

Spaces of observation and obscurity: cinematic prisons of light and dark

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In *The Eye of Power*, Foucault¹ delineated the key concerns surrounding hospital architecture in the latter half of the eighteenth century as being the 'visibility of bodies, individuals and things'. As such, the 'new form of hospital' that came to be developed 'was at once the effect and support of a new type of gaze'². This was a gaze that was not simply concerned with ways of minimising overcrowding or cross-contamination. Rather, this was a surveillance intended to produce knowledge about the pathological bodies contained within the hospital walls. This would then allow for their appropriate classification. Foucault³ went on to describe how these principles came to be applied to the architecture of prisons. This was exemplified for him in the distinct shape of Bentham's panopticon. This circular design, which has subsequently become an often misused synonym for a contemporary culture of surveillance, was premised on a binary of the seen and the not-seen. An individual observer could stand at the central point of the circle and observe the cells (and their occupants) on the perimeter whilst themselves remaining unseen. The panopticon in its purest form was never constructed, yet it conveys the significance of the production of knowledge through observation that became central to institutional design at this time and modern thought more broadly. What is curious though is that whilst the aim of those late eighteenth century buildings was to produce well-ventilated spaces suffused with light, this provoked an interest in its opposite. The gothic movement in literature that was developing in parallel conversely took a 'fantasy world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons...' as its landscape⁴ (Vidler, 1992: 162). Curiously, despite

these modern developments in prison design, the façade took on these characteristics. The gothic imagination⁵ came to describe that unseen world that lay behind the outer wall. This is what Evans⁶ refers to as an architectural 'hoax'. The façade was taken to represent the world within the prison walls and it was the façade that came to inform the popular imagination about what occurred behind it. The rational, modern principles ordering the prison became conflated with the meanings projected by and onto the façade. This confusion of meanings have then been repeated and reinforced in the subsequent representations of the prison. This is of paramount importance since it is the cinematic and televisual representation of the prison, as I argue here and elsewhere⁷, that maintain this erroneous set of meanings, this 'hoax'.

The tropes surrounding depictions of prisons and imprisonment in popular media have fed off and informed one another for some two hundred years. As the gothic novels fed into the themes of penny dreadfuls and theatrical melodramas, these in turn were cannibalised by cinematic depictions of imprisonment. What I intend to do here is unpack how those concerns of transparency and obscurity, of the rationality of the modern⁸ and the irrationality of the gothic⁹, remain prevalent in the varied contemporary imagery surrounding imprisonment. In particular, I will focus on *The Silence of the Lambs*¹⁰ and *Manhunter*¹¹ as a means to explore both traditional and non-traditional, or what I will refer to as 'non-place', depictions of imprisonment. I use the term 'traditional' to invoke those depictions of the prison that rely upon 'gothic' imagery. To put this differently, it refers to those that feature the familiar late eighteenth and nineteenth century designs of prison. A 'non-traditional' prison film

1. Foucault, M. (1974). *The Eye of Power*. In C. Gordon (ed.) *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books. p. 146.
2. Ibid.
3. Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.
4. Vidler, A. (1992). *The Architectural Uncanny: essays in the modern unheimely*. London: MIT Press. p. 162.
5. It is important to note that in describing the facade I refer to a popular understanding of 'the gothic' that relates to the set of meanings derived from the literature of the genre as opposed to Gothic architecture itself.
6. Evans, R. (1982). *The Fabrication of Virtue: English prison architecture, 1750-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 256.
7. Fiddler, M. (2006). *The Penal Palimpsest: an exploration of prison spatiality*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Keele University, UK; Fiddler, M. (2007). Projecting the Prison: the depiction of the uncanny in 'The Shawshank Redemption'. *Crime Media Culture*, 3, 2, 192-206; Fiddler, M. (forthcoming). A 'system of light before being a figure of stone': the phantasmagoric prison.
8. Foucault, 1974, 1977.
9. Fiddler, 2007.
10. Dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991.
11. Dir. Michael Mann, 1986.

looks to more contemporary prison construction, be that 'new generation' as seen in *Ghosts...of the Civil Dead*¹² or the Metropolitan Detention Centre of *American History X*¹³. Visually these are carceral worlds that are far removed from the imposing façade of the 'traditional'.

