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Imagining Prison Spaces: A Spatial Reading of *The Shawshank Redemption*

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Abstract

This paper aims to do a spatial reading of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) by Frank Darabont using the concepts of Thirdspace and Heterotopia. The study places the film in its historical context to understand the subtle political stance that it takes. The constant exploitation of prison space by the authorities accentuates the ideological conflicts between retributive and rehabilitative punitive philosophy. The understanding of prison spaces in binaries of good and bad is challenged by the narrative. The paper critically evaluates this rejection of the dichotomic representation of prison space in the film and attempts to understand the complex *imaginary* space created by the filmmaker.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Thirdspace, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Spaces, Prison Cinema

Introduction

The Shawshank Redemption, released in 1994, is a cinematic adaptation of the novella *Rita Hayworth and The Shawshank Redemption* by Stephen King. Directed by Frank Darabont, the film, on the surface, is the story of a rich banker, Andy Dufresne, who, having been (wrongfully) convicted for the murder of his wife, has been penalised to serve two life sentences in Shawshank Prison. The narrative captures the journey of Andy and his fellow inmates at the Penitentiary through their years of punishment, while constantly challenging the viewer's understanding of prison spaces as a place of rehabilitation.

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The fictional space created in the film throws a critical light on various aspects of spatial understanding that work together to define the complex dynamics of prisons. With a severe attack on the prison space as a "correctional home", a critique of the authoritative structures exploiting prison spaces for personal gain, a stance against the ideological inclination towards retributive punitive practices of the government, and a fundamental evaluation of the understanding of prison spaces in the binaries of good and bad, *The Shawshank Redemption* becomes a representation of punitive institutions in America in the latter half of the 20th century.

The latter half of the 20th century was also the time period, when, through "radical postmodernist perspectives", according to Edward Soja, "the most interesting and insightful new ways of thinking about space and spatiality" (Soja 3) were being identified and analysed. A critical thirding of the binary structures resulted in the creation of a *Thirdspace* which was being evaluated by most sociologists, geographers, and other academics and researchers of the time. This paper uses Michel Foucault's *Heterotopia* and the concept of *Thirdspace* given by Edward Soja, assisted by the space theory given by Henry Lefebvre, as multiple lenses to look at the imaginary space of the Shawshank Penitentiary created by the film. Such an observation helps to understand the complex prison space created by Frank Darabont in the film, and consecutively, aids the understanding of punitive practices in the socio-political context of America in the late 20th century.

Literature Review

Owing to its creative cinematography, rich and gripping plot, philosophical outlook of life, and succinct social commentary, *The Shawshank Redemption* has been able to grasp the attention of a number of scholars and critics over the years. Various aspects of the film have been academically explored. Some of the earlier works by Nicole Hahn Rafter (2000) and Sean O'Sullivan (2001) have argued over the genre of the film and whether it falls under the category of an escapist fantasy to which both the critics have had contradicting opinions. Both the critics, in a way, have defined the prison film genre and studied *The Shawshank Redemption* in the larger context, comparing it to the different ways in which crime and prisons were being represented in the contemporary cinema of the time. Michael Fiddler (2007) has added another aspect to this research by showing the representation of prison in *The Shawshank Redemption* as dramatic and "uncanny" (Fiddler 203) whereby the "Gothic façade of the prison" (Fiddler 203) has been explored.

Tony Magistrale (2008) explores the interpersonal relations between the men at Shawshank and how they are forced to reconsider their relationships with women. Magistrale points towards the lack of female presence in the film and, simultaneously, analyses the significance of Rita Hayworth and the other posters of female celebrities in relation to the inmates' aspiration for freedom.

Daniel KL Chua (2011) and David Ireland (2018) have both studied the music in the film. They have attributed a sense of liberation to Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* played at an absurd juncture in the film. Both of them have remarked about the irregular or incongruent response to the music by the inmates, becoming a symbolic representation of their captivity. Yuan-yuan Peng (2020) has analysed the theme of institutionalisation in the film and has referred to the captivity and regularity of prison life for accentuating the same.

