The Time of Our Lives:
Consumption of the "Hey-buddy" Social Currency
Gregory R. Webb

INTRODUCTION

The "consumption site" chosen for this paper is a medium-security male prison in Victoria, Australia where the time of people's lives is consumed by the prison-industrial complex as a "commodity" (Woodward, 2007, pp. 13-14; Wright, 2000, p. 19). In the process of conducting social research, I applied a symbolic interactionist perspective and incorporated an auto-ethnographic analysis of the topographical post-disciplinary prison I am held in.[1] In other words, this paper is based on my unobtrusive observations and descriptions of the environmental factors, semiotic cues and activities of the various actors encountered within the prison where I am held captive.

While describing the consumption space, I interchangeably refer to the self as a prisoner. Above all, I aim to demonstrate that "the social actions and social reality result from [individuals] giving meaning to events and objects, and agreeing about the meaning of these things and actions" (Bessan and Watts, 2007, p. 85). Specifically, I focus on the linguistic and non-linguistic communication, including the dialect, gestures and body position of the men within the social setting.

In doing so, I briefly explore the transformation of the birth of the prison from the eighteenth century to the present. The trappings of the contemporary prison disguised as an open campus community with therapeutic alternatives is then examined, followed by an analysis of the consumption space and its effect upon identity formation. Through the lens of the interpersonal "hey-buddy" behaviours and interactions with *others* in the consumption space, I consider how the prison and the public discourse impacts the imprisonment and society until their time behind bars is completed.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL, LEGAL AND CULTURAL TOPOGRAPHY OF MY SITUATED-NESS

An assumption guiding this work is that an objective view of material culture is not practically achievable. Even if hidden from those being observed, the observer gazing out from their vantage point cannot help but have some preconceptions that cannot be shed (Goffman, 1990, pp. 234-

235). My particular social, legal, and cultural location and vantage point as a diachronic *being* is the product being consumed in the space that I observe — the prison. Due to this very fixed situated-ness, I must take a subjective view from where I am situated, and that view is of "an abnormally embodied self" in a system of consumers and the consumed (Leder, 2004, pp. 51-52).

As a particular "mechanism" of power, the prison consumes the "time" of a prisoner, while suppressing the underlying rules or deep structures of society that are enveloped by the hierarchical modality of authority (Foucault, 1991, p. 105). The significant social, cultural, and personal calendar of events throughout the year, for the most part, seemingly break down. Rather, the *mores* or conventions that embody the fundamental values of a group within a society are replaced by "distinctive material" objects and behaviours that become substituted for what is missing, serving as a mask to what is really being consumed — the finite time of prisoners' lives (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 76). In other words, my broader point is that prisoners are compelled to work for a meagre wage in a variety of prison services, industries, horticulture and environmental management (Department of Justice, 2007, p. A1, 27).[2] The majority of prisoners are employed in metalwork and woodwork. Modern day slaves, utilizing their obsolete skills in the manufacturing sector that supplies the machinery and material for production (e.g., cattle gates, space bathes, first aid kits, etc.). Their bodies have become malleable, readily trained and used, transformed and improved through the modification of their individual behaviour (Foucault, 1991, p. 136).

The obedient prisoner is necessary for achieving meaningful activities at the prison. Programs, education, and work perpetually attempt to structure and consume the day by ascribing purpose and meaning to the fragmented self. As the product of a depthless culture, caused by the decline in intimate relationships, the prisoner could be described as a distinctly fragile and feeble object, prefabricated to become reliant upon instructions as opposed to being autonomous.

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT
OF THE SPACE

The historical and social context of the birth of the prison is found at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century,

when after decades of physical torture inflicted upon the flesh of the condemned, discipline was transformed into the psychological application of a "time-table" (Foucault, 1991, pp. 8, 149; Woodward, 2007, pp. 12-13). In addition, the transformation from the physical to the psychological did not eliminate the "horrifying spectacle of punishment", not even in the twenty-first century. Rather, it has been removed from a "public exhibition" to a "private examination" in the "machine for altering minds" that now penetrates beyond the flesh to the limitless depth of the human soul (Foucault, 1991, pp. 8-9; Woodward, 2007, p. 13). Thus, as Illouz (2008, p. 3) suggests, "through therapy the Self is made to work seamlessly for and within a system of power".

