

'There is more than one sort of prison, Captain': A popular criminology of prisons and penal regimes in *Star Wars*

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Abstract

In this paper we emphasise how science fiction, as a projection of the possible, can forewarn of dystopic dangers in emergent and future penal regimes. In this popular criminology we explore three archetypes of the prison as they have appeared across the *Star Wars* franchise: the panopticon prison; the labour camp; and the smart prison. The panopticon prison of the Galactic Republic invokes reflective nostalgia; prompting critical discussion of the deficiencies of the modern prison. Under the Galactic Empire prisons become labour camps, recalling the horrors of the Gulag as violent and cruel manifestations of underpinning ideology. Whilst the fall of the Galactic Empire signalled a return to governance based on democratic values, the representation of the smart prison in the New Republic continues to resonate as a techno-Gulag, reading as an allegory for a deeper crisis of liberal democracy. Analysed as such, prisons in *Star Wars* exist at the intersection of the past, present and possible futures of penal regimes, and in our current political climate can be a resource for resistance to technological trends and dystopic dangers. *Star Wars*, we conclude, and science fiction more broadly, is well-positioned to inform a radical re-imagining of future prisons and penal regimes.

Keywords

penological imagination, popular criminology, prisons, science fiction, *Star Wars*

Introduction

Radical penal reform requires bold acts of imagination that blur, bend and break the boundaries of what seems possible in the world around us. This is why new voices in prison abolition highlight how the practice and process of creating fiction, including science fiction, can help to challenge

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the complex ontology of crime and legal processes of punishment (Crockett Thomas, 2022). Such voices join a rich seam in penal scholarship. For Nellis (2006), for example, the penal imagery generated in science fiction can be understood as a projection of the possible. We concur with this view, emphasising how the prison in science fiction can serve to critique contemporary punishment and forewarn of the dystopic dangers in both emergent and future penal politics and practice. In doing so, we suggest that science fiction provides an insightful lens through which to consider the radical re-imagination of penal regimes, attuning us to both possibilities and pitfalls. To do so, we explore representations of the prison in one of the most successful science fiction franchises of all time: *Star Wars*.

Esterich (2021) recently remarked that beyond the superficial simplicity of *Star Wars* this franchise, as a cultural product, reflects our own world and thus merits serious critical examination. Subsequent studies have signalled how the *Star Wars* universe – incorporating the space regions, planets, people, places, objects, histories and events, that give form, substance and life to the stories told in this galaxy far, far away – is replete and symbolically imbued with the discourses of crime, justice and punishment (see Atkinson, 2022, 2023). Concurring with Esterich's (2021) assessment our paper extends the critical gaze further by undertaking a popular criminology of the relationship between science fiction and the penal imagination. In our view, *Star Wars* presents a compelling space to apply popular criminology and bridge the gap between the speculation of science fiction and the realities of contemporary punishment. In short, we contend that popular criminology can be an insightful conceptual approach from which to make sense of the diversity of prisons and penal regimes in *Star Wars* and, further, that such depictions can inform a re-imagining of contemporary and future prisons and penal regimes.

This paper is organised into five sections. The first section outlines the key tenets of popular criminology and why they should be applied to penological representations in the *Star Wars* universe. Second, there is a short summary of the research design. Following this, the third section summarises the relevant periods of galactic governance and their underpinning politics in the *Star Wars* universe. The paper then progresses in its fourth section to present prisons in *Star Wars* thematically; considering the panoptic prison, the labour camp, the smart prison and their intersection. The paper concludes with a broader discussion about science fiction and its relevance to the penological and political challenges of our own times. While the imaginative renderings of science fiction are not predictive, we again follow Nellis (2006) in suggesting that they should be taken seriously as depictions that 'inform, stimulate and constrain our mental image of what could happen' (p. 10). Given the sustained global success and cultural impact of *Star Wars* across almost five decades the depictions of prisons and penal regimes therein, perhaps more than any other science fiction or multimedia franchise, merit serious critical examination and popular criminological inquiry.

A popular criminology of *Star Wars*

From the emergence of popular criminology in the early to mid-2000s onwards, cinema and television, despite their status as mainstays of popular culture, were recognised as relatively under-explored sites of criminological inquiry (Rafter, 2000, 2007; Rafter and Brown, 2011). These cultural sites provide a map of expressions about crime, its causes, its consequences and to how such transgressions should be responded. The 'Netflix effect' (McDonald and Smith-Rosey, 2016)

that transformed the media landscape in the period since the emergence of popular criminology disrupted established models of production and consumption in both cinema and television. The rise of Netflix has only compounded the popularity of depictions of crime and justice across a range of genres; from the true crime documentary series *Making a Murderer* (Kennedy, 2018; LaChance and Kaplan, 2020; Larke-Walsh, 2021) and prison-centred comedy-drama *Orange is the New Black* (Enck and Morrissey, 2015; Silverman and Ryalls, 2016) to more conventional crime dramas such as *Mindhunter* (Byers and Collins, 2022; McFadden, 2022; Smith, 2022) and *Narcos* (Goyes and Franko, 2022). Streaming platforms – including Netflix, but now extending to a wide array of technology and media companies that provide video-on-demand and often produce such content – have thus brought an array of such representations, across multiple genres, directly into our homes and onto our media devices. These on-screen depictions of crime and justice in the streaming age are a window into public fascinations and everyday sensibilities, refracting the politics of these issues and resonating with a wide range of audiences. In this streaming age, contemporary representations of the prison we contend, present particularly germane ground for popular criminological inquiry.