All the mentioned studies analyse some key aspects of the film and, consecutively, of Shawshank prison but the complete nature of the fictional prison space created by Frank Darabont can be studied and understood in terms of the critical theories of spaces propounded by Michel Foucault and Edward Soja.

The Shawshank Redemption in Light of the 1994 Crime Bill

The Shawshank Redemption attacks authoritative structures by portraying Shawshank prison as a space of power that is being continuously exploited by the men in authority. Be it the unnecessary beating to death of the *new fish*, the killing of Tommy Williams, or the scandalous "inside-out" programme of the warden, the film continuously portrays how power is misused by people in authority. The warden and the captain of prison guards are portrayed as antagonists in the film with their villainous actions throughout the course of the narrative. The prisoners are used as cheap labourers, be it with the "inside-out" programme or the money laundering scheme through Andy. One might argue that prison inmates with rigorous imprisonment are supposed to work hard, but the narrative indicates how the "inside-out" programme challenges the space outside prison by producing labour at rates that would be impossible to obtain by adhering to the minimum wage rates in the outside world. Such exploitation of the prison space and its dynamics by the authorities hint towards a rather political angle that enlightens our understanding of prison spaces in the socio-political context of the times. Warden Samuel Norton says in response to Andy's request of directing more funds towards the prison library, "As far as they are concerned, there's only three ways to spend the taxpayer's hard-earned money when it comes to prisons. More walls. More bars. More guards." (Shawshank 55:41 - 55:48). Here, the state senate is responsible for redirecting the "taxpayer's hard-earned" money to the prisons and it clearly prioritises the enhancement of prison infrastructure to maintain strict surveillance of the inmates over the basic needs of the prisoners, such as the library or better food quality (there is a scene where there are worms coming out of Andy's food), which are essential for their rehabilitation. Thus, there is a mockery made of the assertion that prison spaces have become rehabilitative in nature, evolving from their retributive past. By this, the film assumes a political stance.

In 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was brought into action in the United States of America by then President, Bill Clinton. This became

the largest crime bill in the history of the USA consisting of 356 pages, "providing 100,000 new police officers, $9.7 billion in funding for prisons, and $6.1 billion in funding for prevention programmes that had been designed with significant input from experienced police officers" (Kawashima 211). As a result of this bill, there was a massive increase in incarceration, especially of African-American men throughout America. The number of arrested "criminals" became the measure of the effectiveness of each of the local police departments to "keep federal monetary support for the increased employment of police officers in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, as Clinton himself later regretted" (Kawashima 211). When Norton's statement is seen in the light of these events, it is easy to sense the political reference and a subtle critique of the crime bill in it. When Andy says, "on the outside, I was an honest man, straight as an arrow. I had to come to prison to be a crook" (Shawshank 1:23:16-1:12:18). It becomes indicative of the major inefficiencies of the penal system. Through the tropes of brutality and corruption, the film comments on the crime bill and its predictable repercussions. Thus, in an era where the prison authorities were glorified and the chants were to put more convicts in prisons, *The Shawshank Redemption* strings together a counter-narrative.

From this perspective, the narrative could be seen as an attempt to ignite the hope of escape from mass incarceration through the mythical character of Andy Dufresne, who enlightens the prisoners by expanding the prison library and gives a message of liberation through knowledge. The prison space created by Darabont is, thus, the representation of the crime bill of 1994, deploring the changes being made to prison spaces which would be a step back from their rehabilitating nature to the more primitive idea of retributive prisons.