The post-disciplinary prison, structurally, remains a fortress. However, it does not fight off intruders. Rather the prison, as a socio-political mechanism, welcomes and "targets the enemy [of non-conformity] from within, trapped between the walls the prisoner may not escape" (Chauvenet in Chantraine, 1999, p. 65) until, at least, their time is consumed. According to Chantraine (1999, p. 65) "psycho-experts", or qualified clinicians throughout the carceral archipelago, aspire to reduce "hyper-incarceration" (Simon, 2000, p. 288) by providing alternatives to thinking skills deemed to be inadequate via cognitive skills programs[3] (Heseltine et al., 2009, p. 23), which in theory cannot be put into practice until the 'offender' returns to the community. The logic behind this therapeutic methodology fails to deliver as mass incarceration continues, both locally and internationally (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015, p. 145; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, p. 155). My experience is that *there is no place for logic in prison* and that if rehabilitation is to be pursued, it must be a personal journey.

MATTERS OF STYLE AND ENVIRONMENT

The philosophy of Marngoneet Correctional Centre is that of a holistic approach centred upon the structure of an "open campus" environment. With buildings that do not look too much like prison, it is spaced with green lawns and paths. The backdrop is picturesque, occupied by a large mountain range. Prisoners and officers are encouraged to interact with one another on a first name basis, attempting to break down the barriers between the two groups with the stated goal of ending the cycle of

recidivism. The name "Marngoneet" reflects the contemporary attitude of the post-disciplinary prison and is adopted with permission from the local Wathaurong community language and means "to make new" (Department of Justice, 2008, p. A1, 27). That is, "the name reflects the prisons focus on rehabilitation and offers a respectful gesture to the Wathaurong people. And it is supported by the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative" (ibid).

On site is a Prisoner Shop, a commissary where prisoners are allowed to purchase a small selection of consumer goods, token and hobby items (Harper, 2014; LOP 4.10-1, p. 1) to make the consumption of their time less intense as they seek treatment for their criminalized behaviour. The Victorian Government says that Marngoneet is "the first therapeutic prison in Australia, in which all inmates receive high-intensity interventions and reside in therapeutic communities" (Heseltine et al., 2009, p. 64). However, combined with the architectural trickery of the "circular", the "open campus design" is really about aiding the modalities of surveillance that are hidden in its architecture, while creating the appearance of community living, or in reality allowed "a single gaze to see everything" from any vantage point in the prison (Foucault, 1991, pp. 173-174).

According to scholar and prisoner Craig Minogue (2011, p. 193), there are clear parallels between the disciplinary power of the sixteenth and seventeenth century described by Foucault (1991) still at work in contemporary era prisons such as Marngoneet. For instance, the most obvious are "the psychological and administrative characteristics of disciplinary power" (Minogue, 2011, p. 192). That is, the "omnipresent 'surveillance, categorization, classification, the time-table, [and] non-idleness'" (Alford in Minogue, 2011, p. 191). Put differently, a bureaucratic methodology for the management of each prisoner is implemented. Nevertheless, it is the unobvious that I am interested in and that Minogue (2011, p. 192) describes as "the sense of Self which emerges from disciplinary power" exercised upon them or the rejection of the *other* that I intend to focus on. This means, the majority of prisoners take on the labels associated with the three dominant treatment neighbourhoods (ibid, p. 187) as they transition and transform into what they come to perceive to be a normal existence. However, before I explore this lived experience I need to describe the context in which the research was conducted.

