



## California, Texas

Kenneth Geurts, Artistic Research, University of Amsterdam, NL, [kennethgeurts@gmail.com](mailto:kennethgeurts@gmail.com)

---

Combining elements from Peter Watkins' mockumentary *Punishment Park* (1971) and a 2020 anti-police brutality protest in Dallas, Texas, "California, Texas" is a videographic essay that aims to criticize the perpetual nature of police violence and brutality while also highlighting the importance of (video) recording devices for accountability.

---





### Creator's Statement

“California, Texas” concerns the perpetual nature of police violence and brutality. Through an assemblage of real and fictional events, the essay aims to critique the systemic nature of police brutality. The essay combines elements from Peter Watkins’ *Punishment Park* (1971) with elements from an anti-police brutality protest in Dallas, Texas (2020). Watkins’ *Punishment Park* is a mockumentary film in which a British film crew sets out to document the events occurring in a “punishment park.” In this alternate timeline, pacifists, Marxists, Black Panthers, feminists, and other political activists are rounded up by the crypto-fascist government, after which they get to choose between federal penitentiary and Punishment Park, a multi-day course in which the political prisoners are let loose in a desert without any equipment, in which they are actively hunted by the police and military. If they manage to reach the American flag, which is placed about a hundred miles from where they are released, they should supposedly be able to regain their freedom.

The events recorded in Dallas, Texas occurred at an anti-police brutality march, six days after the death of George Floyd. During this manifestation, the protest march was cut off by the police multiple times, eventually leaving the protestors only the option to move onto the highway. When the protestors reached the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, they were met with extensive police force: rubber bullets, tear gas, and arrests. All 674 of the protestors were arrested through the means of very thing they were protesting against: excessive police force and violence. The almost film-like qualities of footage, through the helicopter following the crowd, the suspense that is built through this framing, and this event having such a climatic (and unfortunately, predictable) ending to it, makes the footage seem fiction-like. By mixing the audio of *Punishment Park* with the visual material of protest, a strange sort of liminality is created. The audio is ambiguous; it could be real as much as it could be fictional.

The red thread that runs between the protests in Dallas, Texas and *Punishment Park* is not only the threat of the police, but also the fact that these acts are recorded as well. The anti-police violence protest was organized in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Police violence is perpetual, but the fact that these acts can now be recorded due to the omnipresence of recording devices—the synopticon—means that these acts of violence will not go unnoticed any longer, and thus systemic change is slowly being forced through. The people in the society should be considered subaltern in this case when contrasted to the hegemony of the state. The synopticon empowers this subaltern.

A similar effect is present in *Punishment Park*, in which a fictional British BBC film crew set out to document the events in one of the many punishment parks. Light is only shed on these events of violence through this documentation. A common recurrence after acts of police violence is the police proclaiming innocence. It is the moral judgement of the public that holds the police accountable; the outrage of the public is what causes action to be undertaken, as the hegemony would never turn against itself. These affects are embedded in this essay. In the essay, the narrative shifts from the police's motivations to a defense of their actions. The motivations, as well as justifications of by the police in *Punishment Park* are eerily similar to the way these events play out in the real world. "California, Texas" is simultaneously hopeful as it is pessimistic. On one hand, these events are still happening on a similar scale after fifty years, but on the other hand, the growing synopticon offers a glimmer of hope, as more and more of these cases reach the news and the public, and thus change is slowly occurring. This is highlighted in the videographic essay in the form of a perspective switch. As the protest marches onward, suspense is rising due to spoken descriptions of violence in *Punishment Park*, which eventually leads to a predictable catharsis: the descriptions of violence materialize in real world violence on the bridge. However, as the violence erupts, the perspective switches from the seemingly objective aerial view to a subjective personal view from within the protest. It is from this subjective perspective that we can see what the actions of the police are, which is a result of the synopticon, and may lead to accountability.

