turned out cold from a punitive institution into a hostile world. It's safer for the public and it gives Joe a chance.

In the end, the victim is fully swayed and feels regret for potentially damaging Farber's chances of successful reintegration. *The Ticket* preached tolerance and foreshadowed parole reform in Canada with the *Parole Act* (1959) coming into force the next year.

In sum, the films of the early postwar period were shaped inexorably by the mission of the NFB to teach Canadians about themselves and, importantly, how to take up their proper place in the social order. While the films hinted at some of the deep tensions underlying Canadian democracy such as poverty, crime, and intolerance, the prison was projected as a solution to problems threatening social cohesion. Intolerance can be overcome by education, we are told in the films, just as a life of crime can be righted by the careful and direct intervention of penal authorities of the Canadian state. The apparent realism of the films, drawing on supposedly real case files and taking audiences inside real penal institutions, amplified the ideological power of these films, while facilitating a penal encounter that allowed audiences to safely consume penal imagery and vicariously participate in punishment (e.g., Brown, 2009). Drawing, at times, on familiar Hollywood tropes, these films not only reflected Canadian penal culture, but actively promoted reforms to rehabilitative programming and conditional release in the years to follow.

1960s: Disappearance

The 1960s were marked by the disappearance of the Canadian prion film. Lack of government support for filmmaking through most of the decade impeded the development of feature-length narrative film in general. While the NFB continued to make films through the 1960s on a variety of social themes, prison and rehabilitation were no longer a key focus for social engineering. The close of the previous decade and Canada's new *Parole Act* (1959) bracketed off a period of interest in prison issues in Canadian film that was not reawakened for more than a decade. Consequently, the 1960s remains a period of absence for Canadian prison cinema. However, the following decade saw an abrupt shift, reflecting greater government financial support for film and a new critical and skeptical tone about the prison that reflected criminological and penological discourses in this era.

1970s: Pessimism

Cell 16 (1971), part of the NFB "Challenge for Change" series, was a short experimental film directed by Martin Duckworth illustrating "the complex effects of incarceration on individuals." Filmed at Collins Bay Penitentiary in Kingston, Ontario "with the cooperation of staff and inmates," *Cell 16* marked a distinct shift in tone and style for the NFB. Lacking conventional scripted dialogue or actors, key participants were credited by their institutional number and name. The film juxtaposed the recitation of beat-style poetry/prose over the ambient echoing soundscape of the prison along with stark visuals emphasizing bars, corridors, gates, pipes, and crumbling cell walls. These visuals mirrored contemporaneous Hollywood films, like *Escape from Alcatraz* (1971), featuring "camera work that dwells on miles of cells, pipes, and other apparatuses of containment [that] visually reinforces viewer antagonism toward social control" (Rafter, 2006, p. 13). A handheld camera provided point-of-view footage, focusing on prisoner #6314 Peter Madden as he eats, writes, smokes, and attempts to sleep, sometimes mimicking his pacing movements in the cell. The film was a collaboration between Duckworth, a staffer at the NFB, and Madden, a prisoner at Collins Bay. *Cell 16* was a short-form adaptation of Madden's play *The Criminal Record* that was written and produced in Collins Bay in 1971. *Cell 16* heralded a new and highly critical view of the prison — even within the government-

directed NFB. Rather than positively shaping men for eventual release into society, the film showcased how prisons "lock men within themselves, depriving their minds of normal life experiences, confiscating their humanity".

In addition to the new critical tone at the NFB, several critical fictional films were released in the 1970s. *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1971) was the most well-known Canadian film of this period and was adapted from the successful stage play by Canadian author John Herbert, based on his experience as a teen incarcerated in the Ontario Reformatory at Guelph, Ontario (Figure 4). First produced off Broadway in the US in 1967, the controversial play shocked critics and audiences, but ultimately became the most widely produced Canadian play of all time and was "the first play to dramatize in an often shocking manner society's treatment of homosexuals [sic.] and inhumane prison conditions" (Wagner, 2013, para. 1).

