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Not the State's Failure, but its Success

David Carr

2007

PUNISHMENT PARK (2005)

Directed by Peter Watkins New Yorker Video

DVD 88 minutes

In *Punishment Park*, political dissidents face citizen tribunals set up by the Nixon administration to try revolutionaries and antiwar activists. These are kangaroo courts in which a guilty sentence is predetermined. The defendants must choose between lengthy jail terms or three days in *Punishment Park*. Almost all choose the latter, entering a "game" with the object of reaching the American flag on the other side of 56 miles of scorching hot desert with no food or water, as police and military units carry out counterinsurgency exercises on them. The participants are told that they will be pardoned if they reach the flag.

The film follows two groups, one which has gone through the trial and is in Punishment Park, the other, still in the trial phase. The action moves toward a dual climax in which we discover there is no way for them to win. Dissidents and the

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establishment elaborate their ideas in the tribunal tent, while in the desert, we see these ideas as actions and tactics. Each side argues what they believe is at stake: law, order and the preservation of the nation on the one side, human rights, freedom, and social justice on the other. Some of the dissidents are pacifists, others militants, while some are undecided. Anyone looking to bolster one or another theory of revolution will not find the metaphorical ground of *Punishment Park* very fertile. Rather, the film addresses state power and its effects on both its victims and its servants. The inescapable conclusion is that this power cannot be reasoned with, making attempts at reform exercises in futility, symbolized most obviously by the quest for the American flag in Punishment Park.

The overarching anti-state message is lost on many critics, including Professor Joseph Gomez, whose audio commentary is included with this DVD. He can serve as our model critic since he is among the most supportive of the film and has defended it since it opened in 1971 to harsh criticism and the suppression of its distribution. As he sees it, the structural societal problems examined involve polarization in which “a breakdown in communication means no one is listening to each other.” Relating the film to present day concerns, Gomez correctly assesses that the game is obviously rigged but he believes this can be fixed by preserving “that balance between protecting the nation and allowing people freedom to express themselves under the constitution.” There is a contradiction in his critique. On the one hand, he points to this balance, arguing the necessity of saving the nation (and therefore the power structure) while simultaneously stating that “it doesn’t matter if you play by the rules or don’t play by the rules. The controlling power structure does what it wants to do. That’s the importance of the metaphor, and that’s why it’s impossible for these people to reach the flag and what it represents.” The safety of the nation and freedom of speech are both ultimately tied to the power of the national apparatus.

self the system, not of a breakdown of communication between poles in American civil society, or between elites and the governed. Neither My Lai, nor Abu Ghraib are about “a few bad apples” representing an anomaly to be reformed away or nipped in the bud. Similarly, Watkin’s film is not about a failure in our system, but about its *success*. By turning this concept on its head, critics serve to preserve power even as they attempt to safely deconstruct it.

The defendants’ freedom of speech has been revoked, but the “protection of the nation” remains. This should dispel any illusion of balance. Gomez presents this pseudo-opposition of the system to itself as somehow worth struggling for. His point of view is vigorously, if pointlessly, argued in the film by the defendants’ liberal lawyer who Gomez acknowledges can do nothing in these circumstances. His critique builds on this reformist position. This is not a Marxist or right wing film, he explains, setting himself up as its protector by removing it from a political context and placing it into an academic one where politics are trumped by humanism. This provides the film a respectable role in the spectacular dialogue between critics and power, the very exercise presented as a ruse in the film.

Gomez inverts *Punishment Park*. He accurately analyzes the “tyranny of objects” such as handcuffs and guns, and the role of water, which only the tribunal and police have access to. He describes how the amateur actors were allowed to present their own views and improvise their lines, and these anti-authoritarian means do shape the message. But Gomez’s subsequent call to restore dialogue fails to define the sides accurately. There is no equal dialogue between the power of the state and dissident groups or individuals. The state seeks to dominate and define all levels of existence through centralization. Would improving communication alter this fact? Speaking truth to power is usually pointless because power’s goal is self-maintenance. The film doesn’t have to argue for revolution. The implication is clear enough, and Watkins never implies mediation as the solution.

The lack of a principled criticism of power relations leads Gomez to even more egregious statements. He discovers that Watkins is not on the side of the dissidents, shown by the fact that a police officer is the first casualty: “We need to look here and realize that it is the dissidents who indeed start the violence,” he says. This misconstrues the context of violence

and repression that is Punishment Park, and therefore is the metaphor and the film. Both the tribunal and the police forces understand they are there to repress the defendants violently. In one scene, a sheriff instructs his officers on the use of buckshot which is “To kill, not to disperse, not to harry, not to wound, to kill. Use it for that fact when you have to do so.” The tribunal members similarly kill the defendants’ rights by gagging them, yelling over their testimony, and forcibly removing them from the room.

Gomez’s contention that the game’s prey started the violence unwittingly gives credence to the tribunal members’ belief that the state is making a defense against the violence of its own citizens. Here Gomez moves from the role of ineffectual defense lawyer to that of arguing the tribunal’s side. To miss the source of violence, ironically requires dismissing the content of the very dialogue Gomez sees as key, and its relegation to the category of non-communication (and many critics have commented on the shallowness of the dialogue). A black militant, loosely based on Bobby Seale at the Chicago Seven trial says that “[w]hen fired upon, I believe in firing back.” A young woman explains how her faith in constitutional guarantees has eroded: “Violence is inherent in the society. .. the movement... was very reluctant to become violent! But we saw that the government would only make changes when we did become violent!” The defendants all describe the system as the source of violence. Even the handful of soldiers who may not agree morally or politically with the state can’t act in their own interests while carrying out its mandate.

The film is not without flaws. Watkins allowed all of the actors to improvise while incorporating key elements of the plot and this spontaneity helps bring back a sense of reality to the clear cut divisions between the sides. While all the leftists were improvising lines based on their own views, some actors on the establishment side were told to espouse views to the right of their own. This likely adds to any slant in perspective, but as

Watkins points out, the fact that the viewer can’t be sure which ones are genuine and which are not is to the film’s credit. The conflict is also portrayed as a generation gap which reflected a popular view at the time. Given that much of the state’s violence within the US was aimed at younger activists, it is understandable that Watkins would focus on youth. A few of the dissidents who end up on trial look to be in their early thirties, and all are presented with bald spots, frizzy hair, acne and herpes sores and all, so we’re not talking about the kind of hipness portrayed in *Wild in the Streets*. The generational divide does limit the scope of Watkin’s critique, but does not detract from the critique of the state.

Watkin’s manipulation of the documentary format intentionally calls into question, as Gomez notes, whether such a form can ever bring truth to the screen. That is why the Punishment Park, a narrative construct, is used to comment on reality rather than pretend to objectivity. The medium of film contains inherently conservative elements (not least of “which is its spectacular one way communication): “[r]evolution is not ‘showing’ life to people, but making them live” (*Situationist International Anthology*, 312). It is to the film’s credit, that it was so roundly rejected by the film industry, public broadcasting, critics, and academics upon its initial release. Whether or not the film has an inherent revolutionary value, it hit a nerve by elucidating the limits of reform. With its rerelease comes new opportunity for recuperation of the type Gomez unknowingly participates in.

Punishment Park portrays the state with the mask off and Gomez wants to put it back on. Seeking a return to the benign state that existed before the challenge to its power ignores that the one state is the same as the other, differentiated by time but not substance.

In his introduction to *Punishment Park*, Peter Watkins mentions the influence of the My Lai massacre on the tone of the film. That massacre was a symptom of a pathology which is it-