CARCERAL FANTASIES

FILM AND CULTURE

JOHN BELTON, EDITOR

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CARCERAL FANTASIES

Cinema and Prison in Early Twentieth-Century America

ALISON GRIFFITHS

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For Evan, Charlie, and Soren

While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism.

Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, 1833

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Acknowledgments

Carceral Fantasies is a product of my sustained interest in crossing disciplinary borders to explore filmmaking and film exhibition in unexpected contexts (anthropology in my first book and museums and spaces of immersion in my second). Walter Mignolo's idea of "border thinking,"[1] in the sense of both giving voice to subaltern people and working across fields, infuses this book. The border is a fitting figure both for the book's straddling of film and penal studies as well as for the architecture of prison walls and razor wire fences, cell blocks and recreation yards, and cell windows and barred doors. *Carceral Fantasies* recognizes the real people whose lives are posthumously touched, individuals whose incarceration and death by capital punishment left families crippled with grief and economic hardship, including the entry in Sing Sing's record of executions listing the names of the six child survivors of Ferraro Giovanbatista, sent to the electric chair on March 20, 1919. These somber artifacts are tempered with shards of hope from the same institution, as when inmates sat down to a Thanksgiving dinner and watched motion pictures at Sing Sing in 1914. Similarly, the long hours I spent cloistered conducting archival research in the institutional and personal records of early twentieth-century prisons provided a stark contrast with the unforgettable time I spent among contemporary inmates and staff at Sing Sing.

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CARCERAL FANTASIES

Introduction

> The criminal, in the sense that we so often use the word, is just as imaginary as the equator.
>
> Thomas Mott Osborne, former Sing Sing Prison warden and reformer, 1915[1]

Carceral Fantasies is about how motion pictures and the penitentiary in the United States came into contact, both figuratively and literally, in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Expansive in scope, the book examines the earliest cinematic representations of prison and punishment (mostly pre-1915) and, more intriguingly, how motion pictures were shown to both male and female prisoners and gained a foothold in American prisons between 1909 and 1922. Why the double objective, why not just one of these methodologically distinct approaches? Prison is a paradox: unknown to the vast majority and yet resolutely imagined through popular culture, what I call the *carceral imaginary*.[2] Cinema plays a key role in this paradox: affording audiences virtual access to the penitentiary through prison films and, more recently, TV shows, while giving prisoners an opportunity to sample the outside world—if only vicariously—through organized screenings, recreation yard television, and, in some facilities, in-cell television. Exploring the penitentiary not merely as a cinematic subject but as an exhibition venue, *Carceral Fantasies* makes the case that any study of film reception in prison has first to acknowledge where our ideas about this institution and its inhabitants come from. *Carceral Fantasies* is methodologically ambidextrous, then, not through choice but through necessity, using textual analysis, cultural and penal history, and the effect of incarceration on the senses to sift through archival material. If we are to even come close to understanding the rich, fascinating, yet all too elusive relationship between cinema and prison, we must acknowledge the fact that no single method can do all this work. Responding to David Garland's call in *Punishment and Modern Society* for a nuanced, multidimensional interpretative approach to understanding our puzzling relationship to punishment,

Carceral Fantasies privileges neither text nor institution but argues the need for both.[3]

How do we know of punishment, prison, and inmates? Tales of punishment, incarceration, torture, and especially execution have enthralled audiences since time immemorial; as Caleb Smith argues, "prison is not only a material structure . . . but also a set of images and narrative patterns."[4] Even witnessing actual executions was within the realm of the possible up until the dawn of the twentieth century, as death penalties were carried out in public. A rich, macabre visual culture evolved around spectacularized executions, images of barbaric deaths recorded in medieval artworks, woodcuts, paintings, drawings, photographs, lithographs, and motion pictures. *Carceral Fantasies* begins with an analysis of how the invention of cinema responded to the longue durée that is visualized executions, not by constructing a genealogy of execution on film, but by homing in on a method of execution that came of age with cinema: electrocution. Both are exemplars of technological modernity, affiliated with Thomas Alva Edison, early cinema's doyen, and shaped by shared histories of popular and scientific display.[5] Without Edison's expert testimony in the legal appeal of William Kemmler,[6] a case that established electrocution as a replacement for hanging in New York State and made Kemmler the test case for this new method of execution in 1890, the electric chair might have remained a blueprint and not one of the deadliest killing machines in U.S. prison history. Edison is doubly implicated as filmmaker and historical agent behind the establishment of the apparatus that took the lives of death row inmates.

Edison's role in the history of electrocution adds immeasurably to our understanding of one of the earliest and most famous prison films, *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901).[7] The film has three main use values: to transcend press accounts of Czolgosz's execution through imaginary access to the death chamber; to put to rest lingering concerns about the brutality of electrocution by supporting the mistaken notion that not only had electrocution been perfected since Kemmler's death, but it was as clean and simple as turning on a lightbulb; and third, to assuage Edison's pivotal role in the legalization of electrocution, since this film showed it working flawlessly. On many levels, *The Execution of Czolgosz* is a recursive film, a throwback to public executions and other "plebeian sports" that roused the passions. As a writer for the *Philanthropist* noted in 1812: "To see five of their fellow creatures hanged, was as good as a horse-race, a boxing-matching

[*sic*], or a bull-baiting. . . . It is a spectacle which cannot soften one heart, but may harden many."[8] Like other public rituals, electrocution drew meaning from performance-based cultures such as the freak show, scientific and popular experiments with electricity, and the Phantasmagoria, as well as civic ceremonies, the latter underscored most powerfully in the legally mandated witnesses, the others in the site of the body as a locus of spectacle.