Following the play's success, the film gained the financial support of the CFDC and the backing of a major Hollywood studio. Filmed in a former Quebec City prison, the opening wintery scene locates the action firmly in Canada. Women shivering in parkas bid farewell to husbands and boyfriends being led away to prison. Young first-time prisoner Smitty says a tearful goodbye to his girlfriend. The film chronicles Smitty's transformation from a new brutalized inmate to the dominant male in the cell. The play and film were highly controversial, in particular for depicting a prison rape scene. The film also depicted violence and corruption among the guards as well as a drag performance. *Fortune and Men's Eyes* was a shocking indictment of the prison system that reflected the mood of pessimism in a decade marked by a 'nothing works' ethos (Martinson, 1974).

The ideological framings of the NFB films of the early postwar period were amplified by the realism attained through the rhetorical devices and conventions of documentary film. Conversely, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* and other films of the period promised a different type of gritty realism by claiming to lift the veil on the inherent brutality of the prison. Promotional materials claimed, "What goes on in prison is a crime" and "There's only one way to get a better view of prison life" (Figure 4). Thus, *Fortune and Men's Eyes* promised a voyeuristic view of the prison that directly implicated the audience in the

pleasurable consumption of carceral violence. Lacking the critical force of the stage play, the film nevertheless rejected the postwar optimism about the potential of the prison to positively shape men.

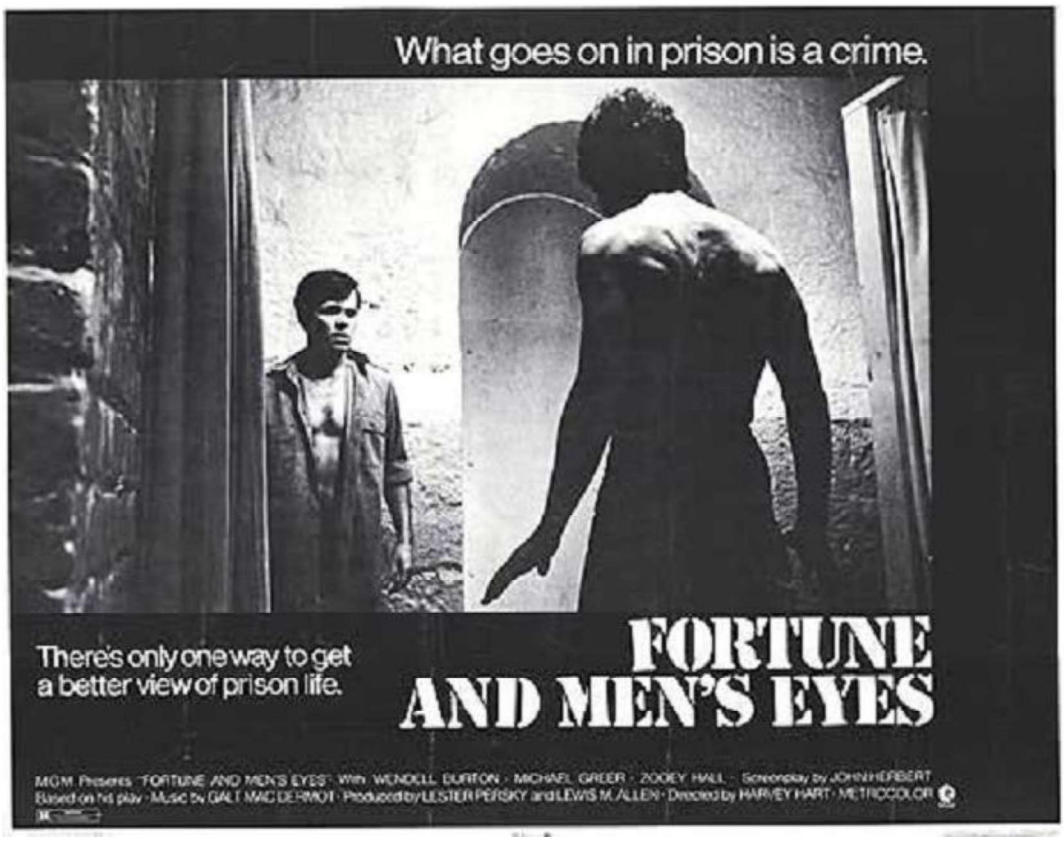

Figure 4: Promotional poster for *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, 1971 (Evans, 2022).