In 2011, Marngoneet, the machine for altering minds, was described by Minogue (2013, pp. 8-9), paraphrasing the promotional material, after he transitioned to the medium-security prison after twenty-two years in maximum-security facilities:

> An intensive level of treatment and offender management activity [is provided] to prepare for a successful crime-free release from prison. There are 3 x 100 bed neighbourhoods (one protection and two mainstream) which function as therapeutic communities where all prisoners participate as members of the neighbourhood community.
>
> Accommodation in each neighbourhood comprises: one 40-cell unit, each cell with a shower and toilet. The 60 other beds are in self-catering accommodation with: 2 lock-up accommodations of 6 cells which each have a shower and toilet; 6 flat-style accommodations with six bedrooms each and 2 shared bathroom facilities; 3 cottage style accommodations with four bedrooms and 2 shared bathroom facilities. All have a lounge area and kitchenette. The carpeted bedrooms have a bed, a desk, and a wardrobe the like of which could be found at an Ikea store.
>
> Each neighborhood has a targeted clinical purpose: protection and sex offender; violent offender; and drug/alcohol offender. Prisoners cook, clean and manage [the] budget and their own hygiene in the 4- and 6-bed units (independent living/self-catering) and take responsibility for themselves and each other, working together with custodial, clinical, and vocational staff to achieve a safe, secure and therapeutic neighborhood.

At the time of his prison research, Marngoneet was considered the jewel in the Crown of Corrections Victoria. Recently, however, the prison system it is a part of has experienced a crowding crisis (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015, p. 4). There are now three 141-bed neighbourhoods at the facility with the addition of another mainstream parenting / educational focussed neighbourhood, a 161-bed neighbourhood, along with the modification of 40-cell units to accommodate 27 more bodies. Likewise, the self-catering accommodation with two lock-up accommodations of six cells each have been transformed into one lock-up transition unit of 12 beds and a management unit. In addition, the six flat-style accommodations with six

bedrooms have been 'upgraded' to accommodate nine men, while the three cottage style accommodations with four bedrooms now house five prisoners. As a result, there are a total of some 580 prisoners at a time when plans are underway to expand the capacity to confine in Victoria, Australia by two more prisons by the end of 2017 (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015, pp. 4, 13).[4]

THE CONSUMPTION SPACE

Of the prisoner group observed, these men comprise a variety of cohorts, nationalities, languages and cultures. The socio-economic background of the prisoners varies as well, along with their level of education, and physical and mental health. Yet most are from disadvantaged communities (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015, pp. 7, 33, 146). All, however, are identified by their distinctive 'prison clothing' (green and loose fitting, but with some personal alterations that distinguish their personality, style and status outside of the walls), along with an identification card that locates them to a specific treatment neighbourhood that restricts their movement and access to certain 'zones' within the prison (Harper, 2014, p. 1; Norman, 2010, p. 2).

A handful of men in the consumption space 'opt-out' in their individual ways and are not so totally consumed, as are most, with the petty prison politics associated with the "hey-buddy" behaviour lifestyle and illicit trade. While the majority seem to 'opt-in' with the consumption of the buying and selling of goods and services.[5] Despite the differences in the cohorts, there is a commonality of what transpires in the space, a pattern to the public spectacle within the prison, and that pattern is in the form of symbolic messages. The message is aimed against the prevailing order, transmitted and traded upon as a social currency within the disconnected and distorted audience of men who fit the dominate pattern of recidivism — a pattern that seems to temporarily dissociate them from the reality that the time of their lives is being consumed with every prison sentence.

The symbolic messages are transmitted like brand names, logos and advertising in the world outside the prison. There are, however, no physical manifestations of brand names, logos and advertising inside the prison unless drawn upon specific artifacts or body parts. So, rather than having a brand name on one's clothing, a logo on one's fashion or communication accessories, ways of behaving and personal associations are traded and consumed by the majority of prisoners observed. As a result, this symbolic