Fictional representations of the prison have been common across literature, television, cinema and video games, and the significance of such depictions has been recognised in existing scholarship (Chibnall, 2006; King and Maruna, 2006; Jarvis, 2006; Jewkes, 2006; Levan et al, 2020; Mason, 2003, 2006). Prisons are perhaps more prevalent here than any other penalty: they are a familiar setting in literature; they are cliché cinematic devices ('the prison break'); and they are the stage for high stakes television drama (Simon and Sparks, 2013). Our analysis that follows in this article acknowledges Wakeman's (2021) popular criminological project that explored punishment in the television fantasy series *Game of Thrones* as a reflection of contemporary penal practices. Wakeman (2021) concluded his project with a call for further critical debate on punishment and society as they are (re)presented in popular culture,

'There is a wealth of criminologically significant media out there just waiting to be discovered, read, and critically dissected by criminologists interested in thinking differently about their worlds.' (p. 19).

Representations of the prison in science fiction, we argue, similarly reveal contemporary concerns and may also contain the coordinates for understanding future penal systems. In his consideration of the cultural significance of dystopic penal imagery in American science fiction cinema, Nellis (2006) wrote:

'Whilst I will take for granted that such movies – like science fiction generally – are often an oblique, and sometimes satirical, commentary on the social context which spawned them, I will also suggest that they can legitimately be taken at face value, as projections of possible, if not necessary probable or plausible, futures.' (p. 210).

Across all of its manifestations science fiction is an act of imagining, and in doing so it can bring to life new penal landscapes and future worlds where alternative forms of control and discipline prevail. Unpacking the power of such contributions should form a central concern for any popular criminology, and the *Star Wars* presents perhaps the foremost opportunity for such an analysis.

Following the first projection in cinemas of 1977's *Star Wars*, the Star Wars franchise became, and has remained, a pop culture phenomenon.¹ Today, the requirement for a popular criminological encounter with Star Wars is particularly pressing given developments in recent years. In 2012 the company that produced Star Wars, Lucasfilm, was acquired by The Walt Disney Company for a fee of over \$4 billion (USD). Disney announced, and subsequently delivered upon, plans to expand the franchise through a slew of new cinematic releases: from 2015's *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* to 2019's *Star Wars: Episode IX – The Rise of Skywalker*. The expansion of the Star Wars universe more recently, however, has occurred not through content released in the cinema, but on the home streaming service Disney+. Importantly, representations of prisons and punishment, already prevalent in Star Wars, have deepened during the Disney era. Such penal concerns were disclosed in this new period of Star Wars storytelling in 2016's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. *Rogue One* depicted, amongst other characters, a spiritual warrior named Chirrut Îmwe. Following imprisonment by insurgents Îmwe remarked to his fellow crew member, 'There is more than one sort of prison, Captain'. Whilst Îmwe was referring to the impact of the psychological trauma experienced by his crewmate, Captain Cassian Andor, his comment prompts a consideration of the plurality of prisons and penal regimes across this fictional universe.

Research design

Recent criminological encounters with the Star Wars universe (Atkinson, 2022, 2023) have deployed the tools of multimodal critical discourse analysis, engaging an array of canonical content across both cinema and television to explore the extent to which they have been both produced by and reproduce dominant ideologies and power structures in society. The promise of this multimodal approach to inform a popular criminology of penal regimes in Star Wars finds support in existing scholarship on the intersection of culture and punishment in contemporary society. For Brown (2009), for example,

'In American popular culture, the work of penal representation as a formula for building narratives of punishment perhaps begins at the cinema but ends at an infinite number of points across social life, where image and practice blur. In many of these settings, we see the prison through a deeply structured cinematic legacy with specific tendencies, long-standing conventions, and its own cinematic vocabulary.' (p. 58).

In practice, the focus of our paper is the analysis of prisons 'on-screen', but supplemented at key points by other Star Wars canonical media that have deepened or developed such representations. This methodological approach, engaging with the multiple texts and diverse media across the franchise, follows recent approaches in research on Star Wars and its cultural impact (Kempshall, 2022; Wilczak, 2021).

