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EXECUTION RITUAL:
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF EXECUTION AND THE SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING THE DEATH PENALTY

By
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B.A., University of Louisville, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Sociology
University of Louisville
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May, 2011

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A Thesis Approved on

April 11, 2011

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director (Dr. Mark Austin)

Dr. Patricia Gagne

Dr. Cara Cashon

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Mr. Timothy Craig Dyer

and

Mrs. Debbie Irene Dyer

who have always supported coloring outside the lines.

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I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Mark Austin, for his encouragement and his advice. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Patricia Gagne and Dr. Cara Cashon, for their assistance in completing this research. This study would not have been possible had I not found myself in the socioeconomic circumstances that allowed me to complete my education. The examples of my brothers and my family have also shaped my worldviews and made me a stronger, more intelligent person capable of completing this work.

ABSTRACT

EXECUTION RITUAL: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF EXECUTION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING THE DEATH PENALTY

Emilie B. Dyer

April 11, 2011

The public's exposure to state sanctioned killings is limited to the mass media representations such as editorials, news reports, feature films, and books. Therefore it is important to examine the process of execution and its relation to the media forms that construct a social reality of execution for the public. The messages of the mass media and the images they portray are a crucial element of capital punishment because they represent a social construction of reality that may guide the beliefs and opinions of the public (Heath & Gilbert 1996). Using Ethnographic Content Analysis (Althiede 1987), this study uses the media representations of state sanctioned executions that are presented in films to explore how the media constructs messages about the ritual of execution. The research demonstrates the ways in which media creates an outlet of information for the public about execution because the act itself is so privatized in society and discusses how these opinions shape public policy.

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Timeline of Inmate's Final Days	38
2. Execution Procedure by Method	39
3. Execution Ritual Accuracy	56
4. Execution Ritual Accuracy: Lethal Injection	57
5. Execution Ritual Accuracy: Electrocution	58
6. Execution Ritual Accuracy: Hanging	59

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
LIST OF TABLES	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
METHODOLOGY	32
The sample	33
The coding scheme	35
FINDINGS	41
Summary of the films	41
Techniques of Neutralization	43
Expressions of emotion or repression of emotion by corrections officers	46
Admission of guilt or verbal/non-verbal cues of tacit consent by inmate	49
Verbal/ non-verbal cues from execution team that pacify inmate	52
Accuracy of Ritual	55
Execution ritual acts that cause breakdown/ resignation to death by inmate	59
Signs of executioner stress displayed by corrections officers	61
Ritual Inaccuracy	63
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	65
REFERENCES	71
CURRICULUM VITAE	76

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Despite the controversy inherent in most dialogue about capital punishment, the average American citizen knows very little about the process of execution. State sanctioned killings often occur in the obscurity of prisons located far from populated areas under the cover of night (Bessler 1997). The public's exposure to state sanctioned killings is limited to the mass media representations such as editorials, news reports, feature films, and books. Therefore it is important to examine the process of execution and its relation to the media forms that construct a social reality of execution for the public.

A subject of greater obscurity in the academic literature and to the public generally, is the role corrections officers play in carrying out the death penalty. Their ability to reconcile the difficult and psychologically taxing duties of executing inmates with their contrary instincts has attracted minimal attention. Some inquiry into the subject has been explored in the field of psychology and corrections itself (Osofsky & Osofsky 2002, Vasquez 1993, Payne & Pray 1990, and Osofsky, Bandura, & Zimbardo 2005). However, the majority of these studies focus only on the emotional stress that corrections

officers endure from participating in an execution and also offer training models that can alleviate the stress of executions.

Wardens, corrections officers, and support staff involved in carrying out executions, and ensuring that the process is smoothly implemented have also contributed a great deal to the body of knowledge about the experience of executioners and execution teams (Cabana 1996, Solotaroff 2001, Prejean 1993, Lifton & Mitchell 2000). Their first-hand knowledge and eye witness encounters with capital punishment provide some of the most accurate reconstructions of state sanctioned executions. These detailed documentations also provide insight into the thought processes and habituated procedures that guide individuals through the difficult task of putting an inmate to death.

Media representations of corrections officers participating on execution teams have also become more prevalent in culture through films and other outlets in recent times. The messages of the mass media and the images they portray are a crucial element of capital punishment because they represent a social construction of reality that may guide the beliefs and opinions of the public (Heath & Gilbert 1996). Some authors have touched on this subject and the potential influences of film on public opinion (Sarat 2001, O'Sullivan 2003, and Wilson & O'Sullivan 2004).

The utter obscurity of executions from the general public, coupled with the power of impression that is cultivated in popular culture, facilitates the fluidity of factual reality and fictive depictions in society. This relationship requires further investigation to understand the collective social perceptions of the public about the process of execution and its effect on those involved.

This study will explore the strictly habituated behaviors of execution teams and the culmination of these behaviors into a ritual. This ritual and its significance for the execution team are examined in terms of their social functions and meanings. The portrayal of this ritual in popular culture through film is also considered in order to further develop an analysis of the accuracy and representativeness of socially constructed images of execution. Their effect on society is also discussed in terms of how public opinion about the death penalty is influenced by mass media.

The review of the current literature includes a background of the history of execution and its movement from the public into the privacy of the prison walls. Each of the methods of execution that are used today are explained in detail to develop the setting in which execution ritual takes place. The execution ritual is described in detail and its function for inmates, corrections officers, and society at large is discussed. An overview of the media and its relationship with execution is covered and several theoretical concepts related to execution ritual are explored.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Execution

Execution as a form of social punishment has been used in America since colonial times. The main methods before the invention of lethal injection, the electric chair, and the gas chamber were hanging and firing squad. At that time, executions were performed in front of the public and drew large crowds of spectators. Public execution was considered a righteous act of society that was encouraged by the population. It was also seen as a means to deter other potential deviants from corrupt behaviors. Eventually the act of public execution came to be seen as a stain on the civility of American society and the practice was driven into the interior of the prison in New England and the Mid-Atlantic Territory by 1845. In the southern states, public executions were alive and strong well into the 1940's due in large part to the racially charged atmosphere of the south in the post-Civil War era (Johnson 1998, Smith 1996). Although executions have retreated into the secrecy of the prison they still include a small audience of victims family members, journalists, state witnesses, and chaplains (Bessler 1997, Smith 1996).

When executions became private affairs within the prison, their measure of social coarseness was still considered a blight that besmirched civil society and so alternative methods of execution were developed that might afford prisoners a more humane execution. In 1888, the electric chair was invented and it was used for the first time in 1890 in New York (Trombley 1992 and Randa 1997). Nevada adopted the gas chamber in 1924 as an attempt to neutralize the brutality of the death penalty for inmates. The Prohibition Era and The Great Depression of the 1930's saw more death sentences carried out than any other time in the United States (Bohm 1999; Schabas 1997).

The state attempted to make execution more bureaucratized and privatized because it was viewed as a barbaric act that regressed the American social image into a less sophisticated point in its history. By speeding up the process and moving the executions into isolated areas within prisons the state was able to execute more furtively. The inmate was also treated differently in modern times. His emotional reactions were controlled as much as possible to ensure that his final days were less gruesome. For instance the inmate no longer saw the apparatus of execution prior to being executed (Johnson 1998). The attempts to make the death penalty more humane were deemed insufficient by the Supreme Court in the landmark case, *Furman v. Georgia* 1972 (408 U.S. 238). It was found that the death penalty violated the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution because it did not ensure a punitive sentence that was not "cruel and unusual". No executions took place in the U.S. between 1967 and 1977 as a result of this ruling (although the case was not tried until 1972, no executions took place in the U.S. Between 1967 and 1972). The ruling was overturned by the *Gregg v. Georgia* 1976 (428 U.S. 153) decision that reinstated the constitutionality of the death penalty. New statutes

for guiding the sentencing of criminals that included the consideration of mitigating and aggravating factors, such as the convicts state of mind at the time of the crime, or the convicts prior record, made it possible to reinstate the death sentence. Juries and judges using the guidelines provided within their state could recommend execution in capital cases. The first execution to take place after the *Gregg* decision was in Utah where Gary Gilmore was executed in 1977 by firing squad (Johnson 1998; Lifton and Mitchell 2000; Bohm 1999).

Current methods of Execution

There are currently five methods of execution that are legal in the United States. Lethal injection is the most commonly used method and is offered in thirty-six states. The next most popular method is the electric chair which is offered in nine states and has been used to execute 157 prisoners between 1976 and 2009. The gas chamber is still available for use in four states, however lethal injection is the primary method in all four states. Hanging and death by firing squad, which was last used in Utah in 2010, are legal in three states but only in the event that it is chosen over lethal injection/electrocution, or if lethal injection/electrocution are found to be unconstitutional (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2009). The next sections will describe how each method of execution is administered and the responses of inmates throughout the process.

Lethal Injection

An inmate executed by lethal injection is first strapped to a gurney by corrections officers. After he is strapped in, heart monitors are attached to his body. Two needles attached to the lethal injection machine on the outside wall of the execution room are

inserted into a vein on the inmate's body. One of these needles is a back-up needle. Many inmates on death row are intravenous drug users and it can be difficult to find a useable vein on their bodies. If a vein cannot be located a nurse will use a process called "cutting down the vein". In this instance, a scalpel is used to cut open the flesh of the convict and the needles are inserted into an exposed vein within the person's body (Trombley 1992).

There are six large injection pistons within the lethal injection machine. Three of the pistons are filled with a saline solution which is injected into the body first. The last three pistons contain sodium thiopental, pavulon or pancuronium bromide, and potassium chloride. The first drug anesthetizes the inmate and he drifts into a state of unconsciousness. The second drug paralyzes the muscles and prevents respiratory function. The final dose stops the heart from pumping blood and the inmate dies from a combination of respiratory failure and cardiac arrest. The curtains to the witness room are drawn back to expose the inmate in the execution room. The warden signals for the pistons to be activated and a lethal cocktail is released that will kill the inmate (Ecenbarger 1994 and Weisberg 1991).

The lethal injection machine is built with two levers that are pulled at the same time by two different corrections officers. One lever releases the lethal drugs while the other acts as a dummy lever. This feature was built into the machinery so that neither officer would know whether or not his or her lever was the one that caused the execution. Physicians are prohibited by medical ethics establishments from participating in lethal injection except to insert the needles and to pronounce the death of an inmate after examining the body. The drugs used to anesthetize and paralyze the inmate make it impossible to tell if the process is painful for the inmate (Ecenbarger 1992, Weisberg

1991 and Trombley 1992).

Electrocution

Prior to being electrocuted an inmate's leg and head are shaved to improve conductivity of electricity through the body at the points of contact. The person is then led to the electric chair where his/her limbs and torso are strapped to the chair. A sponge saturated with an appropriate amount of saline solution is placed on the head underneath a metal cap that contains an electrode. The whole device is strapped to the inmates head. It is important that the sponge is prepped correctly; otherwise, it will not conduct electricity properly and may cause malfunction during the execution. The second electrode is covered with a conductive gel and placed on the shaved leg. Once the inmate is strapped in and the electrodes are applied, his or her face is covered. (Trombley 1992, Hillman 1992, and Weisberg 1991).

