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Prison Life in Popular Culture:  
From *The Big House* to  
*Orange Is the New Black*

Dawn K. Cecil

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**PRISON  
LIFE IN  
POPULAR  
CULTURE**

From *The Big House*  
to *Orange Is the New Black*

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# 1

## History of Prisons and Prison Imagery

Like candy to cavities, a diet heavy on popular culture will rot one's perceptions of reality.

—Ray Surette, "*Prologue: Some Unpopular Thoughts About Popular Culture*"

**BAD GUYS MAKE GOOD ENTERTAINMENT. FROM EARLY DIME NOVELS** and comic books to films and television programs, Americans have always been enchanted with tales of the good guys catching outlaws. The final satisfaction is often provided by the echo of cell doors slamming, reassuring us that criminals are being punished. While many are simply entertained by these crime tales, others rely on these stories to learn about the criminal justice system. Most of these stories offer assurance that the system is effective and justice is achievable, but often the story is much more complicated, especially when it comes to punishment.

People have always been fascinated with punishment. In the past, they would gather in the town square to watch as wrongdoers were punished; however, in the late eighteenth century, most punishment moved behind prison walls. What took place there was a mystery to most. In the modern era, people often turn to the media and popular culture to feed their curiosity about this social institution. The prison film genre developed early in the history of moviemaking (Rafter 2006). Many of these films have a special place in US culture. *The Shawshank Redemption*, which is perhaps the most beloved prison film of all time, celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2014 with a weekend of events, including a cocktail party at the prison. In 2013, the cable station TNT

devoted 151 of its programming hours to airing the movie (Schulz 2014). That same year more than 18,000 people visited the county in which this movie was filmed, exploring the Ohio State Reformatory and other filming sites (Schulz 2014). This prison is not the only one that people tour; on average, 4,000 people per day take the ferry across San Francisco Bay to tour Alcatraz (National Parks Conservation Association 2010). People who do not travel to one of these institutions can get their fix by turning on the television to watch marathons of the prison documentary series *Lockup* on the cable news station MSNBC or by binge-watching *Orange Is the New Black* on Netflix. We may not make punishment as visible today as in the past, but there are ample opportunities to satisfy people's curiosity.

In the twenty-first century, people have instantaneous access to many different types of crime-related imagery. With the flick of a switch, click of a mouse, or a swipe on a tablet, they can watch criminals plotting and executing their crimes, law enforcement in pursuit and making arrests, attorneys arguing in court, judges pronouncing sentences, and ultimately justice being achieved through punishment or death. Some of these are fictional representations while others are reality based. One could live off of a diet of crime-related media. While engrossed in these images, some viewers become armchair criminologists; by ingesting all of the information fed via the mass media, they become "experts" on the inner workings of the criminal justice system and the causes of criminal behavior.

People also learn about crime and justice through their own experiences. Personal knowledge trumps symbolic awareness such as that obtained by gorging on crime-related media. If someone has prior experience with the criminal justice system, then he or she is less likely to rely on the media (Pickett et al. 2014). Comparatively speaking, the United States has high crime rates (despite the fact that these rates have been decreasing since the mid-1990s), but in reality most people do not have experience with the entire criminal justice system. They observe police on a daily basis and at times have interactions with these law enforcement officers. They may even go to court for jury duty or to fight a traffic ticket. In all likelihood, however, they have never experienced the system of punishment. If they have, it was most likely community based, such as probation, which is the most common sanction given. They may have even spent a night in jail. Prisons, however, are far removed from the daily lives of most people. These institutions are closed; access to them is strictly controlled. Unless one works, visits, or is incarcerated in a prison, opportunities for experiencing it firsthand are extremely limited. When personal experiences are absent, people turn to

the media to gain knowledge of social issues (Krczmar and Strizhako 2009). The end result is an overreliance on media imagery as a source of information about prison. The problem is that the media are known for presenting an inaccurate depiction of crime and punishment (Dorfman and Schiraldi 2001). While some portrayals may be more accurate than others, it is not possible for the media to offer a complete representation. Limited personal experience mixed with a reliance on imprecise or incomplete information is a dangerous combination, particularly in a nation in which imprisonment plays such a large role. In this book, I set out to uncover how we as a culture have come to understand prisons through media imagery and the implications of this process.

