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From *Oz* to *Lockup*: Bringing Prison Life (Back) Home

Claudia SCHIPPERT¹

This paper examines HBO's prison drama *Oz*. I connect the 1990s depictions of prison life in *Oz* to the more recent prevalence of prison shows like *Lockup*, currently shown weekly on MSNBC. While the two series belong to different genres (fictional drama vs. documentary/docudrama) they give us a window into the story lines about and perceptions of prisoners, crime, and security that American audiences found, and continue to find, believable and compelling.

The prison has been an ongoing theme in American literature and prisons are of increasing importance in political analysis². One could think that building and filling prisons and ever increasing mass incarceration are as American as apple pie³. To most observers, the reality of mass incarceration in the United States of America is indeed astonishing, as are the stunning racial disparities, demonstrated most recently by Michelle Alexander⁴.

Activists and scholars have been somewhat dumbfounded by the impossibility of using rational arguments in political debates. For example, it can be demonstrated that incarcerating more people does not make communities safer; and yet, a majority of citizens vote for building more prisons, because doing so makes them feel protected. How is such (contradictory, one might think) affect produced, maintained, and disseminated? One useful avenue of investigation lies

¹ The author gratefully acknowledges support received through a sabbatical leave from the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida.

² Caleb Smith, *the Prison and the American Imagination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, Seven Stories Press, 2003; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, University of California Press, 2007.

³ As of June 2009 the US continued to have both the largest incarcerated population (2,297,400, a decrease of 0.5 percent since December 2008) and the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world (748 inmates per 100,000 residents). <<http://www.hrw.org/en/world-report-2011/united-states>>, consulted May 2011.

⁴ More than 60% of the people in prison are now racial and ethnic minorities. For Black males in their twenties, 1 in every 8 is in prison or jail on any given day. These trends have been intensified by the disproportionate impact of the "war on drugs," in which three-fourths of all persons in prison for drug offenses are people of color. <<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/page.cfm?id=122>>, consulted April 2011. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: New Press, 2010.

in the narratives people watch and listen to, find believable and resonate with, including, of course, on television.

HBO's first original dramatic series, *Oz* (1997-2003), was significant for American television for several reasons: it ushered in new standards for graphic depiction of violence, brutal sex scenes and unrestrained frontal male nudity⁵. It also established HBO's prominence in creating cutting edge cable television series, soon followed by shows like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, all of which were depicting language and imagery impossible to broadcast on existing network television.

I am interested in *Oz* specifically as a prison drama and connect the 1990s depictions of prison life in *Oz* to the more recent prevalence of prison shows like *Lockup*, currently shown weekly on MSNBC. While the two series belong to different genres (fictional drama vs. documentary/docudrama), and while some might more starkly juxtapose them as quality TV versus trashy reality show, I suggest that they can provide a window into the (change in) story lines about and perceptions of prisoners, crime, and security that American audiences found, and continue to find, believable and compelling.

While *Oz* was notorious for its gritty violence, contemporary "documentaries" like *Lockup* draw on much more conventional (or perhaps even pornographic) methods in telling their story – and end up depicting greater violence – that might not be immediately recognizable as such to the audience. *Oz* surely drew on stereotypes, but it also featured complicated characters and inserted multiple levels of political commentary. In *Lockup* critical commentary about the prison system is contained or entirely absent, and the portrayal of offenders shifts from complexity to images of abject monsters. I suggest that these television series reflect and influence public perceptions of safety and danger in the construction of a national "home" and participate in the increasing crisis of mass incarceration in the United States.

1. *Oz*: It's No Place Like Home

Oz (HBO, 1997-2003) focused on the lives of inmates and correctional staff in a fictional maximum security prison, Oswald State Correctional Facility. For six years, television audiences followed the lives of prisoners and interpreted crime and punishment with the help

⁵ Peter Lehman notes: "With *Oz*, HBO has almost single-handedly changed Hollywood's norms of representing male nudity, but such other HBO shows as *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood*, and *Rome* have also contributed in a significant manner." Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2007, p. x.

of complex story lines and meta-commentary provided by the character of the wheelchair-bound African American inmate Augustus Hill, whose sometimes poetic, often surrealist, and always critical rants functioned akin to a Greek chorus and inserted into the dramatic series important layers of political critique.