A prison in the shadows: The Silence of the Lambs

Whilst it would be difficult to claim that *The Silence of the Lambs* is a 'prison film' as such, the cameo appearance of an imprisoned Hannibal Lecter (as played to Oscar-winning effect by Anthony Hopkins) has served to reinforce those familiar tropes related to carceral spaces that reside in the popular imagination. Hopkins' performance, now the stuff of parody, is so heightened that it radiates out into the form of Lecter's 'cell' itself. It has a certain hyper-real, stylised quality about it. Indeed, this is less a cell and more a dungeon. Cinematic cells tend toward the chthonic or earthy, but this is simply dank. All is rust, bare brickwork and decay.

Interestingly, Hantke¹⁴ proposes that in the gothic literary genre it is typically a female character that finds herself imprisoned in such an environment. The reversal in *The Silence of the Lambs* emphasises the symbiotic relationship between Lecter and Jodie Foster's trainee FBI profiler, Clarice Starling. Ordinarily this would be her cell and he would be the gaoler. As it stands, the cell is as monstrous as its inhabitant. The cell *looks* like it should contain a monster.

The set design draws upon the work of the eighteenth century artist Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Piranesi's work typically depicted vast, often subterranean, ruined spaces. In his etchings huge chains hang from crumbling bridges that span epochal spaces. Piranesi's prints were used as the inspiration for theatrical and operatic set dressing of the period and continue to be hugely influential. They embrace the

dark, earthy connotations of cellular confinement that pervade gothic descriptions of imprisonment, but on an immense scale. The catacombs in Piranesi's collected *Carceri d'Invenzione* ('imaginary prisons') have the uncanny air of the carceral and purgatorial about them. Lecter's cell in *The Silence of the Lambs* is akin to a detail of a wider Piranesian sketch. The same compositional and thematic ideas can be found in the set design, but on a reduced scale. The vast ruins of Piranesi have seemingly been shrunk to the level of the two characters sat observing one another. In Piranesi we see a conjoining of the vaulting span of the catacombs and the earthy, smaller tombs. Or, to use Bachelard's¹⁵ expression, there is a combination of both the 'rationality of the roof' and 'irrationality of the cellar'. There is a dream-like, irrational quality to the 'depths', whilst height denotes clarity of thought. In this instance, to use Bachelard's curious analogy, we are firmly in the irrational space of the cellar.

The illuminated prison: Manhunter

Lektor's¹⁶ cell in *Manhunter* is the diametric opposite to that seen in *The Silence of the Lambs*. The earthy, rust tones are replaced with a room that is a uniform white. The walls, bars, bedding, the chair Will Graham, another FBI profiler, sits on and even Lektor's overalls are white. We do see green, orange and

magenta hues when the camera, and by inference Graham, looks over the Doctor's bookshelf. As Feeney¹⁷ puts it, Graham 'looks nauseous' when we cut back to him. It is as though the difference that they represent to their surroundings is itself physically unsettling. Brian Cox's performance as Lektor is far more internalised than that of Anthony Hopkins and this is similarly mirrored in the cell design. The starkness of the surroundings heightens 'the candy-pink complexion of [Lektor's] skin, and a head of hair so jet-black he might be [dying] it with shoe polish'¹⁸. This lends him a sickly, other-worldly quality. His is a strange presence amongst

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12. Dir. John Hillcoat, 1989.

13. Dir. Tony Kaye, 1999.

14. Hantke, S. (1998). "The Kingdom of the Unimaginable": the construction of social space and the fantasy of privacy in serial killer narratives. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 26, 3, 178-195.

15. Bachelard, G. (1958, 1994). *The Poetics of Space* (trans. J.R.Stilgoe). Massachusetts: Beacon Press. p. 18.

16. The character is referred to as Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* and Lektor in *Manhunter*. The role, as portrayed by Anthony Hopkins, would latterly appear in both a sequel, *Hannibal* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2001), and a prequel, *Red Dragon* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2002). The latter film was based on the same source novel as *Manhunter*. However, for the sake of continuity, the cell design used is that from *The Silence of the Lambs* and not Michael Mann's earlier version.