This paper particularly analyses four prisons across the three periods of the Star Wars in-universe timeline. The three periods of galactic governance in the Star Wars timeline under inquiry are the era of Galactic Republic, the rule of the Galactic Empire and the galaxy under the New Republic. In considering the representations of the prison in the Galactic Republic the analysis considers the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center as depicted in eight episodes of the

animated television series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008–2020). In considering the prison in the Galactic Empire the paper analyses the Imperial Detention Center and Labor Camp LEG-817 as seen in the theatrical release *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, supplemented by an analysis of this prison in both the novelisation of this film (Freed, 2016) and *Rebel Rising* (Revis, 2017), a novel set between the prologue and first act of *Rogue One*. Additionally, under the reign of the Empire the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex is considered as it depicted in the live-action television series *Star Wars: Andor* (2020–), which functions as a prequel to *Rogue One*. In considering the prison in the New Republic the paper considers the Karthon Chop Fields as seen in the live-action television series *The Mandalorian* (2019–). The analysis disclosed three recurring and oftentimes overlapping archetypes of the prison as they have appeared across *Star Wars*: the panoptic prison; the labour camp; and the smart prison. Understanding these archetypes and their interplay requires a short summary of the underpinning politics of each period of governance.

Periods of galactic governance and their underpinning politics

If not all prisons are alike, as Imwe observed, then this is because they are rooted in different social and political contexts (Brangan, 2021). The first period of concern to this paper is the latter years of a democratic union of star systems known as the Galactic Republic. For over a thousand years the Galactic Republic was largely characterised by stability, prosperity and a commitment to democracy; underpinned by Jedi Knights as the guardians of peace and justice. This paper focusses on depictions of the prison in the Galactic Republic during a period of decay known as the Fall of the Jedi, occurring from the year 32 Before the Battle of Yavin (BBY) to 19 BBY.² During this time the Galactic Republic was manipulated to become embroiled in a conflict with Separatists known as the Clone Wars, ultimately leading to the Republic's demise.

The second period of governance under analysis is the reign of the Galactic Empire. Immediately succeeding the Galactic Republic, Imperial rule accounted for the period 19 BBY to 4 After the Battle of Yavin (ABY). The Galactic Empire was a fascist and oppressive regime that capitalised on disillusionment with the destructive military conflict of the Clone Wars and growing anti-Jedi sentiment to usurp the Galactic Republic. The Empire promised a renewed era of peace, order and security, but was in fact a dictatorship that over time became increasingly stratocratic and repressive. In this period the Empire was in asymmetric conflict with the Alliance to Restore the Republic (more commonly known as the Rebel Alliance), culminating in the destruction of the Empire's second Death Star at the Battle of Endor in 4 ABY and the subsequent surrender of the Empire to the Alliance.

The third period of governance under analysis is the rule of the New Republic, accounting for the period from 4 ABY (although it was officially founded in 5 ABY) to 34 ABY. The New Republic defeated and succeeded the Empire and was characterised by the re-establishment of the democratic values and politics that underpinned the Galactic Republic. In its early period the New Republic focussed upon eradicating Imperial remnants; albeit guided by the principles of demilitarisation, the avoidance of conflict and the recognition of the autonomy of individual planetary worlds. However, following the collapse of the Empire the New Republic failed to recognise and act upon an emerging military threat from a fascist military junta known as the First Order.

Growing in power, capability and intent over time the First Order drew the New Republic into a new galactic conflict. This conflict resulted in the use of a superweapon by the First Order that caused the cataclysmic destruction of the five planets of the Hosnian system, one of which, Hosnian Prime, was the home of the New Republic Senate.

The panoptic prison

In their account of prison design Jewkes and Moran (2017) paid attention to the architectural symbolism of incarceration; that is to say the ways in which prisons are physical manifestations of punitive philosophies. The Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center as depicted in the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* represents a fully formed and familiar vision of the panoptic prison in the Star Wars universe. This prison was located on the core world Coruscant, which at this time was also home to the other significant locations in the galaxy, including the Galactic Senate Building and the Jedi Grand Temple. The first appearance of the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center was in the season one finale 'Hostage Crisis', the plot of which centred upon the attempt by a crew of bounty hunters, led by the notorious Cad Bane, to liberate the incarcerated crime lord Ziro the Hutt. However, Hostage Crisis only fleetingly featured the prison as Ziro made his escape. A more comprehensive vision of the prison was shown in the season four episode 'Deception', the first of a four-episode story arc. Across these episodes the Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi was the main protagonist as he attempted to infiltrate and disrupt a criminal network plotting to kidnap the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic. This kidnap was being orchestrated from within the prison by Moralo Eval and his now cellmate Cad Bane. Kenobi, assuming the identity of a known criminal, entered the prison as an ordinary prisoner, with the intention of penetrating this network from within. As an important location on the core world of Coruscant the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center warrants a close analysis that is informed by the wider scholarship on prison architecture and the panoptic urge.