While the *New York Times* praised the film's realism, stating: "the bleakness of incarceration is projected with depressing authenticity" (Weiler, 1971, p. 30), the film was initially dismissed by critics "as retrograde in its depiction of heteronormative role playing among the inmates" (Dickinson, 2007, p. 104). Some claimed that nearly every aspect of the film "screams and yells that prison is bad because it causes homosexuality" (Dickinson, 2007, p. 110). However, film scholars have retrospectively offered a positive appraisal of "the film's situational politics" as offering a critique of "the binary codes of representation that adhere to the regulation of gender and sexuality in most institutional spaces, as well as some of the ways those codes might be resisted within the particular space of the prison" (Dickinson, 2007, p. 104). *Fortune and Men's Eyes* stands as a critical com-

ment on power within and outside the prison. The sexual exploitation and violence between inmates replicated broader "hierarchies of power" (Dickinson, 2007, p. 106) and reflected changing scholarly and public perception of prison culture in the 1970s. While not nearly as successful as the stage play, the film adaption set a new and critical tone in Canadian film in the 1970s. The film also exemplified the changing economics of filmmaking in Canada. While funded in part by CFDC, the film was nonetheless a commercial venture undertaken in partnership with a major Hollywood studio. Unlike postwar-era NFB documentaries, the film's criticism of prison and societal intolerance was subverted by its commodification of carceral violence. Audiences were no longer positioned as citizens in need of ideological training, but as penal spectators, complicit in the violence of the prison.

A lesser-known exploitation film, *Caged Men* (1971), explored similar themes and provided shocking depictions of life in prison as pleasurable viewing, including violence, corruption of prison guards, and sexual assault. Also released under the title *I'm Going to Get You ... Elliot Boy*, the film trailer promised gritty realism:

> This story was literally torn from today's headlines and actually filmed inside the walls of a modern, active penitentiary. This, then, is the real story of what happens in a closed male society and the hell to which these men are committed in the name of justice.

University student Elliot Markson is imprisoned after his girlfriend Sherri informs the police of his involvement in a bank robbery. Mirroring generic tropes, Elliot is a young, naïve first-time convict (Figure 5). He soon learns that many prison guards are corrupt, certain prisoners control the prison, and there are predators among the inmates, like Evans, who enjoys sexually exploiting others. Eventually Elliot is cornered by Evans and raped by several inmates and a prison guard. As revenge, Elliot kills Evans by setting a fire in his cell and stabs the prison guard who raped him. With no evidence linking Elliot to the murders, he is eventually released following his two-year sentence. After finding out his ex-girlfriend Sherri was the informant who put him in prison, he stabs her to death, and is arrested once again and sent back to prison. *Caged Men* clearly reflected an ethos

of pessimism about the prison. Instead of rehabilitation, the violence and corruption of the prison further entrenched inmates in a vicious cycle of crime leading straight back to the institution. While not as well known or celebrated as *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, this film explored the same themes and provided audiences with shocking and ostensibly realistic depictions of the exotic world of the prison, facilitating pleasurable spectatorship of carceral violence.