But *Carceral Fantasies* also explores how a carceral imaginary was constructed in some of the earliest films—actualities, fiction, and dramatic reconstructions—featuring prisoners.[9] Early cinema was embedded within a mediated landscape of prison imagery at the turn of the last century, one that included stereocards, postcards, newspapers, magazine illustrations, and vaudeville skits. Cinema was one representational site among many shaping public attitudes toward prison, alternately pandering to the "most voyeuristic and punitive emotions of the audience" and urging us to root for the prisoner pitted against merciless authority."[10] The mass media, as Rebecca McLennan argues in *The Crisis of Imprisonment*, quickly became a "coauthor in the penal drama" of incarceration, ensuring that notorious prisons such as New York's Sing Sing stayed in the headlines, especially when famous criminals were executed, riots erupted, or inmates staged escapes.[11] According to penal scholar Nicole Hahn Rafter, prison films are mostly concerned with "oppression, transgression, and the restoration of the natural order of justice," although even relatively mundane goings-on at the prison claimed the imagination of a public eager for any tidbits about penitential life.[12] 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 hypermasculinity, prison stories that frequently foreground displays of the body or violence (or both).

Convicts have a long lineage or history as cinematic subjects. Prisons, as Jan Alber reminds us, found an expressive outlet in the novels of Charles Dickens—Amy Dorrit's brother Tip returns repeatedly to debtors' prison in *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857)—and Dickens himself could claim familiarity with the institution through his father's incarceration, which forced the younger Dickens to leave school early and work in a factory.[13] Garbed in comic-looking black and white stripes, prisoners function as "reliable signs of embodied discipline," examples of what Juliet Ash calls "sartorial punishment," clothes as "signifiers of the power of political systems to bodily punish miscreants."[14] Depicting prisoners performing some version of hard labor or marching the

lockstep, an awkward, shuffling walk in which the convict's head is turned to one side as he holds the waist of the man in front, prison motion pictures sated a desire to peer inside one of society's most notorious institutions.[15]

Prison's Challenge to Ideas of Film Spectatorship

Interest among film historians in how cinema was experienced in nontheatrical spaces has grown exponentially in the last ten years; as film historian Haidee Wasson argued in *Cinema Journal* in 2009, "Endorsing the idea that there is a singular knowable entity called 'the cinema' that was uniformly operationalized across all social and historical contexts is an error we are reminded of daily in our contemporary and ever-changing technological environment."[16] And while our understanding of cinema's role as a regulatory device has been significantly advanced by film scholars such as Lee Grieveson in *Policing Cinema*, William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson in *Reframing Culture*, Haidee Wasson in *Museum Movies*, Richard Abel in *Americanizing the Movies*, and Peter DeCherney in *Hollywood and the Culture Elite*, no one has turned the spotlight on early film spectatorship in prison, and the several books on cinema and prison have been concerned exclusively with representations of prisoners in films (predominantly from the sound era) and been encyclopedic rather than focused, including Bruce Crowther's *Captured on Film* and Nicole Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*. Likewise, Yvonne Jewkes's UK case study, *Captive Audiences: Media, Masculinity and Power in Prisons*, Paul Mason's *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*, and Peter Caster's *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity*, while making important interventions, are neither interested in the finely grained historical experience of prison cinema exhibition nor concerned with representations of prisoners in the popular imaginary before WWII.

With prisons, cinema entered an environment in some ways similar to other spaces of social reform, education, and coercion where early film screenings occurred, including schools, museums, churches, boys' and girls' clubs, the YMCA, military bases, and insane asylums.[17] There is consanguinity across these spaces in their appropriation of cinema, especially during the early cinema period before the regularization of the economics and social practices of exhibition was accomplished. Film exhibition in prison exemplifies the idea of intermediality, combining older technologies and screen practices, including lantern slide lectures, musical concerts, and vaudeville perfor-

mances with motion pictures. Such diverse programming was not unique to the penitentiary, but was a feature across other nontheatrical venues of the period. The prison warden, asylum superintendent, or military commander often acted as film programmer and censor, and a member of the audience's institutional population typically supplied piano or other musical accompaniment during screenings. Prisons seldom boasted a dedicated space for film exhibition (screenings were almost always held in chapels that doubled as auditoriums), and the prison lacked the extratextual signifying elements of cinema lobbies, film posters, barkers, and ticket booths that were part of civilian moviegoing. The examination of cinema in the prison complicates received models of early cinema's transformation from a storefront nickelodeon to an ideologically sanctioned middlebrow entertainment. Likewise, the persistence within prison screenings of older exhibition forms, including the magic lantern show, vaudeville program, concert performance, and public lecture, along with the distinct setting of a prison administration employing the new medium in service of a larger regime of surveillance and discipline, demand a rethinking of the social *and* sensory experience of cinema in nontheatrical venues.

The challenge of reconstructing the historical experience of cinema, never an easy undertaking, is in some ways surprisingly less daunting in the case of prison (at least during its first decades), since we have detailed records of screenings from prisoner newspapers, identifying when, where, and with whom inmates watched motion pictures. Rather than view cinema as an unprecedented new media form in the prison, I argue that one evocation of the cinematic experience—the sensation of staring at the rectangle of light on a blank cell wall, which becomes a proxy screen—helped lay the ground for the arrival of motion pictures behind bars. Somewhat paradoxically, one could argue that prisoners were sensorially primed for cinema long before it made its (relatively) late appearance in U.S. penitentiaries between 1909 and 1914. And while cinema brought the outside world in, it also turned the prison inside out, as a result of the location shooting within prisons that took place with increased regularity.

