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Panorama of Western State Penitentiary

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Structured by a series of panoramic shots of Western State Penitentiary in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, this video essay historicizes and deconstructs the gleeful partnership between prison and moving image media.

Creator's Statement

"Panorama of Western State Penitentiary" problematizes the cinematic pleasures of carceral moving images by concentrating on a contemporary prison site of intensive media production. It develops a location-based critique out of the visible and hidden cinematic histories of an abandoned carceral site in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Griffiths 2016: 138). By combining excerpts of early cinema, classical Hollywood, vlog footage, current news reportage, and my own on-site footage, this video essay remixes the cinematography conventions of early and contemporary moving images to suggest that prisons, as Anne Kaun and Fredrick Stiernstedt (2023: 7) have argued, are a form of media in and of themselves.

Influenced by Harun Farocki's *Gefängnisbilder* (2000) and taking its title and structuring formal mechanism from Edwin S. Porter's *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901), this video builds on panning shots of its titular penitentiary. The historical poetics of shooting prisons with motion picture cameras begin with the panning shot. As Kristen Whissel writes, Porter filmed "a panorama of the prison that aligns film audiences with a point of view similar to the one available to tourists who arrived at the prison on the railway line visible within the frame, suggesting the proximate distance of those spectators who journeyed to the prison" (2008: 154). The panning shot facilitates a gaze that is both touristic and worshipful, producing a sense of awe-inspiring scale by suggesting that the prison is too large and powerful to be contained within a single frame. Through this form of movement and framing, cinema participates in what Michael Welch terms "penal modernity" and its "various

techniques of positioning intended to establish certain perspectives and perceptions" of the prison (2015: 1–25).

In this sense, the video essay addresses what Marcus Harmes, Barbara Harmes, and Meredith Harmes describe as "the capacity for sites of incarceration to provide carnivalesque thrills, prurient observation, and delight in the torments of others" (2020: 4). By centering the panning shot, it flirts with but does not embrace the synonymity of optical regimes between the panorama and the panopticon, which Michel Foucault famously argued "arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately" (1995: 200). Yet as visual media grew in tandem with carceral modernity, other formats, aesthetics, and camera movements began to characterize the prison. For instance, Patrick Keating (2019: 117) has argued that tracking "seriality" shots, whereby a dollying camera emphasizes repetition from cell to cell, are a particularly fecund cinematic expression of carceral modernity. Thus, the video essay expands from its anchoring panning shots to embrace an elastic notion of panorama. Intermingled with the handheld video blog aesthetics of the YouTube age, the reportorial banality of Action 4 news, the muddy digital Netflix look of contemporary serial production, and repurposed drone aesthetics, the panning camera works to produce a haunting palimpsest of moving images and prison.

Intentionally missing from this picture are the bodies and voices of the incarcerated themselves. This choice emerged from a chance encounter with someone formerly incarcerated in Western State Penitentiary. A person approached me as I filmed a television production crew at work, revealing that they had spent time behind the prison's walls but refusing to elaborate and laughing at the prospect of fictional media representing their experiences. Pantomimed through acting and speculated over by vloggers and news reporters, incarcerated people are not actually seen despite their representation. In this way, the images produced at this prison do not, as Foucault argues of the Panopticon, "reverse the principle of the dungeon" (1995: 200) by rendering the imprisoned subject hyper-visible. Martine Beugnet (2022) has compellingly argued that the failure of the Panopticon as an ideal model of carceral control does not lessen the relevance of Foucault's theories for contemporary prison-centered visual media. Nevertheless, the testimony of the man I met suggests that moving images made at this prison do not allow us to "see constantly and to recognize immediately" those incarcerated. Instead, they structure a spatial and temporal arrangement of misrecognition and elision wherein the imprisoned hover in a hauntological and phantasmatic territory.

Sound further complicates panopticism, overtaking the strict frame of the camera and prison's visual arrangements. It is more often a terrain of resistance than vision in carceral media (cf. Boonin-Vail 2023). The video essay's soundtrack consists of train

noise, bird song, and the muttered shouts of a film crew, all recorded at Western State Penitentiary. Layered atop each other, this carceral cinematic ambience reinforces yet undermines the essay's images. Blithe insistences from YouTubers and film office bureaucrats that this prison is "amazing" and "incredible" are shot through with the screeching rails and menacing hum of prison space. As we hear the quotidian laboring sounds and dialogues of a television crew under images of prison walls, we come to understand prison as a mediated cultural production. Simultaneously inviting and punishing our fascinated gaze, "Panorama of Western State Penitentiary" is intended to ask the viewer why we enjoy looking at prisons through our screens.