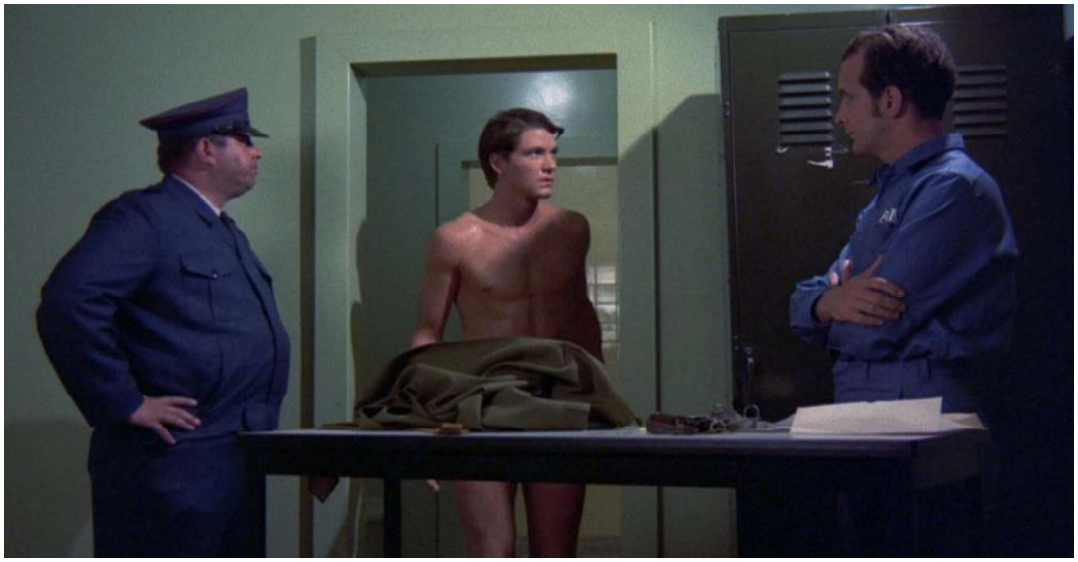

Figure 5: First time prisoner Elliot Markson is strip searched (Caged Men, n.d.).

Subject matter and limited distribution of the film precluded reviews by most mainstream news outlets at the time of release. However, *Bay Area Reporter* film critic Terry Alan Smith (1971) gave the film a surprisingly laudatory review: "The title would lead you to believe it's an American quickie, but it's really a Canadian film made with care" (p. 15). While Smith praised the film for its direction and acting, if not its technical effects, he gave particularly high marks to the "sensitive and three-dimensional" (p. 15) drag performance of Don McQuarrie, who played the prison librarian Josie. In contrast, contemporary reviewers have offered only negative appraisals of the film. One online critic wrote, "The acting is appalling, and it constantly gets caught wanting to be brazen and titillating — only to be overcome by modesty" (Prison Movies, n.d.). Nevertheless, the film has earned some praise for its exploration of taboo sexual subjects.

For example, Josie carefully explains to naïve young Elliot the difference between LGBTQ+ people and criminal predators like Evans:

> Not all homosexuals are perverts. In many cases, nature makes a mistake, it puts a male personality into a female body, or vice versa. It's because each and every one of us has characteristics of the opposite sex … There are also categories of criminal perverts. These are people who need medical treatment. Society being locked into its present backward attitude towards crime punishes these people, or so it thinks, by putting them into prison.

As one critic conceded: "Maybe it was brave and ground-breaking in its day by virtue of its depiction of homosexuality and corruption in prisons. But my guess is that it was a tawdry, poorly made film back in the 70s … and it remains so today" (Prison Movies, n.d.). Nevertheless, *Caged Men* and *Fortune and Men's Eyes* directed critical public attention to the prison at the same time that academics were beginning to question the rehabilitative ideal. The Canadian films of this era refashioned the prison as a brutal school of crime rife with sexual violence and institutional misconduct, setting a new tone for prison cinema going forward.

1985–2000: Visibility and Alternatives

The 1980s and 1990s saw an overall increase in filmmaking about Canadian prisons. Approximately one quarter of the films in our sample were made in this period. Filmmakers finally focused on groups that had been hitherto invisible in Canadian media depictions of punishment and corrections: women, young offenders, and Indigenous peoples. Additionally, films of the era focused on alternative approaches to justice and penal reform, signaling a shift from gritty pessimism to cautious hope for change in Canadian corrections. As popular criminology, these films worked alongside and in tandem with scholarly and professional discourse of the era, drawing attention to critical issues and the need for penal reform.