Carceral Fantasies fills a striking gap in our understanding of cinema's usefulness in progressive penal reform and illuminates the little-known story of Hollywood's relationship to prisons, which included studios supplying films free of charge in exchange for location shooting.[18] Not only did Vitagraph, Fox, Metro, and Paramount loan hundreds of films for Sing Sing screenings, but

Warner Bros. conducted inmate test screenings throughout the 1920s and 1930s and, in 1933, Harry M. Warner personally financed the construction of the three-thousand-seat prison gymnasium in memory of Jack Warner's son Lewis, with the expressed hope that in addition to giving the inmates recreation, it would also "build their character." While New York City may be considered the center of the early American motion picture industry, with thousands of storefront theaters serving a new popular audience, thirty miles up the Hudson River, in the small town of Ossining, New York, a separate system of film exhibition culture was taking shape within the infamous Sing Sing Prison. A parallel cinema existed at Sing Sing, where men who had come of age with cinema outside the prison sat side by side with those whose first encounter with the medium occurred behind bars. At the same time, inmates often watched the same comedy or dramatic releases that their free brethren saw beyond the prison walls. The historical experience of prison filmgoing is less the tale of a unique medium than the story of a specific disjunct alignment between the civilian and captive experiences of cinema. In less than a year, a vibrant fan community would emerge within Sing Sing, with films regularly reviewed in the "On the Screen at Sing Sing" column of the prisoner newspaper, *The Star of Hope*. *Carceral Fantasies* also connects the emergence of cinema in prisons to the larger project of nation building, evidenced both in discussions of cinema's potential as an agent of acculturation for the immigrant prisoner population by inmates writing in *The Star*, and in Sing Sing warden Lewis E. Lawes's involvement in the American Boy Scout movement.

Film exhibition in prison serves both as a disciplinary agent—related to Michel Foucault's idea of punishment shifting from a violent public spectacle to an "economy of suspended rights" in the penitentiary—and as a great equalizer, giving prisoners a modicum of the cultural capital shared by family and friends outside.[19] Moreover, as agents of surveillance, the prison guards are doubly implicated in the film screening, watching the watchers of cinema while also partaking of the viewing experience. Rather than assume that the protocols of civilian film exhibition were completely absent in the penitentiary, *Carceral Fantasies* looks for points of convergence and divergence, suggesting that anthropologist Anne Laura Stoler's argument that the space of rupture in the ethnographic archive, located in the "disjuncture between prescription and practice, between state mandates and the maneuvers people made in response to them, between normative rules and how people actually lived their lives," can be applied to the penal context.[20] How might organized en-

tertainment have created opportunities for all manner of disjunctions, spatially with regards to film exhibition and psychically in terms of cinema's role as a palliative against the ills of incarceration? And might these disjunctions give us special access to new ways of thinking about both the nature of incarceration and what it means to attend the cinema? My hunch is that it does.

Carceral Topoi

Carceral Fantasies is organized into three parts: "The Carceral Imaginary," "The Carceral Spectator," and "The Carceral Reformer." Chapter 1 explores the nature of the carceral imaginary within the context of early execution films, galvanism and the electrical wonder show, and the Phantasmagoria. Thomas Edison's famous *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901) is the chapter's theoretical vortex, a phantasmic film that lied about electrocution in order to trigger a case of collective amnesia for contemporaneous audiences who, eleven years after William Kemmler's botched electrocution at Auburn, had conveniently forgotten about this grisly method of capital punishment. I use the contested cultural meanings of electricity and capital punishment as suggested in *The Execution of Czolgosz* to discern how electrocution is represented in examples as diverse as an episode of Harry Houdini's *Master Mystery* series (Grossman and King, 1919), a fictional reconstruction of Ruth Snyder's 1928 electrocution in *Picture Snatcher* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), and *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999). These films satisfy a psychic impulse to witness punishment and incarceration, a subject taken up in greater depth in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 examines how actuality, reconstruction, and fictional films representing prisons and prisoners made before cinema's transitional era constructed a carceral imaginary that was indebted to precinematic visions of imprisonment while at the same time established new rules about visualizing incarceration. Prison life can be represented, but it is rarely experienced by elite commentators, and its form has been reduced to a predictable repertoire of images: prison stripes or jumpsuits, bars and wire fences, aimless bodies moving in an exercise yard or assembled in mess halls. Beyond enumerating the kinds of visual tropes used in prison dramas to signify the imprisonment, this chapter examines conventional and subversive narrative spaces carved out for prison dramas and considers whether films made prior to the transitional era open up alternative ways of theorizing carcerality. Given that most

people's perceptions of prison came from popular cinema, how do these films rise to the challenge of representing prison with any degree of accuracy, and are there any films that disrupt commonly held beliefs about life behind bars?

Part 2 of the book, "The Carceral Spectator," begins with chapter 3, "Screens and the Senses in Prison," an analysis of how film exhibition in prisons across the United States and United Kingdom was covered in the popular press, trade publications, magazines, and prisoner-written books and articles, and how incarceration's recalibration of space and time affected the senses in curiously protocinematic ways. These accounts reveal a great deal about the distinctive nature of nontheatrical film exhibition in cinema's earliest decades and the special journalistic attention that the prison as exhibition venue attracted. I examine the introduction of prison libraries, illustrated lectures, and vaudeville shows; the popular press's imagining of film spectatorship in prison as a social experiment akin to avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage's idea of the "untutored eye"; film as a portal to the outside word; and the cell and prison chapel as overdetermined, metaphorical spaces of projection.