The corrections officers retreat to the observation room and the warden gives the signal for the executioner to throw the switch that will administer between 500 and 2000 volts of electricity through the inmate's body for thirty second intervals until he or she is dead. The amount of voltage a victim receives is based on his or her weight and size which must be accurately calculated in order to avoid any dire mishaps during the execution including a slow death or causing the body to be defaced unnecessarily. The inmate may constrict violently, dislocating joints and fracturing bones, while the electricity passes through the body. The inmate usually releases his or her bowels during

this process. A doctor waits for the body to cool, then checks for a heartbeat after each interval of electricity is applied until there is none. After the execution the body displays severe burns. (Hillman 1992 and Weisberg 1991).

Gas Chamber

The gas chamber is a cramped cylindrical airtight room with a chair at its center, small windows surrounding, and a metal pipe running up through the roof to the outside of the building outside (Cabana 1996 and Trombley 1992). The inmate is led into the chamber and his arms legs, torso and forehead are strapped into the chair by the corrections officers. A long stethoscope that reaches the outside of the chamber is attached to the inmate. Underneath the chair rests a repository containing sulfuric acid. The room is sealed at all openings to ensure that no toxic gas is released during the execution. A lever located within the chamber holding sodium cyanide crystals is released into the bucket of sulfuric acid below the inmates chair by a corrections officer outside the chamber at the warden's signal. The chemical mixture creates deadly hydrogen cyanide gas. The inmate is encouraged to breathe deeply to endure as little suffering as possible although this rarely occurs. Most victims of the chamber resist breathing but must eventually give in. Death is caused by a lack of oxygen entering the brain. During the execution the inmate appears to experience great pain and may exhibit uncontrollable spasms (Cabana 1996, Weisberg 1991 and Trombley 1992).

Once the inmate is deceased a fan within the chamber ventilates the area through the pipe entering the roof. The corpse and the chamber must be sprayed down with

ammonia before the body can be retrieved from the chamber (Trombley 1992 and Cabana 1996). In the aftermath, the execution team retrieves the body from the chamber wearing protective gloves and gas masks (Weisberg 1991).

Firing Squad

Execution by firing squad is used only in the state of Utah since 1960 it was last used in 2010 in the execution of Ronnie Lee Gardner. During a firing squad execution, five corrections officers fire one shot each from a .30 caliber rifle into the inmate's heart. One of the rifles is loaded with a blank round so that no officer will know which of them delivered a deadly shot. The inmate is located twenty feet away behind a canvas wall with openings to allow the rifles a clear shot. The victim is strapped into a chair from the waist down. Sandbags are positioned around the chair to absorb the blood after the inmate is executed. Officers aim at a target over the inmate's heart. A direct shot to the heart sends the inmate into shock and the prisoner dies of blood loss through the large blood vessel in the heart and or the tearing of the lungs (Hillman 1992 and Weisberg 1991).

Hanging

The prisoner is blindfolded and his hands and legs are bound before a noose is placed around his neck upon a gallows. The noose must be positioned directly behind the left ear and the length of the rope must be precisely measured to fit the corresponding weight of the inmate. If the rope is too long the inmate could be decapitated; if it is too short, the inmate will not die instantaneously but will suffer a slow death from asphyxiation. The executioner releases a lever that controls a trapdoor beneath the

prisoner (Weisberg 1991 and Trombley 1992). The prisoner's neck is dislocated and fractured when the noose recoils which results in death. The method was last used in 1996 in the execution of Billy Bailey (State of Delaware Department of Corrections).

The Execution ritual and participants

The execution team

Becoming a member of the execution team requires certain characteristics. The position is one of great honor within the corrections field because officers who are chosen for this work receive more job autonomy than their counterparts in the general population. They are approached for the job only if they exhibit qualities that are highly regarded by the warden or the leader of the execution team. The position requires a level of extreme discretion due to the stigma that is synonymous with death work (Johnson 1998, Osofsky & Osofsky 2002, Osofsky, Bandura, and Zimbardo 2005). It is often the warden or the leader of an execution team that must choose the members. Candidates that are eager to put a person to death are usually least likely to be chosen because they do not have the poise of professionalism needed to carry out the job with dignity.

The most highly valued qualities of corrections officers on an execution team are professionalism, dignity, and discretion (Cabana 1996, Johnson 1998, Osofsky, Bandura and Zimbardo 2005). Each of these attributes allows the members of the team to participate in the ritual of execution without displaying emotion or other signs of judgment that might affect the convicted inmate or witnesses to the execution. Members of the team share a unique bond that is forged to counteract the socially controversial and psychologically disturbing aspects of their work. This group is selected by superiors

within the penal system's hierarchy, but their participation is strictly voluntary (Brown & Benningfield 2008, Johnson 1998).

The Rehearsal

The execution team rehearses their duties prior to the execution and one member of the execution team acts as a stand in for the convicted inmate. The reenactments prepare the team for the actual execution and facilitate a deeper trust amongst members as they work to carry out their duties with precision. Positioning oneself in the exact place of a person's last minutes of life induces great stress. Although the equipment used to complete the execution is not functioning during a rehearsal, acting as a stand-in for the convicted inmate requires that one trusts his fellow team members. A climate of complete trust and a deeper obligation amongst members is necessary within the execution team (Cabana 1996, Johnson 1998). This procedure also functions to dull the emotions of the officers for the execution in order to reduce the stress surrounding the situation. Within the team, members are paired up to provide an extra layer of support and unity within the group (Johnson 1998, Osofsky & Osofsky 2002, and Lifton & Mitchell 2000).

The Execution Ritual

In theory, rituals are created around symbolic actions that give rise to a collective idea about the meaning of something in the social world. A ritual is a set of specific procedures, actions, conversations, and/or symbolic materials that create an expression of a subject (Smith 1996). The ritual is meant to be interpreted in a specific way by those involved. Through the act of ritual and its completion, individuals attach a higher

meaning to the actions they perform. Individual perceptions are unified in ritual to create a collective idea used by those engaged in the ritual act to interpret the world (Durkheim 1912). The story a ritual lays out for those participating acts to strengthen their convictions about a subject or define their opinions about the ritualized object. The ritualized object is contorted into a form that the ritual designates. It softens the subjective experiences of those involved so that they might recount the same collective sentiments about the ritual and the subject of the ritual (Smith 1996).

People derive their notions of group unification through ritual activity. Turner (1986) explains, "If they have developed a ritualized encounter that affirms their common group membership, they will be more likely to enact those rituals again" (p.443). The attachment of group members to one another and to the predicates of social order depends on the manifestation of unified focus through ritual. Strengthening the bonds of group members and validating the social order through the collective action of ritual affirms for all members a mutual perception and interpretation of social action.

Execution sentences are carried out under strict adherence to procedure and protocol. The habituated behaviors corrections officers perform to carry out the death penalty are part of a ritual. Each corrections officer on the execution team is charged with a specific, but simple task that contributes to the work of the entire team. For example one member may be responsible for strapping down the inmates left leg to the execution chair (or gurney), while another execution team member is in charge of strapping down the right arm (Johnson 1996, Osofsky & Osofsky 2002). Breaking down the work into

less complex actions allows each member to take a smaller role in the execution. Using this method also leaves less room for error.

The inmate also plays a role in the execution ritual. Once the death warrant is issued the execution team prepares themselves and the inmate for the execution. The inmate is put on deathwatch, a task requiring two guards to observe the inmate at all times prior to the sentence being carried out. The guards are members of the execution team and they carry out the watch in rotating two person shifts. During the deathwatch, officers are examining the inmate for signs of suicidal tendencies and gauging the emotional stability of the prisoner to ensure that he will be able to meet his execution without being incapacitated by his own distress. The deathwatch can begin as soon as the death warrant is issued but is usually enacted 24 to 48 hours prior to the execution. The length of time is dependent upon the psychological state of the inmate. During the deathwatch the inmate is removed from death row and resides in a special cell away from the other prisoners. (Johnson 1998).

The inmate is led through a series of dehumanizing activities leading up to his death once the death warrant is issued. The orders for a last meal are delivered to the death cell. The inmate must box his worldly possessions and bequeath them to family and loved ones. A last visit with family and loved ones takes place. These visits are heavily monitored and security measures often prohibit physical contact (Prejean 1993). The inmate's head and leg are shaved if he is to be electrocuted and he is then led to a shower room for his final shower. Returning to his cell, he dons a clean prison uniform that he will wear to his death. The prisoner is finally ready to take his last walk to the execution room from which he will not return (Johnson 1998).

Each calculated step towards the moment of execution serves to dissociate the inmate from his life. The ultimate result is a human being stripped of his relationship with the world outside him. The prisoner inhabits a psychological state that embodies a living death. His acceptance of this gruesome fate plays a significant role in the ritual. He meets his death with a broken spirit that submits to his destruction. This behavior signifies to those participating and witnessing that execution is permissible or even justified. The fact that convicted parties surrender can be interpreted as their own admission that this punishment is a suitable resolution to their crimes (Johnson 1998 and Conquergood 2002). However, one could interpret some resistance in final statements where the prisoner maintains innocence or condemns the death penalty as an unjust punishment (Heflick 2005)

Executioner's Stress

The phenomenon of executioner's stress is the result of taking part in the execution ritual. Symptoms of this condition include difficulty sleeping, emotional numbness, and feelings of anxiety or depression (Payne & Pray 1990). Members of execution teams have reported problems such as recurring nightmares or an inability to connect emotionally and appropriately in various life situations (Solotaroff 2001 and Lifton & Mitchell 2000). To combat the stress of executions, officers rely on their group identity with the execution team and the support of the legal and judicial administration. The officers view their role as one created by the public and their actions as those mandated by society (Johnson 1998, Cabana 1996, and Solotaroff 2001). Researchers claim that the officers ability to "externalize, dissociate, and rely on diffusion of

responsibility often breaks down, causing many to describe conflicting feelings about their roles and the execution process itself” (p. 367 Osofsky & Osofsky 2002).

Psychologists have explored stress inoculation programs to lessen the negative effects of executioner’s stress. These programs have had some degree of success, but some of the resilience may be attributed to the personal characteristics of corrections officers willing to take on this type of work (Vasquez 1993, and Payne & Pray 1990). Osofsky, Bandura, and Zimbardo (2005) found that execution team members used strategies of moral disengagement to reconcile their duties to execute with the social taboos of taking lives. The officers use techniques such as dehumanizing the inmate by focusing on the crimes he or she has committed and justifying the actions as a security measure for society. The ritualized process of execution aided in moral disengagement through the displacement of responsibility which transpires from sharing the act with an entire group of execution team members. Most officers also described a strict separation of their work and personal lives which allow them to dissociate their actions on the job from their identity outside of the execution team.

The functions of execution ritual

Execution ritual for inmates

Execution teams carry out their duties with little to no visible or apparent emotional reaction (Johnson 1998, Solotaroff 2001, and Cabana 1996). This particular aspect is very important to providing a “humane” experience for the convicted inmate who must summon the strength to confront his death with minimal indication of fear or

frustration. The corrections officers' interactions with inmates during the deathwatch and leading up to execution are intended to pacify the inmate and ensure that he/she will be able to complete the ritual with as much dignity as possible. Living on death row compounded with the last highly structured hours of the convict's life being used to symbolically and materially prepare him or her to leave the world create a situation in which the inmate feels he or she has little or no autonomy (Smith 1996, Johnson 1998). Although their actions are highly regulated and they are mentally defeated, an opportunity for uncontrolled action presents itself in the form of an inmates' last words. These words are often sentiments of apology to the victims families, requests for forgiveness, religious convictions held by the inmate, or political statements about the death penalty, but they are usually shaped by the powerlessness of the situation. Expressions of defiance are less common in this setting (Schuck and Ward 2008, Rice, Dirks & Exline 2009, Heflick 2005). What is interesting about these statements is their lack of defiance in most cases. It can be seen as an indication of participation in the ritual. Regardless of the construction of the last statement (with the exception of defiance) the victim plays his or her expected role for the audience (Smith 1996).