While we do not know the exact extent to which media representations of crime shape people's perceptions, we do know that they do have an effect. Even college students studying criminal justice are not immune to the power of popular representations. In one of my criminology courses, students are asked to read articles about the drop in crime, look at current crime statistics, and discuss the ongoing decreases in the crime rate. During multiple semesters, a surprising number of students denied that there had been a drop in crime at all, often citing how much crime they saw every day in the media. Even when presented with factual information, the power of popular representations overrode the truth for many of these students. Relying on popular constructions of crime and justice can, to some extent, create a false understanding of the issues at hand. While this is just one example, research has found that people who rely on the mass media are less knowledgeable about punishment (Pickett et al. 2014). We will never be able to stop people from ingesting the endless information on crime and punishment provided by the media; thus, we cannot prevent this imagery from shaping people's perceptions of the issues. But there is a growing understanding of how this imagery impacts these perceptions, which could be used to combat common misconceptions. Prisons are a costly and at times detrimental social institution; therefore, it is important to identify any misrepresentations and messages contained within modern depictions. For much of the existence of the prison system, there was only limited availability of media images of life behind the walls of these institutions. Now, the choices are seemingly endless. Prisons have become ingrained in both society and popular culture.

## **Imprisonment Rates and Penal Populism**

Imprisonment is a critical social issue in modern US society. The government spends billions of dollars each year on the prison system. The

United States currently incarcerates more than 2 million people, making it the world's leader in incarceration (Carson and Sabol 2012). Of these prisoners, 1.5 million are locked up in state and federal prisons (Carson and Golinelli 2013, 1). There are signs that the trend is shifting, ever so slightly. In 2012, the number of people in state and federal prisons declined for the third year in a row (Carson and Golinelli 2013, 1). But how did we get to the point of incarcerating 1 out of every 108 American adults (Glaze and Heberman 2013, 2)?

Until the 1970s the United States's incarceration rate was not much higher than elsewhere in the world, but, since then, it has transformed into one of the most punitive countries (Tonry 2004). During that time we began what James Austin and John Irwin (2012) term the "imprisonment binge." Just like binge-drinking or -eating, we began to incarcerate more people than is healthy for our well-being. Michael Lynch (2007, 3) defines it as "the tendency for America's prison population to continue to expand." In 1973 the rate at which we incarcerated people began to increase more quickly than the US population (Lynch 2007), marking the beginning of the imprisonment binge. To understand where we are today and how prison growth coincides with increases in prison imagery, let us take a brief look at the changes that took place between 1973 and 2009.

In *Big Prisons, Big Dreams: Crime and the Failure of America's Penal System*, Lynch conducts a comprehensive analysis of the United States's changing incarceration trends. In 1930 there were 129,453 people incarcerated in prisons across the country, and by the end of the twentieth century there were approximately 1.3 million (Lynch 2007). Most of this growth occurred during the imprisonment binge. Between 1930 and 1976 the incarceration rate increased by approximately 15 percent, or less than 1 percent per year; however, once the imprisonment binge began, the average annual increase was 15 percent. The modern prison system is ten times larger than what it was at the start of this binge (Lynch 2007). The binge began shortly after the government declared a war on crime and continued to grow under Republican and Democratic administrations. In the 1990s there were unprecedented changes to crime control policies, making punishment harsher than ever before. States introduced three strikes and truth-in-sentencing laws as well as zero-tolerance policies, culminating in more people in prison serving longer sentences (Tonry 2004). The effects are still being felt today. Representatives of both political parties are considering the next step—how to dig themselves out of the hole caused by this reliance on imprisonment. The recent decreases are mainly attributed to changes in

California's prison population (Carson and Golinelli 2013). The state was mandated by the Supreme Court to decrease the prison population to 137.5 percent of capacity. In response, California passed the Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011, which transferred the responsibility of low-level offenders to the county and shifting some inmates from prisons to jails (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2013). California is not alone in its quest to decrease the state's reliance on prisons. Many other states are now considering how to proceed before their prison systems lead them to bankruptcy or supervision by the federal government.