Oswald State Correctional Facility houses many different characters. Predictable stereotypes are deployed as we encounter groups of inmates (e.g. the liberal do-gooder, the white racist Aryan, the Latin gangbanger, the goofy Black dope dealer, the dangerous African, the perverse homosexual, the old loopy guy who talks with God, a mysterious Chinese man with martial arts skills, and also the well-meaning white Catholic nun and ethnic Catholic priest, both of whom are at odds with the Church's teachings). However, most if not all characters quickly become more complex and in the end defy easy stereotyping.

The character representation shows little difference between inmates and staff – they are all thoroughly human and thoroughly flawed. Audiences readily identify with any number of characters, including even those who commit the vilest crimes or whose conflicted emotions and unstable personalities perpetually erupt into unsympathetic cruelty. Nonetheless, each of the characters in *Oz* is interesting and points to the complexity of human nature, the complications arising from living in a racist and violent culture, and the myriad problems resulting from and within the prison system.

The central location of the show is “Em City” (invoking Emerald City of *The Wizard of Oz*), an experimental unit where the liberal do-gooder Tim McManus has a vision of rehabilitation that seeks to acknowledge the humanity of the prisoners and to help them build better lives. Despite his good intentions, McManus is not shown as a savior figure; he is as incapable of living up to his own standards as almost every other character on the show. The show wrestles with the violence of crime and the violence of punishment and tries to understand how people and relationships change within such climates. The series is filled with violent scenes, including graphic killings and many rapes, but the show is not primarily about this violence.

Although it was considered path-breaking on cable television for its depictions of violence and nudity, the violence is not gratuitous and most of the nudity appears in non-titillating contexts: when prisoners are thrown into “the hole” (the solitary confinement cell), when in the shower, or during one of the many rape (and some of the very few consensual sex) scenes. “The hole” is a place where people go crazy, where power struggles between staff and inmates are played out, where character transformations occur (much like what Caleb Smith might recognize as a theme of the function of solitude in American literature). In many ways *Oz* is more interested in these politics of

confinement and explores questions of perspective and the spatial organization of power explicitly.

2. Critical Spaces of Power

While the inmates' cells are arranged in full view of the staff and correspond to a modern version of the panopticon we might recognize from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, innovations by Oz prison staff and on the level of film editing seem to negotiate relationships of power and perspective explicitly. In Season 4, McManus decides to build an old fashion metal cage which he places in the middle of the prison unit, i.e. at the center of the space that functions as the inmates' day room (see Image 1). Serious inmate infractions are punished by confinement in the cage (inmates remain clothed, in full view of the other inmates, readily taunted, spit on, and robbed of all privacy). In many ways the cage is the opposite of "the hole" (solitary dark confinement out of sight).

Interestingly, the camera shows us the variously disturbed or angry inmates from outside the cage that temporarily houses them, but also shifts to a perspective from within. Functioning much like a reaction shot, the scenes enable the viewer to perceive incarceration from both sides of the cage rods (see Images 2 and 3).

Between this public display of punishment and the brutal isolation of the hole, the series brings different forms of confinement to the surface of the viewer's attention. In a further development of this theme, and functioning as container for the most direct forms of critical commentary within the television series, a glass cage plays an important role throughout the series (see Image 4).

Appearing to be modeled on a standards inmate cell, the stylized glass container – which defies gravity and other aspects of logic – inserts a frame for the observations and subtext provided by Augustus Hill. Functioning as our narrator and guide, Augustus introduces each of the newly arriving prisoners to us by providing a film clip summarizing the brutal details of the crime that brought them to Oz and showing the new inmate with their booking-plates (see Image 5). Pushing the surreal imagery further, the glass cage sometimes functions as container for already dead characters to reemerge and offer narrative observations or, at another time, becomes the stage for an out-of character campy performance of musical numbers by some of the show's central characters (see Image 6).

The absurd glass container would appear to be the ultimate embodiment of carceral power, as the cell's space become completely visible from all sides. And yet, the glass cage is deployed in Oz in such

surreal ways as to disrupt narrative coherence and allow for critical meta-commentary. The appearance of the glass cage in the narrative signals an extra-diegetic layer, as it often announces philosophical reflections or critical commentary provided by Augustus Hill.

