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Images
vol. XXXVII/no. 46
Poznań 2024
ISSN 1731-450x

Morality Behind Bars: Regulating Prison Films in Postwar Hollywood

Abstract. Hain Milan, *Morality Behind Bars: Regulating Prison Films in Postwar Hollywood*. "Images" vol. XXXVII, no. 46. Poznań 2024. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 7–24. ISSN 1731-450X. https://doi.org/10.14746/i.2024.37.46.1

The article examines the censorship process related to three Hollywood prison film noirs produced after World War II: *Brute Force* (1947), *Caged* (1950), and *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954). The author argues that the combination of a prison setting and film noir's inherent pessimism and brutality presented particularly "censorable" material for the Production Code Administration, not least because of the conflation of violence and sympathy for prisoners as protagonists. At the same time, however, the research shows that during this period the Production Code Administration was unable or unwilling to adhere to its established practices, which led to a loosening of the rules that had been in place previously. All three films thus contributed in varying degrees to breaking on-screen taboos and to a greater inclination towards cinematic realism.

Keywords: prison films, film noir, censorship, Hollywood, Production Code Administration, *Brute Force*, *Caged*, *Riot in Cell Block 11*, Jules Dassin, John Cromwell, Don Siegel

This article focuses on the censorship process of three prison film noirs released after World War II: *Brute Force* (1947), *Caged* (1950), and *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954). Although the postwar US film industry was characterized by a gradual loosening of the self-regulatory mechanisms implemented by the Production Code Administration (PCA), the policies of the Production Code were still in place.[1] In this text, I start from the assumption that the combination of film noir and the prison setting constituted particularly censorable material.

Prison film narratives tend to focus on individuals who are behind bars for breaking the law (unless they have been wrongfully convicted). At the same time, however, the conventions of Hollywood storytelling routinely elicit audience identification or at least sympathy with the main characters.[2] Thus, in the case of prison film noirs, there was a danger that the audience's sympathy would be on the side of the criminal elements. A common motif in prison films is resistance or

[1] See S. Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1968*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London 2003, p. 164; D. Casper, *Postwar Hollywood 1946–1962*, Blackwell, Malden 2007, pp. 122–123; S.C. Biesen, *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen*, Wallflower, London and New York 2018, p. 73.

[2] See M. Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022. On the audience identification with protagonists of prison narratives, see K. Kehrwald, *Prison Movies: Cinema Behind Bars*, Wallflower, London and New York 2017, pp. 7–8.

organized insurrection by prisoners against guards or prison authorities. Moreover, the guards are often portrayed as antagonists. In this way, the authority of the official institution(s) can be undermined. To add to the previous point, prison films are often socially critical in nature – they can point to systemic problems such as erring or malfunctioning justice systems or overcrowding in prisons,[3] which can be again subversive in relation to public institutions. The oppressive and claustrophobic prison environment provides a setting that breeds conflict between individual inmates or between inmates and guards. This may result in increased levels of violence. And finally, a gender-homogeneous prison population (male or female) may be surrounded by the potentiality of homoerotic relationships, however masked or coded.

In what follows, I examine how the producers of three postwar prison film noirs[4] dealt with these challenges. The choice of films is not random: I choose titles that were made during the last tenure of the long-time head of the Production Code Administration, Joseph Breen, and I am interested in whether his position (before being replaced by Geoffrey Shurlock in the latter part of 1954) had changed in any way from previous practice.[5] My approach to Hollywood censorship is particularly inspired by the work of Thomas Doherty, Lea Jacobs, and Sheri Chinen Biesen.[6] In short, I see censorship not as a repressive tool, but as an integral and productive part of the film industry. The purpose of the PCA's work was to assist filmmakers and make sure Hollywood films could be distributed without restrictions and negative publicity in the domestic and international markets. As long-time PCA staffer and Breen's successor, Geoffrey Shurlock, noted, the job of the Hollywood censor was to approve films, not to reject them or put unnecessary obstacles in their way.[7] The censorship/regulatory

[3] On the affinity between prison movies and social problem films, see K. Kehrwald, op. cit., p. 20.

[4] Kevin Kehrwald defines a prison film as one in which "the imagery and effects of incarceration overshadow all other aspects of the film." K. Kehrwald, op. cit., p. 12. *Brute Force*, *Caged*, and *Riot in Cell Block 11* easily fit this basic definition and are in fact listed in Kehrwald's book as examples of the genre. See ibidem, pp. 11–12 (*Riot in Cell Block 11*), 46–55 (*Caged*), and 86 (*Brute Force*). Film noir is a more difficult category to define, not least because it is a label applied retroactively. In this study, I see film noir as a loose cycle of Hollywood films from the 1940s and 1950s that can be characterized by their adherence to contemporary detective and/or crime stories, often rendered with expressionist visual techniques and an existentialist pessimistic tone. For a concise introduction to film noir and the discussion around its status, see, for example, W. Luhr, *Film Noir*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester 2012. The three films analyzed in this article are usually considered by writers on film noir as part of the classic film noir cycle. See, for example, S. Selby, *The Worldwide Film Noir Tradition*, Silk Press, Ames 2013.

[5] However, it must be admitted that the selection of the three films was also driven by pragmatic considerations, specifically the availability of censorship materials in the digital collections of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

[6] S.C. Biesen, op. cit.; T. Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, Columbia University Press, New York 2007; L. Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1991.

