

I THOUGHT I WAS SEEING CONVICTS

Harun Farocki, 2000, 23 minutes

Images from the maximum-security prison in Corcoran, California. The surveillance camera shows a pie-shaped segment concrete-paved yard where the prisoners, dressed in shorts and mostly shirtless, are allowed to spend a half an hour a day. A convict attacked another, upon which those involved lay themselves flat on the ground, their arms over their heads. They know what comes now: the guard will call out a warning and then fire rubber bullets. If the convicts do not stop fighting now, the guard will shoot for real. The pictures are silent, the trail of gun smoke drifts across the picture. The camera and the gun are right next to each other. The field of vision and the gun viewfinder fall together ...

—

I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts was the result of a sudden opportunity. [...] One year earlier, I had started working on a larger project involving images from prisons. It was about the representation of prisons in movies. But the money to research the project never materialized. So I started looking for footage from surveillance cameras in the U.S. As is well known, there are more prisoners in the US than in any other wealthy nation. The ‘prison population’ continues to grow steadily, while the crime rate does not! Most inmates are black, and many sentences are scandalously long—it was hard for me to not get carried away with the topicality of the issue. I was almost about to make a rabble-rousing film—a film like a pamphlet.

PRISON IMAGES

Harun Farocki, 2000, 60 minutes

A film composed of images from prisons. Quotes from fiction films and documentaries as well as footage from surveillance cameras. A look at the new control technologies, at personal identification devices.

The cinema has always been attracted to prisons. Today’s prisons are full of video surveillance cameras. These images are unedited and monotonous; as neither time nor space is compressed, they are particularly well-suited to conveying the state of inactivity into which prisoners are placed as a punitive measure. The surveillance cameras show the norm and reckon with deviations from it. Clips from Genet and Bresson. Here the prison appears as a site of sexual infraction, a site where human beings must create themselves as people and as workers.

In *Un Chant d’amour* (A Love Song) by Jean Genet, the guard looks in on inmates in their cells and sees them masturbating. The inmates are aware they are being watched and thus become performers in a peep show. The protagonist in Bresson’s *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé* (A Man Escaped) turns the objects of imprisonment into the tools for his escape. These topoi appear in many prison films. In newer prisons, by contrast, contemporary video surveillance technology aims at demystification.

texts: Harun Farocki, 2000

CONTROLLING OBSERVATION

Harun Farocki

In January 1999, Cathy Crane and I started research in the US for a film with the working title *Gefängnisbilder* (Prison Images). We were looking for footage from security cameras installed in penitentiaries, instruction material for prison officers, documentaries, and feature films, which included depictions of prisons. We got to know a private investigator who, as a civil rights activist, campaigns for the families of prisoners killed in Californian prisons: a private detective who reads Hans Blumenberg when he has time to kill. An architect showed us the plans for a new penitentiary for ‘sex offenders’ in Oregon; one-third of the planned buildings—those intended for therapeutic services—had been crossed out from the plans because the legislature refused to fund them. In Camden, New Jersey, near Philadelphia, a guard showed me around the prison; the men gave me disdainful, sidelong glances from behind glass similar to that in the lion house of a zoo. I saw women brushing each other’s hair like women in a Pasolini film. The guard told me that there were vents in the ceilings of the day rooms through which tear gas could be introduced, but that this had never been done as the chemicals deteriorated over time.

Pictures from the maximum security prison in Corcoran, California: A surveillance camera shows a pie-shaped segment of the concrete yard where the prisoners, dressed in shorts and mostly shirtless, are allowed to spend half an hour a day. One prisoner attacks another, whereupon those not involved lay flat on the ground, arms over their heads. They know that when a fight breaks out, the guard will call out a warning and then fire once using a rubber bullet. If the prisoners continue fighting, the guard will use live ammunition. The pictures are silent, and the shot is only revealed in the trail of gun smoke drifting across the screen. The camera and the gun are right next to each other; field of vision and field of fire merge. The reason that the yard was built in pie segments is clear—so that there is nowhere to hide from observation or bullets. One of the prisoners—usually the attacker—collapses. In many cases he is either seriously wounded or dead. The prisoners belong to prison gangs with names like ‘Aryan Brotherhood’ or ‘Mexican Mafia’. They have received long sentences and are locked up far away from the world in a maximum security prison. They have hardly anything but their bodies, the muscles of which they work out constantly, and their affiliation to an organization. Their honor is more important to them than their lives; they fight knowing full well they will be shot at. At Corcoran, brawling prisoners have been shot at on more than two thousand occasions. Some guards claim that their colleagues have often deliberately put members of warring groups into the yard together and placed bets on the outcome of the fights as if the prisoners were gladiators. The surveillance cameras run at a slower speed in order to save on costs. In the footage available to us, the intervals were extended so that the movements are jerky and not flowing. The fights in the yard look like something from a cheap

computer game. It is hard to imagine a less dramatic representation of death.

