3. Voice-ing the Prison Officer

This chapter proceeds from prison officers’ own voices to fictional narratives granting them a ‘voice’. First of all, representations that do justice to the complexity and the hardship of the profession need to disentangle the subject from the institution as far as possible and illuminate the fact that whilst the officer represents the institution and brings it to life, s/he can nonetheless by no means be equated with it. In line with Peter V. Zima’s theory of the subject (Theorie des Subjects), it is assumed that the prison officer is on the one hand subject to overdetermination by culture in general and the institutional and occupational culture in particular. On the other hand, s/he retains a certain degree of agency and the capability to accept, integrate or reject aspects of these cultures. Accordingly, the primary texts treated here are examined with regard to the way in which officers are represented as subjects rather than stereotypes – subjects experiencing a hostile and restrictive work environment.

As in the previous chapter, the complex interrelations between subjects and institution are largely illuminated by applying a combination of de Certeau’s conceptions of place/space and Foucault’s work on discipline. This framework is used to examine fictional representations of the use of discretion and its limitations, i.e. the moment when the prison officer brushes up against regulations. As indicated in Chapter One, these regulations or disciplinary places may be constructed from above (by the management), laterally (by the officer culture), and from below (by the prisoners). A particular focus is again placed on occupational cultures as a disciplinary type of place. In addition to the spatial framework applied in the previous chapter, the examination of occupational cultures will here be supplemented by Alan Palmer’s theory of social minds. The examination of the individual character’s mind in relation to the occupational group as an intermental unit (Palmer), with a focus on conflicts and transgressions, serves to reveal the invisible boundaries demarcating occupational cultures as topological places.
3.1. Theoretical Framework

One of the fundamental premises of this chapter is that in order to dismantle prevalent stereotypes of prison officers by means of fictional texts the narrative needs to invite the readers\(^1\) to assume the prison officer’s perspective; to discover ‘from within’ what working in prison is like, so as to be able to juxtapose prison officers’ experiences with their own slanted mental images, which are, as I have demonstrated in the introduction and in the first chapter, likely to be based on stereotyped second-hand knowledge. In Fludernik’s terms, this requires the narrative expression of prison officers’ experientiality, i.e. the combination of

a number of cognitively relevant factors, most importantly those of the presence of a human protagonist and her experience of events as they impinge on her situation or activities. The most crucial factor is that of the protagonist’s emotional and physical reaction to this constellation, which introduces a basic dynamic feature into the structure. (Natural 22)

Accordingly, I am going to explore how prison officers experience the prison world. As may be deduced from the memoirs discussed in the previous chapter, the environment is likely to evoke fear and other painful emotions, and physical reactions to this environment assume another role of particular significance in a milieu dominated by ‘toxic’ hegemonic masculinities.

Ideally, the representation of officers’ physical and emotional responses to the prison world induces readers to empathise with officers’ experiences of this world so as to invite a more sympathetic stance towards them. Patrick Colm Hogan argues that

literature presents a unique – in some ways – set of depictive representations of emotional experience. These representations are, in effect, instructions for the simulation of emotionally consequential experiences that, when successful, produce empathic emotional experiences in readers. (Literature 38)

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\(^1\) I am going to speak of the reader(s) rather than the reader(s) or the audience even though I discuss Arthur Dreifuss’s adaptation of “The Quare Fellow” in addition to Behan’s play, mainly to increase readability and secondly because the film adaptation is mainly read in its function as an interpretation of the play.