Documentary films like *P4W: Prison for Women* (1981)[2] and the feature-length, made-for-TV movie *Turning to Stone* (1985) purported to realistically and critically examine life inside Canada's only feder-

[2] We were unable to obtain a copy of this film.

al prison for women. The films emerged during a time of increased visibility and interest in the plight of female prisoners in Canada and foreshadowed the Correctional Service of Canada's Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1989) and the subsequent report, *Creating Choices* (CSC, 1990), that recommended the closure of P4W and implementation of new regional institutions. Aired as a CBC TV movie, *Turning to Stone* received positive reviews. "In an escapist medium, *Turning to Stone* offers no escape," wrote Brian Johnson in his *MacLean's* review. He added:

> Although *Turning to Stone* is fiction, it carries the sting of documentary. … The film-maker spent three months talking to inmates and staff at the Prison for Women. As he slowly gained the trust of about a dozen key inmates, they told him secrets they had feared to disclose for the documentary cameras: gruesome stories of organized violence and treachery among the inmates. … The drama generates a macabre sense of unreality, which is simply the world of the prison itself. (Johnson, 1986, para. 2)

Despites its claims to documentary realism, *Turning to Stone* mimics aspects of the Hollywood prison film genre. The innocent, young protagonist Allison is framed by her boyfriend on a drug charge and sentenced to seven years. Allison is pursued by Dunky, who offers protection in exchange for sex. Allison refuses and quickly realizes that the only way to survive is to smuggle drugs into the prison for hardened alpha inmate Lena — who informally runs the prison. Allison's father refuses to take part in the scheme, and she is brutalized by Lena and her associates in the prison drug ring. Eventually, Allison rats on Lena to save herself and is placed in protective custody. While playing on some of the key tropes of the traditional prison film, *Turning to Stone* lacks the cathartic resolution of a prison break or riot. There is no justice restored for the wrongly incarcerated Allison who is gradually broken by the prison environment. With a claim to reality and links to prison documentary cinema, this film mirrored critical scholarly interest in women in prison in Canada in the 1980s, marking it as an example of popular criminology (Rafter, 2007).

The docudrama *Malarek* (1988) similarly brought new visibility to youth incarceration in Canada. The film asserted strong claims to authenticity and was based on the real-life experiences of Victor Ma-

larek, a well-known Canadian journalist who spent time in Montreal's juvenile detention system. The protagonist is a junior reporter in Montreal, Quebec, eager to succeed and willing to do anything to find the next big story. Malarek hears about the shooting of an escapee from the Montreal Juvenile Detention Centre. He finds and befriends some of the other escapees from the institution and harbors them in exchange for information about their experiences in the juvenile system. They describe extreme violence and high suicide rates. We learn through flashbacks about Malarek's own troubled past as a youth in the juvenile system. As a result, the protagonist is determined to expose the problems of the juvenile corrections system. *Malarek* shifted away from a pessimistic and hopeless view of the prison and instead reflected a 'justice restored' narrative (Rafter, 2006). In this case, Malarek successfully uncovers and exposes the brutal conditions within the Montreal Juvenile Detention Centre and paves the way for correctional reform.

Indigenous people remained invisible in Canadian prison films until the 1990 NFB documentary *The Spirit Within*. The film reflected growing public awareness and scholarly concern about Canada's persistently high Indigenous incarceration rates and was released just as Manitoba's Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) was about to publish its final report and recommendations to address systemic discrimination in the Canadian justice system (AJI, 1991). *The Spirit Within* depicted prison programs led by Indigenous Elders, intended to help incarcerated Indigenous peoples reconnect with their culture and spirituality. Eschewing the scripted approach of earlier NFB documentaries, *The Spirit Within* was structured around interviews with current and former inmates, prison guards, prison staff, and Indigenous Elders. The film increased the visibility of Indigenous prisoners and critiqued some elements of the criminal justice system while stressing the importance of Indigenous programming and education, foreshadowing findings of the AJI and other government inquiries.

Only one feature film in this era focused on Indigenous women in Canada's prisons. *Johnny Greyeyes* (2000), directed by Chilean Canadian filmmaker Jorge Manzano, links intergenerational violence in Indigenous communities with crime. Originally planned as a documentary, the film was rewritten as a scripted drama based on inter-

views with incarcerated Indigenous women. The film depicts an Indigenous woman named Johnny as she navigates the prison, serving a sentence for stabbing a man on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Her story is told through flashbacks, and we learn that an abusive father led Johnny and her brother to a life of crime. While in prison, Johnny unexpectedly finds love and hope with another Indigenous inmate, Lana (Figure 6). However, Lana is abused by the guards, and attempts suicide after being placed in segregation, prompting Johnny to also attempt suicide. The film concludes without restoration of justice for Johnny, even as she is released from prison and reunited with her brother. Johnny loses her love and seems largely doomed to repeat the cycle of crime and violence stemming from the trauma of her past abuse and colonialism.

