

A Circular Argument

Emerald Studies in Culture, Criminal Justice and the Arts

Edited by

Yvonne Jewkes

University of Bath, UK

Travis Linnemann

Kansas State University, USA

Sarah Moore

University of Bath, UK

This series aims to take criminological inquiry in new and imaginative directions, by publishing books that represent all forms of criminal justice from an ‘arts’ or ‘cultural’ perspective, and that have something new to tell us about space, place and sensory experience as they relate to forms of justice. Building on emergent interest in the ‘cultural’, ‘autoethnographic’, ‘emotional’, ‘visual’, ‘narrative’ and ‘sensory’ in Criminology, books in the series will introduce readers to imaginative forms of inspiration that deepen our conceptual understanding of the lived experience of punishment and of the process of researching within the criminal justice system, as well as discussing the more well-rehearsed problems of cultural representations of justice.

Specifically, this series provides a platform for original research that explores the myriad ways in which architecture, design, aesthetics, hauntology, atmospheres, fine art, graffiti, visual broadcast media and many other ‘cultural’ perspectives are utilized as ways of seeing and understanding the enduring persistence of, and fascination with, the formal institutions of criminal justice and punishment.

Praise for *A Circular Argument*

Martin Cathcart Frödén's new book will surely accelerate criminology's slow awakening to the potency and importance of imagination and creativity in rethinking crime and punishment. It deserves to be widely read and discussed by anyone and everyone who cares about the pursuit of justice.

**–Fergus McNeill, Professor of Criminology
and Social Work, Associate Director, SCCJR**

Encompassing memoir, creative writing, criminology, and architecture, this unusual book is in two halves. One is a critical, multidisciplinary, autobiographical exploration of carceral space and place, time, absence and visibility, masculinities and vulnerabilities, movement and stasis, circularity and linearity. The other is a novella that explores in fiction the very same themes. The result is one of the most imaginative, ambitious, compelling, clever, and funny books I have read. It is quite simply stunning.

**–Yvonne Jewkes, Professor of Criminology,
University of Bath**

Inspiring, bold and highly readable, *A Circular Argument* is a breath of fresh air in academic publishing. Employing practice as research to disrupt some of the hierarchies it examines, it offers a forward-thinking and transdisciplinary approach to spatial hierarchies with particular reference to carceral systems. Some of its most serious propositions are embedded in its gripping and entertaining narrative, proving that ideas are more effectively shared when rigour and humour go hand in hand. More of this, please – it's what we need to refresh our ways of working.

**–Dr Zoë Strachan, Reader in Creative Writing,
University of Glasgow**

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A Circular Argument: A Creative Exploration of Power and Space

BY

MARTIN CATHCART FRÖDÉN

Malmö University, Sweden



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

Spanning creative writing, criminology, and architecture, this work examines some of the ways power and hierarchies can be explored and exploited in space. It is a practice-led study in two parts: one primarily creative nonfiction (*A Circular Argument*) and the other in the form of a novel (*The Out*). The main focus of the nonfiction piece is the obsession with the circular as an architectural gesture and as a concept combining containment and transparency, from the ideal planned city of the Middle Ages, via Bentham's panopticon, to the all-seeing eye of modern digital society. The creative piece explores how the complications and surprises of human interaction are bound to color and change the supposedly watertight systems of social control we design as a society – how prison architecture or national road networks might be undermined, or how the power dynamics of the class system might be temporarily suspended in a heightened situation. Forgiveness, desistance, and redemption also play a part in the narrative, for both the “guilty” and “innocent” parties. Both elements of the work also examine how time moves differently inside from outside of the prison walls, and the limited success of trying to build away social problems.

Methodologically speaking, the work follows certain key features of practice-led research, where the creative outcome constitutes the research in and of itself, rather than existing as a conduit for preexisting research conclusions. The practice-led approach prioritizes the making process, in dialogue with a theoretical framework, although this may not always be visible in the finished work. Again there are hierarchies at play here, in an epistemological sense, in how knowledge is created, viewed, accessed, and consumed. In this sense, the work takes a deliberately outward-looking approach in terms of intended readership, aiming to sit alongside works of fiction as comfortably as academic texts.

On several levels, the work inhabits gray areas and liminal spaces – between the three academic disciplines across which it is situated, between fiction and nonfiction, and between multiple social and spatial hierarchies. This liminality has come to be reflected within the work through exploring nonplaces, in an explicit sense in the nonfiction work, and implicitly in the creative work – from the limbo of the motorway service station, to the carceral dead space exploited by the prison architect and his escapee. It is also interesting to note that both “nonplace” and “nonfiction” are defined by what they are not, rather than what they are. In researching and writing this book I found that the “thing” and its Janus-like twin the “nonthing” often held an inherent friction which ultimately proved to be creatively generative.