behaviour has a similar effect upon the audience as do material objects in the community. The interaction with 'someone special', an affiliated 'criminal', that is known to acquire stuff (e.g. contraband), is transmitted by non-verbal communication — high fives, loud talking, aggressive hugging followed by backslapping, and territorial positioning in large informal groups within common areas of the space (Albrecht and Ropp, 1982, pp. 163, 167; Dwyer, 2013, pp. 34, 36-37). Their argot is fascinating and marked with phrases that automatically grab the listeners' attention (e.g. "*hey-bruz-what's up*", "*give-me-some luv-cuz*", "*hey-buddy-what's-doin?*"). These expressions denote general greetings, but they are connotative of inclusion, fellowship, unity and a common purpose (Thwaites et al., 2002, pp. 65, 69-71) within a specific group following. The connotative message is all about "seek[ing] to establish or maintain relationships" and thus one's social identity within the prison system as a good earner in the "real world" (ibid, p. 10). A message that subtly says "*I can get stuff if you need it!*", rather than I am interested in befriending you and showing an interest in your life. Thus, the affiliated prisoner gains status within the group and is able to randomly move within time and space with a degree of arrogance.

An example of the benefit of the "hey-buddy" behaviour is seen when a non-acculturated prisoner, naïve of the dominate group's claim to an area, tries to use the communal telephone. From a distance, the phone appears to the new prisoner not to be in use as the receiver is hung-up. Symbolically, this sign within the prison system indicates that the phone is reserved for someone of status to use it whenever required. The non-acculturated, however, may not decode this sign and fail to ask for permission to make a call. Suddenly, out of nowhere, an affiliated "hey-buddy" appears and claims ownership of the shared resource: "*Hey-buddy, I'm about to use that!*" The non-acculturated prisoner then attempts to "book" the next 12-minute phone slot, only to be told abruptly, "*Somebody else has booked it!*" Thus, once again the phone is hung-up and reserved for a member of the dominant prisoner group. Caldwell (1956, p. 659) describes an informal social group as follows:

> …may be thought of as a number of persons possessing established patterns of social interaction, similar attitudes, social values, and group loyalties, mutual interests, and the faculty of cooperation in the performance of a natural function. Membership in informal groups may range from a

minimum of three persons to as many as twenty-five or more. Depending upon the needs and interests of the persons concerned, the members generally display similar types of attitudinal behaviour and adhere to the same set of social values. An important interest of informal groups centres around the cooperative performance of a natural function.

Put differently, the prisoner community is a dynamic and aggressive environment. Having possession over a simple material object, such as a communal telephone, becomes an opportunity to "proclaim progressive rights over another inmate" (McCorkle and Korn, 1954, p. 90). This means it is possible for a new prisoner to be manipulated by the informal prison group's invisible power relations (Caldwell, 1956, p. 651) that exploit the unaccustomed at a crucial time in their sentence. This can range from, as noted above, gaining access to a telephone to reach family and friends in the evening when they are most likely to be home or acquiring non-prison issued clothing such as underwear and sports socks with a "real logo" embroidered on them (e.g. Calvin Klein, ASICS). Furthermore, trust is established between the non-acculturated and the acculturated prisoner, and money can be placed into either's spending accounts for a small fee. Thus, a simple social interaction within the prison environment can lead prisoners in multiple directions, both positive and negative. In the case of the latter, these interactions promote unnecessary conflicts and problems.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ATTEMPT TO CLAIM THE CONSUMPTION SPACE

Goffman (1990) argues that actors play different social roles, with each one requiring a specific performance that is acted upon in a unique setting. These performances become facades that are part of the scene and become an automatic cue used to persuade the audience to accept the actor as being synonymous with the role they are playing (ibid, pp. 30-33).

In the prison, with a dearth of access to mainstream material symbols and objects, behaviours are more stylised and modified to "become saturated with meaning" for the particular sub-cultural group (Slater, 1997, p. 172). Symbolically, this "hey-buddy" behaviour includes or excludes individuals based on their appearance and performance in the system of trading symbols. Thus, their prison identity becomes interpreted as 'cool'

and belonging to a specific masculine group that appears to control and consume the space (ibid).

The trading of the interpersonal "hey-buddy" behaviours is a prelude to the trading of material goods like drugs, shoes, tobacco, nicotine patches and other consumer items. Such material items, which can be traded by those "in-the-know", are displayed symbolically within the interpersonal "hey-buddy" behaviours and symbols. Both displays are of belonging to the personal and material culture, and they are seemingly aimed at claiming *autonomy* and the appearance of a self-directed *will* in the space where the individual, conscious or unconscious, decides what and whom is consumed (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979, p. 37).

