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A Radical Journal of Geography

Brett Story, *The Prison In Twelve Landscapes*, Toronto: Oh Ratface Film, 2016.

<http://www.prisonlandscapes.com>; <http://grasshopperfilm.com/film/the-prison-in-twelve-landscapes/>

The rise of the carceral state required material and ideological support. Its continued stability relies on its imbrication with a variety of material processes and accompanying disavowals in the form of a political common sense that accepts prisons are only about crime and punishment. As many trenchant scholars of police and carceral power have noted, prison became the natural response to racialized threats to social order (Camp 2016; Murakawa 2014), to resolving various state crises of land, labor and capacity (Gilmore 2007), and to rural economic development needs (Bonds 2009, 2013). In short, and as Jordan Camp (2016) has recently argued, the carceral state became the dominant political expression of neoliberalizing racial capitalism. But, as he notes, this violent expression of state power required and performed important ideological work to naturalize the prison into the political common sense of American communities. Other scholars have made similar points about the role of ideology. Dylan Rodriguez (2006) notes that the prison is a normalized backdrop against which other scenes of violence play out. Todd Clear and Natasha Frost (2014) note that the rise of the carceral state has produced a structured intellectual economy, similar to what I've elsewhere called a "carceral habitus" (Schept 2015).

Stuart Hall wrote of ideology that it is the "mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out, and render intelligible the way society works" (1986: 29). The work of ideology itself

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becomes visible when mediums of communication and investigation that purport to tell the truth, such as documentary film and photography (Sekula 1986; Steyerl 2003), either operate within and reproduce ideological discourse or, on the rare occasion, center it in its gaze and subject it squarely to examination, a process Judith Butler has called “framing the frame” (2009: 6), where such work “exposes and thematizes the mechanism of restriction, and constitutes a disobedient act of seeing” (2009: 72).

The Prison in Twelve Landscapes, a new documentary produced and directed by Brett Story about the presence of the prison in the United States,¹ is the rare film about incarceration that captures the scope of the carceral state’s presence in American lives and, in the process, also reveals the ideological work operating through a variety of well-meaning critiques, including from other documentaries. The film unfolds through a series of vignettes that all take place in seemingly non-prison spaces. Its pensive cinematography produces subtle and even abstract engagements with the prison. Story’s artistic choices effectively enhance the film’s analytical work, as her more gentle style enables the film to ease into those places where the prison is hidden in plain sight.

Story’s training as both a filmmaker and geographer has enabled an examination of the prison that is attentive to scale, scope and space; movement and time; and land, labor and gentrification. In other words, the film extracts the prison from its comfortable place in American minds as being intimately tied to crime trends and punishment regimes and relocates it as central to a variety of processes produced by the patterns of racial capitalism–gentrification, rural economic decline, deindustrialization, social movements, contracting labor markets, criminalization, structural joblessness, and uneven development. Story’s film observes that the prison’s centrality to the operations of the

¹ Director of Photography: Maya Bankovic; Editor: Avril Jacobson.

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social formation is often occluded by the notion that the prison is marginal; following Gilmore (2007: 11), *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* illustrates that the prison is, in fact, historically central to the reformation of the state under neoliberalism and immediately relevant to all sorts of spaces in society that are putatively “free”.

Part of the film’s work, then, is to challenge the reliable vocabularies and images that decades—or, really, centuries—of political and popular discourse and media have produced and that have solidified into a stable common sense of tropes, ideas, and images about incarceration and the incarcerated. The film refrains from relying on overly simple portraits of prisoners as it also avoids offering troublingly simple solutions. This is not a documentary organized around the redeemable drug offender, an excessive sentence, a wrongful conviction, or some other gross miscarriage of justice, nor does the film suggest there is an evil corporation holding the puppet strings of the prison industrial complex. Instead, Story’s film illuminates the expansive scope of the carceral state and its utility to racial capitalism in very different American communities to resolve different elements of neoliberal crisis. Some of the landscapes the film examines include wildfires in Northern California fought by prisoner firefighter crews; municipal governments in St. Louis County levying dubious fines on residents for revenue generation; a neighborhood in Los Angeles building a small pocket park in order to exclude people convicted of sex offenses from residing there; and eastern Kentucky communities relying on prisons to replace the coal economy. Taken together, these vignettes are insistent—in the poetry of Story’s cinematic approach—that the problem and possible solutions do not reside within the tensions between innocence vs. guilt, punishment vs. rehabilitation, non-violent vs. violent offenses, public vs. private prisons, or even in “mass incarceration” itself. In this way, the film evacuates from the viewer the reliable vocabularies with which we tend to

