



Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and U.S. Culture

Brian Jarvis

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From the excesses of Puritan patriarchs to the barbarism of slavery and on into the prison-industrial complex, punishment in the US has a long and gruesome history. In the post-Vietnam era, the prison population has increased tenfold and the death penalty has enjoyed a renaissance. Few subjects in contemporary US society provoke as much controversy as punishment. In this context, *Cruel and Unusual* aims to offer the first comprehensive exploration of the history of punishment as it has been mediated in American culture. Grounding his analysis in Marxist theory, psychoanalysis and Foucault's influential work on discipline, Brian Jarvis examines a range of cultural texts, from seventeenth century execution sermons to twenty-first century prison films, to uncover the politics, economics and erotics of punishment. This wide-ranging and interdisciplinary survey constructs a genealogy of cruelty through close reading of novels by Hawthorne and Melville, fictional accounts of the Rosenberg execution by Coover and Doctorow, slave narratives and prison writings by African Americans and the critically neglected genre of American prison films. In the process, *Cruel and Unusual* unmasks a fundamental conflict between legends of liberty in the Land of the Free and the secret, silenced histories of sadomasochistic desire, punishment for profit and social control.

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