Many factors come into play when explaining why the United States relies so much on imprisonment. According to Lynch (2007), these include imprisonment as a response to crime, public demands for a solution to crime and the political responses to their requests, the perceived failure of the system, and the age structure of society. Lynch himself takes a materialistic approach when explaining the US reliance on imprisonment. For the purpose of the discussion at hand, the demands of the public and the responses of politicians are the most relevant. For an in-depth explanation of the other factors, please refer to Lynch's discussion. For now, I turn to the idea of penal populism.

Imprisonment policies are enacted by politicians. Since they are elected officials, they are not immune to pressure from public and private entities. Some of the changes to imprisonment policies can be attributed to pressure from campaign contributors, lobbyists, and other private sector entities (Lynch 2007). There is big money in incarceration; thus, increasing its use benefits some organizations. The idea behind penal populism, however, focuses on public pressure. It suggests that strict imprisonment policies are enacted in response to this type of demand, whether perceived or real, rather than on the basis of effectiveness (Roberts et al. 2003; Pratt 2007). Populist pressure cannot explain all of the changes contributing to the imprisonment binge (Roberts et al. 2003), but it is a large part of the equation. The 1970s ushered in a more conservative mindset among the US public. By the 1980s, there were increasing crime rates and a collective concern about crime as a major social issue. The public demanded that officials get tough—the response was imprisonment. Rehabilitation was perceived by many to be a failure; thus, prison needed to be used for incapacitation and deterrence, translating into longer sentences. The end result was unprecedented incarceration rates that ultimately surpassed every other country in the world. Our place as a prison nation was firmly established.

## US Media Culture and Prison Imagery

Not only is the United States a prison nation, it is a media culture. It is one in which “images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing materials out of which people forge their very identities” (Kellner 1995, 1). In the latter part of the twentieth century, people’s reliance on media grew exponentially, and it has become an overwhelming force in the lives of many Americans. We went from daily newspapers and network television to cable television and instantaneous access to all sorts of media representations on the Internet. According to Douglas Kellner (1995, 2), “In a contemporary media culture the dominant media of information and entertainment are a profound and often misperceived source of culture pedagogy: they contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire and what not to.” While providing lessons on proper behavior, it teaches us the consequences of breaking societal rules. People learn that failure to conform often results in death or imprisonment (Kellner 1995).

People turn to the media for a variety of reasons. For many, there is an expectation that the media will entertain and educate. The lessons and entertainment provided by crime-related tales is undeniable. As imprisonment rates increased, so too did the amount of television programming devoted to crime and justice. *Cops* and *Law and Order*, which debuted in 1989 and 1991 respectively, mark changes in the representation of crime on television. Both offered viewers “real” lessons on the criminal justice system—*Cops* by relying on actual footage and *Law and Order* by ripping its stories from the headlines. From televised news magazines to dozens of copycat programs of *Cops*, infotainment television programming became more prevalent. However, the blending of entertainment and education can be troublesome because the former typically overshadows any pedagogy. Americans are simultaneously fascinated and troubled by the media depictions of crime and justice that they crave. Despite the fact that the great US drop in crime started in the mid-1990s, many people remain under the misconception that crime is worse than ever before, just like the criminal justice students above. The reliance on violence as a form of entertainment is partially responsible for this misunderstanding that contributes to fear and feeds punitive attitudes. Reinforcing the need for a harsh system are many of the prison images consumed by US society.