Conquergood (2002) argues that the tacit compliance of inmates in the ritual of execution serves to validate state sanctioned killings because the image is one of prisoners meeting their death willingly. This behavior diffuses the brutality of execution and distinguishes it from murder in the eyes of the public. Interviews with corrections officers reveal that there is a significant pressure to manage a well displayed execution by ensuring the inmate is calm and collected during his or her last hours (Cabana 1996,

Johnson 1998, Solotaroff 2001). Failure to deliver this performance can reflect negatively on the work of the execution team, the prison, and the judicial system.

Mismanaged executions

The execution ritual is disrupted somewhat, when an execution does not go according to plan. When an inmate is subjected to a brutal execution, the execution team may be subject to investigation in the aftermath. One particular instance included a synthetic sponge attached to an electrode prior to execution. The synthetic sponge did not conduct electricity correctly and the inmate's head began to flame up. The voltage was administered three times before the victim was pronounced dead, and he appeared to be breathing in between the applications of electricity, which is highly unusual. When the execution was investigated the corrections officers gave final statements that exonerated each of the officers. The sponge itself was considered the defective element responsible for the mishandling of the execution despite the fact that the sponge was replaced by a member of the team who had not bothered to inquire as to whether a synthetic sponge would be appropriate (Trombley 1992).

The pressure of previous executions in which things did not go according to plan can weigh heavily on the execution team as an execution approaches. Warden Cabana (1996) recounted an incident with an inmate who exhibited involuntary movements and banged his head against the ventilation pipe in the gas chamber repeatedly during his execution. The display was gruesome and appeared cruel. In executions to follow, the chair in the chamber was fitted with a head strap to restrain the inmate's movement. Cabana recalled having anxiety about an execution that followed because he did not want

to have a spotlight placed on him or his execution team if something unplanned were to happen. These are only two examples of the consequences of a mismanaged execution; however, other scenarios of mismanaged executions have been exhibited throughout the history of the death penalty (Radelet 2010).

It is interesting to note that in this instance the officers are concerned that things will go awry because they do not want to be held responsible for the mishaps; however, in the previous example, officers attributed problems to extraneous variables outside their control. It seems that when faced with the full weight of their actions, the bond between officers and the implementation of ritual prevents the team from imploding under pressure. If asked to account for mismanagement, the team will stand together and protect one another from public insinuations of negligence.

Execution ritual for corrections officers

The ritual of execution serves to diffuse responsibility and stress related to the tasks of putting an inmate to death. Developing a solidarity amongst execution team members that is shrouded in secrecy prevents the corrections officers from being stigmatized in their communities, but it also works to create social cohesion. Many members of the execution team share close friendships outside of their work relationships. This bond correlates strongly with the work they share in common and the deeper trust they must develop to maintain a sense of security during the entire process of execution. Their relationships are also utilized to create a support network to deal with the stress, anxiety and the emotional difficulty that an execution will entail (Johnson 1998, Solotaroff 2001, Lifton & Mitchell 2000).

The level of labor division within the execution team may at first blush seem hyperbolic, but it serves the deeper purpose of distributing responsibility across the team. No one member of the execution team is culpable for taking a person's life if each person is only held accountable for a minute task such as strapping down the arm or the leg. The mental anguish of the job is diffused through this process (Osofsky & Osofsky 2002, Lifton & Mitchell 2000). The constant rehearsals prior to the execution can act as an added buffer against psychological distress. Vasquez found that being mentally prepared for the traumatic experience of putting an inmate to death resulted in less psychological stress afterward (1993).

Officers of the execution team take great pride in the work they do and recognize their place on the team as a high honor within their field. An extremely neutral position on the nature of their work allows the officers to perform their job with the utmost professionalism. Many officers describe their duties as simply part of their jobs and they perceive this task as administering a punishment prescribed by the public through the judicial system (Lifton & Mitchell 2000, Solotaroff 2001, Cabana 1996 and Johnson 1998). Their ability to conduct themselves as professionals helps them control their emotional state as well as the emotional state of the prisoner. They must accommodate the inmate during deathwatch and leading up to the execution. This is crucial to providing a humane experience for the condemned inmate, whose psychological state is extremely fragile prior to execution. The officer must also be careful not to become emotionally involved with the inmate. Doing so will make the task much more difficult and may create unnecessary stress in the aftermath of the execution (Johnson 1998 and Cabana

1996). Professionalism becomes a very fine line that the execution team officers learn to negotiate (Hochschild 1983).

Doing the job well allows the inmate to meet his or her death with dignity and humanity. It permits the officer to take part in that death with as little psychological trauma as possible. The interrelated functioning of the ritual for both inmates and officers is strangely symbiotic. It allows both parties to comply and participate in willful killing and dying.

Execution ritual for society

In Modern times, justifications for capital punishment have been built on a judicial framework that accepts this form of public retribution so long as the method is not “cruel or unusual” (*Gregg v. Georgia* 1976). Federal law (18 U.S.C.A. § 3596 and 28 CFR 26.3) has privatized the execution process by mandating a limit on the amount of witnesses able to view the act. The methods have also become more bureaucratized and technologically advanced as society searches for a means of putting people to death that is free of pain and inhumanity (Lifton & Mitchell 2000). This outcome can be assured through the eyewitness accounts of those present during executions. When the emotional and physical signs of pain are removed from the presentation of execution, a claim can be made for a ‘humane killing’ on behalf of the state.

The ritual of execution, which presents a subdued convict and a team of corrections officers willing to execute, not only functions as a source of emotional strength and support guiding the actions of both officers and prisoners, but also acts out a performance for the public. Even its retreat into the privacy of the prison walls was an

attempt to create a civilized form of execution. This performance makes state sanctioned executions incomparable to the evil and heinous actions society seeks to purge. The inmate does not struggle, the execution team does not defect, and the state does not murder in the name of the people. Instead the convict is symbolic of societal evils and the actions of the state are a sanctified sterilization of society. The execution ritual is the physical evidence of that sterilization and a proper performance signifies the humanity and righteousness of the punitive action (Conquergood 2002).

Media and execution

Media coverage of executions suggests that execution is the appropriate ending to a litany of criminal and violent actions (Miller & Hunt 2008). Further inquiry in media and its various mediums could explain how a culture comes to accept state sanctioned executions as a necessary method of punishment. The opinions of the public sway with the corresponding images that media present (Heath & Gilbert 1996) and these opinions are then used to shape public policies. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) found that media coverage of nuclear power shaped public opinion about the subject and correlated directly with their support of nuclear power plants in their communities. This is one example of how powerful media has become in indirectly shaping social policy. When our information about institutions is derived from media it helps us construct a belief system which we act on in the construction of public policy. Dowler (2003) found that fear of crime is related to a person's level of exposure to crime media (e.g. television shows and film). Finally, in a study done by Killingbeck (2001) it was demonstrated that news coverage of school shootings reinforced fear of crime and the construction public policies that were imprudent.

Most people develop their attitudes about capital punishment without taking into account factual information about the subject, nor do they have an inclination to find out more about the topic (Ellsworth and Gross 1994). Media have played a significant role in our perceptions of reality through its many messages and images. Research has shown that the more a subject is covered in the media, the more importance people attribute to that subject (Funkhouser 1973, Iyengar, Peters & Kinder 1982). The media are especially influential in circumstances where people know very little about a topic or have very little firsthand experience with the subject, for instance capital punishment (Haney 2005).

Sarat (2001) argues that executions are hidden from the public eye and experienced by the general population in only the most “mediated way” through popular culture. He challenges the accuracy of media representations of the death penalty and claims that they are unable to capture the reality of execution that inmates face. Pressures for inmates to claim responsibility for criminal acts are embedded in the plot line of many capital punishment films. Ideas of culpability juxtaposed with images of the crimes create a skewed image of convicts and executions. Sarat claims that these films strive to create an experience of capital punishment for the viewer that will make the audience believe that they have an understanding of the realities of capital punishment. Crime television generally has been based around these themes of genuine evil and the culpability of the convicted party. People learn from these channels of information regardless of whether they are accurate images and in this way the media may influence the opinions of the public (Haney 2005).

O’Sullivan (2003) claims that an analysis of the effects of media representations of execution is inconclusive, but he does concede that these films set a trend in public opinion. Although their effect cannot be fully understood or determined, capital

punishment movies of the 1990s coincided with a period of decline in the number of executions carried out in the United States (O'Sullivan 2003). Contrary to Sarat (2001), O'Sullivan (2003) argues that theatrical films including capital punishment can capture some of the psychological stress of inmates facing the death penalty and reveal the complications of carrying out execution sentences. It is important to keep in mind that fictive depictions of capital punishment may labor under the agenda of producers, who can choose what issues to raise, and what messages to represent (Wardle & Gans-Boriskin 2004).

Theoretical Framework and Concepts

A deeper understanding of ritual (Durkheim 1912) and its functions within society will provide a framework through which we can explore the connections of the execution team with the execution ritual. Touching upon dramaturgical theory (Goffman 1959) demonstrates how this ritual is manipulated and who benefits from the execution ritual. Marx's theory of labor (1844) and alienation is used to illuminate the nature of death work and its effects on corrections officers. Finally, Drawing from the ideas of Foucault (1975) allows insight into what the execution ritual accomplishes. Weber's Theory of division of labor was also included to illuminate how the highly bureaucratized process of execution facilitates corrections officers in carrying out the ritual.

Durkheim's Ritual

Everyday people complete a repetitive sequence of actions based on specific settings in our lives such as, work, home and school. These patterns often form rituals that allow us to maintain our social bonds. People derive their notions of group unification through ritual activity and in that unification they cultivate a stronger attachment to the social order (Turner 1986, Durkheim 1912). A set of actions becomes a

ritual when the actions are shared amongst a group of two or more and their focus is concentrated on a specific object. Group members recognize the attention of one another upon the object and they share a mutual sentiment in regards to the object. Their interactions foster a sense of belonging within the group that excludes those not partaking in the ritual activities. The ritual unites group members through their reciprocal commitments to one another that are exemplified through the ritual. During the ritual, members reach a heightened sense of emotional energy, known to Durkheim as moral cohesion (Alexander & Smith 2005, Durkheim 1912).

The approach of execution teams to their work is an example of a ritual that promotes a group identity and allows group members to follow orders by taking the life of another human being. Rehearsing the act before carrying out the sentence, providing the inmate with a last meal, guiding him through his last walk from his cell to the execution chamber and diffusing the relatively simple task of strapping the inmate into the chair (or gurney) amongst all members becomes an elaborate procedure that takes on a separate meaning for group members. The ritual creates a uniquely sacred space that shields them from the reproach of others outside the group and solidifies their justifications for their own involvement in execution. For the condemned, the ritual slowly dissociates life experiences from self identity so that the inmate will become resigned to the idea of death and accept it passively.

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgical theory also factors into what motivates the execution team to use ritualized behaviors. This idea posits that people prepare their actions for the public in order to send symbolic messages and create social clues as to how others should receive them. This is done through a private “back stage” preparation that supports the “front

stage” performance intended for public examination (Goffman 1959). In this case, the actual execution represents a front stage view of the performance of social justice. The witnesses become an audience that receives and judges the performance of the death penalty by both the corrections officers and the convict.