The first view of Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center in Deception is similar to that seen in Hostage Crisis. Deception begins with a wide shot that establishes the exterior of the prison as a massive neo-futurist spire; a facility in keeping with the wider aesthetic of Coruscant as an ecumenopolis. Externally, this prison is spectacular in both style and scale. From the outside, the architecture suggests a synthesis of mass incarceration fused with imagined technologies. However, in stark contrast to the speculative prison exterior, the internal design of the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center evokes a more familiar and drab mode of modern punishment. Internally, the main prison floor is circular. Armed Clone Trooper prison guards surveil the prisoners from above via a circumferential balcony that overlooks the prison floor, as well as from ground level on the floor itself. The prison floor is coded with the Emblem of the Galactic Republic: a roundel encircling a central disc from which there protrudes eight spokes. On the prison floor each spoke forms the platform for the long benches and tables from which the prisoners eat. Prisoners are fed an unappealing slop while dressed stereotypical orange jumpsuits that are particularly typical of modern forms of punishment in the penitentiaries of the United States (US). Both of these features of prison life – food and uniform – have been understood as instruments of power, discipline, ideology and resistance in the prison environment (see Ash, 2010; Godderis, 2006; Ugelvik, 2011). If the circular prison floor speaks to the architectural spirit, if not quite the practical letter,

of Bentham's Panopticon, then the prisoner accommodation blocks represent a much closer copy of Bentham's Panoptic design.

Each accommodation block is a large spherical structure within which a central observation tower, again housing armed Clone Trooper guards, outwardly monitors the prisoners in the multiple rows of cells that compose the internal walls of the sphere itself. Each prison cell features a large, translucent 'ray shield' door that allows each prisoner to be observed from the central tower, although it is left unclear as to whether the prisoner can reciprocate. This philosophy of panopticism was influential in the radial design and architecture of several prisons in nineteenth-century Europe and the US, albeit that the complete and unseen inspection envisaged by Bentham was also never fully realised in such carceral spaces (see Beijersbergen et al, 2016; Harmes et al, 2020; Jewkes and Moran, 2017). As a prison characterised by routine surveillance and inspired by panopticism the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center is anchored in the politics and practices of modern punishment. This disparity between the neo-futurist exterior of the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center and its fundamentally familiar interior resonates with Jewkes' (2016) consideration of the juxtaposition, or even paradox, of such prison architecture and the respectively incorporated symbolisms of exterior and interior. The familiarity of the prison interior and prison life on Coruscant lends itself to an understanding of the prison in the Galactic Republic as *nostalgia*; suggesting a representation that is concerned with the past and present of the modern prison, more so than its future.

Recent accounts of nostalgia in Star Wars have considered the new contributions to the canon – and the sequel trilogy in particular – as cultural retreat; a comforting invitation to aging fans to return to the halcyon earlier days of the franchise (Geraghty, 2020; Kinder, 2020). The Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center in *The Clone Wars*, however, is a more specific recall to the punitive modern prison, recognising its rootedness in contemporary society, culture and urban life. This reading of the prison on Coruscant as a discourse of nostalgia necessitates a further engagement with politics and ideology. As Mousoutzanis and Teo (2021) have remarked in their recent appraisal of the reading of nostalgia science fiction,

'The politics of nostalgia have been read equally as backward, reactionary, and conservative and as progressive, subversive, and radical.' (p. 3).

In interpreting the representation of the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center as such it is useful to apply Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Boym (2001) understands restorative nostalgia as the total reconstruction of the perfect past; a past of truth or tradition that is to be preserved without decay and to remain 'freshly painted in its original image'. Reflective nostalgia, in contrast, can be considered as a critical rumination on the ruins of the past, which in its refusal to rebuild a collective 'home' from such ruins acknowledges the prospect of future possibility.

The important point of contention here is whether the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center on Coruscant is represented as a memory to be unproblematically restored or one instead to be critically reflected upon. Such representations have important political consequences. For Boym (2001),

'Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies

of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future.’ (p. xvi).

Upon an initial reading, given the apparent virtue of the Galactic Republic as embodied in both its heroic Jedi and its venerated democratic governance, it would seem that the prison is rendered as restorative nostalgia; as an unproblematic facsimile of the modern prison as it is manifest in the conditions of contemporary liberal democracy. However, a deeper dive into the Star Wars canon, including through episodes of *The Clone Wars*, indicates discontent from central protagonists in the saga, as well as ordinary citizens, with the quality of governance of the Galactic Republic. Such fissures in the veneer of the Galactic Republic may then suggest that the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center invokes reflective nostalgia; prompting a critical discussion of the deficiencies of the modern prison and the politics, governance and ideology of which it is an everyday expression. This position is supported by a more recent and dystopic vision of the panoptic prison in the Star Wars canon as it doubles as a labour camp under the Galactic Empire.