[7] Shurlock argued that "we were in the business of granting seals." J.M. Wall, "Interviews with Geoffrey Shurlock," Oral history, Louis B. Mayer Library, American Film Institute, Los Angeles 1970, p. 261.

process was the result of negotiation, and it is this process, replete with concessions from both sides, that is the primary focus of my analysis.

The basic material to which I refer is the text of the Production Code, which, with minor modifications, served as a point of reference for the PCA (and its predecessor, the Studio Relations Committee) since 1930.[8] Under the so-called general principles, the Production Code mandated that "sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin." Further, only "correct standards of life" were to be presented and "law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation." In terms of "particular applications," the following passages seem relevant to the discussion of prison films:

– "Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail."

– "There shall be no scenes of law-enforcing officers dying at the hands of criminals, unless such scenes are absolutely necessary to the plot."

– "Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden." (This category in the PCA's interpretation included various manifestations of homosexuality.)

Perhaps surprisingly, the Code did not specifically address violence. "Brutality and possible gruesomeness" were merely mentioned as "repellent subjects" which warranted a particularly cautious handling on the part of the filmmakers. As Stephen Prince points out, this did not mean, however, that the censors did not pay attention to the representation of violence:

> If it is not named directly, the Code's terminology and particular applications nevertheless point to it. […] the violence in classical Hollywood film is inscribed within categories of reference that are deemed, in the views of the period, to be objectionable—guns in the hands of criminals, gruesome experiments conducted by mad scientists, brutal killings carried out by monsters or mobsters. Protests against the violence in classical Hollywood pictures centered on these referents—gangsters and ghouls, criminals, law-breakers, monsters, and the crimes they perpetrated.[9]

In the text, I trace how the potentially controversial aspects were negotiated between filmmakers and censors and in what form they are represented in the resulting films. To do so, I draw on materials from

[8] I am using the version of the Code that was in force during the period under review. See "The Motion Picture Production Code", https://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php (accessed: 15.12.2023). Various versions of the Production Code are also part of the digital collections of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, https://digitalcollections.oscars.org/ (accessed: 15.12.2023).

[9] S. Prince, op. cit., p. 32. According to Martin Barker, it wasn't until the late 1950s and early 1960s that the violence as a concept with explanatory force emerged. See M. Barker, *Violence Redux*, [in:] *New Hollywood Violence*, ed. S.J. Schneider, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2004, p. 58. His essay provides a cultural studies explanation of the emergence of the discourse on violence and the various political and ideological agendas behind it. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out its relevance for my study, even though my article is less theoretically oriented and approaches the topic more from a historical-analytical perspective.

the Motion Picture Association of America's collection at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Secondary sources are the reactions in the contemporary press, which may indicate the extent to which these problematic aspects were successfully contained or, conversely, remained in the film texts despite the PCA's input. In the case of *Caged*, whose story is set in a women's prison, I also consider the gender dimension and address whether the PCA approached the material with different emphases compared to prison films with predominantly male protagonists.[10]

Brute Force

The earliest of the films selected for analysis is *Brute Force*, produced independently by Mark Hellinger and distributed by Universal Pictures. Robert Patterson's story, developed into a shooting script by Richard Brooks, was inspired by a real-life case in which armed prisoners unsuccessfully attempted to escape from the high-security Alcatraz prison.[11] Five people, including two guards, died during the two-day "Battle of Alcatraz."[12] The film's storyline focuses on a group of convicts at the fictional Westgate Penitentiary who rebel against the inhumane regime imposed by the sadistic chief of security, Captain Munsey. Led by Joe Collins, they hatch a daring escape plan, but Munsey finds out about it with the help of a stool pigeon. This leads to a bloody confrontation that results in the deaths of several prisoners and guards, including Munsey and Collins.

The project was first reviewed by the PCA based on Brooks' script dated December 20, 1946. A week later a reply was sent to producer Hellinger stating that "the basic story seems to meet the requirements of the Production Code," although Joseph Breen added a warning about the possibility of rejection by political censor boards: "Stories of prison breaks have, in the past, met with unfavorable reception in many territories."[13] Despite the generally favorable attitude, the PCA did express several concerns. The most serious offense seemed to be the high number of deaths of guards at the hands of the convicts, which, according to Breen, represented a flagrant violation of the Production Code.[14] However, the script also contained scenes of violence perpetrated by the guards against the prisoners. The PCA urged the film-

[10] Further areas worthy of exploration, which for reasons of scope will only be hinted at, include the historical context of McCarthyism and the influence of the political orientation of the filmmakers on the themes explored and the potential political subversiveness of the films (particularly relevant in the case of the left-leaning director of *Brute Force*, Jules Dassin).

[11] F. Krutnik, "Brute Force", *Brute Force Blu-ray Edition Booklet*, Arrow Films, 2021, p. 15.

[12] For details, see R. Walsh, *The Battle of Alcatraz*, Crime Magazine, 2.12.2013, https://www.crimemagazine.com/battle-alcatraz (accessed: 20.12.2023).

[13] Joseph Breen to Mark Hellinger, December 27, 1946, Brute Force, Production Code Administration Records, MPAA Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (henceforth abbreviated as PCA Records).