17. Feeney, F.X. (2006). *Michael Mann*. Los Angeles: Taschen. p.55.

18. Ibid. pp. 54-5.

the minimalist surroundings. Again, there is a duality to the characters in the scene and this is further underlined by the composition of the shots. As the film's cinematographer, Dante Spinotti, recalls, the director 'took great care to frame each shot so that the bars of Lektor's cell would line up *exactly* from cut to cut...'¹⁹. Similarly, it is worth remembering that the reflection of the opposing character can be seen in the cell's glass divide in *The Silence of the Lambs* when the camera rests on either Lecter or Starling. As a brief aside, this barrier is a detail that the production designer for *The Silence of the Lambs*, Kristi Zea, brought to the canon of cinematic imprisonment. It was thought that this as, opposed to cell bars, afforded a greater intimacy between the characters²⁰. Certainly it allows for a clearer gaze.

When Graham leaves Lektor's cell there is an arresting long-shot of him running down a series of diagonal walkways (again, all white). It looks as though Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the New York Guggenheim has been transposed onto a mental asylum. It is perhaps fitting then that these external shots were taken at an art museum²¹. This is an acutely clinical, sterile place of observation. As Royle²² points out, the

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...various senses of 'clinical' [are] 'hospital-like', 'concerned with or based on observation', 'strictly objective', 'analytical', 'plain, functional in appearance' [and] derive from the Greek *klinikos*...

In contrast, the cell featured in *The Silence of the Lambs* is dungeon-like. Its aim is to be obscuring. Hantke²³ makes a fundamental error in likening it to a panoptical space. Evidently it is the direct opposite. The aim with this design is to demonstrate that Lecter is hidden away. Just as Dracula hides away in his soil-packed coffins in Carfax Abbey, so Lecter is also hidden from view in a shadowy, tomb-like space. He is not to be displayed. He is deemed to be a monster and so

given the fate of other gothic monsters. In *Manhunter*, Lektor is rendered entirely visible. He is placed on display. This is a medical setting that is much more akin to a panopticon. As Royle²⁴ puts it, this is a place that is 'concerned with or based on observation'. Intrinsically the cell and its surroundings (an art museum let us not forget) are designed for *looking*. This directly echoes those modern concerns of light, observation and classification. This is in keeping with the context of the film. The central themes of *Manhunter* are related to the act of looking: metaphorically through the eyes of the victim; the traditional surveillant gaze of the detective and the predatory look of the killer(s). Curiously though, and possibly uniquely to the genre, it

is the 'observed' whose gaze becomes transcendent. In both films the gaze/influence of the character of Lektor/Lecter breaks through the confines of the cell. In a place of observation, a secure hospital, he reverses the look of Graham. In a hidden dungeon-like space, his gaze becomes all-powerful. Neither of these places are sufficient to secure this individual. To refer to Bachelard²⁵ again, Lecter cannot be contained within the irrational space of the basement, nor can Lektor be contained in the

rational space of medicine. The message is that there is no viable place of punishment for Lektor/Lecter.

The 'non-place' cinematic prison

It is the 'non-place'-ness of the cell in *Manhunter* that I wish to turn to now. As we have seen, the non-traditional aspect of cinematic imprisonment is visually starkly at odds with the more familiar gothic and uncanny²⁶ design of that found in *The Silence of the Lambs*. To what extent though are there undercurrents of meaning that flow back and forth between these depictions? What I intend to suggest is that the brightly lit fluorescent world of an increasingly large cinematic and televisual carceral landscape²⁷ similarly draws upon these gothic tropes. They may no longer resemble Piranesian spaces of decay and ruin, but they share a

19. Original emphasis. Ibid. p. 56.

20. *Inter alia*. Picart, C.J. and Greek, C. (2003). The Compulsion of Real/Reel Serial Killers and Vampires: toward a gothic criminology. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10, 1, 39-68.