Understanding the Concepts of Thirdspace and Heterotopia

The film challenges our tendency of trying to understand the world in binaries, i.e. in terms of good and bad, delinquent and disciplined, and in terms of making a clear distinction between the upholders of the law and the breakers of it. Michel Foucault's idea of "sacralization of spaces" or Henry Lefebvre's "double illusion" critique this "reductionism" in the understanding of spaces. The discipline of Geography, which was historically dominated by the objective-materialist and the subjective-idealist approaches, according to Lefebvre, was illuminated by an "illusion" of transparency projected by them. It laid an impression that the space being studied is completely intelligible. The social space was thus seen in terms of either the naturalistic portrayal of space or the physical and concrete understanding of it. Both add to an "illusion" of comprehension of spaces in totality which Soja understands to be "naive". Lefebvre, however, doesn't see these "double illusions" as strictly antagonistic in their opposition, instead, he argues that both the illusions embrace, and even, nourish each other.

> The shifting back and forth between the two, and the flickering or oscillatory effect that it produces, are thus just as important as either of the illusions considered in isolation .... The rational is thus naturalized, while nature cloaks itself in nostalgias which supplant rationality. (Lefebvre 30)

Thus simultaneity is obtained where the real and the imagined, the objective and the subjective, or the material and the metaphorical, exist together. Soja calls this critique of the binary understanding of spaces,

> a vital part of the thirding process, working to break down the rigid object-subject binarism that has defined and confined the spatial imagination for centuries, while simultaneously maintaining the useful knowledges of space derived from both of these binary "fields." (Soja 62)

Prison, which, in its modern sense, is understood to be a space where punitive measures are taken to rehabilitate individuals who are deviated from social order, is constantly compromised in the film. Be it through the conviction of the innocent Andy Dufresne, the unlawful practices by the upholders of the law, the constant smuggling of utilities inside the prison premises, or, on the other side, the bond of friendship and a sense of communion among the prison inmates, Darabont portrays how this space cannot be viewed in terms of good and bad, lawful and unlawful, black and white, as the grey areas are made very prominent. Thus, through this critique of the binary understanding of spaces, Darabont hints towards a *thirdspace*, which is, "both a space that is distinguishable from other spaces (physical and mental, or First and Second) and a transcending composite of all spaces." (Soja 62).

It is important, at this juncture, to understand the *first* and *second* space, for better comprehension of the *thirdspace* that Soja talks about. The *Firstspace*, according to Soja, is "an empirical text" that can be read at two different levels, "one which concentrates on the accurate description of surface appearances (an indigenous mode of spatial analysis), and the other which searches for spatial explanation in primarily exogenous social, psychological, and biophysical processes." (Soja 75)

Thus, the objective, factual space that could be defined on the basis of mathematical or quantitative data forms the *firstspace*. The *secondspace* is endogenous in nature and is made up of the "projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies." (Soja 79). Although this might suggest that the *Secondspace* has no relation to material reality, Soja argues against it. According to Soja, it is the understanding of the empirical reality through the imagined or conceived geography that leads to the formation of the *secondspace*. Thus, in the most simple terms, *Secondspace* becomes an interpretation of geographical space by an individual. Consequently, the concept of *Thirdspace* is derived as, "arising from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstitution of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality" (Soja 81). Not only are the *First* and the *Second*

space critiqued in this *Thirdspace* but, as has been stated earlier, they coexist inside the *Thirdspace*.

A similar idea of critical thirding or "otherization" of spaces was explained by Michel Foucault through the concept of Heterotopias. The word "heterotopia" has been derived from two Greek words, "hetero" meaning "other" or "different" and "topos" which means "place", thus the literal meaning of the word becomes "other places" or "different places". Foucault defines heterotopias as:

> actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realised utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed. (Foucault 178)

For inmates like Andy, Red and Brooks, Shawshank State Penitentiary is their world. Serving life sentences, they have lost any direct contact with the outside world, the "other real emplacements" as Foucault calls them, and they exist, solely, in the heterotopia. Talking about Utopias and Heterotopias, Foucault says:

> But what interests me among all these emplacements are certain ones that have the curious property of being connected to all the other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralise, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [reflechis] by them. (178)

According to this definition, the two types of emplacements, i.e. Utopia and Heterotopia, are connected to all the other real places, and, in a way, challenge our understanding of these places by presenting us with a distorted picture of them. Now, if we view Shawshank prison with this understanding of heterotopia, its connection to the other emplacements becomes apparent, as it is the shelter for the individuals, of these emplacements, "whose behaviour is deviant with respect to the mean or the required norm" (Foucault 180) of the society. But it also presents us with a distorted picture as the "required norm" is violated even inside the prison premises. There are numerous instances of corruption, brutality, smuggling, and other "deviant" practices that "suspend, neutralise, or reverse" our understanding of prisons and consecutively of the "required norm" that has been set in the other emplacements outside of the prison.