By the end of the twentieth century, the United States was officially in the midst of an imprisonment binge, and images of these institutions



started to become more plentiful and popular. Instead of imagining the inner workings of these institutions, avid consumers could now consider themselves extremely knowledgeable about imprisonment in the United States. Prison has become so ingrained in the culture that people are familiar with strip searches, snitches, shanks, striped uniforms, and Secure Housing Units (SHUs) without ever setting foot in a prison. Many of these elements have become clichés, and misunderstandings are abundant. For example, some people cannot differentiate between prisons and jails precisely because the mass media commonly use these terms interchangeably. Regardless of the specific source, each image of prison has the potential to reinforce preexisting stereotypes and send specific messages about the use of incarceration in US society.

A brief note before I continue this exploration of prisons in the media and popular culture. Prisons and jails are distinctly different institutions. Both are used for incarceration; however, they serve different functions in the criminal justice system. We rely on *jails* to house people awaiting trial and those serving short sentences, as well as those awaiting transfer to other institutions. These institutions serve a greater purpose than just punishing offenders. *Prisons*, however, hold those sentenced to longer periods of incarceration—anywhere from 1 year to life. Their overriding purpose is to carry out the punishment dictated by the state. Each type of institution has its own set of issues. The effects of the imprisonment binge have been felt in both prisons and jails, but in the long term they have placed significantly greater pressure on the prison system. While media representations of jails also influence people's social construction of imprisonment, the purpose of this inquiry is to look exclusively at prison imagery.

## **Prison Imagery and Social Constructionism**

A simple equation underlies my examination of prison images—the further a subject is removed from the public eye, the more influential images become in shaping people's perceptions. Most people will never encounter a real prison; therefore, they must rely on prison tales to become informed. Prisons, by design, are removed from our daily lives. This exclusion is a vast change from punishment in the colonial era, which was highly visible and a part of community life. Punishment such as the stocks, pillories, other forms of corporal punishment, and the gal-lows were a public spectacle. However, the invention of the penitentiary in the late eighteenth century changed the face of punishment. Prisons

were designed to keep people locked away from the community. When prisons were created, isolation was considered the key to reformation, so much so that solitary confinement and silence were the norm. The massive walls surrounding these prisons provided further seclusion as well as a veil of mystery. Not knowing what was taking place behind the walls of these structures also served as warning to the masses. While removed from the public eye by design, the walls were not impenetrable to all. As early as 1839 several prisons, including Eastern State Penitentiary and Auburn Prison, opened their gates to tourists who could pay the admission price (Cox 2009), but it was a luxury that many could not afford.

Over the centuries, since the birth of the penitentiary, there have been major developments in corrections and in media representations (see Table 1.1). Modern prisons are surrounded by fences instead of solid stone walls, yet they are removed from most people's day-to-day lives. This isolation is both physical and symbolic. According to Peter Y. Sussman (2002, 258), "Prisons are surrounded by high walls—walls of con-

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**Table 1.1 History of Prisons and Prison Imagery**

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■ **1790–1890s**

The penitentiary system was born in 1790 when a wing of the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia was converted to hold prisoners as punishment. Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829, is considered the quintessential penitentiary. Solitude, silence, and reflection were cornerstones of this system, and work was eventually added. Over the next hundred years, the system grew and transformed. Reformatories eventually developed, focusing on education and vocational training as well as allowing inmates to earn release for good behavior.

*Prison Imagery*

Popular prison imagery was almost nonexistent, although people could buy penny postcards depicting sketch drawings of these institutions.

■ **1900–1950s**

The prison population increased and work replaced education and training, transforming penitentiaries into big houses. In the 1930s, the Federal Bureau of Prisons was created and its flagship prison, United States Penitentiary (USP) Alcatraz, opened. Eventually, the medical model was adopted and rehabilitation became the foundation of the prison system.

*Prison Imagery*

Prison films emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, and by the 1930s enjoyed their golden days. Throughout this period of time, these films were the most common form of prison imagery.

