



Aug/Sep. 2020 Movie Club

Prison in Twelve Landscapes, dir. Brett Story

Why Watch It

[*Prison in Twelve Landscapes*](#) is a film about the prison in which we never see a penitentiary. Instead, director Brett Story quietly but powerfully takes us on a cinematic journey across the USA, to landscapes where prisons do work and affect lives. Not only does the film subvert our expectations of a prison documentary, but it forces us to consider how the prison is upheld not by four walls and prison guards, but our relationships to one another. It's an incredible gateway into abolitionist thought, teaching us to question "common sense" and guiding us to questions like: Why *do* we lock so many people up? What could a society without cages look like?

You can rent the film online or watch it for free [on Kanopy](#), with a participating library card.

Discussion Questions

1. Which vignettes stood out to you and/or surprised you the most? Why?
2. How close does the "prison" (as depicted in the film) feel to you, and where in your own communities do you find the "prison"? If nowhere, why might that be?
3. How do our communities unwittingly and unintentionally perpetuate systemic oppression within the prison-industrial complex & system?
 - a. What is arbitrary about the way power manages the system? What is intentional?
 - b. How does the prison system affect our relationships to one another? In what ways do we police one another?
4. What is the purpose of punishment and prisons in America? What work do prisons do?
 - a. How would we define "criminal"? What does society think "criminals" deserve?
 - b. How can we disrupt the way we think about prisons and punishment? Especially when we are confronted with harm in the form of sexual abuse or physical violence, how might we reframe "criminality"?

5. What is true *justice* and what is *rehabilitation*? Are these currently happening in our prison system? If not, what should it look like?
 - a. What would justice really look like for the people documented in this film?
6. Brett Story's approach to this film is different from the typical "prison" documentary. We never see the inside of a prison; there's very little structured dialogue; it feels like a reel of film unravelling. What do we make of Brett Story's approach?
 - a. How does mass incarceration live through stereotypes and our language?
 - b. How has popular media affected our understanding of prisons? How might we contrast this with something like *13th* (dir. Ava DuVernay)?
 - c. Brett is a young, cis, white, Canadian woman who has written extensively about American prisons. How do you think her identity informs her approach / PoV?
7. To what end can we change how we talk, think, or act against mass incarceration?
 - a. What are those interim steps toward a future without criminalization?
 - b. What can we do in our local communities to address this problem?
 - c. What is one action item we each hope to do this week to address mass incarceration in our communities?

Discussion Summary / Film Analysis

When the camera pans across Attica Correctional Facility's exterior, in the final shot of *Prison in Twelve Landscapes*, it seems to taunt us. We cannot see past this wall, which oppressively fills the screen. We cannot bear witness to the [atrocious conditions](#) we know to exist behind prison walls. But throughout the film, director Brett Story asks us: *Do we need to?*

Her answer: an echoing no. In a series of 12 vignettes, *Prison in Twelve Landscapes* explores how the prison lives through our everyday lives. From Los Angeles' pocket parks, to traffic courts in St. Louis, to a gentrifying Detroit, the film quietly takes us across the country and forces us to reckon with the fact that "the struggle for freedom is a struggle not just against cages, but against a society that could have cages" (Story 2019, 10). Prisons are not just buildings or even the masses of people anonymized within their walls. Rather, they comprise a system that perpetuates racial capitalism, disproportionately deeming Black, Brown, and poor folks as disposable, surplus, and ungrievable.

Resisting this logic, the film humanizes its protagonists by pulling away the mask of criminality – created conveniently, as one participant put it, to allow the system to profit from Black, incarcerated lives. Story follows one woman in St. Louis who received a warrant for arrest, because she did not secure a trash can lid to the can, therefore "exposing trash." Though she had the means, she initially refused to pay \$175 and chose to go to jail, too dignified to let the system take her hard-earned money. However, when she realized she would need to endure the

jail's horrid conditions for 15 days, she tried to bail herself out — which the guards said were against the rules. Recalling the incident, she said: "It [the system] done beat me up too much."

As we considered the "work" that prisons and punishment do, we recognized that they seek to protect white supremacy, as critical race theorists have frequently pointed out, and create a cycle in which the "have nots," the oppressed, are continually denied any path away from prison. Punishment creates a binary: you are either a criminal, or you are not. Not only does our society reify criminality, as though one criminal act makes you an irreparable criminal person, but it makes it a moral issue. The criminal is *damaged*, and from a young age, the rest of us non-Black and non-poor folks are taught to believe this. We are taught to believe that Black bodies deserve life in prison. Those deemed "criminal" deserve to dwell in urban poverty and participate in marginal, "off-the-book" economies. As one protagonist in the film points out, any Black man hustling in the streets has probably been incarcerated. While we are taught to believe that prisons deter crime, they actually deter Black bodies from dreaming too richly, from living too fully. It is a race-making, race-perpetuating institution.