Analysing the space in the film through the lenses of Thirdspace and Heterotopia

Now, with a better understanding of the *Thirdspace* and Heterotopias, the different aspects of the complex prison space, created by Frank Darabont can be analysed. On the surface, Shawshank prison is like all prisons, a space of incarceration. The first few aerial shots of the prison capture its geographical area and compose a spatial understanding of it in terms of its location. This is the *Firstspace* which can be "quantitatively and mathematically" defined. The location of the cells, the prison

yard, the workplaces inside, and other such physical "sites" constitute the *Firstspace*. The *Secondspace* is more individualistic and interpretive. In the context of the film, it could be defined as how the individuals interpret the dynamics of the geographical spaces inside the prison. For instance, the prison yard was understood as a place of business by Ellis Boyd Redding (Morgan Freeman), while Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) saw it, mainly, as the space of collecting rocks and disposing of the remains of his walls so that no one would suspect him and his plan to escape the prison premises. Thus, aligning to Lefebvre's notion of "conceived" spaces, a *Secondspace* is conceived or conjured by the individuals. The *Thirdspace*, in this scenario, becomes the heterogeneous space of the Prison which harbours the *First*, geographical space and the *Second*, interpretive space of the inmates while the individual idea of each inmate is constantly contested against that of the others. This amalgamation of the *First* and *Second* spaces while being constantly criticised produces the complex *Thirdspace* of the prison.

There are two ways in which the viewer is introduced to the Shawshank prison. As the viewer is consumed by the grandiose and intimidating structure of the penitentiary where the inmates are shown as tiny creatures against the huge walls surrounding them, signifying their status against the towering punitive structures, through the voice-over, the narration informs how Ellis Boyd Redding (Morgan Freeman) can smuggle things inside the prison space. This constructs a *Secondspace*, an interpretation of the penitentiary as an intimidating structure with questionable practices, in the minds of the viewer. Thus, the viewer becomes a part of the *Thirdspace* of Shawshank prison, when their interpretation is being constantly challenged as it co-exists along with the other understandings of the space of the prison. The prisoners in the film are constantly trying to define and redefine the space that encapsulates them. A stark contrast is observed in the understanding of prison space by the two main characters, Andy and Red.

Andy challenges the essential notion of incarceration and confinement attached to prison spaces when he plays Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* on the broadcast system of the penitentiary, even after the strict disapproval by the prison authorities. The broadcast system, meant for carrying out instructions and orders, is used to play liberating music. This can be seen as an attempt to change the dynamics of the prison space as conceived by the authorities. The *Secondspace* as a dominating space "of regulating discourses, representative of representations of power and ideology, of control and surveillance" (Soja 67) is compromised while creating a simultaneous *Thirdspace* "as the site of differences between individuals and groups" (Sachdeva 1158) inside Shawshank prison. This compromise of a space of order resonates with the sixth principle of heterotopia which defines heterotopias to be, "a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged, and muddled. This would be the heterotopia not of illusion but of compensation" (Foucault 184). This space of "compensation" is, according to Foucault, a place where the individuals' lives are regulated with a

uniform time to wake up, uniform time to work, and even to sleep. Thus, through this uniformity, Foucault claims that these spaces of compensation aim to attain an efficiency of a certain kind. Shawshank prison, or any other prison space, for that matter, could be viewed as such a space of compensation where the inmates are made to follow a uniform code with the aim to bring them back to social order. But, the symphony of Mozart played on the speakers, changes the dynamics of this heterotopic space of compensation, and in turn, the prison space is compromised.