[14] As he stated in the letter: "please bear in mind the clause in the Code which forbids the showing of policemen, guards, etc., dying at the hands of criminals." Ibidem.

makers to avoid "any undue emphasis on brutality" in such cases.[15] In the scene where the sadistic Munsey slaps one of the convicts, the PCA demanded that the other guards show their disgust at what was happening. Thus, Munsey's violent behavior was to be presented as a deviation rather than the norm.

The high body count of guards and graphic violence remained major areas of concern when the PCA reviewed the revised screenplay. In a letter dated January 29, 1947, Breen pointed out that the filmmakers should avoid "any undue emphasis on brutality and gruesomeness." Breen was aware that violence was an essential element of the upcoming film and therefore did not seek its complete elimination. Rather, he wanted it to be presented "by suggestions, and not in any detail which might prove offensive."[16] Some of PCA's comments might come across as overly technical, as if the censors were preoccupied with minor details rather than the overall flavor of brutality that surrounds the actions of some of the characters and especially Munsey. For example, during the confrontation between Munsey and Dr. Walters, Breen suggested that Munsey use his fist to strike instead of a paperweight. In another scene, a guard was supposed to strike one of the prisoners only once instead of twice. The most pressing issue in the script continued to be the climactic riot scene, in which the censors counted a total of ten guards killed by convicts. Breen made it clear that none of these scenes (a list of which followed) "could be approved in the finished picture."[17]

During February and March 1947, the screenplay was revised in several places without any further comments from the PCA.[18] Hellinger's cut was previewed to the PCA's officers in May and this led to another exchange between the producer and Breen concerning the brutality of the pivotal scenes.[19] While Hellinger invoked creative freedom, Breen cited his integrity, experience of reviewing thousands of Hollywood films, and his long-standing service to the film industry. To get the PCA's Seal of Approval,[20] Hellinger and his collaborators made a number of concessions, as evidenced by some editing choices, particularly in the final sequence.[21] But the key point is that the film's final cut very much retained the controversial aspects that the PCA had warned about, namely the high degree of on-screen brutality and multiple violent deaths of the guards.

Three sequences in particular stand out in this respect. Early in the story, one of the prisoners, Wilson, is revealed as the informer responsible for the death of another inmate. All the other convicts jointly coordinate brutal revenge, resulting in three inmates brandishing blowtorches surrounding Wilson and forcing him to retreat into

[15] Ibidem.
[16] Joseph Breen to Mark Hellinger, January 29, 1947, Brute Force, PCA Records.
[17] Ibidem.
[18] See the documents from February and March 1947 in Brute Force, PCA Records.
[19] The letters are reprinted in the booklet for the Criterion Collection Blu-ray edition of the film released in 2020.
[20] The certificate dated June 2, 1947, is part of the Brute Force file, PCA Records.
[21] S. Prince, op. cit., p. 168.

a mechanical press, which crushes the man. We do not see the actual conclusion of the action – using a strategy Stephen Prince calls "the spatial displacement,"[22] the camera pans upwards to prevent us from seeing Wilson's body in the machinery – but it is still a very powerful and chilling scene, not least because of the cold and mechanical way the revenge is executed.

The scene in which Munsey beats the convict Louie in his office also has a disturbing effect. The chief of security strips down to his muscle t-shirt for the occasion, arms himself with a truncheon and carries out the entire punishment to the sound of Wagner's *Tannhaüser*. As Stephen Prince points out, "the infliction of pain is bound up with darker currents of twisted sexuality. [Munsey] will find a perverse pleasure in marking the skin of his victim."[23] Although we cannot see the blows themselves, their effect is conveyed by the soundtrack and by the cutaway to the disgusted faces of the guards waiting in the next room. To quote Prince again,

> the scene's depiction of eroticized violence, of a powerful man violating a weaker one, is sufficiently unpleasant as to compensate for the visually elided beating. […] The PCA succeeded in minimizing its overt manifestations: the beating itself is not shown […]. But the emotional and psychological tone of the scene, its aura, retains all of the violence that the camerawork elides—and, arguably, the twisted behavior it suggests is worse and more depraved, is more sinister in conception, than any beating itself could be […].[24]

The violence reaches its greatest intensity in the final escape attempt of Collins and his fellow inmates, which escalates into a violent revolt of the entire prison population. The PCA, in reviewing the final version of the film, counted 19 deaths and many others in the attempted jailbreak.[25] At least five of the dead are guards, which directly contradicts Breen's repeated demand that this aspect should be eliminated. But it is not just the high body count and the overall epic scale of the sequence. The individual scenes are very disturbing in their own right, by virtue of their sheer brutality and explicitness: the stool pigeon who gives away the escape attempt to Munsey is strapped to a mining cart and hurled against the guards equipped with a machine gun; Collins is hit by gunfire and lets out a "cry of rage, pain, and existential anguish" that was, according to Prince, precisely "the kind of vocalized suffering that the PCA had worked to suppress;"[26] and in the final confrontation with Munsey, Collins picks up the body of the much smaller man and throws him down from the watchtower, where dozens of rampaging prisoners rush him. All of this takes place in an atmosphere of utter chaos, with the prison walls engulfed in flames.

[22] Ibidem, p. 208.
[23] Ibidem, p. 167.
[24] Ibidem.
[25] See the "Analysis Chart" for *Brute Force*, Brute Force, PCA Records.
[26] S. Prince, op. cit., p. 171.