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think and build solution discourses. *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* unsparingly shows that the problem is embedded in, and exercised through, the everyday operations of the capitalist state

Story's film operates on a couple of important levels. It is a brilliant examination of the presence of the prison in the places we may not expect to find it. The scale, scope, and violence of the prison is felt across different spaces, forcing us to reckon with the ways that carceral geography doesn't just extend into diverse American landscapes, but rather characterizes them. And yet, Story's film refrains from pursuing what might otherwise sound like a Foucaultian treatment of diffuse carceral power. Rather, *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* is grounded in the materiality of everyday life: municipal fines and the jail time they purchase if they go unpaid; the structural joblessness the prison produces among the formerly incarcerated and which it supposedly resolves in rural communities; and the prison's fabrication of new spaces of sociality and community, including those we might consider as constitutive or emblematic of freedom—parks, playgrounds, and the mountains. One sees in the film how the prison produces lives lived differently—nights slept on buses instead of beds; work creatively carved out of the structural joblessness of hollowed out cities, including within new industries to support the carceral state; the limited prospects for ex-prisoners; and coalfield residents seeing their futures hang in the balance of prison siting. Taken together, these moments convey the prison's presence in and production of everyday moments of struggle and survival. The prison is there—as scar tissue, memory, and material reminder of the jobless future—even if its edifices are not.

But in this more explicit work of demystifying the prison, the film also is a critical treatment of carceral ideology, including its transmission through cultural production.

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The film implicitly challenges liberal and progressive documentary traditions and strategies centered on humanization tropes and the generation of sympathies for individuals positioned as innocent or excessively punished. The film's structure and cinematography grants it a subtle power and nuance that ironically enables a sharper politics than more polemical prison films, such as *The House I Live In* (Eugene Jarecki, 2012) or *13th* (Ava DuVernay, 2016). For example, in those otherwise commendable efforts, the viewer nonetheless is led down some familiar paths related to the drug war, redeemable vs. irredeemable offenders, the promise of bipartisan prison reform, and the scourge of private prisons. These familiar avenues may be important and both films may help to politicize a new generation of prison activists, but they do often lead to oversimplified analyses or suggest the expendability of many prisoners; the structuring categories of crime and punishment remain intact. In *The House I Live In*, the historical processes that are the conditions of possibility for the carceral state remain shrouded in the focus on the drug war. In *13th*, those historical processes receive important attention but the resulting analyses hinge on a disproportionate attribution of mass imprisonment to bodies like the American Legislative Exchange Council and the private prison industry (see Berger 2016).

The Prison in Twelve Landscapes succeeds precisely because it penetrates those places in the United States where we may not expect to find the prison and because the film excavates deeply beneath the prison's more readily apparent manifestations in those places where we do expect it. As a film about the prison where we never actually see one until the very last shot, *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* acutely and movingly demonstrates the prison's haunting of lives outside its most material manifestations. This occurs in the film in places where we might expect it—places like Ferguson or Detroit—but

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the film avoids the cinematic pitfall of focusing on an easy target of liberal derision—racial profiling or the war on drugs, for example—and instead bravely delves into the spaces and stories in these cities that on appearance might seem distinct from the carceral state. In Detroit, Story’s interlocutor is an ambassador for the new Quicken Loans corporate headquarters. As he takes us to different floors and buildings within the expansive corporate geography of the company’s downtown presence, the links to the prison state are not readily apparent. Story makes us work in scenes like this one. What is the connection, the film asks, between the largest online lender in the country, its explicit gentrification and corporatization of downtown Detroit, its partnership with local state and federal law enforcement, its employment of off-duty police as security, and the prison state? What the film does, in scenes like this, is reveal some of the strands that knit together expansive carceral geographies without necessarily offering viewers a complete analysis. It suggests that if we want to better understand the carceral state, we might need to ask less about crime and even punishment and more about gentrification and the revanchist police practices that secure it.