Although HBO's *Oz* is clearly a fictional television drama, it draws on the reality of, and it seeks to critically engage, the increasing crisis of American incarceration. Indeed, some excerpts from the glass cage monologues reappear in contemporary political advocacy work. (see Image 7). The slippery continuum of fact and fiction at/in *Oz* makes for its appeal to American television audience in the 1990s.

3. Containing Perspectives: *Lockup*

The documentary series *Lockup* is in its tenth season, with additions of spin offs such as *Lockup Extended Stay*, *Lockup Raw* (since 2008), and *Life After Lockup* (since 2010). The popularity of the documentary series about life in various American prisons and jails (extended in *Lockup World Tour* to prisons in other countries) demonstrates an ongoing fascination of TV audiences with themes of imprisonment that helped *Oz* to critical acclaim⁶. However, as one reviewer of the series notes, “‘Lockup’ never pretends it will have the high tension of a fictional series like ‘Oz’ [...] [Lockup] just picks a dozen or so inmates [...] and follows them around - to the extent a camera can. It ends up somewhere between a documentary, which portrays a situation as it is and reality TV, which tries to find the most dramatic moments in a situation and then, if they aren't dramatic enough, enhances them⁷.” One could certainly argue that *Lockup* belongs into a different genre than does *Oz*. And yet, it is instructive to note the stories these shows tell about prisons, crime and security. In what follows I closely read several symptomatic characteristics of the *Lockup* series.

The stage is set in the opening minute of each episode of *Lockup Raw* (2009). Each episode in the first season begins with an opening sequence that is followed by a preview of the images and themes from the upcoming episode. The first image, in stark white letters on black background, and read in an ominous voiceover, warns

⁶ While this article does not provide space to further explore the spin offs into the global realm, *Lockup*'s 2009 expansion into filming “reality” inside maximum security prisons in Serbia, Poland, the Czech Republic, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Israel, Jordan and Turkey should be further explored. *Lockup World Tour* promotes producer Rasha Drachkovitch's sentiment: “While life in U.S. prisons can be shocking, it's nothing compared to what goes on in prisons around the world” Michael Schneider, “MSNBC takes ‘Lockup’ overseas,” <www.variety.com>, July 1, 2009.

⁷ David Hinckley, “MSNBC's ‘Lockup’ exposes stirring life behind bars,” *New York Daily News*, November 21, 2009, <http://articles.nydailynews.com/2009-11-21/entertainment/17940073_1_inmates-and-staff-solitary-confinement-high-security>, consulted April 15, 2011.

the audience: “Due to mature subject matter viewer discretion is advised.” (This visual and audible warning is repeated and reinserted after commercial breaks throughout). The opening sequence continues: after the camera seemingly flies through an old fashion keyhole into the “behind the scenes” investigation of incarceration, the audience is presented with a rapidly edited collage of stylized representations. Red blood splatters on concrete walls, barbed wires, and security fences provide the stylized canvas. Several short sequences of “convicts,” some framed in what resemble picture frames or otherwise contained within the collage, are displayed, all the while the deep male voiceover announces with a stern urgency: “MSNBC takes you behind the walls of America’s most notorious prisons. To a world of chaos and danger. Now: the scenes that you have never seen. *Lockup Raw*⁸.”

The audience is positioned to expect something requiring maturity and to be watched with caution and “discretion”. Themes previewed for the first episode (under consideration here) are those that provide the title for this first episode: “Ever Present Danger” and “unspeakable violence”.

“It’s a world where the threat of danger dictates every action and every decision. (. . .) A world that *Lockup* producers and camera crew explore on a regular basis.”

The series highlights the danger correctional officers – and also the camera crew—face on a daily basis.... but justify the risks taken (and injuries sustained at times) as a price to be paid in the service of public security and order (on the part of the brave officers) and service to the audience (on the part of the brave camera crew who can, as is pointed out, also “be in the line of fire”).

In almost every episode the audience is reassured that the prison is a dangerous place, a “combat zone” with the perpetual danger of “sudden explosions”. What and who we are about to see are thus perpetually positioned as threatening – *before* we ever encounter the first event or person – a pattern that repeats throughout the series.

“A world where even the most heinous violations are commonplace.”