From the panoptic prison to the labour camp

The first season of the live-action television series *Star Wars: Andor*, released on the Disney+ streaming service in 2022, traced the path of show's central protagonist, Cassian Andor, from petty criminal to rebel operative during the reign of the Galactic Empire. This season of *Andor* featured a pivotal three-episode mid-season story arc that centred upon the incarceration of Cassian in the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex. Just as the architecture of the Coruscant prison reflected the punitive philosophy of the Galactic Republic, so the design of the Imperial Prison Complex on the water moon Narkina 5 projected, symbolically and in practice, the power of the Empire. Comprised of seven individual and identical prisons, each holding around 4900 bare-footed prisoners, this complex functioned as a network of panoptic labour camps. Each individual prison was a partially submerged high-tech heptahedron of seven levels each comprised of three rings: an outer ring of seven cell wings each connected via a network of airbridges to an intermediate ring of seven factory floors, and an inner command core from where prisoners at work could be visually surveilled from raised positions by prison guards. The overall aesthetic of the Narkina prison – expressed in its minimalist cells, sterile factory floor assembly lines and the largely white prisoner overalls with stripes of familiar orange – evokes an eclectic intersection of the laboratory, the hospital, the asylum and the high-tech factory.

Each prison facility on Narkina 5 had an additional level at its architectural apex, level 8, that functioned as a command centre for the whole prison. Staffed by a commander and two technicians, the command centre supplemented direct visual surveillance on each factory floor with prisoner tracking technologies to map the movement of each individual inmate across the entire prison in real time. This level was invisible to prisoners, only rendered in their imagination through threatening announcements emanating from here and broadcast across the prison's public address system. The level 8 command centre also ensured prisoner compliance, good order and labour productivity through violence. All floors in the prison were capable of lethal electrification, the targeted activation of which was controlled by the command team on level 8. Every day the least productive team on both the day shift and the night shift would be subject to electrocution as punishment, and the most productive teams would be permitted flavour in their liquified food.

The near-total effectiveness of this violent disciplinary regime, and its simple threat, required only a small number of prison staff to be present in the facility and negated the requirement for the direct surveillance of inmates through cameras and microphones. This was evident in a tense discussion between Cassian Andor and his fellow prisoner, and floor manager for Cassian's shift, Kino Loy:

CASSIAN

You think they're listening?

KINO

Like you would know.

CASSIAN

I know this. They don't need to care. All they need to do is turn this floor on twice a day and keep their numbers rolling. Why bother listening to us? We are nothing to them. Melshi's right. We're cheaper than droids and easier to replace.

The technologically mediated panoptic gaze of the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex was thus designed not simply to incarcerate and discipline through surveillance, but also to maximise the productivity of the prison as a labour camp.

The ready supply of prisoner labour was ensured through wider Imperial securitisation across the galaxy. In response to 'increased rebel activity' the Empire's new Public Order Resentencing Directive (PORD) increased prisoner numbers through the reclassification of minor offences and the inflation of sentences for those already incarcerated. Maintaining prisoner numbers and productivity at the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex was vital because the prisoners, unbeknownst to them, were manufacturing vital parts for the Empire's new superweapon: the Death Star. It is worth emphasising here that convict labour, criminological interest in prison labour, and the use of such labour for military purposes are not new (Barnes, 1945; Jackson, 1927). Indeed, the use of prison labour in the US had historically been advocated for its contribution to the nation not only through direct or indirect advancement of national defence, but also through the supposed rehabilitative benefits of prison work. However, at Narkina 5, and in the aftermath of the PORD, there was no effort to rehabilitate: prisoners were exploited to the point of physical and mental exhaustion, and then condemned to death and disposed of when their labour was of no further value to the Empire. Understood as such, this rendering of the Imperial prison and its purpose can be read beyond a straightforward critique of a prison-industrial complex; serving just as much as a broader critique of late-capitalism and the exploitative, and largely hidden, production lines that manufacture its advanced technologies (Chan et al, 2022).

Before *Andor* was screened in late 2022 the most visceral representation of the 'prison as labour camp' in Star Wars canon was the Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817, first depicted in the 2016 theatrical release *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*. Located on the planet Wobani – a cold, bleak and desolate world where light struggled to penetrate a permanently dusty atmosphere – the cinematic depiction of the Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817 was powerful and resonant, albeit that it is shown across only a few minutes of the opening of the film. A fuller description of the prison on Wobani can be found in the accompanying

novelisation *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Freed, 2016) as well as *Rebel Rising* (Revis, 2017), a novel that details the life of the central protagonist Jyn Erso between her escape from the Empire as an eight-year-old and her liberation from LEG-817 by the Rebel Alliance some 13 years later.³