In the back stage the execution team rehearses this performance many times to ensure perfection. The officers and inmate are also refining their actions during the deathwatch, where both the prisoner and the officers are mentally prepared. The officer detaches his feelings about the morality of killing a man from his duties on the execution team and also works to distance himself emotionally from the inmate, while simultaneously prepping the inmate to meet his fate. The emotional support given to the inmate to pacify him throughout the process, coupled with the actions that manifest his coming death into a tangible reality, indicate to the inmate that he should resign himself to his impending death. The inmate is shuffled through a series of self deprecating acts that allow him to participate in his own death with little or no resistance. Inmates show little or no resistance to the material death manifest in packing their possessions and eating a last meal which are all backstage activities that prep them for the front stage execution. Their resignation to this fate carried out by the officers indicates to the officer that they are prepared to participate in the execution. Sometimes their actions and conversations indicate that they are not bitter towards the officers that will take part in their execution (Cabana 1996).

Emotional labor and Alienation

Hochschild used Karl Marx’s theory of labor to develop the ideas of emotional labor. According to Hochschild (1983) emotional labor “requires one to induce or

suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others . . . This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality.” (p.7). Execution team members must constantly manage their emotions and suppress feelings including guilt, sympathy, and attachment to perform their duties. Hochschild's work focused on the emotional labor of flight attendants who managed emotions by drawing on their personal emotions of compassion, kindness, and nurturing to provide a polite, comfortable, and pleasant environment for customers (1983). We can see the same principles applied when officers try to remind themselves of the heinous crimes committed by death row inmates during the deathwatch and up until the execution so that they can suppress feelings of sympathy and distance themselves emotionally from the inmate they are about to put to death (Johnson 1998). This constant manipulation of the inner elements of the self for the benefit of the institution using their labor can cause alienation (Hochschild 1983).

The worker is socially engineered to exhibit the emotional responses that are expected by the institution. Partaking in the execution ritual can be seen as a method of subjugating emotional labor by preparing officers to draw on their personal attributes in order to complete the task. This interaction over time may result in the individual being unable to access certain emotional responses for personal purposes within their daily lives. The emotional labor belongs to the institution that utilizes it for its own purposes and can no longer be accessed by the worker who is alienated from this part of the self. The symptoms of executioner's stress and the anguish described by members of the execution team years after their participation in executions is a clear indication of alienation from the self (Prejean 1993, Cabana 1996, Lifton & Mitchell 2000, Solotaroff

2001).

Foucault Social Control

One of the main premises that Foucault (1975a) outlines is that power is enacted through stringent regulation of the human body. Conditioning the body, through the appropriation of its movement, forces people to comply with a power structure. People may then be utilized as tools within that structure at some level. Even more important is the “self-controlled body” which can be adapted by applying pressure to the “soul” of an individual, making his/her behaviors malleable to forces of power. A system of power can be successful in its control over a subject only if it is able to understand the subject. Knowing how the individual operates and what forces motivate his/her behavior are necessary prerequisites for indoctrinating an individual into a system of control (Garland 1990, Smith 1996). For example, Foucault (1975b) discusses how a desire to comply with social norms concerning the body has been manipulated by a system of power that emphasizes surveillance and control of sexuality. Using knowledge of people's intensified focus on the body, other systems of power introduced in advertising and media create other points of control by regulating the types of bodies that are acceptable for public view.

In the execution ritual the body of the inmate is controlled by the officers, but the inmate is more deeply self-controlled by the ritual of execution. Officers come to understand inmates during their time on death row and through their observations on deathwatch. The last meal, assigning worldly possessions to loved ones, and the last walk all represent a form of psychosocial control that subdues the inmate and makes him a willing participant in his/her own death. The actions of corrections officers are controlled through the shared connection they all have to the ritual itself. The ritual and the pressure

to perform the execution properly creates a different form of self-control that ensures the officer's compliance. The officer's deeper understanding of the inmate and his state of mind prior to execution allows the officer to exert the control of the state over the inmate and ensures that the inmate will control himself and act in accordance with the ritual of penal execution.

Rationalization of Execution

Theories of rationalization developed by Max Weber (1905) describes how society adopts the certain characteristics that create a hyper-rationalized social world. The phenomenon is built on four components: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Activities are made more efficient by minimizing the amount of time necessary to complete an action and they are calculable because all aspects of any given task can be quantified. A sense of predictability is created by ensuring the experiences of those engaging in various activities follow a uniform design each time. Control is introduced by inserting technology into the roles that humans once performed and by creating technologies that are meant to control people as opposed to people controlling technologies. In a hyper-bureaucratized system such as the one theorized by Weber, rationalized processes create irrational outcomes. For example, it is generally considered immoral to kill another human being, therefore, the process of execution is broken down into smaller more predictable tasks for each member of the execution team so that no one member can be held responsible for the execution. This also introduces an element of

efficiency into the process. More importantly, the rationalization of the social world removes human reason from the systems in which people live and work and removes morality from the social world.

Executions exhibit several qualities of rationalization. For example, the processes of execution have been perfected over time so that inmates can move through the protocol of execution quickly once their appeals have all expired. Each part of the execution process is timed exactly from the last meal down to the amount of time it takes for the inmate to be killed. The amount of electricity and the lethal dosages necessary to kill the inmate are all measured exactly in accordance to an inmate's body. The procedure for execution may vary slightly from prison to prison depending on the method but the process is essentially the same for every inmate who faces the death penalty. Elements of control persist throughout the execution process, from the machines that carry out the sentence to the simplified tasks of the strap down team. Each piece of the execution process disregards and degrades the humanity of inmates and officers involved.

The Current Study

This study uses the media representations of state sanctioned executions that are presented in films to explore how media constructs messages about the ritual of execution. The academic literature has not addressed the importance of the role ritual plays in validating capital punishment as it is carried out. Almost no connections have been made in the literature about the accuracy of media representations of this ritual. The media create an outlet of information for the public about execution because the act itself is so privatized in society. It is important to illuminate the messages relayed in these

media representations about how executions are carried out because they are a sole source of information that the public can use to define their opinions about the death penalty.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Many movies have been made about death row and inmates facing the death penalty. Most of these movies are focused on the inmate and other characters are peripheral or play a supporting role. The ritual of execution has also been portrayed on the silver screen through these movies. Although there has been some focus on the roles of death row inmates in film (Sarat 2001, O'Sullivan 2003), the academic literature has not addressed the portrayal of corrections officers or the execution ritual enacted by both officers and inmates. This research attempts to address execution ritual in film, by studying movies that include the execution ritual.

The research employs ethnographic content analysis (ECA) to evaluate execution films. Ethnographic content analysis uses electronic, print, or audio-visual documents as cultural artifacts that can relay information about society (Altheide 1987). The method is derived from content analysis and grounded theory (Burden 2009). Content Analysis uses the study of various objects such as text or print as a subject of study to make determinations about the social world (Patton 2002). Grounded theory generates theory in the process of analysis while the research is conducted (Glaser & Strauss 1967). ECA

contains both narrative and numeric data that delineate categories of analysis. Deeper patterns of human behavior are able to emerge that may not be detected using only quantitative content analysis through the exploration of narrative within content (Altheide 1987). Some categories of analysis are developed beforehand and are used to guide the study; however, others emerge as the subject is explored. This flexibility allows concepts to surface throughout the examination of data.

The Sample

The movies chosen for this study were selected for their notoriety. Notoriety is relevant to this study because it indicates that the movie was received by a large audience and this in turn means that the messages derived from the movie effect a greater portion of the public. Their significance in culture is an indication of their over all influence.

In this study, notoriety of the films was based on the money that they earned in the box office, the nominations for awards, the awards that the movie received, and ties to other culturally relevant mediums such as books. The movies most relevant to this research were *Capote* (2005), *Monster's Ball* (2001), *The Green Mile* (1999), and *Dead Man Walking* (1995). By using the movie website boxofficemojo.com, each movie's domestic box office gross was determined. Each of the films grossed among the top 100 movies for the year they were released. *Capote* was released in 2005. It grossed \$28,750,530, was nominated for five academy awards and was awarded one Oscar. *Monster's Ball* which was released in 2001, grossed \$31,273,992 and was nominated for two Academy Awards. The movie was also awarded an Oscar. *The Green Mile* was released in 1999 and was nominated for four Academy Awards. The film grossed \$136,801,374 and was adapted from a novel by well known author Stephen King. *Dead Man Walking* was released in 1995. It was awarded an Oscar and received three other

Academy Award nominations. The film made \$39,363,635.

The films were 133.5 minutes long on average. Respectively, *Monster's Ball* was 111 minutes, *The Green Mile* was 188 minutes, *Dead Man Walking* was 122 minutes and *Capote* was 114 minutes. The films display six executions all together. *The Green Mile* includes three of these execution sequences all of which display execution by electric chair. The electric chair is also the method used in *Monster's Ball*. *Dead Man Walking* exhibits an execution via lethal injection and *Capote* shows an execution by hanging.

Other movies that represent the execution ritual were considered such as *The Chamber* (1996), *The Life of David Gale* (2003), and *Last Dance* (1996); however, they were not included in this analysis because they did not achieve the same level of notoriety that other films possessed. This is an important factor to consider because it indicates the movie was well received in popular culture and continues to be circulated by a wider audience. Therefore, the messages inherent in the movies that were chosen will shape the public views of the death penalty and execution more so than films that do not receive the same critical acclaim or cultural popularity.

Other movies created before 1980 were also excluded from the analysis because they represent a time before the *Furman* (1976) decision. Once the legislation surrounding the death penalty was altered to include parameters of “cruel and unusual punishment” focus of entertainment also shifted to reflect new methods of execution and the psychological distress of death row and executions (O'Sullivan 2003). Execution ritual is a means to measure the ways in which those involved with carrying out the death sentence alter their perception of execution. Therefore, movies in which psychological stress and management of stress are a central theme are more relevant to the time and to the analysis conducted here.

The Coding Scheme

The coding scheme was developed using theory and literature about the execution ritual (Johnson 1998, Cabana 1996, Solotaroff 2001, Conquergood 2002, Hochschild 1983). The seven concepts that emerged from the literature, theory, and films are (1) techniques of neutralization, (2) expressions of emotion or repression of emotions by corrections officers, (3) admission of guilt or verbal/ non-verbal cues of tacit consent on behalf of the inmate, (4) verbal/ non-verbal cues from the execution team that pacify the inmate. Using The Timeline of Inmate's Final Days table 1 created by Osofsky and Osofsky (2002) (5) the accuracy of the execution ritual portrayed in the films was verified. The final categories were (6) execution ritual acts that caused an inmate to breakdown or otherwise become resigned to death, and (7) signs of executioner stress displayed by corrections officers Johnson 1998 and Payne & Pray 1990). The portions of the movie that portrayed the execution ritual were transcribed and the sequences that captured dialogue or actions representative of each category were cataloged. The amount of time that had elapsed in the plot of the story was also noted to investigate the chronological accuracy of the stories.