Despite the ever present genre declaration – “Documentary” is inserted in several web-based presentations of the material (see image 8) – the background music is closer to the suspense of a horror movie or older war film (heavy drums and basses). Images of violent inmates

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, all following quotes are from the narrative voiceover from *Lockup Raw*, Season 1, 2009.

are introduced with announcements such as “when we return, the ghastly results when inmates unleash their rage on the correctional staff.” It is noteworthy that the violence or rage of the correctional officers is not remarked upon, even when the audience is presented with several minutes of riot-gear clad officers inserting large amounts of pepper spray into a small closed cell in order to “extract” an inmate who didn’t follow an order. The protective gear is necessary, the audience is assured, because the officers are in great danger.

After reporting the event of an inmate attacking first one and then several backup officers, *Lockup*’s director states on camera that “talk about attacking officers was really scary.” Immediately following we learn that the officers involved received medals of valor and the inmate involved committed suicide. Thus a very scary situation ends with the reassurance of bravery on the part of the state and self destruction on the part of the monstrous offender.

At another point one officer states about the inmates: “They are human, but [significant pause] they are real hard.” The pause and “but” raise doubts about the co-humanity of inmates and correctional staff and, by extension, the audience. As audience we are assumed to identify with the camera crew, which in turn mostly identifies with the officers, i.e. in a place of constant danger and necessary vigilance. The incarcerated individuals remain abjected and portrayed as dangerous, unpredictable, a constant and direct threat, and as akin to wild animals. The “most disgusting case” introduced in the teaser for the first episode turns out to concern an inmate who used his urine and feces as weapon against correctional staff. The horror the audience is supposed to feel at this (quite literal) exercise of abjection is palpable. A camera man confesses that he was scared when he thought he got hit with urine or feces but then was relieved when it was merely a banana peel that fell on his head. The implied association of a caged monkey throwing feces and banana peels seems far from coincidental.

Throughout several episodes, inmates are shown cuffed and led around on leashes, subdued with huge amounts of pepper spray (to which many of them seem almost immune, while camera crews choke and officers have to wear gasmasks – another indicator of the inmates’ animalistic nature); officers have to use high voltage stun shields, spitting-masks, heavy restraints, or immediately injected drugs to subdue the person. Inmates are consistently associated with unpredictable primitive behavior that is both dangerous to others around them and completely unreasonable/irrational. Lest the audience misses the point, the director includes a comment by the camera man that the feeding of the individually housed inmates with tendencies of harming self and others reminded him of “feeding wild animals”

Throughout the series, some documentary conventions are followed: interviews with inmates appear to present the “human face”

by reporting some of the personal stories, at times even showing redemptive aspects of the person⁹. However, most marginally sympathetic stories are couched in much longer and elaborate constructions of deviance. To give one example: even when we meet “the happiest inmate ever” we learn that Paulando Williams, who appears as an effeminate and gregarious homosexual, talking non-stop, is quite aware that his future is bleak. After most of the filmic segment has established his upbeat spirit and positive attitude, his final statements include his own prediction of his likely failure. As Williams’ upbeat spirit changes to a gloomy seriousness, he pronounces that when he is released he will have enough money to “maybe live off of for a week.” Predicting the challenges he will face upon release, he continues:

So I’m not gonna be able to support myself... which will eventually lead me back to selling dope... which will give me enough money to support myself, and puts me back into the place where... if I am selling dope... eventually I am going to indulge in the dope that I sell... and now I am getting high again... and one thing leads to another and I am back into the life I was before I came... before I... yeah....

Williams’ voice trailing into silence, his face turns sad and despondent; the next frame announced that he was released in 2009 but we do not hear any further about him. Not a happy story after all.

Much like this brief invocation of positive rehabilitative moments, *Lockup Raw* reintegrates any sense of rehabilitation or humanity back into the reassertion of an overwhelming threat and danger presented by the convicts. Further examples of containment of potentially hopeful or insightful moments include: 1. We see one inmate who finds great motivation in a Shakespeare class offered in solitary confinement and behaves well enough to be brought into general population where he can see the cast rehearsing. The positive narrative is immediately undercut by the next frame’s assertion that this same inmate acted up again and was back in solitary within a day. 2. A representative of the Aryan brotherhood is shown to have grown older and wiser and proceeding steadily on a path of rehabilitation, but again, the next frame affirms that he, too, has reoffended within prison and was returned to the worst level within the incarceration system. 3. The sympathetic portrayal of one inmate, shown quietly reminiscing about the last time he saw a tree, is undercut by the immediately following notice that he was beating up an officer the following day.