If in these cases the PCA proved ineffective (unable or unwilling to enforce stricter compliance with the Production Code), other potentially controversial aspects were not addressed at all. According to staff censor L. Greenhouse's analysis, all prisoners without exception are unsympathetic characters, as are Munsey and the prison warden.[27] But this is a very dubious interpretation. The warden is portrayed as a weakling, unable to restore order in the prison and protect his staff and inmates, while Munsey is shown as a perverted sadist with a thirst for power (his appearance, dictatorial methods and liking for Wagner characterize him as akin to German Nazis known from concentration camp films). Inmates, on the other hand, are rather idealized. They form a tight-knit community and only commit violence against one of their own when someone is guilty of breaking a strict code of honor. In particular, the inmates from cell R17, including Collins, are humanized by obscuring the reasons for their incarceration. Instead, via flashbacks we are given glimpses into their personal lives and relationships with women "on the outside."[28] In a way, then, the film feels more like a POW film than a prison film, and the audiences may wonder what these likeable men have done to be locked up in a high-security facility.

Brute Force's socially subversive potential is reinforced by showing the prison system as highly inefficient. Prisoners live in overcrowded cells and have to endure hard labor and inhumane treatment from Munsey. In one of the opening scenes, two conflicting perspectives on the function of the prison are presented: while the warden and the doctor wish to rehabilitate the inmates, Munsey and McCollum, representing the prison's management, see incarceration as punishment and nothing else. In such an inhospitable environment, the prisoners' revolt may seem justified. If we view the film through the prism of the leftist political inclinations of its director Jules Dassin and screenwriter Richard Brooks, we can see it as a vindication of the revolt of the oppressed against a malevolent institution. The PCA, however, left this aspect unnoticed.[29]

The PCA wholly succeeded only on two counts: in removing the motive of drug trafficking and in eliminating the suggestion of "sexual perversion" by one of the prisoners (the sentence "He's here on a 288" from the first version of the script referred to lewd acts with a minor).[30]

[27] See the "Analysis Chart" for *Brute Force*, Brute Force, PCA Records. The only sympathetic character according to this interpretation was the alcoholic Doctor Walker.

[28] For example, Collins' girlfriend has cancer and is confined to a wheelchair.

[29] The film was released before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings began in the Fall of 1947. It is possible that if it had been completed later, it would have been treated differently by the PCA, but that is speculation on my part. Dassin's career was later heavily influenced by HUAC hearings and the climate of McCarthyism. His name was repeatedly mentioned in connection with the activities of leftist and communist organizations and he was effectively blacklisted when the HUAC interrogations resumed in 1951. See P. Lev, *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen 1950–1959*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 2003, p. 70.

[30] See Breen to Hellinger, December 27, 1946, and Breen to Hellinger, January 29, 1947. For some later commentators, the film still contains the potential to

All in all, it can hardly be disputed that *Brute Force* went further, especially in its depiction of violence and brutality, than most Hollywood productions to date. Film noir historian Eddie Muller argued that the film's "climax displayed the most harrowing violence ever seen on movie screens,"[31] while Stephen Prince called *Brute Force* "a landmark in the expansion of violence in postwar US cinema. The film's myriad acts of violence are depicted with a level of brutality that the PCA could not restrain, and the fiery climax explodes with a degree of rage and nihilism that the crime film in general had not yet begun to tap."[32]

Although it was a commercial success (the film grossed $2.2 million during its first run,[33] a solid result for such a nihilistic film), there was some backlash at the time of its release. In his review for the "New York Times", Bosley Crowther called it "a deliberately brutal film" for those who "have a fancy for violence and rough stuff on the screen."[34] Even more distressed was film and theater producer John Houseman, who complained in the pages of the "Hollywood Quarterly" that *Brute Force* "is a deeply immoral picture" and "a cynical attempt to breathe violent and brutal life into a moribund formula."[35]

There were also problems when distributing the film in some territories, which was always an indication that the PCA was not sufficiently consistent, since one of its tasks was to anticipate the reactions of censorship authorities at home and abroad. Additional changes were made in Pennsylvania and British Columbia, and in Alberta and Australia the film had to be "reconstructed" in a more substantial way by eliminating the most brutal shots (the Alberta cut involved a total of 14 such changes).[36]

Caged

The 1950 Warner Bros. film *Caged*, produced by Jerry Wald and directed by John Cromwell, innovated the genre formula of prison movies by setting the story in a women's prison.[37] The picture explores the brutal realities of a young woman's incarceration and the

read relationships between men as homoerotic. It may take a great deal of imagination to interpret the affection between Collins and another prisoner, Gallagher, in this way, but Munsey's pleasure in sadistic violence inflicted on prisoners may certainly evoke negative stereotypes associated with male-male relationships and latent homosexuality. See R. Dyer, *Homosexuality and Film Noir*, "Jump Cut" 1977, no. 16, pp. 18–21, available also online from https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC16folder/HomosexFilmNoir.html (accessed: 3.01.2024).

[31] E. Muller, *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir*, Running Press, Philadelphia 2021, p. 208.

[32] S. Prince, op. cit., p. 172.

[33] *Top Grossers of 1947*, "Variety", January 7, 1948, p. 63.