The techniques of neutralization category was developed by drawing from Sykes & Matza (1957) theory on techniques of neutralization. The theory asserts that people use methods of neutralization to temporarily suspend social and moral inhibitions that prevent them from carrying out actions that would be taboo in most cases. Some of these methods include denying responsibility for these actions, denying any injury is caused to the victim, condemning those who oppose their actions, appealing to higher loyalties, disbursing blame amongst a group, dehumanizing the victim, and misrepresentation of consequences. Although corrections officers may not deny that inmates are harmed by

execution they may resign themselves to the execution process because the methods of execution have evolved to become quick and less painful for the victim. Condemning those who would oppose the death penalty or appealing to a higher power such as the judicial system that ascribes the death sentence are both ways in which officers may neutralize their participation in the execution ritual. The execution team works as a unit to disperse the responsibility and emotional burden of carrying out the death penalty, members have also described fixating upon the crimes of their victims as a way to dehumanize an inmate before execution (Johnson 1998, Osofsky, Bandura & Zimbardo 2005). Misrepresentation of the consequences is defined as psychologically minimizing the effects of one's actions and/ or focusing on the rewards. Corrections officers may exhibit this behavior by making glib statements about an execution to one another. This research focuses on statements made by corrections officers portrayed in the films that embody these methods of neutralization.

Verbal and non-verbal expressions of emotion or active repression of emotion explore the complexity of the emotional labor required of corrections officers to carry out executions. Repressing emotional responses to the act of killing another human being to fulfill the states determination of death as a punitive action clearly falls under emotional management. Visual and verbal expressions of this type are examined in the analysis of the films. Expressions of emotion generally from corrections officers and directed towards inmates may indicate the distress of their position or a lack of professionalism that is uncharacteristic of an execution team. Both aspects of emotional expression will be explored and are juxtaposed with firsthand accounts of corrections officers and witnesses of actual executions in order to determine their accuracy in film (Cabana 1996, Prejean 1993, Solotaroff 2001).

The inmate's behavior during execution can also be interpreted through film by examining verbal or non-verbal admissions of guilt. Other behaviors, such as forgiving corrections officers that are involved in the execution or apologizing to families of the victims during the final statement before execution, indicate a resignation to the ritual of execution. This category explores the inmate's role in the execution ritual and explores the process through which an inmate's tacit consent can be manufactured through the execution ritual.

Any verbal or non-verbal cues exhibited by corrections officers that serve to pacify the inmate prior to execution in the films are important because they demonstrate how corrections officers prep inmates mentally to receive their fate. These actions can be construed as a means to subdue the inmate and ensure that he/she participates appropriately in the execution ritual. This category investigates the relationship between inmates and officers, but also serves to analyze the manufacture of tacit consent more deeply.

Any parts of the ritual that cause an inmate to breakdown and become resigned to death are important because they present the means by which an inmate begins to participate in this ritual. Each physical manifestation of their exit from the world works to corrode their sense of self which makes it possible for the prisoner to succumb to the sentence of death. Any verbal or non-verbal actions on the part of the inmate that suggest resignation to death are monitored in the films.

The symptoms of executioner stress are also analyzed to get a well-rounded view of the long and short term effects of participating in ritual for corrections officers. This problem involves such a small group of people within society that its display in film is an equally significant facet of the execution ritual. It gives a well-rounded view of the

emotional labor required to complete the job and the place of ritual in facilitating this, but it also demonstrates the fragility of the human psyche and the greater consequences of the ritual for those involved.

The category, accuracy of the ritual, uses components of the Timeline of Inmate's Final Days table (Osofsky & Osofsky 2002) as they relate to execution ritual. Each movie is surveyed for its inclusion of these key components. This Timeline serves to check the accuracy of the ritual portrayed in the film.

Table 1

Timeline of Inmate's Final Days

ONE MONTH PRIOR TO EXECUTION:	DEATH WARRANT DELIVERED TO INMATE STRAPDOWN TEAM BEGINS REHEARSALS*
ONE WEEK PRIOR TO EXECUTION:	INMATE PLACED ON "DEATH WATCH"
NIGHT PRIOR TO EXECUTION: DAY OF EXECUTION:	INMATE TRANSPORTED FROM DEATH ROW TO THE "DEATH HOUSE" 7:00 AM-INMATE IS AWAKENED AND SHOWERED 8:00 AM-3:00 PM-INMATE VISITS HIS FAMILY IN "DEATH HOUSE" LOBBY 3:00 PM-INMATE'S FAMILY IS ESCORTED TO SEPARATE FACILITY 3:00 PM-4:30 PM-INMATE VISITS HIS SPIRITUAL ADVISOR(S), MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL(S), LAWYER(S), AND/OR OTHERS 4:30 PM-5:30 PM-INMATE CONSUMES FINAL MEAL 5:30 PM-5:45 PM-INMATE CHANGES INTO LOOSEFITTING CLOTHES WITNESSES ENTER EXECUTION OBSERVATION ROOM 5:45 PM-INMATE IS ESCORTED BY STRAPDOWN TEAM TO EXECUTION CHAMBER 5:50 PM-EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIANS INSERT TWO INTRAVENOUS NEEDLES** 5:55 PM-INMATE IS OFFERED CHANCE TO MAKE FINAL COMMENTS 6:00 PM-WARDEN CAIN NODS APPROVAL TO EXECUTIONER TO COMMENCE EXECUTION

These steps were added to the Osofsky & Osofsky (2002) Table1 to capture elements of execution that are also critical to execution ritual.*

The step in which the emergency medical technicians insert two intravenous needles has been replaced by a second set of criteria shown in Table 2. **

The times at which these events occur are specific to the Missouri execution protocol and are of no importance to this study. The order in which these events occur can be generalized to execution procedures from prisons across the United States. Therefore, the ways in which films represent all aspect of execution are analyzed in the study. The researcher chose to make a quantitative count of which aspects of the execution are displayed and whether they adhere chronologically to the elements described in the Timeline of Inmate's Final Days Table. A second table was developed by the researcher to create a checklist of the necessary procedures carried out during execution based on the method shown in the films. Table 2 below elaborates on the steps of execution by lethal injection, the electric chair, and hanging as they have been described in the literature. These steps and the *Timeline of Inmate's Final Days* table have been adapted into four tables that reflect the accuracy of the films in the findings section.

Table 2

Execution Procedure by Method

Lethal Injection	Electrocution	Hanging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inmate Strapped to Gurney •Two needles inserted into a vein in inmate's body •Two officers pull two levers to start lethal injection machine •1st drug released causes inmate to become unconscious •2nd drug released relaxes the muscles and causes respiratory arrest •3rd drug released causes cardiac arrest and death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inmate's head/leg are shaved •Inmate is strapped into the electric chair •A sponge is saturated with solution and strapped to inmates head under an electrode •Executioner throws a switch to release electricity into the inmate's body •A doctor checks the inmate's pulse •If alive, the executioner throws the switch again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inmate's hands and legs are bound •Inmate is blindfolded •A noose is placed around the inmate's neck •The executioner releases the lever on the platform •The inmate falls through the trapdoor neck is broken or the inmate is asphyxiated by the noose

The more accurately a film portrays execution the more likely it is that the film captures a reality of execution that is rarely experienced by people in the general public. More importantly each of these categories is established to examine the socially constructed ideas about execution that the public may use to determine their opinions about the death penalty. These opinions are a central piece of the ongoing dialogue that shapes social policies of the death penalty.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study used seven categories of analysis to explore the accuracy of media representation of execution ritual in film. The categories developed from academic literature, social theory, and accounts of execution by corrections officers and others who have participated in the ritual allow the researcher to juxtapose the images of execution ritual against the reality of execution as it is described in these sources. Using this analysis, the research also seeks to determine what messages are contrived from media representations of execution. All four of the films examined in the research incorporated four or more elements of the execution ritual outlined in the seven categories of analysis. A brief summary of the films will illuminate certain aspects of the research and will be included prior to the investigation of the seven categories outlined in the methodology.

Summary of the Films

The film, *Capote*, is based on the biography of novelist Truman Capote and his experiences while writing his book *In Cold Blood*. The main character, Truman Capote, befriends and visits with two murderers on death row who have killed a family of four in Kansas in 1959. Capote uses the information that the inmates divulge during these visits

to write his book over the span of the next three years while the two prisoners work through the appeals process. Once the book is written, Capote makes a final journey to visit the prisoners and he witnesses their executions by hanging.

Monster's Ball is about a corrections officer, Hank, on the strap-down team in a prison where he and his son, Sonny, work. Hank's retired father was also a corrections officer and Hank's son is a new member of the strap-down team. The story opens with the strap-down team preparing for the execution of an inmate to take place in the next two days. Sonny is unable to complete the final walk with the inmate and vomits in front of the inmate. After the execution Hank is irate about the Sonny's performance and engages him in a physical confrontation. Shortly after, Sonny commits suicide. Under darkly coincidental circumstances, Hank finds the recently executed inmate's wife hysterical on the side of the road in the rain. He has never met her and does not know of her relationship to the executed inmate. He gives her and her injured son a ride to the hospital where the woman's son dies from a hit and run accident. Over the next few months Hank and the woman begin a relationship that alleviates their grieving.

The Green Mile was adapted from a Stephen King novel and it includes elements of supernatural phenomena that are purely fictional. It is about a group of corrections officers that run death row and are part of a strap-down team during the depression era. The team finds that the newest inmate, John Coffey, has supernatural abilities that allow him to heal the sick and give life to the recently deceased. The main character and head of the execution team, Paul, finds out that John Coffey is innocent through a psychic flashback that John allows him to see, when the actual culprit also finds himself on death row. A vindictive corrections officer, Percy, continuously torments the inmates with cruel jokes and malicious actions. Percy's sadistic nature motivates him to intentionally

mismanage an execution which leads to a brutal and horrific death for one of the inmates on the row. Later, John Coffey releases a dark supernatural substance into Percy that causes him to kill the inmate that committed the crimes John Coffey was being accused of committing. This also resulted in Percy's admission into a mental institution. The movie ends with the strap-down team reluctantly leading John Coffey to the electric chair where he is put to death.

The final film, *Dead Man Walking*, is based on the life of Sister Helen Prejean and her work with death row inmates. Prejean agrees to meet with a death row inmate, Matthew Poncelet, and also agrees to be his spiritual adviser for his execution. Prejean works to accommodate Poncelet during his final days and works to help him find spiritual redemption and reconciliation before he is put to death. Poncelet eventually takes responsibility for the rape and murder of two teenagers and asks for spiritual redemption for his sins prior to his execution.

Techniques of Neutralization

There were ten instances of techniques of neutralization demonstrated in the films. Four of the scenarios involving techniques of neutralization were based on an appeal to higher loyalty in which one's action are justified because of the greater good or the righteousness of the ultimate outcome. When the Warden in *Capote* discusses the inmate's refusal of food with Truman Capote, he says, "It's not his right to kill himself. . . . It's the right of the people of this state and that's who I work for, the people." In this scene the warden is placing the responsibility of execution on the state and the judicial system.

A scene in *Monsters Ball* involved a former corrections officer whose son and grandson were members of a strap-down team. It is unclear whether this character was also a member of a strap-down team when he worked as a corrections officer. The night

before the execution is to take place in *Monsters Ball*, the retired corrections officer, is shown adding a news clipping to a scrapbook. The clipping is a report on the execution that is to take place, and the scrapbook is filled with similar articles about other inmates that presumably have been put to death. This morbid hobby indicates that the man sees the act as justified and is perhaps proud of the work his family does with the strap-down team. His motives are inconclusive, but it would seem that this illustrates the character's idealization of execution as an important job that is supported by society. The articles in the scrapbook are evidence of this social support.

The strap-down team gathers in prayer and reads from the Bible on the eve of execution in *Monsters Ball*. The verse was “Now know I that the lord saveth his anointed. He will hear him in his holy heaven. The saving strength of his right hand . . . we will remember the name of the lord our God when they are brought down and fallen but we are risen and stand upright.” The verse includes a justification for execution in that it implicates those “who are fallen” and also validates those who are “risen and stand upright”. The verse also makes mention of God saving those who have been chosen.