Chapter 4 explores how cinema stood on the shoulders of a longer history of prison entertainments at Sing Sing, considering how the reform efforts and wardenships of Thomas Mott Osborne (1914–1915) and Lewis E. Lawes (1920–1941), along with the Mutual Welfare League (MWL), a self-governing prisoner organization, transformed the prison into a vibrant space of nightly filmgoing by the late 1910s. With a brief overview of how libraries, education, concerts, and other live entertainment paved the way for motion pictures, the chapter considers the unique conditions of possibility for showing film in Sing Sing. Issues addressed include how film obtained a foothold, jibed with other reformist and recreational agendas, and created new habits of being; why Hollywood executives curried favor with Warden Lawes; and cinema's role in inculcating ideas of modern citizenry (a clarion call in the U.S. penological discourse). The chapter also turns to the role played by early radio broadcasting in the prison, since radio headsets installed in Sing Sing's cells in the late 1920s brought in the outside world and served as a strategic ally for Warden Lawes, whose fireside chat radio programs were piped directly into the cells on Sunday evenings.

The book's final section, "The Carceral Reformer," examines penal reform and the growing number of purpose-built women's reformatories constructed in the United States in the context of a brief cycle of prison reform films made

between 1917 and 1919. In light of Angela Davis's argument about the astonishing growth of women's prisons in the early 2000s in the United States, chapter 5 plumbs the history of women's incarceration and early twentieth-century media, not only to shed light on the uses of sanctioned entertainment in the women's prison but also to give voice to female inmates, to excavate what literary scholar Nancy Bentley calls the "sediments of gendered experience."[21] Building on the work of feminist scholars such as Antonia Lant, Shelley Stamp, Vicki Callahan, Jennifer Bean, and Diane Negra, this study redirects the conversation on women's experiences of cinema to an unlikely but important location: the women's prison.[22] Chapter 5 examines two key questions: how women incarcerated in prisons and reformatories at the turn of the last century first encountered modern media such as magic lantern slides, phonographs, and motion pictures and why film exhibition began later in the women's prison than in male institutions. For example, at the New York State Prison for Women in Auburn, women were never shown film in the 1910s, while male inmates over the wall in the men's facility started watching motion pictures in 1914, with Auburn becoming the first prison in the state to start showing film. And yet on some occasions when films were shown to women in prison, they took place in coed screenings, as at Connecticut State Prison in the early 1920s.

Chapter 6 examines how penal reformers appropriated cinema for their cause, addressing not only the moral rehabilitation of individual prisoners but changes in institutional policy. Paying specific attention to films made by prison reformers like Katherine Russell Bleecker, who in 1915 shot footage at three of New York State's biggest penal institutions (Auburn, Sing Sing, and Great Meadow), the chapter explores where these films circulated (in prisons and outside), what publicity they generated, and, in cases where the films no longer survive, what evidence of their impact (if any) on prison conditions might survive. But the chapter expands the optic of prison reform films to an analysis of commercially made films from the late 1910s and 1920s whose narratives and object lessons were hailed by the press as powerful propaganda for reformist measures, as powerful in effecting change as films made specifically for that purpose, or even more powerful.

The book's conclusion fast-forwards to the contemporary period, with brief discussion of several prison museums and contemporary media use in Sing Sing Prison, the subject of chapter 4. The prison museum is a fascinating simulacrum, a semiotic frenzy that is haunting and, by public reputation,

often haunted. Visitors manifestly seem to love imagining what it must be like to be incarcerated, and in many ways prisons have always functioned as de facto museums, given the large number of gawkers allowed to tour facilities from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Prison museums with relics of executions and punishment such as an electric chair, hanging scaffold, or whipping post are especially popular. Meanwhile, a world of prisoner-produced artwork, theater, photography, filmmaking, and writing, a vital topic too vast to more than suggest in this book, promises contrapuntal insights, offering men and women a voice to express their feelings, thoughts, and identities.[23] The conclusion also addresses some features of contemporary media use at Sing Sing Prison, an attempt less to construct an exhaustive history of media use in prisons than to offer a snapshot of some recent changes, including the introduction of in-cell television. Impossible as it might be to claim to grasp the experience of incarceration, *Carceral Fantasies* recognizes the powerful role of the imagination in this project, encompassing both fantasies of escape and freedom enacted by inmates, and fantasies of punishment and despair conjured up by popular culture.

PART ONE

THE CARCERAL IMAGINARY

Chapter One

Tableaux Mort

EXECUTION, CINEMA, AND CARCERAL FANTASIES

> Ghoulish or not, the public is always present at an execution. It is present as a juridical fiction, but as more than a fiction, as an authorizing audience unseeing and unseen, but present nonetheless.
>
> Austin Sarat, *When the State Kills*[1]