The essay aims to achieve a certain effect through the medium of the assemblage by intertwining two dimensions from two different sources: the auditive dimension and the visual dimension. Through the connection of these two elements, the project aims to transcend the singular meanings of these pieces of media. *Punishment Park* should not be considered a work of "fiction." It is very much a product of its time, and the woes present in the film were real societal concerns. We should therefore consider *Punishment Park* as a cultural artefact, telling of its time. *Punishment Park* is an act of *fabulation*: a method employed by the likes of Saadiya Hartman and Donna Haraway to fill in *that what is absent* through fiction. The fabulation is defined by that what surrounds this

gap. In the context of *Punishment Park*, the fabulation is the film itself, but that what surrounds it—the periphery through which the fabulation is performed—are the political circumstances of the 1960s and 1970s. In cultural heritage studies, the past is formed through the present, and the present should be understood through the past, as can be read in Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirectional Memory*. Thus, contemporary police violence should be understood through the history of police violence. But past actions of the police should also be viewed through a contemporary lens for what they are: violence. The juxtaposition of an act of fabulation and seemingly fictional footage surrounding the same topic—separated through time—creates a tension that aims to expose this relationship.

### **Bibliography**

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

### **Biography**

Kenneth Geurts (1996) is an artistic researcher whose practice revolves around the recontextualization of archival material. He has a background in Artistic Research (University of Amsterdam, rMA), Art History (UVA, BA) and Media Studies (UVA, P). His work is embedded with themes of Critical Theory, Memory Studies, and Decolonialism, with a focus on Dutch heritage. Through the mediums of film and design, he creates assemblages and constellations to retell hidden and forgotten narratives, challenging hegemonies. He is currently based between New York City and Amsterdam. <https://www.kennethgeurts.fyi/>

### **Review by Brian Faucette, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute**

The opening of the essay makes great use of images from Watkins’ 1971 film, in particular the haunting image of the American flag as well as audio from the film throughout the essay juxtaposed with actual footage from a BLM protest in the wake of George Floyd’s death. In using the audio from the 1971 film, which was designed to interrogate American cultural and political moments in the early 1970s, cut together with images of the 2020 protest the author shows how policing in America has continued to be militarized and made less accountable to the very people it is designed

to serve and protect. The audio is a chilling reminder that offers a unique context to the silent images of the organized peaceful protests which are coordinated and as depicted almost wrangled by law enforcement who, using their police vehicles and authority, force the protesters directly into the path of the armed police who show little interest in protecting them or listening to them. Instead, with the commentary of the audio from *Punishment Park*, the essay shows that policing which is more subject to surveillance today than in 1971 is still unresponsive to demands for reform and equal justice.

### **Review by Ryan Watson, Misericordia University**

“California, Texas” (2023) is a compelling and well-executed video essay that exists somewhere in the realm between fiction and documentary. The surreal soundtrack is buttressed by voice-over footage from the fictional 1971 Peter Watkins film *Punishment Park*, which plays over aerial footage of an actual protest against police brutality in Dallas, TX in 2020, six days after the death of George Floyd. In juxtaposing the audio and some video clips from *Punishment Park* and the contemporary protest footage, Geurts draws a stark line of continuum between the punishment and oppression of dissenters in a supposedly free society in the American 1970s and protestors for racial justice and against police brutality in 2020. While *Punishment Park* is fictional, it is based on the treatment of Vietnam War dissenters, women’s and gay liberation protestors, and those that fought for Civil Rights by police in the 1960s and 1970s. “California, Texas” successfully transcends its two forms of source material. Geurts creates a contemplative space that largely eschews showing direct violence but rather the formations of police force against protestors. Geurts’ written essay about his work is thoughtful and provocative. He argues that we should understand contemporary police violence through its history. In connecting the 1970s with 2020, the viewer enters a space for contemplation that creates a tension but also room for reflection. As the viewer listens to the audio from *Punishment Park* played over the slow moving, dense crowd filmed at a distance from a helicopter, their mind is seemingly in multiple places at once. Back in 1971, in 2020, and in the stretch between, of a violent police history and an American tradition of the crushing of any forms of organized dissent. The viewer has room to contemplate the police as one of many forms of violence inflicted on the US population over the past decades. “California, Texas” offers the present, read through the past, and a stark warning against the continuum of police brutality and other forms of violence that has existed in America throughout its history and that continues today.

---