Figure 6: Johnny and Lana (Johnny Greyeyes, 2016)

The film is unique in both its portrayal of incarcerated Indigenous women and its depiction of LGBTQ+ love. Joe Laydon's (2000) review in *Variety* called it "Arguably the most tasteful [film] ever made about women loving women behind bars … a sincere but soporific drama that is unlikely to find an audience beyond specialty fests" (para. 1). Queer Indigenous studies scholar Lisa Tatonetti (2010) offered a more positive appraisal, writing: "*Johnny Greyeyes*, the first feature film to focus on Native lesbians, presents a clear picture of the interlocking possibilities and oppressions that undergird race, gender, and

sexuality" (p. 161). Despite this positive academic reading, the film remains obscure and stands alone among Canadian prison films for its intersectional engagement with racialized identity, gender, and oppression. And despite academic criminology's focus on colonialism and Indigenous over-incarceration, popular criminology in the form of narrative film is mostly silent on this issue, reflecting the work of power and ideology, as noted in Rafter's (2006) analysis of Hollywood crime films and society. What is absent in film is just as important ideologically as what is present. While *Johnny Greyeyes* hinted at the colonial roots of mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the film's focus on same-sex love in prison ultimately placed the viewer in the role of penal spectator, pleasurably consuming images of incarceration, sex, and violence.

2001–2020: Post Prison and Hollywood Fantasy

The most recent time period is characterized by two thematic trends: the growth of Hollywood-style genre films and a focus on the post-prison experience. The increase in genre-style crime films reflects contemporaneous shifts at Canada's film-funding agencies (Gruben, 2014). Genre films jettison the critical and alternative tone of earlier films in favour of the dual satisfaction of traditional Hollywood prison films that offer fantasies of rebellion and, often, restoration of justice. *Histoire de pen/Inside* (2002) and *Nitro Rush* (2016) provide examples of the growing popularity of Hollywood-style genre crime films in Quebec (e.g., Santoro, 2011). In the first film, 19-year-old Claude is sent to a maximum-security prison for a string of car thefts and attempted armed robbery. Claude fends off advances by Tarzan, leader of a ruthless prison gang, catching the eye of Zizi, a rival gang member. Zizi offers Claude protection in exchange for participating in organized fights for control of prison territory. Claude agrees, but after losing his third fight, Zizi withdraws protection, leading to a brutal attack by Tarzan. Claude plans a prison break and rejoins his girlfriend in her drug business but is plagued by trauma, which quickly develops into a mental illness. During a drug deal, Claude encounters one of the gang members from prison and murders him, and he is arrested and sent back to the penitentiary. The film was largely panned as derivative of US genre film. A review in *Variety* called the film a "by-the-numbers prison drama," with a "litany of prison-movie

clichés" and a "parade of stereotypical scenes … that nearly drives the film into the realm of self-parody" (Foundas, 2002, para. 5). The second film, *Nitro Rush* (2016), follows Max, serving a life sentence for the murder of a police officer. Max learns about a gang involving his son Theo, so he takes a guard hostage and breaks out of prison to take down the gang. While the film was applauded by fans for its action and intense prison break scene, reviews were negative. *The Montreal Gazette* wryly noted: "Hollywood churns out more than its fair share of believability-stretching action flicks, and the rather silly thriller Nitro Rush is simply the Quebecois variation on that formula" (Kelly, 2016, para. 1). *Nitro Rush* and *Histoire de pen* exemplify the rise of genre-style films aimed at an international audience in response to shifts in priorities at Canada's cultural funding agencies. These films riff on well-worn Hollywood prison tropes and reject attempts at authenticity and social commentary more common in Canadian films of earlier time periods.

