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**Punishment**

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Punishment

Abstract
This is a film review of Punishment (2024), directed by Øystein Mamen.

Keywords
Criminal Justice, Prisons, Repentance, Spiritual Life

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Punishment/Straff (2024), dir. Øystein Mamen

Punishment offers a stark view of prison life of inmates in Norway. In Halden Prison, four men voluntarily agree to take part in a silent retreat that takes place in a prison-ward-turned-monastery for three weeks. As the documentary begins, we see the heavy doors of the prison shut loudly, blocking out the world for these mean, to serve long sentences in a maximum security prison:
Two hundred and fifty men, who have committed anything from aggravated assault to murder, are boxed in and are forced to learn to navigate life inside prison walls. The silent retreat, guided by two Jesuit priests, opens up a space to any who wish to take part in it, as it is open to all faiths. The four men who volunteer to take part in this experiment—Hasan, Christian, John, and Bjorn—have served time in this prison before moving into the monastery for three weeks, and the viewers get to see how prison life has taken a heavy toll on these men, forcing them to lock up their emotions and true selves, to put up masks to hide any weaknesses. In comparison to strict rules in prison, we get to then witness how the stricter rules of silent life positively affect their own perceptions on the crimes they have committed, and about the people whose lives they have affected—both their own, and those who are left to grieve family members who were killed by some of these inmates. This solitude allows these men to drop their masks and delve deep within themselves to see who they truly are and what they want to become.

Throughout the twenty-one days of silence, these men undergo deeply personal journeys to better understand their actions and how they have ended up in such a desolate place in their lives. The two priests who guide these four men provide them with various tasks throughout the day, starting with silent breakfast, meditation, and exercises where they reflect on their past and their crimes. They are expected to be attentive to each other, and to help each other, silently.

During this period of silence, their time is separated by four themes: Love, Evil, Mercy and Hope. Each section is broken down into daily reflections and tasks that has each man look into himself to better understand how he fits in the world. Love is explained as the strongest bond and the most fragile thing in the world: each man must reflect on being loved, in their past, and in their current lives. Each man, through these exercises, must face the more essential question: Who Am I? The retreat walks each man through his past life and past traumas to help him let go of shame.
and guilt. Then Evil is investigated: each man must contemplate how his path in life made him choose to do evil acts, in order to get them to reach the point of forgiveness. They are put in a position where they must own their actions and find ways to make amends for them. Mercy is offered by the priests, to each prisoner. Although the priests absolve the men of their sins through prayer, each man realizes that forgiveness cannot be easily gained. Finally, the last part of the retreat ends with Hope. Hope is described as an anchor, to hold them up, to help them not give up on themselves.

Incorporating Faith, Hope and Love, the retreat helps each man understand how their past has put them on a path of evil, yet they can still find forgiveness from others and eventually from themselves. As long as they have hope to continue on this journey of self-discovery and to face their true selves, they can one day be able to find redemption. This documentary reminded me of the movie Dead Man Walking (1995) where forgiveness and redemption can be found by the most despicable of criminals by looking into themselves and owning their crimes, by realizing that what has happened in the past does not make us who we are today. We can, either through faith in God or humanity, find redemption. These inmates do not believe that they should be released from prison, but that their inner journey, to see the truth of themselves, can be the first step in forgiving themselves while they finish out their prison sentences.

Punishment also makes a glaring statement about the prison system as it is currently set up. It does not provide any form of self-observation, any chance to change one’s beliefs and behaviors: inmates are locked up in solitary, but it does not provide them with the solitude of the silent retreat, where—through silence—the men in this experiment gained a deeper understanding of the traumas they had experienced in childhood, and how those traumas put them onto the path of crime and acts of evil. In order for prisoners to be able to undertake this journey of self-discovery and
positive change through forgiveness, prisons need to stop continuing to traumatize prisoners and set up a system where such soul-searching can be undertaken so that, when finally liberated from the physical walls of the prison, these inmates can free themselves from the imprisonment of their past, to become attentive to each other, and to help each other.