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*continues*

**Table 1.1 continued****■ 1960–1970s**

Problems that had been brewing in the prison system for decades bubbled to the surface. Major abuses were uncovered in the 1960s when prison systems in Arkansas and other states were deemed unconstitutional. The infamous riot at Attica Correctional Facility erupted in 1971. Rehabilitation was deemed a failure when Robert Martinson (1974) released his “What Works” article. On a positive note, the courts abandoned their hands-off policy for dealing with prison issues, thus affording prisoners certain rights. The war on crime was waged, contributing to the beginning of the imprisonment binge.

*Prison Imagery*

Prison films were less common. Those that were made depicted a more violent prisoner population than films of the past. Advances in documentary filmmaking set the stage for prison documentaries to emerge.

**■ 1980–2000**

The United States returned to the use of solitary confinement with the development of supermax units and prisons. USP Marion became the first to receive this designation in the early 1980s and was replaced by Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) Florence in the 1990s. Get-tough attitudes were signified by changes to drugs laws, the creation of zero-tolerance policies, mandatory minimums, and three strikes policies, which contributed to a skyrocketing prison population.

*Prison Imagery*

Crime-related television changed considerably during this time. Prison documentaries became more sensationalistic and the first US TV prison drama was aired.

**■ 2000–present**

Trends that started in the latter part of the twentieth century continued. The use of solitary confinement became more prevalent and the prison population increased through 2009, after which California was court ordered to decrease its prison population and other states began closing institutions due to budgetary concerns. Policymakers began to question the use of solitary confinement.

*Prison Imagery*

The televised prison documentary series became popular, independent documentaries became more easily accessible, and prison films continued to become less common.

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crete and razor wire, of course, but also walls of secrecy and stereotype.” Prisons are located in rural areas, many times sustaining entire communities while being far away from most. Prison tours still exist but, with the exception of educational tours, the public can visit only historic relics that are no longer in use. Most people must rely on the media to tell them about what is taking place in these institutions. Some media representations are littered with prison stereotypes while others offer incomplete information due to limited access to these institutions.

Developing an understanding of all the factors involved in shaping the public's opinion about imprisonment is a complex task. One critical factor that influences people's perceptions is the media images that they consume (Roberts et al., 2003; Surette 2011). Historically, people relied on one another to gain information about social issues; however, in post-modern society, they must gather this information from less personal sources, such as the media (Giddens 1990). In this day and age, the media have become the main source of what many people know about crime (Wright 1985). The same can be said about their knowledge of prison.

For thousands of years, people have debated the processes involved in the development of human's beliefs about themselves and the world around them. Empiricists, such as John Locke, argued that all knowledge comes from personal experience while rationalists, such as Plato and Immanuel Kant, believed that our mental processes shape what we know (Gergen 2009). This book is based on social constructionist ideas about reality and knowledge. Reality is a social construction (Berger and Luckman 1967) that is created through a combination of personal experiences or experienced reality and information gained from other sources or symbolic reality (Surette 2011). The latter is thought to be particularly powerful for matters far removed from our personal lives and, thus, our experiences.

In 1922, Walter Lippmann began laying the groundwork of the social constructionist ideas that underlie the basis of my examination of prison images. He stated that, instead of defining things for ourselves, "we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (Lippmann 1922, 54). The implications of this idea are vast. For instance, if the media are constantly telling people that prisons are an effective crime-fighting tool, they may begin to define them as such, especially if they have no other knowledge. Lippmann's statement was written decades before one of the most powerful forms of media entered our daily lives—television, which brings images of strange and unknown things into the comfort of our homes (Yousman 2009). Television's effects are powerful due to the cumulative nature of exposure to these images (Gerbner et al. 1994). Given the placement of prison in our society and the current nature of prison-related television programming and films, it is undeniable that the images produced will have a profound effect on people's perceptions of these social institutions.