In some sense, prisons deem these Black bodies as useful *only when* they are incarcerated. When someone mentioned the female firefighter in Marin County, CA, everyone else nodded in heartbreaking unison, especially given current events. As the firefighter points out, she would not be able to become a firefighter after she's released from prison despite serving her county and state. (This has [since been overturned in California's legislature](#), but this does not erase the fact that the state *depends* on prison labor to survive each fiery season.) Movie participants also pointed out the various posts circulating across social media, of companies that use prison labor, and how ubiquitous these brands are. As such, it seems like prisons are entangled with the American identity. Nowhere did we see this more clearly than in Eastern Kentucky, which set the scene for our movie club participants to grapple with the ideology of work (i.e. capitalism) that encourages middle America to invite the prison as a "recession-proof" employer. In ways explicit and implicit, we've been deputized to police one another. See something, say something. Or buy something prison-produced, and look the other way.

As such, a lot of our participants grappled with how complicit our communities have grown. The trash can lid vignette led us to ask: why isn't sanitation in charge of that? Our justice system, which relies on a "out of sight, out of mind" model, segregates us so far as to create a fictitious "right" to not see the socioeconomic differences perpetuated by our system. Privilege allows some people to say: "I don't want to see the trash" or "I don't want to see homeless people urinating in the street." The system allocates funds to protect this privilege. As for the poor Black folks: criminalize them. Banish them. They're synonymous at this point.

Our movie club participants were eager to talk about the alternatives. What is true rehabilitation and justice, for those in the film and for the incarcerated at large? We recognized that society tries to pull apart intersectionality, separating gentrification from labor from environmental justice from the prison system. But our solutions must be intersectional. As one participant described, Chicago has recently sheltered houseless folks in vacant hotels, helped all of them

access mental healthcare, and trained them to become contact tracers. The city has even partnered with a local community college to create a pipeline for these formerly houseless folks to become public health workers. (Another participant even mentioned that you can send someone to community college for the money it takes the system to incarcerate someone.) Other participants were inspired by this example, which seems intersectional and future-oriented, aimed at creating opportunities for people. *These are the community-based investments we want to see, not the pocket parks in L.A.*

Brett Story's film is quiet but sweeping. Not only does it travel across state lines, but we appreciated how it crosses class and race and identity, perhaps arguing that there is no abolition without this form of solidarity. As one participant asked: What does the prison guard in Appalachia really think about prisons? Aren't they just serving their own kind of time, left with no choice, in the same way the women on buses are "serving their time" every weekend to visit their loved ones? We all may be entrapped in this capitalist, unjust prison-industrial complex, but just as the film exposes how prisons are as ubiquitous and normalized as the air we breathe, it also implies that there are so many possibilities for intervention. Now, it's a matter of finding our individual and collective opportunities or invention. It can no longer be a question of should we or should we not, but a question of how. *How can we dismantle this wall, this prison, from the outside? How do we disinvest from this moral economy of "guilt" and "innocence," "criminal" and "valuable"? How do invest in a new world, where to be is enough to matter?*

Behavior Changes + Action items:

- Do your research on companies that use [prison labor](#).
- Even in your everyday interactions, normalize discomfort, conflict, and ambiguity instead of relying on the simple, default solutions of punishment / imprisonment.
- Practice early interventions when harm is done, and learn about transformative justice (TJ). [This "mixtape" of lectures](#), featuring seminal TJ leaders, is a great place to start!
- Consider language. What do we mean when we say homeless? Can we call it a criminal justice system when there's no justice?
- Lead with optimism, and be aware of unconscious bias, especially with those society tells us to scorn (e.g. formerly incarcerated folks). Think about root causes of harm.
- Seek out businesses that uplift the formerly incarcerated with a *future-oriented* approach, rather than one that tries to "fix" people. [Drive Change NYC](#) is one example!
- Support mutual aid networks and [form pods with neighbors](#). Start simple: ask for phone numbers! Broadly, seek out local alternatives to 911.
- Learn about your local politicians and political system. Rally for changes in funding so that more resources are put toward those who are systematically oppressed.

Additional Resources:

- *Prison Land* by Brett Story
Buy it from Black-owned bookstores, incl. [Eso Won in L.A.](#), or [Semicolon in Chicago](#).
- Articles:
 - [We Want More Justice For Breonna Taylor Than The System That Killed Her Can Deliver](#) by Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie (Essence, Jul 2020)
 - [The prison in the city: Tracking the neoliberal life of the “million dollar block”](#) (2016) by Brett Story
 - [Mapping the shadow carceral state: Toward an institutionally capacious approach to punishment](#) (2012) by Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa
- A [Verso reading list](#) on Carceral Geography, curated by Brett Story
- Start an abolitionist study group!
 - Syllabus from [Abolition Journal](#)
 - Syllabus from [AAIHS](#)