[34] B. Crowther, *THE SCREEN; 'Brute Force,' Prison Thriller, With Hume Cronyn Marked as Villain, Bill at Criterion – New Melodrama at Palace*, "New York Times", July 17, 1947, https://www.nytimes.com/1947/07/17/archives/the-screen-brute-force-prison-thriller-with-hume-cronyn-marked-as.html (accessed: 5.01.2024).

[35] J. Houseman, *Violence, 1947: Three Specimens*, "Hollywood Quarterly" 1947, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 63.

[36] See the various reports in Brute Force, PCA Records.

[37] Kevin Kehrwald noted that "movies featuring women in prison date back almost as far as their male counterparts" (that is to the Pre-Code Hollywood era), but "it wasn't until the Cold War era of the 1950s and early 1960s that the subgenre truly began to distinguish itself." K. Kehrwald, op. cit., pp. 44–45.

dehumanizing effects of the penal system as she navigates the harsh environment of a women's prison. As Kehrwald says of the entire cycle, which went on to include such films as *Women's Prison* (1955), *I Want to Live!* (1958), and *House of Women* (1962), "women's prison pictures, with their portrayals of 'fallen' women, failed mothers and sexual 'degenerates', emerged as the ultimate narratives of containment, cautionary tales depicting the consequences of not adhering to the 'virtue of conformity.'" But they also "paradoxically challenged the very condemnations they revealed, making them both complicit in and subversive of the cultural milieu of conformity."[38] As will become apparent, the PCA's censorship process had quite different emphases in the case of *Caged* when compared with *Brute Force*. Violence was not as much of an issue as the threat of various social and sexual transgressions, and the excessive exposure of women's bodies.

The project was first considered based on a screenplay from May 1949, when it was still known as *The Big Cage*. The PCA found the material generally acceptable but identified several causes for concern. For this reason, a meeting between the censors and the filmmakers was held on June 9, with producer Wald, director Cromwell, and screenwriters Virginia Kellogg and Bernard Schoenfeld in attendance. During the meeting, the conditions under which the film could be made were agreed upon. Three aspects were singled out as particularly important. The motif of drug addiction and distribution within the prison premises was to be eliminated and replaced by alcoholism (described in the letter as an "ideal solution"). The conclusion was not meant to suggest that the protagonist of the story, Marie, becomes a prostitute after her release; instead she was to be identified as a "booster" (a pickpocket) working for the "Syndicate." And finally, the PCA dealt with the character of Little Bit (in later versions named Smoochie), who was portrayed by the script as a prostitute. After discussion, the PCA allowed it, but the lines that implied her status were supposed to be limited to two instances and were to be delivered "more on the remorseful, and not so much on the flip or smart aleck, side."[39] This concession alone is evidence of the PCA's changing standards after the war.

In addition, several less significant objections were raised: in several places, actions and lines were to be modified to make the story sound as an indictment of only the corrupt politicians responsible for the "evils of the prison system" and not all legislators; references to venereal disease, abortion, and "sex perversion" were to be eliminated; and one of the characters was not to be characterized as "madam of a house of prostitution."[40]

The revised script of June 23, 1949 was supposed to deal with these criticisms, but it did so only in part: the "dope" motif associated

[38] Ibidem, p. 46.
[39] Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, June 10, 1949, Caged, PCA Records.
[40] Ibidem.

with one of the characters was retained, as was the mention of abortion in the dialogue. The censors pointed both out in their report. They also began to take more notice of the characters' clothing: in addition to the obligatory warning that "intimate parts of the body – specifically, the breasts of women – be fully covered at all times," they urged caution in scenes in which female inmates appear in nightgowns, and warned that viewers must not see a bra in any shot. They further asked the filmmakers to avoid "undue gruesomeness" in the scene of the killing of the sadistic matron Harper. However, violence does not play a major role in *Caged*, and the PCA was more concerned with the overall moral of the story. In this context, the foreword (unfortunately of unknown wording) seemed undesirable, as it gave "the impression that the evils presented in this story are more or less universal and commonplace."[41]

Several contentious points remained until the final version of the script was considered by the PCA on 22 July. Despite previous warnings, the screenwriters continued to describe one of the characters as a drug addict, with the censors insisting that this motif be replaced with alcohol. Caution was required in the childbirth scene, where audiences were not allowed to see the lower part of Marie's body, and especially in the women's washroom scenes, where the PCA deemed it unacceptable for a woman to shower in the presence of other convicts. The PCA also requested photographs of the pregnant Marie's costumes to assess whether there was anything offensive about them.[42] I would argue that the PCA's approach to costuming presents a case of double standard. There are several scenes in *Brute Force* where we see male characters (including Burt Lancaster's Joe Collins) stripped to the waist. Moreover, in the case of Munsey, the action of undressing is associated with violence directed at the convicts, giving it a sexualized twist. The PCA offered no comments on that. On the contrary, even with this film where women appear only in brief flashbacks, the censors were exclusively concerned with the costumes of female characters.[43]

It was the issue of suggested female nudity that led the PCA to withhold the Seal of Approval after seeing the preview cut of *Caged* in October. Censors protested the "leg shot" which suggested that "women in the prison are taking a shower without benefit of any privacy."[44] The shot was to be shortened and only then was the PCA prepared to award its certificate. However, the PCA showed surprising laxity in not requiring the final version to be reviewed and trusting entirely in the judgement of the filmmakers.[45]

[41] Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, June 30, 1949, Caged, PCA Records.
[42] Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, July 22, 1949, Caged, PCA Records.
[43] Breen to Hellinger, December 27, 1946.
[44] Memo from Jack Vizzard, October 14, 1949, Caged, PCA Records.
[45] The certificate was issued on October 18, 1949, "with the understanding that the first scene, establishing that the girls are taking a shower, has been shortened, and that the pan shot at the end of the scene has been blown up so as to avoid too great a display of nudity." See the certificate issued by Joseph Breen, October 18, 1949, Caged, PCA Records.