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Biography

Eli Boonin-Vail is a Lecturer at the University at Albany, where he directs the program in film studies. His work focuses on American cinemas, Hollywood and independent, in their relationship to incarceration. This emphasis on the carceral entails research into

collaborations between the studio system and the Prison Industrial Complex, as well as into how the political economy wrought by mass incarceration affects and can be seen in independent filmmaking. His work can be found in the peer-reviewed journals *Animation Studies*, *Inks*, *Film Criticism*, *French Screen Studies*, *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Music, Sound, and The Moving Image*, and in the edited collection *Desegregating Comics: Debating Blackness in Early Comics, 1900–1960* (Rutgers University Press, ed. Qiana Whitted, 2023). His videographic research has previously appeared in *In Media Res*.

Review by Martine Beugnet, Université de Paris Cité

This video essay stems from a highly promising proposition: to explore the concurrent emergence and banalization of the panoramic shot with cinematic records of prison sites. On the one hand, the panorama and panoramic shot promise access to an expansive view of one's surroundings. On the other, the prison not only curtails one's vision to a limited, fenced, outlook onto a strictly enclosed space, but it turns those who are locked in into objects of a surveilling gaze. While such issues are implicit in the video essay, the focus is in on the forms of "dark tourism" that abandoned sites, such as prisons, attract.

The video essay starts with beginning of the century archival material that underline the parallel development of film circulation with the establishment of city-based penitentiary institutions. It continues with a montage of extracts of television shows that testify to the fascination for, as well as rejection of, what the site stands for. On the one hand, following its closure as a working prison, extensive use of the Western State Penitentiary as a shooting location has been made for film and television, with producers praising its spectacular, cinematic qualities. On the other, interviewees acknowledge the local population's wish that the prison be demolished and the site built over.

Most disconcerting however, are the extracts from YouTube channels dedicated to so-called "dark tourism." The video essay includes a long excerpt filmed by a group of designer-clad young photographers and video-makers who marvel at the visually spectacular potential of the place. Through its (deliberately ambiguous) use of captions, the video essay stresses the obscene dimension of the show: its creators wander through the place with what appears like a complete unawareness of the combination of voyeurism and narcissism entailed by their use of the site.

Most intriguingly however, by hovering in the shadows of an ongoing shooting, Eli Boonin-Vail does not exclude himself from a similarly ambivalent dynamic, at the cross between the critical and the voyeuristic. At the same time, there is no effort at

aestheticizing the material, whether it is found-footage or purpose-filmed images. Rather, the video essay makes a point of establishing itself as a visual bricolage, complete with unsteady pans and "dirty-looking," low-definition shots and extracts. Nor is there any attempt at conjuring up the presence of former inhabitants of the place—a choice the author of the essay eloquently justifies in his accompanying statement, suggesting that the notion of the panoramic always is, somehow, synonymous with omission.

Review by Alison Griffiths, Baruch College, The City University of New York and the CUNY Graduate Center

Eli Boonin-Vail's evocative video essay "Panorama of Western State Penitentiary" opens with a shot of water, a not unfamiliar site for those incarcerated at another famous New York prison, Sing Sing, aka the "Big House," located on the banks of the bucolic Hudson River in Ossining and cleaved by the north-south tracks of Amtrak, Metro North, and freight trains. Like Western State Penitentiary, the Sing Sing location also includes an architectural relic, the original, abandoned prison cell block that was built in 1826, although Sing Sing still operates as a maximum-security facility. But the river is a fleeting image in Boonin-Vail's peripatetic video essay. The ambient soundscape accompanying the slow pan right, including wind, birds, and a male voice hollering "here we go" leads to the action, a film crew shooting a local news story about Western State Penitentiary's newsworthiness as a liminal space haunted by its past and reimagined in the present. Boonin-Vail's video essay creatively evokes the lure of the prison and its remediation across multiple media forms and time frames, and how the panoramic shot, complemented these days by ubiquitous drone footage, has become synonymous with the carceral imagination.

Historicizing the dispositif of the prison film and tracing it to Edison's gruesome 1901 reenactment *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (1901), a cinematic spectacle that fabricated the idea of electrocution as a normalized and sanitized method of execution, Boonin-Vail's video essay probes some of the most urgent questions about the politics and ethics of carceral representation: What is it we think we see and learn when we look at prisons on screen, and why are they considered as newsworthy monuments to the carceral institutions of the racist prison industrial complex? Through an eclectic range of found and original footage and words superimposed on the screen, Boonin-Vail juxtaposes sound and image to powerfully deconstruct the most enigmatic of spaces, suggesting that our age-old desire to penetrate disused former penitentiaries and use them as backdrops for carceral fantasies is both instrumental—a "use them

'til you lose them" mentality—and pathological, a dystopic fascination with stories of punishment, what one YouTuber featured in the essay describes as gaining access to "twenty-four acres of nothing but jail."

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