Why are we fascinated by images of punishment, or, more extremely, the extinction of life, and how has popular visual culture throughout the ages catered to this lurid curiosity?[2] No different from the "If it bleeds, it leads" imperative of contemporary news, where stories of murders, accidents, fires, and human suffering drive ratings, execution films were made for the very same reason that waxworks of serial killers, gruesome murders, and electrocutions were included in chamber-of-horrors exhibits and dime museums. Our sensibilities may be offended by both the filmic execution and the waxwork simulacrum, but it is often hard to avert one's gaze. As Roald Dahl describes it in *The Witches* when the young boy first sees the unmasked witches, "There are times when something is so frightening you become mesmerized by it and can't look away."[3] This chapter works with the premises that prisoners and the optic of execution constitute primal exemplars of Dahl's can't-look-away-ness and that popular culture, along with science and the news industry, have ensured a steady stream of gruesome images of state-mandated murders and fictive representations of prisoners condemned to die, including stereocards of lynched bodies and even a phonograph recording of a lynching.[4]

Historical accounts of cinematic representations of capital punishment and imprisonment often begin with Thomas A. Edison's *The Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison*, a four-shot motion picture made in 1901 that cuts from a panorama of the exterior of Auburn Prison in upstate

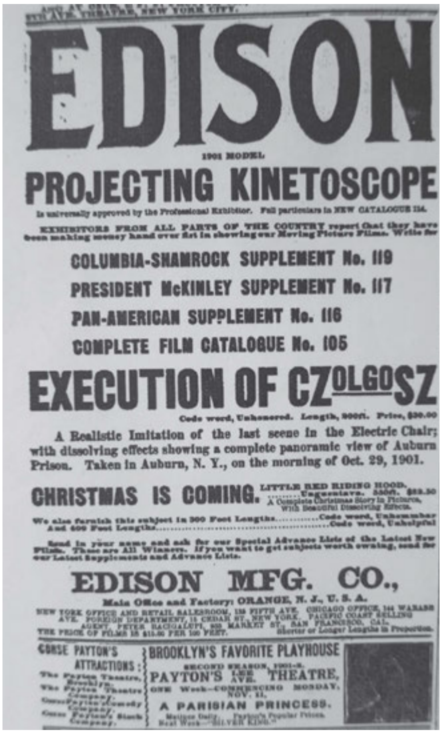

Fig. 1.1 Advertisement for Edison's *Execution of Czolgosz. New York Clipper*, November 16, 1901

New York to a dramatic reenactment of anarchist Leon Czolgosz's electrocution, a reenactment that a *Clipper* announcement boasted was "faithfully carried out from the description of an eye witness" (fig. 1.1).[5] An unemployed machinist and son of Polish immigrants, Czolgosz shot President William McKinley on September 6, 1901, in the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York (fig. 1.2).

The subject of intense public interest, Czolgosz was electrocuted with three jolts of 1,800 volts at Auburn Prison on October 29, 1901, just forty-five days after McKinley's death. Following an autopsy, sulfuric acid was poured into Czolgosz's coffin and his body buried in quicklime to hasten decomposition.[6] Czolgosz's personal possessions and clothes were also burned, to ensure that no one profited from nefarious access to the body or possessions. The *New York World* reported that a "museum keeper in a large city telegraphed an offer of $5,000 for either the body or the garments of the murderer."[7]

I use *The Execution of Czolgosz* and several other execution films in this chapter as a critical vantage point from which to better understand our fas-

Fig. 1.2 Drawing by T. Dart Walker depicting the assassination of President William McKinley by Leon Czolgosz at Pan-American Exposition reception on September 6, 1901. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96521677/

cination with representing execution and punishment on film. There is an epistephilic longing in the execution film not just to see life extinguished but also to penetrate the walls of the penitentiary and show what goes on in its darkest corner: the death chamber. Punishment and the visual are ineluctably bound, as Austin Sarat argues in *When the State Kills*.[8] As the twentieth century's most common method of execution in the United States—over four thousand people died in the electric chair between 1890 and 1966, and New York State topped the chart with 695 executions—electrocution is by no means an anachronistic artifact from an earlier era. And while cameras have been banned—if not always successfully—from the execution chamber, journalist-witnesses speak of the trauma of the experience, as they did at the first electrocution at Auburn Prison in 1890.[9] And let us not forget that execution can engage the senses in powerful ways, generating disturbing sounds, smells, and emotions.[10]

The execution film derives meaning as the "ceremonial of punishment," Michel Foucault's term for all manner of staged public punishments and macabre visual spectacles that exploited the idea of the uncanny, of being copresent with the dead, including the waxwork exhibit, the electrical wonder show (demonstrations inspired by galvanistic experiments with electricity),[11] and the Phantasmagoria. Derived from the Greek *phantasma*, meaning "ghost," and *agoreuo*, "I speak" (the calling up or summoning of ghosts), the

Phantasmagoria was an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century entertainment in which ghostly apparitions were made to appear using the magic lantern, smoke, and mirrors.[12]

In this regard, *The Execution of Czolgosz* joins many other titles, including *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edison, 1895), *An Execution by Hanging* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1898), *Execution of a Spy* (Biograph, 1900), *Histoire d'un crime* (Ferdinand Zecca, 1901), *The Executioner* (Pathé Frères, 1901), *A Career of Crime* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1900), *Electrocuting an Elephant* (Edwin S. Porter and James B. Smith, 1903),[13] *Au bagne* (Scenes of a convict life) (Pathé, 1905), *A Reprieve from the Scaffold* (AM&B, 1905), *The Caillaux Case* (Richard Stanton, 1918), episode seven of Harry Houdini's *The Master Mystery* (Harry Grossman and Burton L. King, 1919), *Picture Snatcher* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), and *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), to name just a few films that have transported audiences to the space of execution for over a century.[14] Not all these films are set exclusively in the prison, but they all represent the apparatus of capital punishment. With varying degrees of verisimilitude, the early execution film animates scenes from the headlines, responding to what Harry Marvin, vice president of the Biograph Company, described as the public's demand for film companies to "gather the news in a pictorial way and disseminate it at once."[15]