COMPLYING WITH THE FIXED NODES OF CONSUMPTION

The consumption of the prisoner's time is not subtle. Every day at set times, a sound comes from a public address system followed by verbal instructions that fills the space and reverberates through the mind of the prisoner (Harper, 2014, pp. 6-7). This noise directs and then elicits the attention and movements expected of prisoners, and their behaviour shifts to docile and compliant. The "hey-buddy" behaviour trading of the petty commodities moves into an intermission while the officers conduct a headcount to ensure that all prisoners are present. The restriction of movements for the muster ensures the consumption of the prisoner's time, which in turn is momentarily masked by the men socializing in a way that is borderline acceptable, consisting of talk in small groups about sporting achievements, sexual encounters, violence against *others* and desires related to "getting-out-of-prison".

The noise again sounds, this time indicating the resumption of "authorised" movements to the industries. With this, the "hey-buddy" behaviour and trading in material items resumes with a fevered pace seemingly aimed at beating the next set of announcements. The movements observed indicate the individual men are aware, albeit for a limited period, of the consumption of their time by the prison, and for an undetermined amount of "free-time" they have to make the most of what they think is their time to trade and interact within the niche market.

Investigating the informal groups of the prison is not a new phenomenon. Long ago, McCorkle and Korn (1954, p. 91) observed that prisoners possess a

unique and intriguing position, quite different from that of those outside prison walls. As a consumer-producer, each prisoner trades and lives in two economic worlds. On one hand, a barterer in the formal and illicit prisoner market and, on the other hand, a wage earner in the prison (ibid). While it is noted that this early research describing the prisoner social system was conducted in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, it still has applicability to post-disciplinary prisons regardless of location as evidenced by the prevalent and thriving material exchanges within them that I have observed.

THE MATERIAL CONSUMPTION CULTURE

Without a sociological imagination and an understanding of identity formation, it may be argued that an individual is easily misled because of external stimuli (Bessant and Watts, 2007, p. 447). The male prisoners observed in my study appear to be largely unaware of the consumption of their time and adopt behaviours oriented around the pursuit of illicit goods in the prisoner market, one that occupies their time by trading and up-scaling from object to object, collecting and selling, talking and enforcing. A poor substitute for substantive two-way communication (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979, p. 38; Wright, 2000, p. 18), the market provides the signs and symbols necessary to be viewed as successful by other prisoners, while fostering violence.

According to Thwaites and colleagues (2002, pp. 2, 10), the metalingual function of a sender who purchases an object "produces various meanings" to the receiver of the message, which then plays a "referential function" in "its ability to invoke content". The content which is being invoked in the prison by the sender is that of power, status, and knowledge of survival in an unfriendly and hostile environment, which is achieved by substituting the material features that have been deprived by the echelon authoritarian system upon imprisonment of individuals. Essentially, a false social identity received through these mediums ascribes purpose and meaning within the group about the events and objects they control (Bessant and Watts, 2007, pp. 88, 444) when a life imprisoned is often experienced as a life without hope or direction.

In other words, upon reception into a prison the individual is stripped of their "old 'citizen' self" (Tietjen, 2013, p. 77). They are, with the exception of gender, no longer characterised by social features, such as citizenship,

status or ethnicity that indicate membership of — or exclusion from — a group or category. Temporarily, if not permanently, the prisoner is denounced as a person, stripped naked before strangers and transitioned into prison clothing. The newly arrived prisoner reluctantly and often forcibly adopts the stigma and status of becoming a prisoner. From this point in time officers refer to 'them' by their surname or number. Thus, elements of *being* that once defined a person in the community are taken from them with their identities and dignity left behind on the dirty, cold cement, change room floor, stored in a property box, or simply discarded into rubbish bins for *others* to lay claim to and fight over.

WHAT IS LEFT IF WE SEE PAST "HEY-BUDDY" BEHAVIOURS AND THE PETTY MATERIAL CONSUMPTION CULTURE?

