



Big Screen Classics

Punishment Park

Punishment Park

Director: Peter Watkins

Production Companies: Chartwell Films, Francoise Films

Producer: Susan Martin

Production Assistants: Laura Golden, Harlan Green

Assistant Director: Peter Smokler

Continuity: Linda Elbow

Casting: Linda Elbow, Laura Golden

Screenplay: Peter Watkins

Director of Photography: Joan Churchill

2nd Unit Photographer: Peter Smokler

Lighting: John Morril, Harlan Chapman, Kit Kalionzes

Assistant Photographer: Richard Wells

Editors: Peter Watkins, Terry Hodel

Assistant Editor: Susan Martin

Art Director: David Hancock

Assistant Art Director: Barry Wilson

Make-up: Miriam Nunberg

Music: Paul Motian

Sound: Mike Moore, Hiroti Yamoto, Wayne Nakatsu

Sound Assistant: Doug Stevenson

Cast:

Carmen Argenziano (*Jay Kaufman*)

Stan Armsted (*Charles Robbins*)

Jim Bohan (*captain, sheriff's department*)

Frederick Franklyn (*Professor Daly*)

Gladys Golden (*Mrs Jergens*)

Sanford Golden (*Senator Harris*)

George Gregory (*Mr Keagan*)

Gary Johnson (*Jim Reedman*)

Luke Johnson (*Luke Valerio*)

Paul Alelyanes, Kerry Canon, Bob Franklin,

Bruce Maguire, Ron Pennington, Allen Powell,

Jim Wettstein (*policemen*)

Harold Beaulieu, Cynthia Jenkins, Jack London,

Rob Lewine (*militants, desert group*)

Danny Conlon, Wally McKay, Cliff Pinard, Don Vann,

Charlie Wyatt (*National Guardsmen*)

Sandy Cox (*stenographer*)

Val Daniels, Harlan Green (*county sheriffs*)

Roland Gonzalez, Jack Gozdick, Brian Hart,

Linda Mandel, Don Pino, Jason Sunners,

Conchita Thornton (*semi-militants, desert group*)

Rodger Greene (*federal marshal*)

Mitchell Harding, Mike Hodel (*newscasters*)

Joe Hudgins (*chief tribunal marshal*)

Michele Johnson (*Jane Reeman*)

Mark Keats (*Chairman Hoeger*)

Tom Kemp, Harry McKasson (*tribunal marshals*)

Mary Ellen Kleinhall (*Allison Mitchner*)

Lee Marks (*FBI Agent Donovan*)

Ted Martin, Harold Schneider

(*pacifists, desert group*)

Patrick Noland (*defendant*)

Katherine Quittner (*Nancy Smith*)

Sigmund Rich (*Professor Hazlett*)

Paul Rosenstein (*Paul Reynolds*)

Norman Sinclair (*Mr Sully*)

Scott Turner (*Janus Kohler*)

Dennis Wilson (*deputy*)

USA 1971

89 mins

Digital

It took me a long time to realise quite how experimental the sound design on this film really is. Like all of Peter Watkins' work, the sonic landscape is doing so much of the heavy lifting in creating the creeping sense of dread and hopelessness. The brilliance of the camerawork, by Joan Churchill, is obvious, but the location sound recording and mixing by Michael Moore and his team is quietly astonishing.

Mark Jenkin

A contemporary review

With Nixon's China trip, and the November election looming, it's more than possible that American military involvement in Vietnam will be insignificant by the end of the year. Not so, according to Peter Watkins. In his new film the Vietnam war has escalated, with a corresponding upsurge of violent dissent. America is shaken by sabotage, the prisons are overcrowded, and in desperation the President has invoked the McCarran Act and set up nationwide detention camps, whence dissidents are hauled before citizen tribunals and offered a choice between prison and Punishment Park – a three-day assault course across the desert in search of the American flag. If you avoid capture by a pursuit squad of police and National Guard, freedom; if not, you serve your sentence. You may not survive the blazing days and freezing nights, and you may get picked off by trigger-happy Guardsmen; what you don't know, though you might have guessed it, is that the Stars and Stripes is an illusory haven. And all this, Watkins says, is happening tomorrow, yesterday, five years from now – 'It is also happening today.'

The War Game was a projection into the not-too-distant future, a loud-voiced warning of things to come; *Privilege* was a fictional metaphor for a future shock. With *The Peace Game*, and now *Punishment Park*, Watkins presents what he calls allegory in the form of documentary. Angered, and not without justification, by the 'critical intolerance against my films', Watkins hits back with 'a cinema of feeling, of direct confrontation with ourselves.' For every damning critic's 'hysterical' or 'obsessed' he counters with 'fear syndrome', 'intellectual repression', 'a malaise common to us all'. Well, if you pull the dog's tail, you're asking to get bitten. In fact, *Punishment Park* is easily the best of Watkins' cinema pamphlets. As a filmmaker he is not one to use gentle persuasion if he can shout instead, and 'obsessed' he may well be. But after so much anodyne posturing in the commercial cinema of late, a kick in the guts may be what we need.