The many criticisms notwithstanding, overall, the film seems to have met with little resistance from the PCA.[46] The shower scene is a good example of this: regardless of whether the opening shot of the sequence was cut by a few seconds, the "leg shot" remained, and the context of the entire scene makes it quite clear that the women are showering together without the "benefit of privacy." Nor has the PCA succeeded in eradicating suggestions of lesbianism. When Marie is moved from mandatory quarantine to the prison itself, she receives an introduction from the sympathetic superintendent:

> You'll find all kinds of women in here, just as you would outside. […] First offenders like you, Marie, are our greatest concern. Unfortunately, they have to be crowded in with more experienced women simply because we haven't more space. And you'll be with such women. Of course, I want you to have friends, all of us need an outlet for affection. But no prison is a normal place.

As Richard Barrios pointed out, an earlier version of the screenplay was indeed more direct about the "dangers" of prison life for Marie:

> First offenders like you, Marie, are our greatest concern. Unfortunately, they have to be crowded in with three-time losers and lifers simply because we haven't more space. You'll be with such women. Watch out for them. Many things go on here that are unhealthy. All of us have to have some outlet for affection. I don't mind girls making friends, but keep it wholesome. Do you understand what I mean? (Marie nods, embarrassed).[47]

Despite the softening of the language, it takes no great imagination to guess the true meaning behind the superintendent's warning, especially her references to "an outlet for affection" and to no prison being "a normal place." The potentiality of lesbian sexual relations is further supported by the characterization of several characters, in particular, the matron Harper, whose interest in the same sex is, like Munsey's in *Brute Force*, combined with sadism and a penchant for convict humiliation; Kitty, whom Barrios describes as "butch from the word go, with a more feminine girlfriend who follows her everywhere;"[48] and another convict Elvira Parker who buys the affections of the other inmates in exchange for gifts (and who instructs Marie that if she wants real rhinestones, all she needs to do is "change your type").[49]

But perhaps the film's greatest subversion lies in the "moral of the story." As the PCA's synopsis states, "this is a story of how a simple sensitive girl of nineteen is sent to a women's prison, and of how the harsh

[46] Following PCA's approval, minor alterations and eliminations were made in some states. In Ohio, the film had to be introduced by a title card to emphasize that it was a fictional story. See various documents in the file Caged, PCA Records.

[47] R. Barrios, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*, Routledge, New York and London 2003, p. 226.

[48] Ibidem.

[49] According to some online sources, Bette Davis turned down a role in *Caged* because she did not wish to star in "a dyke movie." See for example C. Whiteley, *Caged (1950)*, Hollywood's Golden Age, 2010–23, https://www.hollywoodsgoldenage.com/movies/caged.html (accessed: 12.01.2024).

treatment she receives changes her into a hard-faced, bitter woman."[50] *Caged* clearly shows the malfunction of the prison system, which cannot rehabilitate female prisoners and, on the contrary, transforms even an essentially innocent girl like Marie into a hardened criminal. Marie gets parole at the end and joins the crime syndicate as a professional pickpocket. The superintendent, perhaps the only positive character in the film (but still one who can do nothing about the flaws in the system), instructs her assistant at the end that Marie's file should be kept active: "She'll be back," she says with certainty. These last words of the film have an ambiguous effect: on the one hand, they make it clear that Marie will be punished for her crimes, but on the other, they accentuate even more strongly the failure of the whole system.

The film grossed $1.5 million, considerably less than *Brute Force*, which, in addition to the bleak subject matter, may be due to the absence of a star-studded cast (the best-known names were Eleanor Parker as Marie Allen and Agnes Moorehead as the superintendent).[51] Critics mostly praised the poignancy of the film's social commentary and its raw treatment, which was influenced by the personal experience of screenwriter Virginia Kellogg, who spent several weeks in four US prisons as part of her "research."[52] But some commentators saw the film as too gloomy. For example, a review in *Film Bulletin* warned moviegoers that "it never permits a note of lightness to enter the dismal atmosphere, and it leaves the audience in a depressive state."[53] Bosley Crowther in the "New York Times" disagreed with the majority opinion that the film achieves a high degree of realism ("there is much in 'Caged' that rings true, but unfortunately there is too much that appears to be contrived"), but in particular he could not accept the way the script presented the female inmates and their treatment by the penal system: "it does not necessarily follow, as the picture insists, that prisons breed hardened criminals. In this respect, we venture to say that the Warner Brothers and Miss Kellogg have tipped the scales of justice."[54] Thus, the PCA passed a film that, at least according to some, showed criminals as victims and the US court and prison system as the real culprits which hardly seems consistent with the tenets of the Production Code.