Take away the material culture and the consumption of goods within the prison and what is left are immoveable nodes of time, the headcounts which act as gravity-wells that signify the consumption of a prisoner's life, five times a day, seven days a week, year after year, at specific intervals until the time is consumed. The consumption of time is captured in the fluent and prolific lyrics by Linkin Park (2000): "time is a valuable thing, watch it fly by as the pendulum swings, watch it count down to the end of the day, the clock ticks life away, it's so unreal".

Similarly, Scholl (2013, p. 5) states that when he is asked to describe what prison is he responds, "[i]t is a whole different world… like nothing people on the outside have ever known".[6] Being labelled as an "inmate" has slowly penetrated "my psyche and become the defining characteristic of my being, changing me in a way that hurts my soul" (ibid). The public discourse associated with marginalized *others* has denounced the *self* as being worthy of esteem, of being considered 'normal'. This then raises the challenge for the prisoner to convince "myself daily that my life has value, even when the rest of the world tells me that I am worthless" (ibid, p. 6). This conflict causes confusion and distress, a disturbance that threatens to take the form of a psychological death (Honneth, 1995, p. 135) that denounces the *self* as existing. When the dominant social group denies marginalized populations their moral rights and cause them feelings of shame, inclusion and status becomes restricted, both in the prison and the community.

CONCLUSION

The prison is a self-sustaining object, woven into the social fabric of society, a symbol of power, discipline and justice (Foucault, 1991, p. 177; Wright, 2000, p. 20). The prison is intended to act as a deterrent in the eyes of its proponents, a sign to *others* of what punishment awaits them should they engage in deviance, idleness and non-conformity (Ransom, 1997, p. 32). Space and time are a given condition of an individual person upon their birth and material culture seemingly provides the necessary stimulus for a meaningful life. The essence of our lives in material cultural has become one of consumption, a consuming of the time of our lives with every waking moment devoted to, or doing, or consuming something that constructs a memory of value that can, in turn, be traded on as denoting meaning. While work in prison varies, its basic premise is to facilitate an "inmate's ability to make an effective noncriminal adjustment on the outside" (McCorkle and Korn, 1954, p. 92). The message sent by the prison-industrial complex seems to be one aimed at making prisoners docile through working, buying and consuming. That is, to become a citizen, the prisoner is required to adopt a conservative ideological perspective in a capitalistic, individualistic and fragmented world. In this context of keeping-up with our peers in a competitive and unfriendly environment as each *other* tries to outdo the *other* via the collection of material artifacts that tell a unique story in a familiar and bleak space, rehabilitation is a personal journey through every moment where *the clock ticks life away*.

ENDNOTES

[1]   In 2012, I arrived at Marngoneet Correctional Centre. Imprisoned since 2005 for a serious violent offence, I have lived within the Flinders Peak, Violent Offenders Neighbourhood for four years, witnessing the violence and oppressive behaviour of the men from a distance.

[2]   Paid remuneration is at one of three levels depending upon the degree of responsibility, the complexity and demands of the task, the skills required and/or the hours of duty. This reflects the community's standard of scaled remuneration.

[3]   The past two decades have seen cognitive skills training (e.g. Reasoning & Rehabilitation, Accredited Enhanced Thinking Skills, Thinking for Change, Think First, Stop & Think!) become a core fixture of prisoner rehabilitation in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and, more recently, Australia. These programs employ cognitive behavioural treatment methods in a stated effort to improve decision making and problem solving, self-regulation and moral reasoning skills.

4   This was largely caused by harsher legislation after eleven individuals on parole or having just completed it committed murders (see Ogloff, 2011).

5   During my imprisonment, I have observed from afar the dominant attitudes of prisoners and attempted to make progress in a different direction. Since 2009, I have pursued the goal of completing a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in Sociology and Communications, as well as a minor in Philosophy. I plan to pursue postgraduate studies in the future.

6   Colin Scholl is a prisoner at California State Prison, Los Angeles County. He is pursuing a Master's in Sociology.

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