This, at least, is how Watkins sees it, and like his other films *Punishment Park* is a frontal assault on the senses. He describes the method as a fusion of realism and expressionism. As the film jolts along, lurching between one group of dissidents in the desert and another arraigned before the tribunal, a simulated reality spirals into nightmare. The link to the world outside the desert is the media, British and German television teams who shadow the desert fugitives and zoom in on the highlights of the tribunal. The desert television crew, in the unseen voice of an interviewer/director, stands its distance only until they are involved in the violence to the extent of trying to intervene ('Oh, God, stop! Cut the camera,' screams the interviewer as the National Guard mows down a helpless quartet), thus neatly answering familiar doubts about the emotive neutrality of front-line television reporters; while at the same time, of course, raising even more awkward questions about the distance between the television unit we're assumed to be watching and Watkins' own team recording them. What we have, in fact, is the familiar Watkins double-take. We're being asked to believe what we know to be faked, while simultaneously being persuaded that it isn't faked. Not for the first time in a Watkins film, form and content are at once, and disturbingly, interdependent and in opposition. The telephoto lens repeatedly blurs the image, and it's more than just a heat haze. It's a method that is sometimes self-defeating, forcing a gap between film and audience (there's no disguising, finally, that the thing *is* faked); but it's also a method that grips you by the throat.

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Big Screen Classics

Punishment Park

Mon 30 Mar 20:50; Sun 12 Apr 12:20;

Fri 24 Apr 18:10

Pickpocket

Tue 31 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by film scholar, writer and international curator Dr Omar Ahmed); Mon 20 Apr 18:20; Thu 30 Apr 14:40

The Garden

Wed 1 Apr 18:15 (+ intro by artist Sarah Wood);

Thu 16 Apr 21:00

The Thin Red Line

Thu 2 Apr 14:00; Mon 6 Apr 17:30;

Sat 18 Apr 19:50

The Conversation

Thu 2 Apr 20:45; Tue 7 Apr 20:40; Wed 15 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by writer and broadcaster Matthew Sweet); Tue 21 Apr 14:40

Bad Timing

Fri 3 Apr 20:40; Tue 14 Apr 14:40; Fri 17 Apr 20:40;

Wed 22 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by film critic and improviser Tara Judah)

Inland Empire

Sat 4 Apr 19:40; Sun 19 Apr 14:50

Wendy and Lucy

Sun 5 Apr 14:50; Mon 13 Apr 14:40;

Thu 23 Apr 20:50

The Perfect Storm

Fri 10 Apr 20:25; Sat 25 Apr 12:00 (+ intro by filmmaker Mark Jenkin)

Small Axe: Lovers Rock

Sat 11 Apr 20:30; Wed 29 Apr 18:30 (+ intro)

Gallivant

Sun 26 Apr 12:20 (+ Q&A with director Andrew

Kötting, hosted by filmmaker Mark Jenkin);

Mon 27 Apr 20:30

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This time, at least, the tone – shrill, unleavened by any distancing evaluation – is less alienating because more consistent. There are as usual too many barbs for the audience to catch on, things like the doom-laden off-camera voice which periodically intones temperature levels and the facts of dehydration. But in detail at least we *can* believe what we see, even when we're troubled by the larger scheme. The reality of the American generational polarity is graphically registered. Paranoia straddles the fence, in the harassed faces of the tribunal members (housewife, senator, sociologist and so on) as much as in the ranting, self-pitying obstinacy of the accused. Their defence counsel makes allusion to Hitler and in the same breath calls his clients 'these strange and excluded people'; interviews with the tribunal during an alfresco lunch break elicit remarks about 'more spank and less Spock in America'. The pursuit team, whose cynical captain demonstrates their lethal weapons with an ice-cold lack of emotion, are just doing their job and anxious to do it well, even if it means a pimply 18-year-old trainee weeping into camera that his trigger pulled by accident. Everybody mouths the conditioned platitudes of Middle and disaffected America. If there was ever a communicating wire, it's been cut clean through, a point made crystal clear by the woman committee member's hysterical assault ('You're schizophrenic, you should be locked up') on a girl who might be her own. Written into the faces on both sides of the table is fear and incomprehension, and long since the end of the dialogue.

Violence, someone says, is the only thing that will provoke a reaction. And as a car radio picks up a Nixon address to 'forward-looking Americans', the soundtrack stutters with gunfire, screaming jets and unimaginable electronic noise. Watkins' future is predicated on a present imperfect, which is reasonable and right. What is less clear, and it's around the background reverberations that doubts begin to assert themselves, is the precise context for this collision course. The desert game, like the real game, makes no distinction between violent militant and pacifist reasoner, but we're given no indication of particular circumstances which caused this generality. Quite apart from the worrying certainty that if present speculation is future fact, then *any* speculation is valid in Watkins' terms, there's a nagging lack of documentation behind the film's persuasive specifics. What exactly is that war cacophony on the soundtrack? Why haven't the dissidents realised that Punishment Park is a frame-up (the news would surely have filtered through)? Why put your trust in the American flag if your one aim is to destroy all it stands for? More seriously, what is this third alternative (an amnesty pledge) we're suddenly introduced to near the end, and why on earth doesn't someone take it? And yet more seriously, what exactly are those television crews doing in the desert? If the coverage is going out on NBC, as the interviewer tells the captain when things are getting out of hand, are we to assume that NBC is still allowed to transmit what can only be potentially subversive material? If not now, as Watkins keeps insisting, then certainly not in *this* future, where repression would long since have silenced the media as even neutral commentator.

As previously, verisimilitude falters when one starts to question the general credibility of Watkins' hypothesis. If this *is* an allegory, then its very real surface mitigates against its acceptance as such. And the more questions one asks, the larger the credibility gap. I don't think it's valid to attack Watkins (as many have done) for being a romantic masochist. The general malaise which he sees leading to Punishment Park is there for all to see; and as he says, anyone who doesn't see it is trapped by the game. It's just that some people don't see a bullet in the desert as the only end of the road. Watkins says we're losing touch with reality, which is why his film is an allegory. What he hasn't seen, or won't admit, is that other side of the reality which can offer an alternative possibility to his nightmare future. Oddly, though perhaps characteristically, he doesn't see this most political of films as being political.

David Wilson, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1972