The potential sources of symbolic reality of prison extend beyond these mass media images. People choose when they prefer to see prisons and under what conditions, whether by watching a film, going on a

prison tour, or tuning into the latest reality-based television program about imprisonment (Brown 2009). In this sense, “popular culture presents us with the most powerful place in which the practice of imprisonment has been reenacted to the largest audience” (Brown 2009, 54). Popular culture is “culture by the people for the people,” elements of which are likely to be entertaining and recreational (Danesi 2012, 4). It is a part of the larger culture of society. Today popular culture is a mass culture that reaches multitudes through the media and communication technologies (Danesi 2012). The mainstream media are a part of popular culture, but they extend beyond these representations. Crime and justice are ingrained in other aspects of US popular culture. One can find crime and justice, including prison, represented in virtually everything from films, music, and cartoons to games and merchandise.

Exactly how media images influence people’s perceptions is a subject of debate. In general, there is an agreement that substantial exposure persuades “consumers that the symbolic reality presented in the media is an accurate reflection of objective social conditions” (R. L. Fox, Van Sickle, and Steiger 2007, 8). Various media effects models exist, which can help explain how images of prison can influence people’s perceptions of this social institution. The direct effects model argues that the content of the media has an immediate and consistent effect on consumers (Perse 2001). The audience is viewed as passive; they simply take in the information that they are fed. According to this model, if media images consistently support mass imprisonment to deal with crime, those who ingest this information will take it at face value. However, it is likely that the effect of prison images is more complicated than the direct effects model suggests.

Rather than viewing the consumer as a passive part of the equation, the conditional effects model proposes that media effects are dependent on the individual who is consuming the images. People choose what they want to watch and react differently based on their own experiences and knowledge. They are selective in what they choose, usually picking images that match their already existing beliefs. For many, this means that their opinions will be reinforced, although it also argues that, depending on the person, these views could be altered (Perse 2001). Various types of prison images are available to consumers, and this model can explain fluctuations in people’s desire to see prison images as well as the type of images they prefer.

Regardless of the specific images that someone decides to indulge in, there typically is overlap in the content displayed. The cumulative effects model focuses on the repetitiveness of media content. Seeing similar mes-

sages time and time again typically culminates in viewers adopting the media's construction of the issue (Perse 2001). The crime-related messages inherent in much of prison imagery are similar to those already disseminated in other crime-related images. If one is an avid consumer of crime-related media, the repetitive messaging culminates in the belief that crime is rampant and incarceration is the answer. Essential elements of the cumulative model are agenda setting and cultivation. *Agenda setting* is the proposition that, over time, the media has the ability to direct attention toward specific issues (Perse 2001). The traditional saying about the news media is that "if it bleeds, it leads." This statement holds true of most news broadcasts, thus viewers are persuaded to think about crime and violence in society. *Cultivation* posits that the more television that people watch, the more likely they are to adopt the recurrent views and messages about the world sent via these images (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2008). Thus, someone who rarely consumes these images is less likely to adopt these mainstream views. Cultivation looks at what people absorb, not what they think about it. Cultivation is "a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages, audiences, and contexts" (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli 2008, 38). Several decades of research have demonstrated that heavy viewers of television see more violence, which in turn leads to exaggerated ideas about the prevalence of crime in our society as well as other misconceptions about crime and justice (Gerbner et al. 1979, 1980; Shanahan and Morgan 1999; Holbert, Shah, and Kwak 2004; Holbrook and Hill 2005; Goidel, Freeman, and Procopio 2006). Together, these culminate in more punitive attitudes.

Each of these models suggests that both mass media and popular culture have the potential to influence people's perceptions. There is no doubt that the media focus a lot of attention on crime and justice. Even when not focusing on prison per se, the inherent messages are highly supportive of current incarceration policies in the United States. Whether through direct, conditional, or cumulative effects, or a combination of these models, media images of prison have the possibility to shape social constructions of this institution and, thus, opinions. My examination of prison imagery does not set out to determine which of these models is in play. Instead, I focus on what people take away from this mediated experience.