In a sense, the subtleties of the Detroit scene are characteristic of Story’s approach to the film as a whole. The film opens with a nighttime bus ride and a soundtrack of phone calls from loved ones to prisoners. Story returns to and completes that scene only at the very end of the film and fills in its chronology: the bus has stopped at 34th Street and 7th Avenue in Manhattan and picked up visitors—mothers, wives, girlfriends, kids—in order to drive them upstate, almost to the Canadian border, to visit their incarcerated sons, partners, and fathers at its final destination, Attica prison. But in between this opening scene and its resolution, Story has taken us across the country and back, from Kentucky to Detroit to Baltimore to California to St. Louis and back to Appalachia. We

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have, in fact, been on a ride the whole time, a tour of some of the thousands of nodal points of American carceral geography. The film ends as the bus turns into Attica and we are face to face with the grand edifice of the fortress prison for the film's final minute. Remarkably, this marks the first and only time we see a prison in the entire film, a recognition that brings into relief Story's central point: the prison has, in fact, been with us all along.

The bus ride that opens and closes the film is perhaps the most explicit example of Story's examination of the prison's production of time and space. We see the prison's seepage into and structuring of otherwise mundane and quotidian moments and places that constitute our lives. In the bus scenes, we are present with the tensions between forced mobility and forced confinement, and what the enforcement of both produces for the relationships that hang in their balance. Story uses audio from "Calls From Home" as a soundtrack for this scene. Calls From Home is a radio show produced in Whitesburg, Kentucky at the media arts organization Appalshop, designed explicitly for people on the outside to leave messages for people on the inside; it broadcasts those messages into the seven prisons and many other jails and detention centers within its listening reach in Central Appalachia. As we see bus riders dozing, playing hand-held video games, and doing their hair in preparation for the morning visit, we listen to shout-outs from grandmothers, uncles, nieces, nephews, and lovers to their incarcerated loved ones, offering messages of hope and faith but also filling them in on plot developments in their favorite shows, problems with home internet routers, and updates on recent fishing trips. One has the sense in this scene of what is extracted from people directly affected by

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imprisonment: the lost intimacies of mundane conversation, the enforced mobility to try and reclaim some of that intimacy, and the loss of time.²

The materiality of the carceral state even in the absence of the prison is perhaps most acute in the scenes from St. Louis County. There, Story spends time excavating the quotidian violences of theft—of time and money—perpetrated by the police and municipal government against local residents. One woman describes through tears the fines she paid and jail time she completed because of her trash can lid being ajar. In another scene, the camera pans across a long line of residents, mostly Black and Brown, as they file into a converted court to pay fines—a pointed and visceral visual representation of the Ferguson report that found revenue, rather than public safety, shaped city police practices. Story doesn't look away from this scene of misery. This is, in fact, what stealing from the poor looks like and we watch it happen in real time. Story does something cinematically here that also deserves mention. After several testimonies from people in line speaking to the absurdities of the fines, Story slows the camera speed down and positions its gaze at the feet and then at the faces of those moving into the building to pay their fines, capturing and aligning the slow rhythm of the process with what it syncopates: boredom, aggravation, bureaucracy, and expropriation. We watch the extraction of money and the taking of time from those subject to the violence of the carceral state but not presently locked within its walls. It is mundane and quotidian. And it's nowhere near a prison.

The Prison in Twelve Landscapes is the film we need in the present moment of the carceral state. Amidst calls for and embraces of bipartisan reform, a hyper-focus on the spectacular displays of police violence at the expense of acute attention to its everyday expressions, the rise of carceral humanism and expansion of post-custodial

² On prison's extraction of time, see Gilmore (2015).

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control, we need cultural production and analysis that illuminates the carceral state's reach, calcification, and re-formation. In the film, we find the prison in places we don't expect; we see it used as a jobs program and a revenue generating mechanism; we feel its effect on the lives it touches. Story has taken from us the ability to talk of innocence, or redemption, or incremental change. This loss of a comfortable language of reform is, in effect, a gift that the film offers to viewers. The film's destabilization of American common sense about prisons and reform forces us to sit with the inadequacies of our ideas, language, and efforts for change. In the course of that instability, the film opens up space—abolitionist space—for thinking, and unthinking, the prison from our landscapes.

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