In the *Rogue One* novelisation Jyn occupies a dark prison cell, one of an endless number, where filthy water drips from the ceiling and the barred cell doors permit a view of patrolling stormtroopers. Jyn latterly shared a cell with an incarcerated rebel Oolin Musters, who threatened to kill Erso in the prison, which did not matter too much as Wobani was a facility where the life expectancy of those incarcerated was short. Being selected for forced labour here at gunpoint and transported whilst restrained in the rear of a rusting transporter as part of a 'work crew' was preferable to being left in one's cell. *Rebel Rising* further detailed the Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817 by providing an account of each of the 6 months that Jyn was held here. The prison on Wobani is depicted here as a place devoid of hope, where physical beatings and psychological torture by stormtrooper wardens were commonplace. A stormtrooper inducts Jyn to Wobani, detailing the hard labour she was to face. 'Welcome to the worst days of your life', he remarked, to be endured for 'crimes against the Empire' (Revis, 2017: 3). Punishment on Wobani was ruthless and time collapsed into a vacuum of sunless silence: fifteen hours of hard labour followed by eight of sleep, in a relentless cycle in Wobani's dark atmosphere, paying no heed to any circadian rhythm. Jyn was physically restrained, assaulted and beaten by the stormtrooper wardens, with fellow prisoners opting to take their own lives to escape the suffering of similar treatment.⁴ That punishment was an integral function of this penal regime was readily apparent. A high-ranking Imperial officer who visited the labour camp on Wobani was clear on this. In the process of undertaking an arbitrary execution of a prisoner he spoke to others about life in the labour camp,

'This is a punishment. You are criminals against the Empire.' (Revis, 2017: 190).

The Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817 was thus fully rendered as a cold and dark place of dangerous and relentless labour, and one characterised by hopelessness, terror, pain and death. This depiction the Imperial prison resonates with the principles and practices of the Soviet Gulag.

In their oral history Gheith and Jolluck (2011) noted that whilst the Gulag began as a place for both punishment and the reformation of people through labour it developed under Stalin to become a system of mass terror. The Gulag camps were 'unbearably cruel',

'Prisoners were shot for little or no reason; inmates were often forced to go outside with insufficient clothing in 40-degree frost; food was allotted based on meeting labor goals.' (Gheith and Jolluck, 2011: 4).

This resulted in the slow starvation of many, layered on top of already torturous treatment. An exhaustive description of the Soviet Gulag can be found in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's three volume work *The Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn (2003) documented not only the immediate horrors of this system but also reflected upon how evil, as it was manifest here, was catalysed and buttressed by political ideology:

'Ideology – that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors.' (p. 77).

In this way the violence of both the Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817 on Wobani and the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex is rationalised and made possible because these were *Imperial* facilities, underpinned by fascist ideology. In a 1979 CL Mitton (1979) lamented upon the cruelty of the labour camps documented by Solzhenitsyn,

'One asks: Are these camps an inescapable element in the kind of social system that produced them?' (p. 188).

Such a reflection draws one to the central point made in Brangan's 2021 exploration of the politics of punishment: that prisons and penal practice are divergent across jurisdictions as they both reflect and are contingent upon prevailing cultures and modes of governance (Brangan, 2021). Whilst the prisons on Narkina 5 and Wobani may differ in their specific form as labour camps, both are violent and cruel manifestations of the fascist ideology of the Galactic Empire. Nevertheless, the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex was distinguished from the Imperial Detention Center & Labor Camp LEG-817 on Wobani in one important aspect: its parallel representation as a 'smart prison'.

From the labour camp to the smart prison

The prison is increasingly a site for the exercise and implementation of radical technological innovation and reform (Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2022). Such technologies, motivated in part by the commercial imperative of contemporary private technology enterprises and firms to seek new markets, often extend from the wider discourse of, and developments in, the 'smart city' (Laufs et al., 2020). McKay (2022) understands the resultant 'smart prison' to be characterised by the integration of new and networked digital technologies into the design and infrastructure of the prison, particularly for the purposes of security, surveillance and prison population management. The smart prison enhances control and surveillance through digital technologies and datafication, including the reference to prisoners not by name but by numerical code (Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2019). On Narkina 5 the Imperial prison was defined by the use of technology for such purposes, but also in its use of datafication to enhance labour productivity.

For Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier (2013) datafication can be understood as the transformation of human behaviour and social interactions into quantifiable formats, often at scale as 'big data' in order that they can be tabulated, tracked, mapped and analysed. Kaun and Stiernstedt (2019) supplement this perspective in highlighting how smartification through sensors, applications, algorithms and artificial intelligence has increasingly generated data on the prison and those who are incarcerated within. For McKay (2022),

'Prisons are on the cusp of a technological transformation as twenty-first-century digital engagement and connectivity in 'free' society permeate prison design and offender management. Automation, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), facial recognition and data analytics are

just some of the new technologies being deployed and embedded into the infrastructure of prisons in many countries.' (p. 101).