Following this, in the next scene, Andy, after he has come back from solitary confinement as a punishment for his "stunt" he argues with Red about the importance of music in the lives of inmates; music which has no meaning inside prison for Red. The scene goes like this:

> Andy (Taps his heart, his head): The music was in here... it was in here. That's the beauty of music, they can't get that from you. Haven't you ever felt that way about music?
> Red: Well, I played a mean harmonica as a younger man. Lost interest in it though. Didn't make much sense here.
> Andy: Here's where it makes the most sense. You need it, so you don't forget.
> Red: Forget?
> Andy: Forget that... there are places in this world not made out of stone. That there's something inside that they can't get to, they can't touch. It's yours.
> Red: What are you talking about?
> Andy: Hope.
> Red: Hope? Let me tell you something about hope. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside, better get used to that idea.
> Andy: Like Brooks did? (Shawshank 1:11:31 - 1:12:49)

This becomes a pivotal scene in the development of the spatial idea of prison in the film. The stark contrast in the *Secondspace* of two individuals is on display. To Andy, music carries the semblance of outside space, the hope of a space where he aspires to be; whereas, to Red, who understands prison to be the space where he belongs, music is meaningless as it brings an angst of the space outside the confines of prison, of which, he was a part as a "younger man", but now he doesn't belong there. As both views can be critiqued individually, it is important to understand how they exist in synergy in the space of the prison. Thus, by projecting the differences in the understanding of prison by the inmates "the thirdspace becomes an arena where acceptance and resistance from different sections are played out." (Sachdeva 1158).

Prison, as an "otherized" space, has a special policy of exclusion and inclusion which is not determined by the inmates themselves. Foucault observes in the fifth principle of heterotopia:

> Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time. In general, one does not gain entry to a heterotopian emplacement as if to a windmill. Either one is constrained to enter, which is the case with barracks and prisons or one has to submit to rituals and purifications. (Foucault 183)

In the manner that has been mentioned in the fifth principle of heterotopia, the prisoners of Shawshank have been "constrained to enter" the premises of the penitentiary and are thus isolated from the other emplacements and deprived of agency. Also, the inclusion in the premises of the prison means a simultaneous exclusion from the "outer" world that is the space outside the prison. Thus, as a heterotopia, the space of the prison is seen as the "other" and this only adds to the social and metaphorical isolation which becomes the reason for the institutionalisation of some inmates. In the film, Brooks (James Whitmore) is unable to cope with the "outside" world after he is released on parole. He is reckoned to be institutionalised. The spatial differences inside and outside the prison accentuate a sense of alienation as he feels secluded from the spaces outside of the penitentiary. This angst and a sense of imprisonment, even in the outside world, is conveyed in the shot right before Brooks hangs himself. As he scratches the roof to sign his name, the shot captures Brooks' face through the wooden bars attached to the roof (Shawshank 1:04:40) giving the semblance of a man behind bars. The composition symbolises Brooks' anguish which still imprisons him, even in a space outside prison. This dread caused by isolation could be seen as the reflection or a representation of the existential dread of the individuals from other emplacements. A similar angst could be noticed in Red as he too has been isolated and secluded from the space outside prison, but Andy digs a hole in the space of the prison, both literally and metaphorically. The hole Andy digs on the wall of his cell is a symbol of the metaphorical discontinuity in the construction of the space of the prison.

Conclusion

Darabont, thus, creates an imaginary prison space that is much like any other space in the *real* world. A space where the disciplined and the delinquent cannot be clearly distinguished. A space where a revered warden abiding by the Holy Bible could be associated with the sin of murder and, at the same time, a convicted murderer could show the path of liberation through education and knowledge. This *imaginary* space cannot be approached with the simplistic dichotomy of good and bad. The complex dynamics of the Shawshank prison are suggestive of the complexity of the *real* world where simple designations fail to incorporate the true measure of situations.

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