When a corrections officer that is challenging the motivations behind Sister Helen Prejean's charity to a convict that is to be executed in *Dead Man Walking*, he responds to her criticisms of the death penalty by saying “You know the Bible says there's an eye for an eye.” Meaning that the convict has murdered and that God's law condones retaliation of a similar fashion to provide atonement for the prisoner's actions. Each of these sequences is an incident of appealing to a higher loyalty to neutralize the effects of the act of execution. The warden appeals to the higher loyalty of the judicial system in *Capote* and the corrections officers in *Monsters Ball* and *Dead Man Walking* use religious appeals.

There were three instances of denial of responsibility which proposes that a person acts out because they are found in circumstances beyond their control. A denial of responsibility is played out once in *Monsters Ball* and twice in *Dead Man Walking*. One instance of techniques of neutralization in *Dead Man Walking* involved a nurse whose responsibility was to insert needles into the prisoner to prep him for lethal injection. In *Dead Man Walking* the nurse who will be prepping the inmate assists Sister Helen Prejean when she faints. When Prejean asks if she will be participating in the execution the nurse replies, "It's just part of the job, you know?" Prejean has a conversation prior to this with a corrections officer on the strap-down team in which the officer says of his participation in execution; "It's just part of the job."

When talking to his son the night before the execution that they will be carrying out, the main character in *Monsters Ball* tells him, "You can't think about what he (the prisoner) did or anything else about him. It's our job we have to do our job right." Each of the characters in these films reiterate an almost identical response to their participation in execution. The technique serves to take their personal actions and involvement out of the act of execution and make their actions a product of the rationalized working environment they inhabit.

Denial of the victim was also illustrated in two different sequences of the movies. This techniques asserts that one's actions are appropriate because the person was deserving of the treatment they receive. The two scenes involving the technique were shown in *Dead Man Walking* and *The Green Mile*. In *Dead Man Walking* the corrections officer reveals to Sister Helen Prejean that he is part of the strap-down team to which she responds that it must be a difficult job. The corrections officer replies, ". . . these prisoners get what's coming to them." Before reading the file on a new inmate, the leader

of the strap-down team in *The Green Mile* mentions to the team that he believes the new inmate on their row might be feeble minded. A second corrections officer replies “Imbecile or not he deserves to fry for what he done.” In both scenes, the act of execution is validated by emphasizing the criminal acts of the victim.

The one instance of condemning the condemners is illustrated in *Dead Man Walking*. Condemning the Condemners is a techniques that involves accusing those that condemn one's actions as judging their own acts harshly, impartially or unfairly. When a corrections officer scrutinizes Sister Helen Prejean because of her involvement with the inmate facing execution, he asks her “What is a nun doing in a place like this? Shouldn't you be teaching children? Do you know what this man has done . . . How he killed them kids?” His criticisms are a clear indication that he condemns her aid of the prisoner, which is also a method of neutralization for him that allows him to validate his own involvement in execution.

Expression of emotion or repression of emotion by corrections officers

Emotional displays including emotional labor and management or emotional reactions unchecked by self control. This category was displayed by several different scenes in *Monsters Ball* and *The Green Mile*. *Capote* and *Dead Man Walking* were not representative of this category. This is most likely due to the fact that these movies put more emphasis on the inmates and corrections officers are peripheral minor characters in these films.

Monsters Ball included several of these scenes. The first involved Sonny, the main character's son and fellow execution team member reaching through the bars to pat the inmate on the shoulder as he begins to have a panic attack. This happened in the death house a few hours prior to execution. The main character, Hank, lightly reprimands

Sonny and tells him to back away from the inmate repeatedly. Once Sunny complies Hank opens the cell and asks the inmates to remove his hands from the cell bars and gently guides the inmate away from the bars before leaving the cell and locking it. It is clear in this instance Hank finds this level of intimacy between Sonny and the inmate to be professionally inappropriate.

Later the inmate is drawing a portrait of Hank and he mentions that “a portrait captures a person far better than a photograph. It truly takes a human being to see a human being.” Hank remains stiff, rigid, and non-responsive to the inmate's conversation. Hank's behavior leads the viewer to believe that he would like to distance himself from the prisoner and the prisoner's emotions despite the amicable dialogue the inmate uses to engage Hank.

When the inmate finally takes his last walk to the execution chamber guided by Hank and Sonny on either side of him, Sonny breaks away from the unit hunches onto the floor and proceeds to vomit. The team continues forward with a third member stepping forward into Sonny's position guiding the inmate along. Sonny's physical reaction to the execution indicates an emotional disturbance related to his role on the strap-down team.

Once the inmate has been led to the chamber and has been executed the movie pans to the employee bathroom where Hank finds Sonny washing his hands. Hank begins screaming and cursing at Sonny for messing up the last walk and the argument escalates into a physical confrontation that is broken up by other execution team members. Hank leaves the bathroom and Sunny slides down the wall into a crouching position as he holds back tears. The scene reveals the importance of emotional distance and repression for Hank who sees Sonny's actions as an inappropriate display of emotion that threatened the execution ritual.

Sonny commits suicide the next day, and there is no sign of grief or disturbance on Hank's part. Hank does, however, resign from his job as execution team leader. He turns in his badge despite the warden's insistence that he keep it, and he also burns all of his corrections officer uniforms. When his father reprimands him for quitting the team Hank replies, "I can't do it anymore." Although many of the events that transpire are Hank's reaction to Sonny's death. The suicide and Hank's resignation are clearly related to participating in execution which seems to compound the troubled relationship between the two characters. The film gives the impression that the cold-blooded nature of the careers of both characters exacerbates their conflicts and makes it more difficult for them to relate to one another which can indicate alienation as a result of emotional labor.

During the first execution rehearsal of *The Green Mile*, the orderly that is a stand-in for the soon to be executed inmate begins making vulgar jokes about death. Many of the corrections officers laugh at the orderly's antics, but the execution team leader, Paul, scolds the team for encouraging this behavior. He explains, "We'll be doing this for real tomorrow night. I don't want anybody remembering some stupid joke like that and getting going again." The character is asking that the team remember they will need to suppress their emotional reactions, in this case humor, because it will disrupt the ritual.

Prior to the final execution, Paul has an intimate conversation with an inmate he now knows is innocent. He asks, "When I stand in front of God on my judgment day and he asks me why I killed one of his miracles, what am I going to say? That it was my job?" The statement references Paul's feelings of remorse and guilt over his participation in the execution. It is also interesting to note that his mention of the execution ritual simply "being his job" appears to be a rejection of a technique of neutralization that might have otherwise allowed him to reconcile these emotions with his actions.

Later, when the corrections officers begin to work together to strap this inmate into the electric chair, one of the members strapping down the left leg begins to weep silently. Paul tells the man to wipe his eyes before he stands and turns to the witnesses. Paul's response to the corrections officer's show of emotion presents an element of emotional repression required of this officer to properly conduct the ritual. During the strap-down scene the other officers are also clearly holding back tears as they step away from the inmate now strapped into the electric chair. A second corrections officer has to prod Paul to give the final order to start the electricity. This is an uncharacteristic behavior for Paul because he had no trouble giving the command in the previous executions shown in the film. This final execution takes an emotional toll on the entire team and it is obvious that each member is working to suppress their feelings in order to complete the ritual.

Admission of guilt or verbal/non-verbal cues of tacit consent by inmate

Many of the admissions of guilt and cues of tacit consent by the inmate are exhibited in the final comments made prior to execution. All of the movies reviewed included this category. The inmate in *Capote* says of himself and his accomplice, "There must be something wrong with us to do what we did," before recounting the crimes he committed that led to his death sentence. The inmate points out that he believes there is something intrinsically unnatural in his character that separates him from other members of society and this admission precludes both guilt and consent because this unique nature has made him capable of heinous acts.

A few hours prior to his execution the same prisoner tells Truman Capote, "I understand why you didn't want to come. I wouldn't be here either if I didn't have to." This statement presumes the inmate feels resigned to participate in his own death. He is

obliged to fulfill this engagement even though it is not in his interest. Right before ascending the platform to be executed the inmate reaches out to shake the hand of a police officer from the small community in which he murdered an entire family. He tells the police officer, "Great to see you," in an earnest exchange. It is as though the character is welcoming this person to view his death as a form of penance to console the community members. In his final statement the inmate asks, "Is there anybody from the family here?" When the warden responds that there is no family the inmate replies, "Well tell them . . . I can't remember what I was going to say. For the life of me." It seems the inmate intended to apologize for the crimes he had committed, but in his final moments he seems to become disoriented by the stress of facing his death.

When the inmate in *Monsters Ball* meets with his wife and son for a final visit his son asks, "I'm not gonna see you again after this?" To which the inmate says, "No . . . because I'm a bad man." The son asks, "Who says?", to which the inmate tells him, "I do . . . you ain't me. You're the best part of what I am . . . this man you see sitting in front of you today, you ain't." This dialogue expresses how deeply the inmate has internalized the sentence of death and combined this judicial decision with his identity. The inmate's final words are "Push the button." Meaning that the corrections officers should start the electrical current that would kill him. His response is one of complete resignation to the execution. It was almost as if the inmate simply wanted to move through the process quickly and without protest.

The second prisoner to be executed in *The Green Mile* asks that the inmate in the cell adjacent to him take watch over his pet mouse while he is being executed. He says, "You take him John. Till this foolishness be done." Asking the inmate to take care of the mouse and referring to his own execution as "foolishness" demonstrates the inmate's

surrender to the execution despite his frustration with the ultimate outcome, which is his death. Immediately after placing the mouse with another inmate the prisoner turns to the corrections officers who have come to collect him for his last walk and he begins to cry then addresses the officers, “You're a good man boss. You too boss Edgecomb. I sure wish I could have met you guys someplace else.” This statement reveals that the inmate holds no animosity towards the corrections team that is about to lead him to his death. It is symbolic of the inmate's consent to this process. The inmate's final statement is an admission of guilt: “I'm sorry for what I do. I'd give anything to take it back but I can't. God have mercy on me. . . Amen.”

The final execution shown in *The Green Mile* is especially emotional for both the inmate and the corrections officer. When the execution officer asks how he will reconcile his actions with God the inmate replies, “Tell God it was a kindness you done. I know you're hurting . . . I'm tired. I want it to be done and over. I do. I'm tired.” In this scenario the inmate consents to execution despite the reluctance of even the corrections officer. The inmate even goes so far as to console the strap-down team as they lead him to the execution chamber. He remarks, “It's alright fellas. This here is the hard part. I'll be alright in a little while.”

As the time counts down to Poncelet's execution in *Dean Man Walking*, he gives Sister Helen Prejean his Bible and mentions that he has dated it himself. Prejean opens the Bible and sees that on the inside of the front cover Poncelet has written his name, his birthday, and the date and location of his death. The scenario represents Poncelet's acceptance of his death that is hours away. Right before he enters the execution chamber Poncelet ties up a final loose end, knowing that there is no point in resisting any longer. He asks Prejean, “Will you check in on my momma from time to time?” Poncelet's final

statement admits guilt and seeks redemption: “Mr. Delecroix I don't want to leave this world with any hate in my heart. I ask your forgiveness for what I done. Its was a terrible thing I done taking your son away from you. Mr. and Mrs. Percy I hope my death gives you some relief . . .”