Several of these technologies, and their underpinning rationales, are apparent in the prison in *Andor*. Sensors track prisoner movements in real-time across the whole prison, with this data collated and visualised in giant screens in the command centre on level 8. As aforementioned, this data allowed for the targeted electrocution of prisoners for behaviour deemed 'off-program' and thus a security risk, or to punish work performance and labour output deemed unsatisfactory to the Empire's requirements. In this way the prison incorporated the technology and ethos of the smart factory, where data from assembly lines are visualised and analysed to optimise processes and outputs, and for troubleshooting and decision making (Xu et al., 2017). Across its episodes *Andor* disclosed how the Empire used its smart prisons and the tools of managerialism – including quotas for arrests and labour productivity – to feed the demands of the Imperial war machine. However, the Imperial prison complex on Narkina 5 is not the only representation of the smart prison in Star Wars, and nor did such prisons only exist under the authoritarian reign of the Empire.

Despite the significant transformation in governance following the fall of the Galactic Empire, signalled in the gravitation back towards the democratic values and ideology of the Galactic Republic, the representation of the prison in the New Republic resonated with a new techno-Gulag. This was most apparent in the depiction of the prison on the planet Karthon in the television series *The Mandalorian*. Effectively acting as an evocative mirror to, and synthesis of, the Imperial prisons on both Wobani and Narkina 5, the Karthon Chop Fields was a labour camp where prisoners were used to dismantle and scrap Imperial starships. Visually, the Karthon Chop Fields is most similar to the Wobani labour camp: both settings characterised by dirt and grime, with prisoners secured by ankle tag technology under cold and leaden grey skies.⁵ In the seventh episode of season two of *The Mandalorian*, titled 'The Believer', a former Imperial Army sharpshooter turned mercenary named Migs Mayfeld was serving a 50-year sentence on Karthon for the killing of a New Republic officer. Like his fellow prisoners, Mayfeld was designated to undertake hard manual labour on the dismantling operations. The rusted orange overalls worn by the prisoners on Karthon, including Mayfeld, bear similarities to the orange jumpsuits worn by prisoners on Coruscant, but the strict discipline and use of ankle tags on Karthon, alongside the hard labour, is much more closely aligned to the Wobani prison. However, one key point of difference between the Karthon Chop Fields and the penal regimes and practices that preceded it is the use of droids as prison guards.

In 'The Believer' Mayfeld is at work dismantling a scrapped Imperial Twin Ion Engine (TIE) starfighter craft when he is approached by a droid guard bearing, as a badge on its chest, the insignia of the New Republic. The droid communicates strict commands to Mayfeld, only referring to him by his prisoner identification number 'Inmate 34667', which is also printed in Aurebesh, a standard text used across the galaxy, on Mayfeld's overalls. The droid is quick to resort to the threat of physical force to ensure Mayfeld's compliance with each directive that it communicates. Demonstrating the synthesis of technologies, droids also seem to be capable of communicating with, and deactivating, the ankle tag technology worn by prisoners on Karthon. Whilst ankle tag technologies are often considered in policy and research as an alternative to punishment (Belur, 2020; Vanhaelemeesch et al, 2014), the use of such technologies is also increasingly part of the

discourse of incarceration in the smart prison (Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2019). Similar droids are also at work in other areas of the New Republic penal regime. In the sixth episode of season one of *The Mandalorian*, 'The Prisoner', for example, droids are also used to patrol and secure an almost fully automated New Republic prison transport ship. Whilst the use of robots as guards in the contemporary smart prison is certainly uncommon, it has become a contemporary reality in Pohang, South Korea, where robots have in some circumstances replaced human guards, resulting in an intensification of prisoner monitoring and surveillance (Bloss, 2012). Interestingly, droids are also at work in the New Republic criminal justice system beyond the prison. The third season of *The Mandalorian*, and specifically episode three, 'The Convert', depicts droids as de facto probation officers. They monitor the political rehabilitation of ex-Imperials and their reintegration into the community on Coruscant.⁶ Rehabilitation and reform here are not delivered through social connections in communities, but are instead an automated process to be delivered through technology.

The synthesis of multiple forms of surveillance data, including bio-surveillance and geo-tracking systems through sensors and restraints, prospectively offers a powerful system of control at sites of punishment, especially when integrated with artificial intelligence and robots. Such systems are already emerging today. For Kaur et al. (2020),

'China already has a fully functional smart prison where smart sensors are used to track each prisoner and their activities to detect any unseemly activities and notify the guards. This is connected to an artificially intelligent computer where all the data is recorded with the help of facial recognition while analyzing movements.' (p. 208).