While retaining some documentary conventions, the series editing thus does a great deal of discursive work to contain the

⁹ Some of the predictable stories involve formerly brutal killers who have adopted stray cats and learn about responsibility by caring for the cats (E2, 39:00-44:00).

possibility of sympathetic readings¹⁰. To illustrate this strategy with another example: announcing with a great deal of suspense that the audience will now see “the oddest looking person” they have ever seen, the inmate is finally shown, shackled and led around the hallway on a leash before arriving and again after leaving the interview (see Image 9). The interview itself is conducted through the small opening in a holding cell. Jonathan Richardson offers some rather clear and not particularly crazy observations about his own history of self injury (connecting it to hopelessness and despair in the face of real life chances of convicted felons, and also a lack of psych medications) and explains his hairstyle and makeup as part of his longstanding goth identity (see Image 10). When he states that his make up help remind him that he is “not just an animal behind bars, I am not just locked away for the rest of my life” the edited sequence of images accompanying his final comment seem to undo his assertion, as the camera again dwells on his shackled body being led on a leash into his cell where he is, finally, again securely contained.

The series does not completely erase evidence of resistance and critical commentary by the prisoners. *Lockup Raw* does insert bits of critical commentary from the inmates. For example, one inmate explains into the camera that caging young offenders in crowded circumstances that rely on and foster violent relationships with others does not make the world safer upon their release. The scene is immediately followed by a note that this inmate was subsequently locked up for a violent outburst. When other inmates are shown expressing their rage at the prison system or specific acts by officers, they tend to appear less than credible and the assumption of guilt overrides any critical observation the inmate might make.

Viewers are perpetually placed in a position of caution and suspicion. Those who are the object of episodes with titillating titles, e.g. “Inmates Gone Wild” or “The Devil’s Workshop,” are never represented as subjects. Even seemingly sympathetic sequences (which let the series appear as “objective” documentary) are edited so as to frame any semblance of humanity as illusion or, at best, temporary.

In an example that pushes this tendency even further, in the final chapter of one episode (called “ghost stories”), the audience learns about instances where the ghosts of dead inmates continue to haunt a prison. Explained as “the specter of an inmate refusing to leave prison” the narrative continues to assert that some are so bent on destruction and mayhem, that “some would, if they could, carry on even after death.”

¹⁰ Even on the rare occasion when “inmate cams” are used, the confessional data is edited and couched in the larger narrative.

All scenes are filmed from the perspective (literally) of the crew and correctional officers: We see heavily protected staff shoot gas canisters into a tiny cell – but we do not see what that looks like from inside the cell. Inmates are presented as suspect, officer and audience appear as innocent, in perpetual danger, and “we” thus reasonably request more security measures (and more lockup). The discursive work *Lockup* does seems to produce a powerful message: in order for us, the audience, to feel safe, the prison system needs to enact these levels of control, including the brutality, violence, and denial of human rights that are shown throughout, but that do not receive direct critical analysis. *Oz*’s Augustus Hill would not have much space in the place that *Lockup* constructs.

“We” (the audience) are supposed to identify with the courageous staff and camera crew – even while ever growing numbers of “us” (people in the USA) are affected by mass incarceration. Watching the television shows from the comfort of home, American audiences receive and develop narratives of danger and safety that shape the very contours of what counts as home and as security, not least because these “documentaries” are featured on a cable channel otherwise well known for its progressive political news shows.

Interestingly, in the spring of 2011, according to one observer, more people watched a rerun of the *Lockup* series than tuned in to either CNN or FOX (channels that were reporting on the popular uprising in Egypt at the time)¹¹. In conclusion, while *Oz* was a fictional series, it may have more to contribute to a critical engagement with the real world than what passes as news-worthy documentary these days.

¹¹ <<http://blogs.e-rockford.com/applesauce/2011/02/01/msnbcs-prison-porn-draws-more-viewers-than-egypt-coverage-on-fox-and-cnn/>> consulted May 2011.