My goal in this chapter is to situate *The Execution of Czolgosz* and other execution films within a rich array of precinematic entertainments, as well as discuss *Czolgosz*'s legacy in three other films featuring the electric chair that tell distinct stories about the device's fraught status within the American popular imagination and cinematic lexicon: Harry Houdini's *The Master Mystery*, *Picture Snatcher*, and *The Green Mile*. I begin with some of the earliest execution films mentioned above, tracing the depiction of execution from the scaffold dance (public hangings) to the Chamber of Horrors waxwork, before reevaluating *Czolgosz* in the context of the Phantasmagoria, the electrical wonder show, and the historical record of electrocution's effect on the body, an account occluded—or suppressed—in Edison's film. Experiments to revivify a dead human body or make parts of it seemingly spring to life serve as an important backdrop for our understanding of films representing electrocution and for audience members witnessing electrocution in the 1890s. This long history of electrical display, executions, and cinema's role as a state witness helps us better grasp prison and punishment's indelible hold on our imagination.

Public Execution and Mary, Queen of Scots

> Sir, executions are intended to draw spectators. If they do not draw spectators they don't answer their purpose.
> Dr. Samuel Johnson, 1783[16]

In 1901, the *Star of Hope*, a prison magazine published at Sing Sing Prison, thirty miles outside New York City, but featuring contributions from the state's main penitentiaries, ran a cover story entitled "Reformed by a Picture." The article was a morality tale told by an inmate of Clinton Prison about a friend and former Sing Sing prisoner who reformed after seeing *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (fig. 1.3), made in 1895, on a temporary screen in an open-air screening in Columbus, Ohio:

> Small things have changed the course of many of our lives, and, by some mysterious power influenced us for good and evil. A kinetoscope is an innocent looking piece of machinery and one would hardly credit it with the reformation of the crook, but it did. One of its pictures, projected upon a square of canvas in the city of Columbus, Ohio . . . was the means by which a notorious crook was made to realize his position. . . . It was as thorough a conversion as I have ever witnessed. That little picture accomplished more in five minutes than all of his term in prison did, or could ever accomplish, if he was incarcerated for the remainder of his natural life.[17]

Fig. 1.3 Frame enlargement from *Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* (Edison, 1895).

The prisoner's elaborate account of the screening is fascinating not only for the prescient way in which it foregrounds cinema's role as a moral reformer, but for the inmate's extraordinary recall of the minute details of this execution film. Despite misremembering its length at five minutes instead of an elliptical twenty seconds, the description compensates for the fact that few of the *Star of Hope*'s inmate readers would have ever seen motion pictures let alone this film. The painstaking detail is also a writerly move designed to underscore the emotion of the public execution.[18] The decapitation at the end of *Mary, Queen of Scots*, an early example of stop-camera photography, left both men deeply moved: "The execution was done so quickly that it rendered me speechless. Turning to my friend, I saw his face was pale, and if his life depended upon it he could not of [*sic*] spoken one word. When he recovered from the shock he turned to me and said: 'That was meant for me, and I'm going to heed the warning.'"[19] Combining the shock factor of the early cinema of attractions with the literal shock of seeing Queen Mary's head suddenly roll to the ground, *Mary, Queen of Scots* delivered a gut-wrenching reminder of the irreversibility of execution.

Although a reconstruction, the film was the closest thing to attending an actual execution that these two men had ever witnessed, and the visceral effect of seeing the queen's head tumbling to the ground in an infant communication medium must have been disconcerting to say the least. Historical fact takes a backseat to the idea of execution as fast and precise in this film, since records indicate that it took several attempts to sever the queen's head (death by chopping block was tricky, as it demanded considerable skill and experience on the part of the executioner). The film's title announces its status as a historical reenactment, and even though spectators may have winced and been oblivious to the dummy substitution trick, even today's spectators often demand a second viewing in order to confirm what it is they (think) they have seen.

This parable about *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*' reformative power adumbrates cinema's role within an optic of execution that long predates motion pictures (woodcuts published in broadsides and photographs satisfied an audience's desire for images of public execution long before motion pictures).[20] Such filmic spectacles also created a unique spectatorial entry point for those inmates on death row who faced the prospect of electrocution. Incarcerated at a prison where executions were part of the grisly cycle of men exhausting the appeals process and being scheduled to die, this film hit a raw nerve as a reminder of the fate awaiting those on death row. Accord-

ing to the inmate's account, the reformed criminal gave away a roll of bills to a female beggar and her children and turned his back on crime, becoming a respected citizen.[21]

Pathé's *The Executioner* (1901) (fig. 1.4) brings the audience a lot closer to a beheading than *Mary, Queen of Scots*. The film opens with a priest staring dispassionately at the camera as an executioner prances around the set and begins swinging his axe in eager anticipation once the prisoner is led into the execution chamber. A small platform with a wooden chest on top becomes a makeshift chopping block, and after some stage business involving the executioner tearing off his cloak in swashbuckler style, a second priest leads the prisoner to the block while a third stands frame right looking on. The effect of the head being severed from the body with one swipe of the axe is sophisticated, especially the substitution shot revealing the beheaded prisoner's body sliding slowly off the block. The severed head—which shares an uncanny resemblance to the executioner—is held up in front of the camera before being placed on a platter, an explicit nod to the performative imperative of public executions.

