

# Punishment Park—1970s radical protest film released on DVD

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*Punishment Park*, a film by veteran British director and political radical Peter Watkins (*La Commune*, *Edvard Munch*) that was made in 1970, was recently released on DVD by New Yorker Films. The film is a pseudo-documentary made amidst the escalation of the Vietnam War and the growth of the antiwar protest movement. Watkins was roused to make it by the Kent State shootings of four students by the Ohio National Guard in May 1970. The movie is an unrestrained depiction of a United States that has been turned into a police state in which all political dissent has been outlawed.

Watkins made the film in the California desert over only a three-week period with hand-held cameras and a supposed European “news” crew. He used young antiwar protesters whom he’d met in Los Angeles, depicting themselves being summarily tried by military tribunals and then given a choice between imprisonment or completing a three-day course in one of the government’s concentration camps, called “punishment parks.” In the scenario, they all choose the Punishment Park, where they must complete a grueling course to reach the American flag without being caught by armed police, for whom this is a training exercise. The outcome is a foregone conclusion.

Watkins’ film technique takes just enough actual fact—concentration camps were indeed authorized in case of a state of emergency under the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950—and then adopts the conventions of “cinema verité” to film a fictional scenario that is plausible, but not actually fact.

As early as 1938, when Orson Welles provoked mass hysteria with his broadcast of *War of the Worlds*—listeners believed Martians were actually invading Earth—such a blurring of fact and fiction in the “trustworthy” format of a news program disturbed audiences and angered the authorities. It is also significant that both 1938 and 1970 were politically volatile periods.

When Welles made *War of the Worlds* the world was on the brink of the Second World War, which would soon involve the United States. In 1970 the Nixon administration feared the growing protests against the Vietnam War.

Not surprisingly, after screenings at the Cannes and New York film festivals in 1971, *Punishment Park* was not picked up for distribution by either the US film industry or television networks. Eventually it ran in a small New York theater for four days before it was closed down.

The film fared a little better in Britain, where audiences had initially been more receptive to the director’s hallmark style. He had directed *Culloden* (1964), a television series for the BBC, using amateur actors and including a modern-day camera crew in its recreation of the 1764 battle of “Bonnie” Prince Charles for the throne.

In 1966, Watkins generated more controversy with *The War Game*, a depiction of the aftermath of a nuclear attack on Britain, with scenes of nuclear destruction interspersed with interviews with “survivors” played by actors. This film was found so distressing that it was banned on TV till 1985. It did, however, gain a limited theater release and won several prizes, including an Oscar for best documentary in 1967.

These explorations of how the mainstream media packages the news in ways that can be other than truthful, and Watkins’ hypothesis that a fictional “scenario” filmed realistically might indeed be more “true” to the underlying reality, is a worthy undertaking, especially as the mass media has, if anything, become more complicit in disseminating government lies over the past 30 years.

*Punishment Park* has also been hailed as particularly prescient under current circumstances, when the Bush administration’s open embrace of torture, indefinite detention, warrantless wiretapping and other techniques have placed the question of the danger of dictatorship

squarely on the agenda. The government is presently in open violation of the provisions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. FISA, which in fact makes the granting of warrants for wiretapping almost routine, was enacted in 1978 because of the exposure of government spying on antiwar and other activists during that period—precisely the sort of young people as those appearing in Watkins’ film.

All of this should, by rights, make *Punishment Park* an interesting film. It may perhaps be to the taste of some. This viewer found it virtually un-watchable, however.

Cross-cut between scenes of protesters—the black nationalist, the “yippie,” the pacifist, the feminist—hurling radical slogans at their “square” interrogators, and scenes of previously sentenced protesters stumbling through the desert with Watkins, as the “news” voice-over, telling us the temperature and how many miles they have to go, the structure is unduly repetitive. And while the “actors” gain something for being genuinely themselves, it is mostly for how they look—which is painfully young—not for what they say, which is a string of clichés.

In response to questions like, “Don’t you feel immoral for dodging the draft, not working a job, holding ‘love-ins’ while others are defending your country?” one shouts, “I’ll tell what’s immoral, man! War is immoral, poverty is immoral, racism is immoral, police brutality is immoral, oppression is immoral, genocide is immoral, imperialism is immoral! This country represents all these things!” This dialogue never rises above the completely superficial, and it is tedious as well.

As the WSWS wrote of the more recent Watkins film *La Commune* (2000), the project’s low political and ideological level yields a result that is stunted. In both films angry shouting and superficial slogans are substituted for a more penetrating analysis of the actual political tendencies involved.

The problem is that Watkins views the events within the general political prism of the 1960s counterculture itself. The radical protest movement of the day was only an aspect of a deeper class conflict and political crisis. The authorities’ attacks on the counterculture and the middle class protesters were aimed more fundamentally at the working class.

This was a time of growing and explosive antiwar feelings in the working class, including among the draftees in Vietnam and millions of striking trade unionists who refused to pay for the war through attacks on their living standards at home. The attacks on democratic rights that took place during Nixon’s time in

office were aimed above all at heading off an independent political struggle against the war by the working class.

None of this comes across in Watkins’ film. *Punishment Park* quite correctly points to the danger of police-state measures in the US. Ignoring the real causes of this danger, however, leads both to political pessimism and to an orientation toward pressuring the ruling elite and particularly the Democratic Party. From watching this film, one would never gain any insight into what led so many of the angry protesters of the time to soon become venture capitalists or entrepreneurs, like Jerry Rubin and Rennie Davis of Chicago Seven fame, or to follow the path of people like Tom Hayden or John Kerry into the Democratic Party.

Watkins is undoubtedly sincere, and he takes on important subjects, such as the interrelationship between war and political oppression. One of the more affecting scenes in the film is the shot of the faces of the protesters as they are jolted along in an open jeep in the desert to the accompaniment of news broadcasts of the casualty tolls in Vietnam.

Watkins has also perceptively analyzed the “culture of the monofilm,” as he calls the manipulations of the mass news media, and has a healthy desire to subvert it. These insights should be taken up and expanded upon by a new generation of filmmakers, and apparently they have been in at least one instance, by the Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi in *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), an excellent film.

In the final analysis, however, it must be said that *Punishment Park* yields no real understanding of the actual driving forces behind the government’s resort to police-state measures. The release on DVD of a film on this subject could not be more pertinent, but this film is a great disappointment.



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