I have tried to keep the writing centered on the concrete and rebars of the various sites I've described. I've tried to conduct interviews with silent corridors. Mumbled monologues while walking down pathways, the line painter's ruler-straight line separating me from the prisoners. I've come back on trains, furiously writing in a little notebook, which I couldn't bring into the prisons. Transcribing an inner, half-remembered harangue of silent questions and slippery answers. It might have looked like I was doing one thing in the prison but I was doing something else – patching together an erratic, fictional ethnography, with a building as the main character.

The Parts and the Whole

This is a work in two parts. One part is a nonfiction piece called *A Circular Argument* and the other is a creative piece called *The Out*. In terms of word count, workload, reading, and research, the split has been roughly 70/30 – fiction/nonfiction. I have strived to make the sometimes perceived divide quite porous. The parts are not separate, but not entirely connected either.

Prison is arguably an in-between space/place, where waiting and being processed is a large part of the structure and daily life. In the creative part of the work, the preordained escape is made possible only by connecting strips of dead space. The nonfiction component of the work purposefully teeters on the brink of a few modes or styles of writing.

Presented sequentially like this it might seem that one part has sway over the other but the reality is that neither component was written before the other. They came into being alongside each other. A contributing factor to this was a tripartite arrangement of mentors situated in Creative Writing, Architecture, and Criminology, which for me has been very fruitful and continuously surprising.

The fictional part shouldn't have to prove itself to be clever, but nevertheless in this case it is informed by critical readings, research trips, and fieldwork, mostly through monthly visits to HMP Shotts, but also drawing from my previous experience of working as a tutor in prisons. The nonfiction shouldn't have to be entertaining or in essence have wide appeal, but I have tried to make it a clean, informed read. Hopefully I have made sure that the cross-pollination between the two parts is evident and of use, both in terms of form and in content.

The Whole and the Parts

The work as a whole looks at prisons, and at civic spaces and to some extent the private spaces that exist within those spheres. In the creative part this is exemplified in the road network, the car, the cell. In the nonfiction part perhaps more abstractly so, in spaces and uses, focusing on the circular. Often from a higher point of view – both physically and socially, often looking at city planning and how the cell fits into the larger narrative of society. What unites the two parts of the work is the exploration of space and place, with a grounding in psycho-geography and the fictional space we all inhabit. It's an investigation of the idea of

home and away, and of the transient – both in time and in space, which is a thought I came across early in the research. Dr Sarah Armstrong’s ideas on the prison as a corridor, rather than a holding pen, quoted in *A Circular Argument*, struck a chord with me.

Throughout the writing of both parts I was also influenced by this quote by Jane Jacobs: “The architects, planners – and businessmen – are seized with dreams of order, and they have become fascinated with scale models and bird’s-eye views. This is a vicarious way to deal with reality, and it is, unhappily, symptomatic of a design philosophy now dominant: buildings come first, for the goal is to remake the city to fit an abstract concept of what, logically, it should be” (Jacobs, 1957).

In both parts I wanted to see how the notion of “We make spaces and spaces make us” would fit in a carceral context, where someone imprisoned has very little control over how the space they are in is constructed, down to the placement of the bed, the desk lamp, and what can go on the walls. Put in contrast with the complex construction work that lies behind a prison – a highly complicated task, where safety, visibility, politics, rehabilitation, risk, classification, gender, not to mention light, electricity, water, and utilities, and a limited access to the internet, need to be considered in a way that is completely different from how a “normal” building is constructed.

Maybe I too was “seized with dreams of order.” On a small scale (should main character Cecil be 5’ 9½”, or taller?) and on a large scale (Canberra, Baghdad, Brøndby Garden City, and the temporary city of Burning Man were all built to be circular – how can I decipher that?).

The prison is a complicated idea and a complicated building. For any person of any height it has to function like a whole city. Education, hygiene, health care, social interaction, and intimacy have to be catered for. When not, it may be part of the punishment, in ways that, if you live outside the walls, might seem, and often are, incredibly perplexing, slow, and often dehumanizing. The prison complex is very complex. I hope I have captured some of that friction in the following pages.

On Writing

Practice as Research is a lovely beast to wrangle. If nothing else, this work has taught me to wear my research lightly, and at the same time to be rigorous in my imaginings. My fictional and nonfictional output have for obvious reasons bled into one another, as they should.

This relationship between fact and fiction has meant that I have had the pleasure of translating concepts and complicated ideas into character, conflict, voice, point of view, tense, and dialogue. That I have been allowed to think about narrative structures as well as real concrete structures. I’ve busied myself with transforming people like one of the prisoners I have talked with, and places like the circular town of Palmanova, into imagined landscapes, townscapes, weather, and into written emotions, which lie somewhere between the real, the unreal, and

the hyperreal. This porous approach has allowed me to use the structural elements of fiction to represent critical thinking, and architectural critique. To reuse bricks and marble from one kind of structure to make anew, and like all builders past and present, reimagine an edifice – in this case, a book.

I am going to miss working on this.