Riot in Cell Block 11

Riot in Cell Block 11 is in many ways similar to *Brute Force*: it takes place in a men's prison and follows the inmates' concentrated efforts to resist the inhumane conditions. Unlike Dassin's film, however, the critique is not centered on one character, the corrupt chief of security, but is more generalized. One of the impulses for making the film was

[50] "Caged – Analysis of Film Content, Part Eight – Cast of Characters and Synopsis", Caged, PCA Records.
[51] *Caged* was listed as number 74 on *Variety*'s list of top grossing films for 1950. See *Top-Grosses of 1950*, "Variety", January 3, 1951, p. 58.
[52] B. Crowther, *Bleak Picture of a Women's Prison*, "New York Times", May 20, 1950, https://www.nytimes.com/1950/05/20/archives/bleak-picture-of-a-womens-prison.html (accessed: 12.01.2024).
[53] *'Caged' Stark, Gripping Prison Film Is Highly Exploitable*, "Film Bulletin", May 8, 1950, p. 10.
[54] B. Crowther, *Bleak Picture…*

producer Walter Wanger's personal experience of imprisonment for assaulting the alleged lover of his wife, actress Joan Bennett. Wanger served ninety-eight days of his four-month sentence at Castaic Honor Farm and upon his return decided to make a film that would show the failings in the US prison system.[55] In the picture, Wanger emphasized a realistic approach to the topic, which was evident in the use of newsreel footage, the absence of stars in the lead roles, and the filming of some of the interiors in the abandoned block at Folsom Prison.[56]

The screenplay for the film, following the course of a violent riot in an unnamed prison facility, was first reviewed by the PCA in June 1953. The story was found acceptable by Breen, but the script contained several problematic elements that became the subject of a personal meeting between Wanger and the censors. At a conference held on June 12, 1953, it was agreed that "all references to perverts and homosexuals" and offensive words such as "hell" and "damned" would be eliminated. The PCA further warned against the level of violence indicated by the script: scenes of protest and destruction were to be "held to the barest minimum consistent with the proper telling of the story" and violence was to be toned down and ideally kept off-screen. A sensitive point of contention was the depiction of toilet bowls: Wanger wanted to show them as standard equipment in the cells as part of the overall move towards authenticity, but the PCA had a long-standing rule forbidding this. The last major comment was directed at the conclusion, which suggested that while the prisoners had won, any concessions achieved were nullified by the decision of the governor. The PCA did not like the idea that such a high-ranking authority should not keep a promise, which could undermine moviegoers' confidence in public institutions.[57]

Wanger was reticent at best in implementing changes based on PCA's first round of comments. After reading the revised script, Breen was concerned to find that it "still reflects an intention to show toilet bowls as part of the cell equipment," arguing that "there are certain areas of realism which are not proper subject matter for the entertainment screen. Toilets, and other visual and oral references to the bodily functions which they serve, very definitely fit into this area." The resulting film does show a toilet in one of the opening shots, documenting not only Wanger's determination to fulfill his creative vision, but also the PCA's declining authority during this period. Nor did the brutality seem to have been toned down from the previous version of the script. The PCA again urged that the violence should not be too gruesome and, where possible, should be indicated "out of scene."[58]

[55] For more about the film's production history, see M. Bernstein, *Walter Wanger: Hollywood Independent*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 2000, pp. 281–301.

[56] Ibidem.

[57] Joseph Breen to Lorene Buntrock, June 17, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[58] Joseph Breen to Lorene Buntrock, July 9, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records. In a later letter we can see how the PCA conceptualized permissible on-screen violence. In the scene where one prisoner is beating another, Breen suggested: "One or two blows – both indicated out of scene – would suffice; the close-up of Carnie slamming a chain over Al's head

In the following weeks, in addition to violence, audience sympathy was the main issue. The PCA correctly interpreted that Wanger planned to portray the convicts as legitimately protesting a flawed system. Breen therefore urged the producer to take "great care […] to present the prison guards in as humane a light as possible." From this perspective, in addition to excessively gruesome scenes of violence perpetrated by guards against prisoners, the ending appeared to be problematic because it "definitely throws sympathy to the side of the criminals as opposed to constituted authority, and the administration of justice."[59] Wanger eventually agreed to remove the lines in which Dunn, the defeated leader of the riot, says "There'll be another riot" and "Next time we'll do it Carnie's way,"[60] referring to the psychopathic inmate who advocated for an uncompromisingly violent takeover of the prison without the benefit of negotiation with authorities. These minor changes, however, do not radically change the perception of the overall trajectory of the story as dramatized through action. In the final film, the audience's allegiance is most likely towards the prisoners, as it becomes clear that the government has broken all promises to change their unacceptable living conditions for the better. While the riot is shown to have failed and authority prevailed, this only has the potential to reinforce the film's social-critical tone and the sense that injustice triumphed.