Surveillance Technology

We obtained the footage of the fights and shootings from a female attorney representing the relatives of the prisoners killed. The guards continually claimed that they feared the attacking prisoner was carrying a weapon, such as the sharpened handle of a plastic spoon. The prisoners in Corcoran are subject to such strict controls, however, that this hardly seems likely. From a central control room it is possible to monitor which cells are occupied and which are empty, which doors are open and in which walkway each person can be found. The guards can send out an electronic identification signal to warn of a prohibited movement by a prisoner.

In the present judicial crisis in the US—despite falling crime rates, the number of prisoners has quadrupled over the past twenty years—many new prisons are being built, including some by private operators. New technologies are being developed and implemented in order to reduce costs. Guards are meant to have as little direct contact with the prisoners as possible, and just as humans in the production sector have turned over war production to machines, prisoners should also be isolated from any direct human contact. There is now a machine available that can check for drugs and weapons in all of a prisoner’s orifices. There are metal detectors at every door. An iris scanner is a device that photographs the iris, isolates the significant characteristics, and compares them with a set of data. This equipment can be fixed to doors and identify each individual, prisoner or guard, within two seconds. Meanwhile, a chair embraces a raging prisoner in its steel arms and gags him with gentle force, like something from a fantasy film. This apparatus also expresses a general desire for objectivity, for dispassionate repression.

Public Relations

The State of California has removed the word ‘rehabilitation’ from its statutes; prisons have given up on correction, they are explicitly and solely there to punish. The justice department commissioned a video for the media, primarily intended to prove that those sentenced to prison do not lead a life of luxury and actually have a tough time there (‘The Toughest Beat in California’). The style for this video meant slamming and locking doors extra loudly, guards approaching with loud and ominous footsteps and rattling their keys as if there were an execution about to happen.

They are shown in slow motion, using a long focal length and the accompanying background music is intended to link them with the heroes from Westerns. This video can be compared to a propaganda film the Nazis produced at the Brandenburg Prison in 1943. They have the same message: ‘The time for leniency is over. Let us no longer speak of correction, but rather of the severity of punishment’. Both films show how a prisoner is bound hand and foot like an escape artist in the circus. Both films transform the criminal into a spectacle. In doing so, the California film is even

more sensationalist than the Nazi film. The extent of abuse in the Germany of 1943 was of course far greater than in the California of today, but the Nazis were still at pains to maintain at least an appearance of legality. The demand for entertainment has grown immeasurably since then. Even films critical of prisons aim at being entertaining. There are hardly any critical films that manage to do so without the accompanying fearful excitement of an execution.

Prison as a Spectacle

With the advent of the modern era, punishment underwent a fundamental change when public torture and execution were abolished. Those who break the law today are shut away behind walls, withdrawn from the gaze, made invisible. Every picture from prison is a reminder of the cruel history of the criminal justice system. We see a film produced by the Bureau of Prisons in Washington, D.C., for the further education of the prison staff. A prisoner is raging, and a guard tries in vain to calm him down; he calls his superior who again attempts appeasement. Then the guard fetches a camera to document the procedure completely. A combat unit arrives on the scene together with a physician; having stormed the cell and overwhelmed the prisoner, they tie him up on the bed. (The five members of the combat unit are wearing protective helmets and breastplates, and each of them has the task of seizing a particular part of the raging man's body.) All this is captured on camera so as to document the detachment that the justice apparatus is supposed to maintain towards the prisoner. Precisely because the portrayal is so meticulous, it is also implausible and thus functions as a denial. It insists so emphatically that the personnel were acting indifferently and without emotion, that they took no pleasure in subduing the prisoner. This message is proclaimed so often and so loudly that one ends up believing exactly the opposite.

Observational Control

In modern prisons, where the aim is to rehabilitate the prisoner, he is not put on display, but the guard's controlling gaze remains. The guard is society's representative, and with this in mind, Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher of punishment, drew up plans for a prison with a central watchtower, providing a line of sight into each cell. The prisoners would be unable to tell whether the tower was actually occupied; they would simply be aware that they were potentially being observed. Bentham thought that anyone could enter the tower and perform the task of supervision.

