

PUNISHMENT PARK

FRIDAY 19 SEPTEMBER 2003

Memorial Hall, Betws-y-Coed, doors open at 7pm

Real Institute launches its new season of 'alternative film nights' with a controversial film suppressed for over thirty years.

Directed by Peter Watkins, 'Punishment Park' was filmed in the USA during the Vietnam war and caused international uproar on release. It was effectively banned only four days later and has never been shown on television.

In the film, the government declares a national emergency and detains all those it judges a risk to internal security. They are given a stark choice: long prison sentences or a mysterious three-day endurance test in 'Punishment Park'.

Watkins' uses real-life counterparts to act the roles (students, civil rights activists, government officers), which heightens the tense drama of this fictitious documentary.

A startling film of its time, few would have foreseen its disturbing relevance to today's intense debate on the balance between civil liberties and national security.

As usual, this 'alternative film night' includes a cabaret compere, short films and newly commissioned adverts - plus the acclaimed coffee and cakes.

FILM SCENARIO

Its 1970 and the war in Vietnam is escalating. President Nixon has decided on a secret bombing campaign of Cambodia. In the face of massive public protest Nixon declares a state of national emergency, and - we presuppose - activates the 1950 Internal Security Act that authorises Federal authorities to detain persons judged to be "a risk to internal security".

In a desert zone in southwestern 'Group 637' (comprising mostly university students) find themselves in the Bear Mountain National Punishment Park. Having chosen 'Punishment Park' in lieu of heavy prison sentences they are informed of the rules of the 'game'. They are promised liberty if they evade pursuing law enforcement officers and reach the American flag 53 miles away across the mountains, within three days.

Meanwhile, in a tribunal tent nearby, 'Group 638' is assumed guilty before tried and attempt in vain to argue their case for resisting the war in Vietnam.

'Group 637' begin their test and quickly become exhausted in temperatures of 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Some give up, others attempt to escape, the rest are determined to reach the flag still believing freedom will be their reward.

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Further press information contact: Iwan +44 (0)7748 826 151

www.realinstitute.org • press@realinstitute.org

see also: www.peterwatkins.lt/p_varyk.htm • www.punishmentpark.com

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BIOGRAPHY

Born in Norbiton, Surrey, Watkins grew up in south Wales. After studying theatre at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, he began his career in advertising as an assistant producer and turned to amateur filmmaking in the late 1950s. In the mid-60s Watkins was commissioned by BBC-TV to make two feature-length docudramas incorporating a quasi-newsreel style and nonprofessional actors. The second of these, **The War Game** (1965), graphically portrayed the nightmare of nuclear war and was banned from broadcast. It was subsequently released in theatres and earned a best documentary Oscar in 1966. Watkins enjoyed modest success with the commercial feature film, **Privilege** (1967), but has subsequently worked primarily in the documentary genre, based in various Scandinavian countries.

One of his more recent films, *Resan* (1988), is an 873 minute (14 hours) epic that addresses such issues as the arms race and global hunger.

REVIEWS: United Kingdom

The Sun (a review of 'Punishment Park' and 'Fortune and Men's Eyes'): "... is sincerity a virtue when the eyes of both directors are hooded in the blinkers of their own extreme sickness? ... Propagandist Peter Watkins is left **hopelessly adrift in his own hopeless mind.**"

The Observer: "This is a thoughtful and sincere film and any thinking person should go and see it... It is hysterical and obsessed, but faced with the way things are going, it would be odd, given his concerned and committed temperament, if it were not."

Daily Mail: "Peter Watkins ... has gone to Southern California for his fierce and frightening new film ... A few years ago we might have dismissed the film as the figment of a crazed imagination. **Today its documentary overtones are all too horribly real.**"

The Guardian: "Peter Watkins, a **sincere, honest and talented filmmaker** who wears his heart so obviously on his sleeve that one almost weeps for him, since there are so few romantics left."

The Scotsman: "It's a **stark, uncompromising, brilliant film**... an important cinematic statement which ought to be widely shown. It will not be; see it now."

Time Out: "It is crucially important ... that films like this one survive financially in sufficient numbers to keep the door open for others. And when you look around at the kind of propaganda decorating your local (cinema), you can't help believe that Watkins' film can be effective and that it is **easily the most subversive film to show for a long time.**"

REVIEWS: USA

New York Times: "A movie of such blunt-wrong headed sincerity that you're likely to sit through the first ten hysterical minutes of it before realising that it is essentially the wish-fulfilling dream of a masochist... [this is] **futuristic nonsense....**"

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Playboy: "Seldom has the cause of peace and freedom been served so mindlessly."

The Staff: 'evil... the pornography of hate ... hugely depressing, not merely because it rather accurately reflects some of the worst aspects of life in this country, but because it exaggerates those aspects, not simply on the screen, but in the psyches of those Americans who see it. As such, it becomes part of the problem.'

Village Voice: '... extraordinarily believable, and it is impossible to emerge from his 90 minutes of psychodrama unbruised. The considerable gut reactions Watkins' films provoke may partially explain the extent to which they are despised and ignored ... But if the hopelessness of Watkins' vision increases with each film, his technical brilliance has been sharpening to contain this rage, and the distance he has travelled since 'Privilege' is a phenomenon that American audiences deserve to see.'

Rolling Stone: 'Peter Watkins' film is a **cinema verite masterpiece** of technique... one of the finest films about dissension in America that's been made in a long time..." (Rolling Stone voted 'Punishment Park' one of the 10 Best Films of 1971)

The Village Voice: 'Peter Watkins ... seems to have permanent "controversial" status ... Many critics dismiss him as a paranoid, which is rather irresponsible... Watkins may in fact be **our greatest realist**... the film expresses exactly what is happening in this country.'

San Francisco Chronicle: 'It is a devastating indictment, a paralysing drama and a chilling prognosis. It is unquestionably a polemic but I'm not at all sure that it is loaded ... Through the sounds ... the cutting, the photography, the acting ... Watkins has created a **profoundly disturbing** motion picture.'

REVIEWS: France

Le Monde: "[Peter Watkins'] works remain hidden, or forbidden, in most cases... 'Punishment Park', which is now available... more than twenty years after its first screening ...reveals what was -and still is - carefully hidden behind Mickey mouse's big smile ... A tale in which Walt Disney would have put his anti-Communist and anti-Semitic opinions into practice, and turned his gigantic leisure parks into concentration camps ... 'Punishment Park' is also a **great lesson of cinematography**, excluding any kind of didactic attempt. Presumably, the only park that is worth a detour."

Les Cahiers du Cinema: "... a very powerful and impressive political documentary-fiction... reveals the contradictions of an America in confrontation."

Télérama: "Peter Watkins is the **last of 'the angry young men'** to have preserved his furious insolence."

Le Nouvel Observateur: "A rebel and a filmmaker whose **brilliance and original vision** guarantee him to remain unique in the history of film, Watkins is catching everybody. **In 1971, it was frightening. Today it still is.**"

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