Verbal/ non-verbal cues from execution team that pacify inmate

All of the films demonstrated verbal or non-verbal cues from corrections officers that were meant to pacify the inmate except for *Capote*. In *Monsters Ball*, during a final meeting of the strap-down team, one member mentions that the inmate likes to draw and that this calms him down. The team leader then asks a second member to ensure that the inmate has the necessary supplies to draw with when he is moved to the Death House. Before the inmate is escorted to the Death House he has packed all of his possessions and asks the guard to be careful with his things to which the guard replies earnestly, “Don't worry about it man.” When the inmate is transferred to the Death House the corrections officer tells him he is going to make the handcuffs loose so that he can be comfortable as long as “everything is gonna be okay”. The inmate agrees. When he reaches the cell the inmate gets slightly agitated when he does not see his paper and pencil in the cell. The corrections officer reassures him that the drawing materials are on their way and that he will have them shortly. In these scenes the corrections officers have taken every measure to sooth the anxieties of the inmate prior to execution.

The corrections officers sit for portraits that the inmate draws and they compliment him on his work. The inmate begins to have a panic attack after giving a drawing to one of the corrections officers. He clings to the bars of his cell and to the corrections officer. The second corrections officer enters his cell and gently, but firmly

removes the inmates hands from the cell bars saying calmly to the inmate, "It's alright just let go. Let go, it's alright come on." The inmate complies and the corrections officer closes the cell. The corrections officer provided a professional level of support for the inmate so that the inmate would comply with regulations. Once the inmate was led to the execution chamber and the team had strapped him into the electric chair, the remaining two corrections officers lightly pat the inmate's hand before exiting the room. The lack of emotional response from the corrections officers makes this action appear to be in the interest of conciliating the inmate.

The Green Mile captures the intentions of corrections officers to promote an environment of concordance through an exchange that the strap-down team has with a particularly vindictive member of the team. One corrections officer says of the inmates, "We don't scare them more than we have to." The execution team leader, Paul, adds to this comment, "Men under strain can snap. Hurt themselves and hurt others. That's why our job is talking. You'd do better to think of this place like the intensive care unit of a hospital."

When Paul meets with an inmate prior to his execution, the inmate asks if Paul believes that people go to a better place if they have repented for the bad things they have done. Paul replies, "I just about believe that very thing." The comment provides the inmate with some relief as he prepares to meet his death. Paul then tells the inmate "It will be fine. You'll do fine."

The corrections officers set up an appointment for a different inmate to entertain other corrections officers, so that they may rehearse the execution without the inmate having knowledge of what they were doing. This allowed the officers to prepare for the execution without unnecessarily upsetting the inmate. In a final discussion about the

inmate's most prized possession, his pet mouse, the corrections officers develop an elaborate story about a fictitious place called "Mouseville". The officers promised the prisoner that they would take his pet mouse there once his execution was over. The story put the inmate at ease and prepared him to proceed with the execution process. Before the inmate makes his final walk the officers once again reassure the inmate that the mouse will be cared for in "Mouseville" and they make arrangements for the mouse to be watched over by another inmate while the execution takes place. When the inmate enters the execution chamber he is somewhat apprehensive. Paul tells him, "Del it's alright," and leads him to the electric chair.

In the final execution of the film, the officers work to make the inmate as comfortable as possible prior to the execution by allowing him to watch a film in the prison auditorium. When the inmate enters the execution chamber he remarks that the people in the room hate him. The corrections officer at his side tells him, "We don't hate you." Throughout each execution in the movie, the team provides a support that allows the inmate to go through with the execution with little or no resistance.

In *Dead Man Walking* the inmate, Mathew Poncelet, is supported by his spiritual adviser, Sister Helen Prejean. She encourages him by telling him, "It takes a lot of strength to turn the other cheek," in reference to his impending execution. The sentiment seemed to be that Poncelet could show strength by not retaliating against the system or those carrying out his sentence of death. When Prejean asks the chaplain presiding over Poncelet's execution whether she may play a hymn for Poncelet the chaplain replies, "Experience tells us that music stirs up emotion. Emotion that can produce an unexpected reaction in the inmate." The chaplain's refusal illustrates how those involved in the execution ritual must regulate the inmate's frame of mind throughout the process. When

Poncelet meets with Prejean days before his execution he is frustrated and stands then paces while talking with her. Looking behind him, he sees that a corrections officer that was sitting in a chair has risen out of his chair in response to Poncelet's body language. Poncelet looks again and acknowledges the guards posturing, then sits down in the chair in front of him. The scene reveals the underlying elements of control and the subtle gestures on behalf of corrections officers that are used to manage the inmate's mood. When Poncelet has a final visit with his family, the prison complies with his request to personally bequeath his possessions to his family members instead of allowing the prison to send his possessions through the postal system. The warden also allows Prejean to hold Poncelet's shoulder on the final walk to the execution chamber. Poncelet was somewhat irate when leaving his cell to be transported to the execution chamber, but when the warden obliges his request he continues to comply with the rest of the execution ritual.

Accuracy of Ritual

The accuracy of the ritual displayed in each film is demonstrated by a quantitative count of the steps included in execution ritual as described by the *Timeline of Inmate's Final Days* table and the *Execution Procedure by Method* table. From these two sources four tables have been adapted to reflect the accuracy of the execution ritual carried out in each film.

Table 3

Execution Ritual Accuracy

Inmate's Final Days Table 1	Capote	Monsters Ball	The Green Mile			Dead Man Walking
			1	2	3	
•Death Warrant Delivered to Inmate			X	X		
•Strap-down Team begins rehearsals	X	X				X
•Inmate is placed on "Deathwatch"						
•Inmate is transported from death row to the "Death House"		X				X
•Inmate is awakened and showered						
•Inmate visits his family in "Death House" lobby		X	X			X
•Inmate's family is escorted to a separate facility		X				X
•Inmate visits his spiritual adviser(s), mental health professional(s), lawyer(s), and/or others	X					X
•Inmate consumes final meal		X				X
•Inmate changes into loose fitting clothing		X				X
•Witnesses enter the execution observation room	X	X				X
•Inmate is escorted by strap-down team to execution chamber						
•Inmate is offered the chance to make final comments	X	X	X	X	X	X
•Warden nods approval to executioner to commence execution	X	X	X	X	X	X
	X		X	X	X	

All of the films provided some level of accuracy with regards to the ritual; however, the completeness of the ritual might have interfered with the films ability to exhibit some parts of the execution ritual. For example, the timeline of *Monster's Ball* begins only two days prior to execution therefore it does not include a delivery of the Death Warrant. This does not make the movie any less accurate it simply means that the movie did not have the complete account of the ritual. *Dead Man Walking* provided the most accurate and complete accounts of execution ritual according to this criteria. It

displayed 10 of the 14 steps described in the *Inmate's Final Days* table. *Monsters Ball* could be deemed equally accurate but less complete. It followed closely behind *Dead Man Walking* with 9 of the 14 criteria demonstrated in the film. *Dead Man Walking* did not include the rehearsals by the strap-down team. *Monster's Ball* did not include images of the inmate placed on “DeathWatch,” or visiting with spiritual adviser(s), mental health professional(s), lawyer(s), and/or others. Capote only disclosed 6 of the 14 criteria. *The Green Mile* included three different executions by electric chair. The first execution included 5 of the 14 criteria, the second execution included 4 of the 14 criteria, and the third execution only included 3 of the 14 criteria. As evidenced by Table 1, no movie showed the death warrant being delivered to an inmate or the inmate being awakened and showered on the day of the execution..

Table 4
Execution Ritual Accuracy: Lethal Injection

Lethal Injection	Dead Man Walking
•Inmate Strapped to Gurney	X
•Two needles inserted into a vein on inmate's body	X
•Two officers pull two levers to start lethal injection machine	X
•1 st drug released causes inmate to become unconscious	X
•2 nd drug released relaxes the muscles and causes respiratory arrest	X
•3 rd drug released causes cardiac arrest and death	X

Dead Man Walking was the only movie the used lethal injection as the method of execution. All aspects of the lethal injection method were represented; however, only one needle was inserted into the vein on the inmate's body as opposed to the two that are

generally used as a secondary precaution. In that respect the ritual was portrayed somewhat inaccurately.

Table 5
Execution Ritual Accuracy: Electrocutation

Electrocutation	Monsters Ball	The Green Mile		
		1	2	3
•Inmate's head/ leg is shaved	X	X	X	
•Inmate is strapped into the electric chair	X	X	X	X
•A sponger is saturated with solution and strapped to inmate's head underneath an electrode		X		X
•Executioner throws a switch to release electricity into the inmate's body				
•A doctor checks the inmate's pulse	X	X	X	X
•Executioner throws the switch again if inmate is still alive		X		
	X*	X		

Monsters Ball shows every aspect of execution except saturating a sponge with solution and the doctor checking for a pulse before continuing to administer electricity. Instead, an initial administration of electricity was conducted followed by a brief break and then a second round of electricity was administered. Only the second execution in *The Green Mile* does not include the step in which the sponge is saturated. The circumstances of the movie's plot line made this exclusion intentional, as opposed to neglecting its existence altogether. The second and third executions in *The Green Mile* did not include a doctor checking for a pulse or the switch being thrown a second time.

The first execution shown in *The Green Mile* exhibited every aspect of this method of execution.

Table 6
Execution Ritual Accuracy: Hanging

Hanging	Capote
•Inmate's hands and legs are bound	X
•Inmate is Blindfolded	X
•A noose is placed around inmate's neck	X
•The executioner releases the lever on the platform	X
•The inmate falls through the trapdoor and the neck is broken or the inmate is asphyxiated by the noose	X

Capote exhibited every aspect of the execution ritual using the method of hanging.

Execution ritual acts that cause breakdown/ resignation to death by inmate

The Green Mile was the only film analyzed that did not include segments in which the ritual acts caused a breakdown in the inmate or resignation to death by the inmate. These episodes generally occurred on the day of the execution and are a direct result of the execution ritual.

In *Capote* the inmates on death row are able to see out of their small cell window into an open prison yard with an empty warehouse. While the inmate is visiting with Truman Capote, another prisoner in a cell across the hall is escorted out of death row and into the warehouse. The inmate on death row is able to see this from a small window at the top of his cell. The prisoner disappears into the warehouse and while Capote and the inmate on death row continue to talk they can hear the trapdoor being released in the warehouse signaling the final part of the prisoners execution. As this happens the inmate being interviewed by Capote swallows hard and says, “Now me and Dick are next in

line.” He is indicating that the pressure of time is weighing on him as the reality of execution materializes around him in the form of execution rituals played out by fellow inmates.

The prisoner executed in *Monsters Ball* starts to show evidence that he is actualizing his death when he breaks down in his cell in the Death house and has a panic attack that the corrections officer must regulate. The corrections officer complimented him on the portrait he drew and as the officer collected the portrait the inmate repeatedly said, “You're welcome, You're welcome” then started breathing heavily and grabbed the cuff of the corrections officer's uniform to support him as his body grew weak. The inmate's physical response is an image of a nervous breakdown as a result of facing the reality of execution.

In *Dead Man Walking*, when Poncelet is on Deathwatch a few days before his execution he makes the remark the he was taken away to “get measured for his coffin or something.” He then explains to Prejean, “It's the wait, It's the countdown that gets to you.” Meaning that being placed on a time schedule for execution made the situation an even more emotionally pernicious experience. At his final visit with family his mother walks towards him to give him a hug goodbye, but the corrections officers step in and prohibit her from engaging the inmate with physical contact. The corrections officer explains that this is for security reasons. At this point, Poncelet's voice starts to quiver and he holds back tears as he asks his mother not to cry. Being denied the touch of his mother one last time was a yet another emotionally disturbing event that destabilized the inmate's sense of self and emotional security.