The second thematic trend in the last time period is the re-emergence of interest in the post-prison experience. Several documentary and fictional films revisit themes first explored in 1950s, but without the optimism and deference to correctional authorities. NFB documentaries *Life Inside Out* (2005) and *The Free Ones* (2020) explore aspects of the reintegration process, giving greater voice to prisoners through interviews. *Life Inside Out* provides a critical view of the Canadian criminal justice system, exploring issues related to human rights, parole, prison conditions, mistreatment from prison staff, language barriers, and accessibility barriers. Focusing on interviews with incarcerated women, the film provides a new perspective challenging conventional ideas of what prison life and life after prison should look like. *The Free Ones* explores the challenges of reintegration for male prisoners at the end of their sentence. The film depicts prison programming that may help to equip prisoners with job skills and coping mechanisms needed to re-enter society. However, both documentaries lack certainty and optimism about life after prison and offer a more open-ended conclusion mirroring the experience of those struggling to re-enter society. These documentaries differ from the direct citizen-training NFB films of the postwar period both in cinematic approach and ideological effect. Rather than assuring audiences that the prison can be an instrument of societal cohesion, more recent

NFB documentaries mirror criminological and popular ambivalence about the prison, yet do not reject the institution outright.

Lastly, a pair of feature-length dramas released in this time period explored the post-prison experience to varying degrees. *Poor Boy's Game* (2007) and *The Con Artist* (2010) both begin with the release of young men from prison (both portrayed by Canadian actor Rossif Sutherland) and both underscore the difficulty of escaping a criminal past. However, *Poor Boy's Game* stands out for its intertextual links to real events in Halifax, Nova Scotia and its endorsement of restorative justice in a community riven by class and racial divisions. Directed by Clement Virgo, the film follows Donnie, released from prison after a nine-year stretch for a racially motivated assaulted that left Charles, a young boy, with permanent brain damage. The assault sparked outrage amongst the Black community, and further divided the historically segregated city. Donnie's release added to these tensions, leading the impaired boy's family to seek extralegal revenge. The community's anger is channeled into a boxing match scheduled between Donnie and Ossie Parris, a professional boxer who intends to kill Donnie in the ring (Figure 7). Amid the conflict, Charles' father George offers to train Donnie to prevent him from being killed. Offender and victim thus work together and effect a type of reconciliation, mimicking restorative justice (Medovarski, 2017). It is later revealed that Donnie did not assault the boy; it was Keith, Donnie's older brother. The boxing match culminates in a riot and both fighters work together to fight off the angry mob and protect Charles.

Poor Boy's Game was the first Canadian dramatic feature film to focus on racial tensions in Halifax. However, it received very little media attention across Canada. Medovarski (2010) states, "this lack of interest is surprising given the film's well-known cast, large budget — substantial by Canadian standards, more than $5 million — previous success at film festivals, and significant international interest" (p. 118). However, recent scholarly appraisals have focused on the film's engagement with reconciliation and the pains of re-entry after prison (Medovarski, 2017; Kohm, 2022). *Poor Boy's Game*, like the other post-prison films of this era, offer more complex messages about the role of the prison in effecting human change. In this case, it is only the actions of communities, victims, and offenders that can begin the

process of healing the wounds left by crime and victimization. The formal justice system, including Donnie's parole officer, are almost entirely absent, and the prison itself is sidelined and left mostly out of the frame, reflecting a return to deep skepticism about the prison as a tool for societal change. The prison is nothing more than a place for the protagonists of these films to start their journeys. The best hope for change lies outside the walls of the prison and beyond the reach of the social workers and parole officers highlighted in the films of the earlier postwar period. Thus, Canadian post-prison films offer a more subversive popular criminology of punishment that is closer in style and ideological effect to what Rafter (2006) dubs critical and alternative crime films.