## **Uncovering Media Frames and Messages**

In today's media culture, people can turn to a vast variety of sources in their quest for knowledge and entertainment. Each of these sources has

its own way of conveying information, and each has the potential to send different messages about the prison system. There are various ways that one can begin to dissect the information presented in these media images. One can begin by describing how films, television programs, and documentaries depict prison to their audiences. These descriptions uncover the particular aspects of imprisonment detailed in these stories. For example, a commonly used scene is a new inmate being processed into the institution. This image is familiar to people; yet alone, it does not send any particular message about prison. Initially it taught viewers about the process, later it was used to set the stage. Looking at the bigger picture, there is much more to prison imagery than just these descriptions.

To truly uncover the meaning of prison imagery in our culture, we need to identify the underlying messages and determine how the issue of imprisonment is framed. The cumulative messages are created by visual images and the words and sounds that accompany them. In general, crime-related media are known for conveying messages about crime control and due process. The crime control message shows people that the goal of the criminal justice system is deterrence and punishment (Surette 2011). It does not matter how you get to that point—the boundaries can be pushed as long as there is punishment. In essence, the end justifies the means. *Dirty Harry* (1971) is an early and quintessential example of this type of messaging. The audience did not mind that Detective Harry Callahan took matters into his own hands in order to catch the Scorpio Killer. He did what he had to in order to keep people safe. The crime control message has become popular in many of the popular crime shows on television. The police are often depicted as bending the rules to get the bad guys. The due process message is not as common, but it does exist. The due process model focuses on protecting individuals' rights. It is the government's job to follow the rules that are in place before exacting punishment (Surette 2011). The means that one uses to get to the punishment phase are critical. Media imagery that send a due process message highlight the importance of these procedures in the quest for justice. It is most often the underlying message in courtroom films and TV shows. Viewers watch the attorneys follow a strict set of rules in order to ensure the achievement of justice. The crime control and due process messages are just two examples. Crime-related media representations can send a variety of messages about crime, its causes, and its possible solutions. Prison imagery sends some of these same messages. However, there are also unique messages that are crucial to our understanding of what people are taking away from all of these representations of life behind bars.

Underlying messages are affected by the way that the issue is framed; therefore, to understand any media representation it is critical to look at the frames used by the creator. Frames “are the focus, a parameter or boundary, for discussing a particular event. Frames focus on what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and above all, how it will not be discussed” (Altheide 1997, 651). A frame determines what topics will be included and how they will be covered. Frames are shaped by the media organization itself as well as by previously used frames, history, and ideology (Tuchman 1978). Media representations of crime often use violence to frame the issue. Time and time again consumers view images of violent criminals, thereby ignoring the most common types of offenders. Media images of prison are also known for using the violence frame, but there are other ways the issue is framed that affect information gleaned from these sources. The specific content, messages, and frames used in modern prison imagery come together to form the larger picture of prison life, and it is these elements that can ultimately shape people’s social construction of prison.

## **Modern Prison Imagery**

Exploring prison imagery is not a new endeavor; others have examined prisons in films, television programming, and the news. While my discussion draws from this literature, its uniqueness lies in the consideration of the new media images popularized in the twenty-first century. By considering the cumulative messages about prison presented in popular media and culture, we can begin to understand how prison is constructed in the eyes of many Americans.

Today, there is an endless variety of imagery available to those who are curious about the world behind prison walls. There are many commonalities in the ways that prison is presented, yet there is also variation depending on the source. Each genre that I explore in this book has unique qualities. Creating nonfictional representations has more boundaries than developing fictional accounts of prison life. Furthermore, there are different factors that come into play when trying to entice people to pay for a movie ticket versus trying to sustain television viewers’ attention for years on end. To best understand the variations in this imagery, as well as its development, I examine prison imagery genre by genre.

To begin, in Chapter 2 I briefly look at where representations of prison are found in US culture. The most obvious place is the news



media, which has been known for not paying a lot of attention to prison issues. After looking at the role of the news media in the social construction of prison, I explore other aspects of US popular culture that have embraced imprisonment. Today, both children and adults catch glimpses of prison in the most unexpected places—from cartoons to alcoholic beverages. While these are not the most influential sources of information on prison life, they serve as examples of how prison has become ingrained in many aspects of our culture.