In the remaining hours before the execution Poncelet's leg is shaved so that they may find a vein in that area if one cannot be located in his arm. His expression is somber

and he is once again holding back tears. He stares at his leg in bewilderment as explains to Prejean why they have cut off his pant leg and shaved the calf. The pressure mounts when he receives a final phone call from his family. As he is removed from his cell for his last walk his mood is erratic, anxious, and frustrated. He yells angrily that he wants his boots and that he is upset that he must walk to his death in a diaper and slippers. Upon seeing Prejean who is there to meet him as he walks to the execution chamber, Poncelet collapses to the floor and exclaims, "Sister Helen I'm going to die." The entire movie has been building to this moment and the viewer can see that each process has been progressively dehumanizing. Poncelet's statement reveals that any final notion of escape or refusal have eroded.

Signs of executioner stress displayed by corrections officers

Monsters Ball, *The Green Mile*, and *Dead Man Walking* were the only films that exhibited instances of executioner stress. In *Monsters Ball* the movie opens with main character, Hank, lying in his bed awake at 1:41am. He does not sleep and it is only a couple days prior to the execution. When he gets out of bed he immediately goes to the bathroom and vomits. Weeks after the execution is over, he has a similar reaction when he looks in the mirror and sees a picture of the inmate that was executed in a picture frame on the wall behind him. This time he also vomits and then explains to his significant other that his physical reaction was not related to her in any way. The insomnia and the regurgitation are both tied to participation in execution throughout the movie.

Paul, the strap-down team member in *The Green Mile*, is presented as an older man, retired in a nursing home where he explains to a close friend that he has been unable to sleep. He begins to cry while a group of seniors are watching television in the home

because the program reminds him of an inmate that he has executed in the past. He explains to his friend that his unstable emotions and sleeplessness are attributed to his work as a corrections officer on the execution team many years ago. The story is told in flashbacks and Paul is presented again as a younger man at home with his wife where he explains to her that he is unable to sleep because he has just gotten orders for a new inmate that will be executed soon.

The night before the final execution of the movie takes place, Paul is at home with his wife and he explains to her that his participation in this execution is creating serious doubts for him about his morality. He shares with her, "I've done some things in my life I'm not proud of, but this is the first time I've felt real danger of hell." This admission illuminates the character's obvious distress over participating in the execution ritual.

In the closing scenes of the movie Paul is shown back at the nursing home where he is confessing to his friend, "It was the last execution I ever took part in. I just couldn't do it anymore." Paul explains that even after a great deal of time has elapsed he is still affected by his duties as a member of the execution team.

Dead Man Walking included a brief conversation between Sister Helen Prejean and a corrections officer on the strap-down team. When Prejean inquires about the difficulties of being involved in an execution and mentions that she had seen the officer look rather upset at the execution that had taken place previously the officer admits, "It's hard. I didn't sleep that night." He immediately follows up this statement with indications of techniques of neutralization. As though he must use these techniques to combat the psychological stress that is entailed in his role in the execution ritual.

Ritual Inaccuracy

The films did have some inaccuracies that should be addressed. The ways in which the movie misguides the viewer about the ritual of execution may affect the entirety of the message that is received by the audience about the process of capital punishment. In *Capote*, Truman Capote bribes the warden so that he may have unlimited visitations with the inmates that he is writing his book about. This is clearly against protocol and highly atypical.

The Green Mile also has some unrealistic aspects of the ritual displayed. For example the execution team leader Paul, and the warden both allow a guard to participate in executions even though neither of them trust him nor do they have confidence in his abilities. When Paul expresses his concerns about this officer he says, “The man is mean, careless, and stupid, and that is a bad combination in a place like this.” This also shows an orderly standing in as the prisoner during execution rehearsals as opposed to one of the corrections officers fulfilling this role. Finally, when the untrusted corrections officer, Percy, conducts his first execution he cruelly taunts the inmate right before covering his face in the electric chair. When the execution goes horribly because Percy does not saturate the sponge beneath the electrode attached to the inmates headwrong, the other officers force Percy to extinguish the fire and watch as the body burns in the electric chair.

Dead Man Walking included only one incidence of inaccuracy while *Monsters Ball* had none. When Poncelet is led out of his cell in the death house and begins his walk to the execution chamber and corrections officer yells out “Dead Man Walking!” and then the inmates escorted by corrections officers make their way to the chamber. This type

pronouncement is highly uncharacteristic and would probably create unnecessary chaos that may emotionally de-stabilize the inmate in an actual execution setting.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

The study has explored social constructions of the execution ritual that have been formed by the media. The findings indicate that films portraying the ritual of execution are accurate representations of carrying out the death sentence with some exceptions (Cabana 1996, Johnson 1998, Solotaroff 2001, Trombley 1992). That the films correspond with firsthand accounts of execution is promising because they contribute to most of the general information that the public has about execution ritual.

The findings indicate that the entertainment industry focuses heavily on the psychological circumstances of both inmates and corrections officers. This scrutiny brings to life the gravity of capital punishment in terms of its effects on those involved. It magnifies the significance of just what is being asked of the people that participate in the execution ritual that the United States deems morally sound. An understanding of the inmates and officers that complete the execution ritual is intensified through media representation. This research also demonstrates for the audience exactly how a ritual is used to validate state sanctioned executions and allow participants in execution to submit

to the otherwise amoral act of taking a person's life. The process creates what could be labeled a “Nuremberg Defense” in which no one is responsible for the actions of the state because each individual's responsibilities play a small role that makes up the greater act of execution (Rubenstein 1975). The opinions that people develop from these representations affect the way society thinks about execution. It shapes the discourse about the death penalty and it sets the trajectory of the conversation surrounding the topic. Though the images of execution portrayed in film are not real, the consequences of the messages they impart are very real.

A research poll done by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC 2010) indicates that only 33% of participants supported the death penalty as a form of punishment, which has dropped dramatically since the mid 1980's (Bohm, Clark & Aveni 1990). The timing of this decrease in support coincides with the release of the films reviewed in this study. Although it would be methodologically inconceivable to account for all the factors that may have contributed to this decline in support, it is possible to assert that this decline in support is correlated to the modern media images of execution displayed in these films.

As mentioned previously, films have achieved a level of notoriety that indicates that they were widely received by the public and popular culture. This indicates that the dialogue they have encouraged in society may have a greater affect on the public opinions of the death penalty. Even though many states still offer a sentence of death as a punitive action, the amount of execution that have transpired over 2009 and 2010 have been the lowest numbers since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976 (DPIC 2010). The research concludes that our support for the death penalty may be correlated to these media images in that they are one of the most readily available sources of information

about the subject. Even though the ritual represented in media may not be an exact duplication of the ritual that plays out in prisons, it creates an image that allows people to interpret the situation as a real. The social responses of the public are very real consequences of these media images. For example, Brace & Boyea (2008) found that the composition of the state supreme court was influenced by public opinion and that this opinion therefore indirectly affected the votes of judges in capital punishment cases. Furthermore, officials elected to office are equally exposed to media and this exposure may indirectly affect their judgments.

These films illustrate for the public the psychological torture of this sentence for inmates and corrections officers, a point that is not lost on the public. In recent studies, survey respondents preferred more “humane” methods of execution, such as lethal injection, over more brutal methods like the electric chair or the gas chamber. This would indicate that people do develop a sense of empathy for convicts facing a death sentence as they would prefer the least amount of suffering despite finding their actions worthy of this drastic punishment (Radelet & Borg 2000).

A sense of humanity and a deeper understanding of the process of death is captured in media images of the execution ritual. This message resonates through the films as an audience that experiences the dehumanizing process of death that resigns inmates to willingly accept their horrific deaths at the hands of the state. Depicting the ways in which inmates internalize the execution ritual illuminates the means by which the inmate's humanity is debased. There is something to be said for the lack of defiance that pervades in both the films and in real life accounts of execution. It is clear from the films that inmates have accepted their situation as hopeless and have experienced a mental death prior to their execution. The rituals effect on inmates predicates the effect it has on

corrections officers who must rationalize their actions and dissociate their emotional selves from their actions in order to carry out the death sentence. The films exhibit the psychological damage and the emotional pressure of these situations for corrections officers that are mandated to participate in these actions as part of their jobs, but also as part of a greater system in which they bear the full weight of the consequences of sentencing an inmate to death.

Considering the ambiguity of the execution ritual in society, the social constructions of reality that media create are even more significant. If the public is unaware of the subject then there may be no way for the average citizen to distinguish the representation of media from the actuality of execution or any other topic that is peripheral. Studying whether these portrayals are genuine accounts of the reality they represent creates a level of accountability that is otherwise absent from the discussion of media effects on public opinion and public policy.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited in that the scales used to determine the accuracy of execution ritual have not been used in any other research. Therefore the reliability and validity of this measure cannot be confirmed through other sources. This scale is also unweighted meaning that the various aspects of the ritual that were accounted for were all given equal significance within the measure. A weighted scale may present a more accurate or in depth examination of the execution ritual. Especially if certain parts of the ritual of execution are more significant to the effects that the ritual has on those involved.

The fictional liberties taken by the producers and writers of the execution films may have affected the reflection of social reality for the audience. In movies such as *The Green Mile*, the plot included elements of supernatural occurrences that might have

affected the the way the audience perceived the execution ritual and the other situations presented in the film. The historical time periods that both *The Green Mile* and *Capote* are illustrating might also affect the ways in which the audience relates to the material and its authenticity. For instance, the argument could easily be made that these images of execution represent a different time in American society and that they are no longer relevant to the current ritual of execution despite the fact that both films show a realistic and accurate portrayal of execution.

Conclusion

Examining the messages of media representations of executions broadens the viewpoints of those exposed to films and other mediums that construct our ideas of execution. A healthy level of scrutiny applied to the images of execution and the presentation of execution ritual allows us to understand how a dialogue about the death penalty is presented. Media becomes a powerful and sole source of information on subjects of obscurity in our culture. Research must examine these sources in order to reconcile media representation with the inception of public values and beliefs. To understand how public policies can be derived indirectly from such sources, research must investigate the content of media to analyze the information it portends.

Future Studies

Future studies about images of execution should explore the construction of closure for co-victims of crimes resulting in the death penalty. As this is often cited as a main reason for supporting state sanctioned execution (Radelet & Borg 2000), it is important to examine the media representations of this aspect of the death sentence. Furthermore, media images of other marginalized groups that may be obscure in society,

such as secret societies, institutionalized people, or the extremely wealthy may be important to look at in terms of their socially constructed images messages via mediums of popular culture since there is little factual information circulating about these groups in the general public. Yet again these groups represent a population that has little exposure to the public therefore their place within society is mediated through alternative outlets such as the media.

Research advancing the discussion of media's construction of cultural reality through the exploration of the topics that are covered in media regularly as opposed to those that receive little or no attention could benefit the academic literature as well. Through such research, evidence of the social systems that form public opinions that affect public policy can be built . For example, Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz (1997) found that increasing news reports on crime increased the fear of crime in people who watched television programs reporting on crime frequently. Other such studies could explain what drives social policy and this understanding can contribute to a more informed public policy. With regards to the media, such studies could transform the ways in which media is regulated. This is especially relevant considering the hyper-information age brought about by the internet. Now more than ever media is a larger part of daily life.

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