21. The High Museum of Art located in Atlanta, Georgia and designed by Richard Meier.

22. Royle, N. (2003). *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. p.148.

23. Hantke, 1998.

24. Royle, 2003.

25. Bachelard, 1958/1994.

26. Fiddler, 2007.

27. This is not limited to *Manhunter*. We might take *Oz* (Creator, Tom Fontana, 1997-2003) and *Ghosts...of the Civil Dead* (dir. John Hillcoat, 1988) amongst others as the exemplars of this new sub-genre of the non-traditional depiction of the prison.

particular set of messages. They also look back to those concerns of what is revealed by light or obscured by the dark. What is meant by 'non-place' though? This is a term originated by Marc Augé²⁸ to describe those buildings and areas defined by transit. There is perpetual movement in and around them. These are the contemporary airport lounge, supermarket or motorway service station²⁹. They 'do not integrate the earlier places' that occupied their position³⁰. For Augé it is the 'supermodern', the condition that privileges lightning fast connections and movements, which produces non-places³¹. Non-places are contrasted by Augé against 'anthropological places'³². This anthropological place is created through 'complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how.'³³

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.³⁴

Individuals enact place through their everyday use of it. They inscribe new layers of meaning to a given place constantly. In this sense, '[p]lace and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed'³⁵. In the non-place meaning and memory cannot adhere to surroundings. It is individuals that produce place by giving it a sense of meaning and history. In the non-place, however, it is 'as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news'³⁶.

What we see in *Manhunter* and other such 'non-traditional' prison dramas are the blank surfaces of just this sort of late-modern design. To use Augé's terms, they are ahistorical and unconcerned with identity. Meaning slides off of these spaces. These buildings more closely resemble a futuristic hotel or office block. They are inconsistent with the popular understanding of what a prison 'should' look like. They simply seamlessly melt into

the 'continuum of security and design' that characterises much contemporary urban construction³⁷. This is a carceral architecture that echoes the faceless design of the mall, airport lounge or hotel. The design can be repeated *ad infinitum*, further stripping away any discernible 'anthropological place' or sense of history and identity. Whereas the 'traditional' on-screen prison reaffirms what we expect a prison to look like, the non-traditional depiction could resemble any one of a number of other building types. The exterior shot of the Metropolitan Detention Centre in *American History X*, for example, resembles an office block. It is anonymous. The interior shots of cellblocks in *Oz* and *Ghosts... of the Civil Dead*³⁸ are shorn of detail. These non-places make their inhabitants anonymous.

Seeing darkness within the light in the cinematic prison

Perhaps the depictions of the non-place prison in *Manhunter*, *Ghosts...* and *Oz* will begin to displace the traditional place myth³⁹. The prisons contained in these dramas, with their Kubrickian coolness, have moved beyond the typical Victorian representation. Instead they typically depict a more open, transparent new-generation

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design. The podular set designs for both *Oz* and *Ghosts...* are of a different order to the Piranesian dungeon of *The Silence of the Lambs*. They are suffused with an (artificial) light. Walls are smooth and the wings are bright. Yet, these blank spaces of observation continue to be infused with elements of the gothic. They still contain a prisoner who is as damaged and difficult as any seen in the films that hold their inmates in cinematically 'traditional' prisons. In these carceral non-places we see the binary opposition of light and dark broken down. Both, uncannily, exist in one another. How is this achieved and to what purpose?

We can certainly see darkness flooding the tomb or mausoleum-like cell space of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Yet, save for very similar depictions of the 'hole'

28. Augé, M. (1995). *Non-Places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (trans. J. Howe). London: Verso.

29. Moran, J. (2005). *Reading the Everyday*. London: Routledge provides a persuasive counter-argument to this.

30. Augé, 1995. p. 75.

31. *Inter alia*. Virilio, P. (1991). *Lost Dimension* (trans. D. Moshenberg). US: Semiotext(e).

32. Augé, 1995. p. 78.

33. *Ibid.* p. 101.

34. *Ibid.* p. 77/8.

35. *Ibid.* p. 79.

36. *Ibid.* p. 104.