In Chapter 3, I delve into the most enduring prison imagery—the prison film. For generations, people relied on films to peek into the mysterious world behind prison walls. Early on, many of these films were a form of propaganda that highlighted the need to reform the system. A standard formula was immediately devised, and elements of it remain intact today. In the twenty-first century, however, the importance of the prison film has waned. Pure prison films are rare, but those that exist contain lessons on modern prison life.

The seeds of sensationalistic prison imagery can be found in the development of televised prison dramas, which I examine in Chapter 4. US television has been slow to embrace dramas about prisons, instead relying on the investigative side of the system to provide entertainment. In the midst of the imprisonment binge, however, prison dramas appeared. Given the serial nature of these programs, more context can be provided on inmates and life inside; however, these dramas tend to rely on emotional manipulation, negative imagery, and violence to entertain viewers. And in the long run, this type of fictional prison drama failed to develop beyond the initial stages.

While the dramatized images presented in films certainly contribute to people's perceptions, it stands to reason that viewers will have more faith in nonfiction accounts. Since news reports are limited, it is left to documentarians to provide a more complete look at prison. Documentary films on prison life were slow to develop, but now are plentiful and easily accessible. In Chapter 5, I explore the development of documentary films in general as well as those that were made about prison life. Some of these films took a historical look at infamous institutions such as Alcatraz while others investigated the system or attempted to deter viewers from a life of crime. By the 1990s, documentarians began to record the stories of maximum security life. While there are some hints of humanity in these films, many have focused on violent inmates out of control behind bars, thus laying the groundwork for the spectacle to come.

At the turn of the century, people's appetites for reality-based television and infotainment grew. So too did the number of prison docu-

mentaries, which placed a heavy emphasis on sensationalism to attract viewers. In Chapter 6, I examine popular cable television documentary series as well as independent documentary films made in the twenty-first century. As the genre developed, the imagery became more complex but still provided a spectacle at which viewers could gawk. Some of the old documentary tradition was maintained, but these are not the most prevalent or popular sources of prison tales today. Instead, it is the infotainment genre of televised documentaries that people seem to crave.

Latent lessons about masculinity are contained within nearly every type of prison imagery. Viewers are also exposed to strong messages about proper female behavior and femininity in films, television shows, and documentaries about women in prison. In general, all media images are gendered and present specific messages about masculinity and femininity. Stories about life behind bars are no different. Men make up most of the prison population; thus, the dominant depiction is based on the male perspective. Given that men and women experience imprisonment in their own ways, the differences in the imagery are an important consideration. The next two chapters focus on the ways in which the female prison population is depicted. In Chapter 7, I examine fictional representations of women behind bars, beginning with melodramatic films of the 1930s through the newest women in prison dramedy *Orange Is the New Black*. In Chapter 8, I cover the way that this correctional population is depicted in documentaries. Some of these documentaries appear to borrow elements from their Hollywood predecessors while others are better able to reflect the reality of these women's lives by focusing on unique prison programs, motherhood, and abuse. Taken together, both fictional and nonfictional representations send powerful messages about proper female behavior in US society.

While most of the book focuses on the visual images provided in films and on television, in Chapter 9 I take a look at prisons in music and comedy, which both offer a variety of takes on imprisonment. One might brush off these types of images as trivial and unimportant; however, the degree to which prison is embedded in US popular culture demonstrates that this is truly an incarceration nation.

After taking an in-depth look at prisons in all of these facets of US media and popular culture, I conclude by tying the vast representations together. Across the genres there are mainstream and alternative images, each presenting their own view of prisons in the United States. In their own way, both have the potential to distort people's perceptions of prison, but mainstream imagery is more likely to reinforce punitive atti-

tudes. Yet today people can chose the type of imagery that they are most interested in. Ray Surette (1998) believes that too much popular culture results in the rotting of perceptions. If we can begin to understand the specific sources of this decay, we can understand why so many people have been reluctant to question the use of incarceration in the United States.