The film went into production in mid-August and entered post-production in early September 1953. As the preview screening before PCA members approached, Wanger – anticipating resistance – wrote a personal letter to one of the censors, Jack Vizzard. In it, he emphasized that the film was made "honestly and courageously" as a serious social statement and did not in any way abuse or exploit sex, comedy, or exaggerated cruelty. Wanger also highlighted that the film was made with the cooperation of Director of Correction Richard McGee and Folsom Prison's warden Robert Heinze: "Naturally they are giving us this support because they are anxious to see a seriously researched picture produced, as the prison situation is acute in this country and has so many implications bearing on our national welfare as well as its penal problems." The producer referred to his own prison experience, detailed research on the subject and consultations with experts, and requested that Vizzard "assign a man to read and acquaint himself with the facts on this penal problem as set forth by the authorities so that our picture will be judged the proper way, based on proper thinking and not on rules."[61] In other words, Wanger used informal pressure and an appeal to the delicate nature of his film and

should be deleted." Joseph Breen to Lorene Buntrock, August 14, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[59] Joseph Breen to Lorene Buntrock, July 21, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[60] Breen to Buntrock, August 14, 1953, PCA Records.

[61] Walter Wanger to Jack Vizzard, September 4, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

its alleged social relevance to negotiate an exception to the usual PCA procedures.[62]

It is unclear from the documents what reaction Wanger's letter elicited and whether the film received special treatment. What is certain is that *Riot in Cell Block 11* was approved on September 25, 1953 with no further demands from the PCA – that is, with the shot of the toilet bowl intact, high level of violence, and an ambivalent ending that offers no resolution and portrays official institutions as unreliable.[63] A certain degree of the censors' cluelessness is evident in the final report, where the question "Does the story tend to enlist the sympathy of the audience for the criminal(s)?" is answered with "both yes and no."[64]

The film ended up a resounding commercial success (according to Bernstein, it made a profit of $300,000 for the studio[65]) and its release was not accompanied by the controversy of *Brute Force* seven years earlier. The conservative trade journal "Harrison's Reports" called it "unobjectionable for the family but best suited for adults"[66] and the review in "Motion Picture Daily" referred to it as a "clean" melodrama "suitable for all types of theatres and audiences."[67] That the combination of "explosive" material (in the words of the "New York Times"[68]) with a naturalistic treatment and an appeal aimed at the moviegoing public did not meet with greater resistance from the PCA, the critics or (so it seems) the public is a sign of how conditions in US society and the film industry had changed in the decade since the end of World War II.

Conclusions

The three case studies in this article demonstrate that the postwar liberalization of Hollywood film content described by Drew Casper, for example,[69] took place not in spite of but with the assistance or complicity of the PCA. If the success of the PCA after its inauguration in 1934 resulted from its ability to integrate self-censorship into the overall narrative and cumulatively shape the moral implications in a desired direction,[70] this changed after the war, at least in the films examined: Breen's office was simply no longer able or willing to enforce the rules of the Production Code to the letter. In October 1954, only a few months

[62] Wanger enclosed two printed pamphlets with the letter: "A Statement Concerning Causes, Preventive Measures and Methods of Controlling PRISON RIOTS & DISTURBANCES" published by the Committee on Riots and "U.S. Prisons: How Well Do They Protect Us?" published by the Club and Educational Bureau. Both are part of the file Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[63] There followed only a minor adjustment in the scene with the "so-called incendiary bomb", which was, according to Breen, too detailed and might lead to imitation by would-be criminals. Joseph Breen to Lorene Buntrock, October 16, 1953, Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[64] "Riot in Cell Block 11 – Analysis of Film Content, Part Five – Crime," Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[65] M. Bernstein, op. cit., p. 300.

[66] See the undated report "Riot in Cell Block 11 (AA)", Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[67] *Riot in Cell Block 11*, "Motion Picture Daily", February 8, 1954, part of the file Riot in Cell Block 11, PCA Records.

[68] A.W. *At the Mayfair*, "New York Times", February 19, 1954, https://www.nytimes.com/1954/02/19/archives/at-the-mayfair.html (accessed: 25.01.2024).

[69] D. Casper, op. cit., p. 121.

[70] See L. Jacobs, op. cit., p. 119.

after the release of *Riot in Cell Block 11*, Joseph Breen stepped down as head of the PCA – according to Thomas Doherty, among other things because of the weakening of his influence[71] – and was replaced by Geoffrey Shurlock, who continued the gradual liberalization begun after the war.

The production histories of *Brute Force*, *Caged*, and *Riot in Cell Block 11* – all potentially controversial in nature – show how attitudes toward violence, sex, and more generally toward various social transgressions, altered after the war. The moral message of these films is profoundly ambivalent, which contributed to the maturation of US cinema by offering serious social statements alongside straightforward entertainment. The approval processes described above show that Breen's office was more concerned with details than with the overall narrative trajectory and moral imperatives: in *Brute Force* it was the mechanics of violence (number of slaps, for instance) instead of the overall flavor of brutality; in *Caged* the motif of drug addiction and suggested nudity; in *Riot in Cell Block 11* the depiction of toilet bowls; and in all three the clothing of female characters, even though women are almost absent from the narratives of two of them. For filmmakers, this approach was more convenient because it allowed them to respond to audience demands for more novel and daring themes and, at the same time, the emphasis on detail rather than the overall story made it easier to make changes, although even there, as the examples examined show, filmmakers were allowed significant concessions: despite initial objections, PCA allowed for an unprecedented level of violence against prison guards in *Brute Force*, the explicit characterization of one of the characters in *Caged* as a prostitute, and the representation of toilet bowls in *Riot in Cell Block 11*, which were all elements that had been previously considered inconceivable in mainstream Hollywood fare.

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