In order for panoptic control to work, cells must be open and have bars instead of walls. This is usually the case in the US Over the past ten years, prisons in the United States are again being built according to panoptic principles. In point of fact, video cameras could be used anywhere but what is important to prison operators is that the prisoner feels exposed to human observation.

At the same time, there are more and more prisons where the prisoners no longer have direct visual contact with their visitors whether it be through bars

or glass. They are only allowed to communicate via videophone. This is justified on humanitarian grounds: relatives no longer need to trek long distances, they only have to go to an office which provides and supervises the videophone connection. This bit of modernization has meant that one of the central narrative figures of prison films has lost its basis in reality. How often have we viewed movie scenes where the visitor and prisoner are talking together and the vigilant guard steps in? Or of a parting couple symbolically touching longingly through the glass pane that separates them.

Studio Play

Silent films prior to D.W. Griffith, set in prisons: these films are related to theatre and the cell usually resembles a sitting room. Like the fireplace in a sitting room, the bars in the cell are like stage props that the actor playing a prisoner is better off not rattling for fear that they will fall apart. Without a fourth wall, a cell becomes no more than a scene in a peepshow; especially if the actors involved are 'acting as if', instead of acting.

Because there are few visitors in prison, it is difficult to develop dramatic intrigue. This is why silent films often make the prison cell the setting for visions. The condemned man imagines his execution or pardon, the desperate recall their lost happiness, the vengeful picture their hour of revenge. The imagination is portrayed using superimpositions, double exposures, and other film tricks. Seen in this manner, the prison cell is a spiritually rich location. We come to understand that the origins of the cell are related to monastic solitude. 'Alone in his cell the prisoner is delivered up unto himself; in the silence of his passions he descends into his conscience, questions it, and senses within the awakening of that moral feeling which never completely dies in man's heart.' The cell then is designed not just as a grave, but also as a scene of resurrection.

Removing Walls

More than anything else, electronic control technology has a deterritorialising effect. (Companies no longer have to be concentrated in one location; and production at these locations can be quickly switched to making different products.) Locations become less specific. An airport contains a shopping center, a shopping center has a school, a school offers recreational facilities, and so on. What are the consequences of this development for prisons, themselves mirrors of society as well as its counter-image and projection surface?

On the one hand, electronic technology makes it possible to constrain a person even when he is outside prison, it can supervise and punish him, and with electronic foot tagging it can keep someone under house arrest while it allows him to go to work or attend school. On the other hand, some two hundred years after Europe tore down its city walls, ever increasing numbers of people are closing themselves off in so-called 'gated communities'. The residents of these communities are by no means exclusively

from the upper classes. Security technology is no longer restricted to selectively regulating access to 'sensitive' nuclear or military facilities; today it is also used to control access to normal offices and factories. Throughout a thousand years of urban history, streets have always been public space; twenty-five years ago in Minneapolis the first system of inner-city skywalks was established with private security firms to exclude undesirables. Deregulation does not by any means imply a reduction of control. In one of his last writings, Gilles Deleuze outlined the vision of a society of controls which he said would replace disciplinary society.

The End of Themes and Genres

We have already mentioned that the prison visitation scene will soon correspond to nothing in reality. The introduction of electronic cash will make bank robbery practically impossible as well, and if it turns out that in the future all weapons will be electronically secured and only capable of being fired by the licensed owner, the end of movie shoot-outs will be just around the corner. With the introduction of iris scanners that identify an individual *en passant*, the comedy of errors becomes an endangered genre. It will be almost impossible to tell the story of a man going to prison for a crime he did not commit or of a visitor exchanging clothes with a prisoner, allowing him to walk free. With the increase in electronic control structures, everyday life will become just as hard to portray and to dramatize as everyday work already is.

Prison—Workhouse

In the prison film, work scenes are more commonly shown than in other genres. In the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, there were cells in which water kept rising and whose inmates had to bale themselves out to keep from drowning; this demonstrated that man must work to live. In eighteenth-century England, many prisoners had to work the treadmill—today many prisoners can again be found on treadmills, keeping themselves physically fit. Prison labor has seldom been economically significant and at best had some educational value. Prison trains prisoners to do industrial work, because factories are organized on similar principles: to concentrate, to distribute in space, to order in time, to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces.

It is worthwhile to compare images of prison with those of work-research laboratories: opening the cell doors, prisoners leaving their cells, role call, marching to the yard, circling around the prison yard, etc. Experiments were carried out for the organization of Fordist factories on how a wall should be built. Should one worker lift the stone and do the mortaring, or is it better for one worker to do the lifting and a second worker to do the mortaring? These tests present a picture of abstract work while the pictures from the surveillance cameras yield a picture of abstract existence.