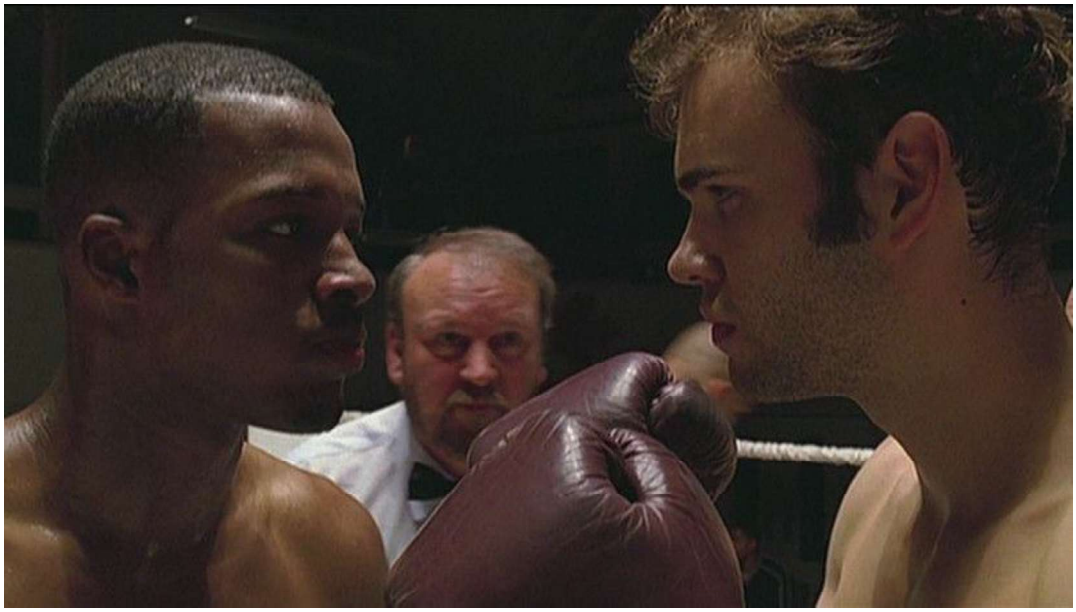

Figure 7: Donnie faces Ossie Parris in the ring. (Poor Boys' Game, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study adds to the literature in popular criminology of the prison by providing a comprehensive exploratory analysis of the Canadian prison film — a national cinematic and penal culture neglected in the international literature. Films about prisons and punishment in Canada have tended to reflect changing penal philosophies and reform efforts, constituting a popular criminology that attempts to make sense of crime and punishment (Rafter, 2007). The forgoing popular criminological analysis demonstrates that Canadian prison films comprise a popular discourse about punishment that works in tandem with pro-

fessional and scholarly discourses to shape public sentiment about crime and justice. In some cases, the Canadian prison films we analyzed anticipated or even participated in the movement toward change, such as reforms aimed at federally incarcerated women in the 1980s and 1990s and the reforms to conditional release of the late 1950s. Canadian prison films constitute an ideological address to audiences, suggesting proper modes of conduct and modeling good citizenship, particularly in the NFB films of the postwar period. Even fictional films such as *Fortune and Men's Eyes* drew on claims to gritty realism and authenticity to forward assertions about the nature of punishment, while simultaneously offering sexually charged fantasies to be pleasurably consumed by audiences. Whether government propaganda or commercialized entertainment, Canadian prison films facilitate an affective encounter with the prison. As Brown (2009) suggests, these encounters allow a detached form of participation in the project of punishment and can work ideologically to position the prison as a necessary, if at times flawed, social institution. However, unlike other aspects of the justice system like police or criminal courts, prisons and prison films have tended to lack visibility in Canadian society. Prison films are fewer in number than other kinds of crime films, and struggle to find an audience. Moreover, shifts in government funding policy have most recently led to an emphasis on gaining audience share more so than documentary fidelity or critical import. The result appears to be an increase in prison genre films that reiterate the conventions of the Hollywood prison fantasy, and that lack the critical edge of some earlier Canadian films. Nonetheless, documentary remains a key strength of Canadian filmmaking and new streaming platforms and technologies offer opportunities for critical documentary engagement with issues of punishment in Canada. While the competing interests of voyeuristic entertainment and social critique will remain a feature of any cinematic representation of the prison, our analysis demonstrates that critical scholars of prisons can learn much about a nation's penal culture through critical engagement with film. This paper uses the conceptual and methodological tools of popular criminology to undertake a broad overview of one such penal culture in Canada, providing a novel empirical case study of crime in popular culture.

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