The Karthon Chop Fields thus offers an interesting synthesis of penal practice; where the Gulag remains the resonant model but is overlaid with futuristic technologies that continue and compound the disciplinary control functions of the precursor Imperial prison. Unlike the prison in Galactic Republic – which was characterised by the penal systems, architecture and practices of nineteenth and twentieth century liberal democracies – the Karthon Chop Fields presents a dystopic and foreboding depiction of the prison. The vision of the smart prison in Star Wars does not, for example, engage with more positive representations focusing on reducing the exclusionary pains of imprisonment and to address the isolation of the prison as a space removed and disconnected from the wider community (Järveläinen and Rantanen, 2021; Knight and Van De Steene, 2021). The penal regime of the New Republic instead reads an allegory for the contemporary 'crisis of liberal democracy'; a stage characterised by the decay in the moral and normative appeal of such systems, which are increasingly the mercy of a confluence of currents and shifts that challenge its hegemony and legitimacy in the global order (Öniş, 2017).

Star Wars and the penological imagination

Star Wars, as one of the world's longest running and largest grossing science fiction franchises, retains as much grip on the public imagination today as it did when it first emerged in 1977. Yet as much has changed in our world since this time, so too has Star Wars. The Star Wars franchise has developed and deepened to become more complex, nuanced and intensely political than may

have seemed possible to those early cinemagoers who queued to see a space-based, swashbuckling blockbuster. As the stories and settings of this galaxy far, far away have diversified across the years, so too have the depictions of the prison therein. Our popular criminology contends that the Narkina 5 prison presents the most unsettling and unnerving of all the prisons depicted in Star Wars to date. It is amoral and civilised to the point of seeming unassailable. There are new technologies to track and monitor the penal subject, creating a system for effective control that delivers both punishment and productivity. Recent Star Wars stories such as this project a more intense vision of penological advances apparent in our current time: the prison is made increasingly efficient and instrumental through advances in technology, while politics becomes more authoritarian and reactionary. There are, it seems to us, uncomfortable correlations to be made between the dystopic penal visions in Star Wars and emerging trends and transformations in contemporary penal politics.

Furthermore, and reflecting the conclusions of Raymen (2018), we posit that our popular criminology of the prison in Star Wars can move beyond an analysis of our current circumstances, and onwards to predict trends in punishment and the technologies of the future prison. Indeed, that the prison in science fiction can have the consequence of stimulating understandings of future penal regimes and the possibilities for punishment has not been lost on those who make Star Wars. Tony Gilroy, the writer, creator and executive producer of *Andor*, expressed his own unease that the terrifying concept of the Imperial prison at Narkina 5 – with its relentless assembly lines of Imperial production underpinned by electrified floors and a panoptic gaze mediated through smart technologies – would inspire the future design and construction of prisons in the real world (Brooks, 2022). If popular criminology discloses the importance of understanding public perceptions of the prison and how these are shaped, then a popular criminological encounter with science fiction can serve *forewarn* of future penal regimes and their possible contours and consequences.

Yet as well as forewarning us of what might lie ahead, science fiction can also simultaneously work to *liberate* the prison in both the public and the criminological imaginations (Crockett Thomas, 2022; Nellis, 2006). In depicting the Narkina 5 prison Star Wars presents us with an interpretation of what a largely automated and seemingly perfected future prison may look like. It shows how such a prison would routinely and efficiently operate, and how it would feel for those who are sent there to serve their sentences. It is clean and ordered, and yet it is inhumane and intolerable. In its modern managerialism this prison is a barbaric expression of a particular punitive philosophy. In presenting us with these carceral fantasies Star Wars, and science fiction more broadly, allows us to imagine *against* our mainstream imaginings (Crockett Thomas, 2022). In our current political climate – with rise of populism, post-truth and the democratic backslide – science fiction may operate as a potent resource for *resistance* to such dystopic depictions. Engaging seriously with science fiction allows us to counter such terrifying visions with alternative narratives; of a future characterised by that recurring theme of Star Wars since its inception, but absent from its prisons: hope.

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Notes

1. This movie was retroactively named *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.
2. The Battle of Yavin was depicted in *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* and featured a space battle between the Rebel Alliance Fleet and the Imperial Military that culminated in the destruction of the Empire's original Death Star. Events are thus understood as being either before or after this moment.
3. Interestingly, as detailed in the book *Catalyst: A Rogue One Novel* (Luceno, 2016), Jyn Erso was born in a Separatist prison during the period of the Galactic Republic.
4. Prisoner suicide was also depicted at the Narkina 5 Imperial Prison Complex in *Andor*.
5. Although the purpose of this technology on Karthon – for example, for the tracking of movement, health or labour productivity – is unclear.
6. This amnesty programme promoted rehabilitation and reintegration through the use of therapy, assigned accommodation and restrictions on movement in the community, routine monitoring and surveillance using parole and police droids, and non-invasive experimental psychological treatment. Nevertheless, there is no indication here that this programme was extended to routine offenders in the New Republic.

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