37. Davis, M. (1990). *City of Quartz*. London: Pimlico. p. 257.

38. Henceforth abbreviated to *Ghosts...*

39. Shields, R. (1991). *Places on the margin: alternative geographies of modernity*. London: Routledge.

as a dank pit devoid of light, in *Oz* and *Ghosts...*, the cells and blocks are brightly illuminated. In addition, in *Oz*, the plexiglass cells render everything visible. In social spaces, though, visibility and obscurity, light and shadow can move within one another:

On the one hand...space contains opacities, bodies and objects, centres of ... actions and ... energies, hidden — even impenetrable — places, areas of viscosity, and black holes. On the other, it offers sequence, sets of objects, concatenations of bodies — so much so, in fact, that anyone can at any time discover new ones, forever slipping from the non-visible realm into the visible, from opacity into transparency.⁴⁰

Dark space, the space of 'viscosity' (and we might be reminded of Douglas⁴¹ here) is opposed here to light. Transparency is said to offer 'sequence' or, in other terms, rationality. That which obscures is linked to irrationality. This takes us back to consider Bachelard's juxtaposition of the irrational space of the cellar and the rational space of the roof. One is in darkness, the other in light. It was, Vidler suggests, the project of modernity to flood the dark space with light:

[i]n every case 'light space' is invaded by the figure of 'dark space', on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the homeless.⁴²

At some point between the level of the body and the city we might place the prison. It was a site upon which the light of modernity was to shine. The intention was to eradicate dark, ambivalent, irrational space through transparency and light. Yet, as Foucault⁴³ argued in *The Eye of Power*, this desire to illuminate in the eighteenth century also drew attention to its opposite: '[the] negative of the transparency and visibility which it is aimed to establish'⁴⁴. It is as though, as Lefebvre⁴⁵ suggests in the passage above, there is 'forever slipping' between the dark and light. So it was

with the prison. The 'meaning' of the prison came to be derived from the confusion of the inner, ordered world and the 'dark' façade. Vidler⁴⁶ points to the attention paid to the importance of transparency. This was developed by Le Corbusier and other modernists in the creation of a 'hygienic space'⁴⁷. It was thought that this 'would eradicate the domain of myth, suspicion, tyranny, and above all, the irrational'⁴⁸. However, the divisions between light and dark are not binary oppositions. Darkness resides in the light. The irrational and repressed, those elements that were to be eradicated by the flooding of urban spaces⁴⁹ with light, were simply highlighted and brought into focus. For Vidler:

...the spaces of modernism, ...the first Panopticon [for example], should be seen as calculated not on the final triumph of light over dark, but precisely on the insistent presence of the one in the other.⁵⁰

We see a flooding of space with light in *Manhunter*, *Oz* and *Ghosts...*, These are spaces of unfettered observation. Certainly all is transparent in *Oz*. In *Ghosts...*, we, the viewer/voyeur, complicitly watch CCTV footage in this techno-Panopticon. These non-places are bathed in light. Yet the dark remains. It is almost as though one is able to see the darkness that pervades these prisons with a vivid new focus. Violence is illuminated. The darkness is revealed as something already insistently present. It is 'what comes to light...what is revealed to the eye'⁵¹. In this sense, the spaces of *Manhunter*, *Oz* and *Ghosts...* are arguably more uncanny than the dungeon-like *The Silence of the Lambs*. These non-places, these clinical and 'hygienic' sites of observation, bring that which is hidden away more completely into a terrible clarity. Lefebvre⁵² comments on the 'viscosity' of dark space. We can certainly see in these non-traditional depictions that the darkness sticks to each of the inhabitants, be they prisoners in their cells or observing officers. The darkness pervades all who come into the uncanny space of this carceral non-place.

40. Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space* (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith). Oxford: Blackwell. p.183.

41. Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: an analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.

42. Vidler, 1992. p.168.

43. Foucault, 1974.

44. Vidler, 1992. p.169.

45. Lefebvre, 1991. p.183.

46. Vidler, 1992.

47. Ibid. p.168.

48. Ibid.

49. In particular the hospitals, workhouses and prisons.

50. Ibid. p.172.

51. Ibid.

52. Lefebvre, 1991.