Fig. 1.4 Frame enlargement from *The Executioner* (Pathé Frères, 1901).

Save for the hands of the priest, which spring up in shock at the moment of the beheading, this film is a virtual prototype of execution as entertainment, with the executioner becoming a poster child for what André Gaudreault calls early cinema's internal monstrator, a magician demonstrator.[22]

In 1898, American Mutoscope and Biograph (AM&B) cameraman Arthur Marvin filmed the hanging death of an African American at the county jail in Jacksonville, Florida. Catering to what Miriam Hansen characterized as the sadistic impulses of early cinema audiences,[23] *An Execution by Hanging* is "probably the only moving picture that was ever made of a genuine hanging scene," and it breaks the action down into four brief phases: the man mounts the gallows, an executioner places the noose around his neck and adjusts his black cap, the trap is triggered, and the body shoots "through the air, and hang[s] quivering at the end of a rope."[24] *An Execution by Hanging*[25] occupies a unique place in the history of filmed executions; a throwback to the scaffold dance of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where if you were close enough to the scaffold you witnessed death, the film is eerily contemporary, a nod to the smartphone's ability to capture the live and the immediate, as when an Iraqi soldier used his mobile phone to shoot an unauthorized video of Saddam Hussein's hanging on December 30, 2006.[26] The desire to represent the moment of death in execution is virtually as old as the practice of execution itself.

Execution films like these are an outgrowth of the woodcuts, broadsides, sketches, and literature depicting public executions that were sold to crowds wanting a souvenir of the event, crowds that often swelled into the tens of thousands.[27] Even last-word statements were sold as broadsides on the roads thronged with people after a hanging. Public executions were overdetermined by social conventions, rituals governing representations of the state, so much so that "the manner in which sentences were executed was at least as important as the content of the sentences."[28] The more notorious the murderer, highwayman, or burglar, wrote the authors of *The Criminal Prisons of London and Scenes of Prison Life* in 1862, the larger the crowds "of the most respected citizens . . . wending their way from all parts of the city toward the fatal tree."[29] Removing executions from the public view did nothing to stem a morbid fascination; indeed, one could argue it heightened the voyeurism, since it was now no longer possible to "see for yourself." Public executions not only drew crowds but were spectacles where witnessing became less about actually being able to see the scaffold than about

Fig. 1.5 Albumen print of interior of Tombs Prison, Manhattan, from Robert N. Dennis's collection of stereoscopic views, New York Public Library. Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_Tombs,_from_Robert_N._Dennis_collection_of_stereoscopic_views_2.jpg

being part of the event. At the Tombs Prison in Manhattan in the late nineteenth century (fig. 1.5), New Yorkers clung to the chimneys and railings of surrounding buildings to catch a glimpse of the condemned about to be hanged. And if fear of falling impeded those eager for an eyewitness view, the Chamber of Horrors on the lower level of the Eden Musée on Manhattan's Twenty-Third Street served up a cavalcade of execution tableaux in its basement, including wax blood gushing from the "'headless, writhing corpse' of an executed Moroccan criminal, a lynched American horse thief dangling from a tree limb, and a terrified French prisoner witnessing the grisly work of the guillotine."[30]

Waxworks conventionalized representations of violent crime scenes, the clammy, milky hue of the flesh and the smell of the molded bodies concocting a multisensory experience.[31] Execution waxworks transmogrified the assaulted physical senses into contemplative or spiritual ones that justified the act of witnessing and drove home the object lesson that serious crime met with serious consequences; as Kathleen Kendrick explains, "By reproducing the gory effects of contemporary crimes, the Chamber of Horrors offered another form of access to the shared body of information generated by mass media accounts."[32] The walls occluding visual access to executions were no barrier

for the tabloid press and waxwork proprietors who repackaged executions and crime scenes for bloodthirsty audiences.

The Legacy of *Czolgosz*

Unlike contemporary audiences, who have no historical memory of how, when, and where electrocution was first used as a legal method of capital punishment in the United States, audiences viewing *The Execution of Czolgosz* in 1901, just eleven years after the first U.S. electrocution, would probably have had *some* recollection of the earlier public controversy over this method of capital punishment. How public opinion—at least as represented in the press—went from sharing the sentiment of Dr. George Shrady, who, upon seeing the first electrocution in 1890, declared, "I want never again to witness anything like that," to nonchalantly watching *Czolgosz* is curious indeed.[33] With electrocutions continuing unabated from 1890 to 1901, the public might have become inured to its brutalizing effects on the body, many people believing that it was more humane and modern than hanging, despite countless stories of botched executions, usually stemming from faulty equipment and miscalculations of the amount of current to be applied.[34]

The retributive impulse of including Czolgosz's name in the eponymous film afforded it a specificity and currency that linked it to the illustrated-newspaper function of early cinema (this was not *any* electrocution but one of a presidential assassin). Mary Anne Doane argues that the meanings of *The Execution of Czolgosz* are contingent on external spectator knowledge, although I contend that the film's vexed status as simultaneously a reenactment, reportage, and snuff film, coupled with the fact that the film could be purchased and shown without the opening panorama, means that *Czolgosz* could stand in for *any* prisoner's death by electrocution, imbuing the film with an instructional quality, a moving textbook illustration of a nonsensational, bloodless homicide.[35] Notwithstanding this degree of textual openness, *Czolgosz* is a "narrative of national catharsis," constructing audience members as "eyewitnesses for the state" and promising closure for the nation in the wake of the assassination of President McKinley.[36] But the film's sanitized depiction of state killing also intervened in a longer debate over the use of the electric chair in the United States[37] and justified Edison's role in the establishment of electrocution, a topic he avoided in interviews in later years.[38] The film is phantasmic for the simple reason that it constructs an idealized

version of what death by electrocution should, but rarely did, look like, vivifying the fantasy of the "quick, clean death that supporters of the electric chair had long promoted, while omitting the gruesome details that marked real electrocutions" (fig. 1.6).[39] The thirteen seconds of electrical charge delivered in bouts of six, five, and two seconds (in reality, the current was kept on for sixty seconds), the swift stethoscope examination by two doctors that confirms death, and the warden-demonstrator at frame left who brings an end to the proceedings by turning toward the camera and speaking, all serve to transform death by electrocution into a creepy display of magic, with the final declaration of death the equivalent of the prestige. The look at the camera is also a nod to the self-fashioning and performative underpinning of eighteenth-century scientific demonstrators, whose social status shored up the validity of the experiments *and* the experimenter.[40]

Because *The Execution of Czolgosz* was made in the aftermath of public executions, whose heyday in the United States was 1776–1865, it was just one other way of sating a desire for visual information about this notorious electrocution, and, as Charles Musser observes, Edison was even prepared to pay two thousand dollars for footage of Czolgosz entering the death chamber, but when the authorities refused, he made do with the panoramas.[41] A wax effigy of Czolgosz was placed in the Eden Musée's Chamber of Horrors

Fig. 1.6 Frame enlargement from *Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Edison, 1901).

electric chair, an object first exhibited at the museum in 1898 in an installation that told the story of the killing and dismemberment of William Guldensuppe in 1897 and the subsequent electrocution of one of his assassins. And even though photographs and artists' sketches of the electric chair had circulated in popular culture since 1889, the waxwork gave audiences an opportunity to savor an image that was too fleeting in the Edison film and lacking in gory realism in the sketches, lithographs, and photographs. *Czolgosz* thus complicates historian of execution Louis P. Masur's argument about the "shift from public, external, physical forms of punishment to private, internal, psychological modes of discipline," insofar as prison authorities clung to the idea of execution as civic ritual, no doubt a way of balancing the ignominious spectacle with capital punishment policy.[42]

The Execution of Czolgosz was not the first reconstructed electrocution film. In 1900, AM&B made *A Career of Crime*, a five-part film that shows a criminal's exploits culminating in his electrocution, ostensibly at Sing Sing Prison.[43] This is fast-track electrocution, the entire process taking an elliptical twenty seconds or so; the mise-en-scène, with a large brick wall signifying an old-fashioned prison, a priest standing immediately to the left of the condemned man, evokes the scaffold rather than the so-called modern electrocution death chamber. Priests were never allowed to stand next to someone being electrocuted—people were kept well away from the body because of the heat—evidence of either artistic license or ignorance on the part of the filmmaker. The man also does not wear a mask, though it was standard to do so, at least in New York State. Like the hangman's hood, the black leather cap dispelled all hopes of de-ritualizing electrocution, as the body of the condemned became monstrous and anonymous through donning the mask. Our reaction to the electrocution is cued by the embodied response of the priest, who not only removes his hat (as does a guard standing next to him) but drops to the ground in shock at witnessing death. This film delivered an unambiguous teleological object lesson: go over to the dark side of crime and be prepared to die in the electric chair. More disconcerting, however, is the fact that this man has not committed murder but larceny, and, in the spirit of what would go on to become California's three strikes and you're out law, is killed for failing to reform.

Reassessing *Czolgosz*: The Kemmler Case and the Electrical Wonder Show

> I think that the killing of a human being is an act of foolish barbarity. It is childish—unworthy of a developed intelligence.
> THOMAS EDISON on capital punishment, 1888[44]

> It was impossible to imagine a more revolting exhibition.
> *BUFFALO EXPRESS*, August 8, 1890, describing Kemmler electrocution[45]

Coming as it did at the height of technological innovation at the end of the nineteenth century, electrocution as represented in *A Career in Crime* and *The Execution of Czolgosz* must have seemed both uncannily familiar (the *New York Herald* reported that the prototype electric chair resembled an "ordinary barber's chair," adding that there was "nothing uncomfortable about the chair save the death current which goes with it") and utterly terrifying, a cautionary tale about how the state now dispensed with its criminals.[46]

Prison visitors waited to sit in the electric chair, to sate a perverse curiosity about what it must have felt like to be so close to death and yet have the ability to walk away, as New York State's second electrocutioner, Robert G. Elliot, recalled in his memoir: "The electric chair seemed to hold a horrible fascination for everybody, including women; and all invariably wanted to be shown the death chamber. Once inside, most of them were not satisfied until they had sat in the forbidding instrument."[47]

Czolgosz's chair might well have been a table if the Medico-Legal Society proposal of having the condemned lie horizontally on an electric table covered with rubber cloth had been adopted; it was thought a chair would afford more dignity to the condemned, since "strapped to a table, he would be utterly helpless, resembling a bit too closely an experimental animal strapped to a laboratory table for vivisection."[48] A contributor to the *Medico-Legal Journal* proposed using a small room, "something like a sentry box or watchman's hut" with a metal-lined floor and electrodes descending like a showerhead, a space that shares a strong affinity with the box used by magicians to reveal parts of the (almost always) female cut-in-half body.[49] In 1883, five years before the first legalized electrocution in 1888, an invention of a Mr. H. B. Sheridan (of the Sheridan Electric Company), who had created an "improved