Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

# A Field in England

**Review Number:**
1446
**Publish date:**
Thursday, 4 July, 2013
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**Date of Publication:**
2013
**Publisher:**
Rook Films
**Place of Publication:**
London
**Reviewer:**
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**WARNING - THIS REVIEW CONTAINS SPOILERS**

I could barely contain my enthusiasm on hearing that Ben Wheatley?s *A Field in England* was to be set in the English Civil War. Considering that this is arguably one of the most exciting and tumultuous periods in English and British history, it is rather surprisingly an era which has scarcely been used to its potential by filmmakers.

A time when the country was at war with itself and more people died (as a proportion of the population) than during the First World War, when ideas of politics and religion were being fought over, and when anything really did seem possible, and a King was executed, has been neglected by film and programme makers alike. We have had a few films in recent years but they have yet to really get beneath the surface of this period. It is most often reduced to the clichés of the good, fun-loving, jolly royalists vs. the bad, boring Parliamentarians, or used as an excuse for a bodice-ripping yarn. The dramatic reality of the events which took place perhaps limit, or maybe intimidate, would-be film-makers, given that these events need so little fictional augmentation.

Of course there are worthy exceptions. The 1975 film *Winstanley* did eschew these clichés and attempted to put on screen some of the political forces which were unleashed after the Civil Wars. Its focus is the occupation of St George?s Hill in Weybridge by the Diggers, and it uses the pamphlets of Gerrard Winstanley (played by schoolmaster Miles Halliwell) to illustrate key moments in their struggle against tyranny and the fear of new ideas. Directed by Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo, it is a beautifully shot and passionate examination of the struggle and works of Winstanley. Taking eight years to make, and with a tiny budget and a largely amateur cast, it is a labour of love.

So it was with hopes for a film of a different ilk that I made my way to Channel 4?s headquarters, walking alongside Parliament and down Monck Street, and feeling the historical resonances around me.

I am delighted to report that *A Field in England* does not resort to the aforementioned and well-trodden stereotypes, far from it. However, a word of caution: if you are seeking a film that attempts to examine the religious or political ideas fought over during, and the fall-out from, the English Civil War then I would suggest that you view *Winstanley* instead. If, however, you wish to see a visceral, funny, disturbing and at times violent and crude film, with elements of mysticism, coupled with some good performances and interesting filmic styles, but which just *happens* to be set in the English Civil War, you could do worse. *Winstanley* and *A Field in England* are two very different films, with little else in common bar both being shot in black and white and set in the same period.

One thing *A Field in England* does share with the period is that, in Hobbes? words, it is, ?nasty, poor, brutish, and short?. Nasty, as war is, and this film does not shy away from gruesome detail. Poor, as it was done on a fairly tight budget. Brutish because some scenes are gory, and short as it is only 90 minutes long. This comparison, however, should not be seen as a bad thing, as the film is also a trippy and unnerving tale of four deserters. Deserting from which side is unclear, but on fleeing from an unknown battle they stray into the eponymous field and, after eating some magic mushrooms, come under the spell of Devil-like figure of a sadistic alchemist O?Neil (played brilliantly by Michael Smiley) who has been pursued ? somewhat reluctantly ? by one of our deserters (Whitehead, played by Reece Shearsmith) for stealing their master?s papers. O?Neil is convinced that Whitehead can find him a treasure which is hidden in this field and which ?they will find and he will take?.

After bullying them all through the sheer force of his personality, and torturing Whitehead to forsake his religious vows, his loyalty to his master, and instead to ?open up and let the Devil in?, the location of the treasure is ?found? and a deep hole begins to be dug. One of their number (Friend, played endearingly and to good comedic effect by Richard Glover) is seemingly murdered by another (Cutter, played by Ryan Pope) for no reason. After Whitehead takes Friend away for a Christian burial he attempts to escape from O?Neil and hide in the grass. He then also eats some magic mushrooms, aiming to ?swallow whole? the oppression of O?Neil and his kind.

There follows a mystical and a deeply uncomfortable psychedelic scene wherein the protagonists are trapped on what seems like a blasted heath. Whitehead and his fellow deserter (played by Peter Ferdinando) attempt first to hide from, and then fight O?Neil. Ferdinando?s character is killed by O?Neil because Friend, Lazarus-like, returns from the dead (see, I knew there was something odd going on there) and gives their position away to O?Neil.

The film then ends with Whitehead taking up arms and brutally and graphically slaughtering O?Neil. Returning to the tent in the field that was the place of his torture he rearranges his former master?s papers, changes into O?Neil?s cloak and so takes his place. We then return to the noise of the battle where we came in, unclear as to how much time has passed and whether they have all in fact died and are in purgatory, or whether it was all just a dream.

Unlike *Winstanley*, which is somewhat lacking in humour, there is a lot of bleak, bawdy and very British humour in *A Field In England*. The deserters are really keen to go to the pub and Friend?s ?death? scene is the antithesis of what we have come to expect of a ?war? film. The audience is wrong-footed by the dying Friend asking his companions to swear to find his wife and to tell her that ?I hated her? and that ?I had her sister? from behind, like a sow?.

However, like *Winstanley* it is also beautifully shot and there is an incredible depth and texture added by the use of black and white film. Wheatley experimented with homemade lenses and these create strange flares on screen which add to the film?s disorientation. Both films also use still shots to strong effect. Brownlow and Mollo?s close-ups of ordinary men, women and children do, for me, have resonances with the German

expressionist films of the 1920s and 1930s, and Wheatley uses a strange tableaux effect which echoes woodcuts of the period and adds to the film?s surreal nature.

Both have the English countryside as another character. In *Winstanley* it is hard and exhausting (and it is often raining), but ultimately benevolent. It is the place that will provide the Diggers with their livelihoods and what they are fighting for. *A Field in England* performs this characterisation literally, as the cast-list has Sara Dee as Voice of the Field. But although it appears bright and clear, as the sun never sets, the countryside is also harsh and unforgiving. One character says ?I fucking hate the countryside?. I cannot imagine any of our Diggers saying that. It is a strange and threating place where insects and grass stalks are creepy and not benign, and at one point for some reason I was reminded of the Wicker Man.

Interestingly, although it is obviously impossible to truly recreate a period, *Winstanley* seems to almost achieve this. Perhaps because it took so long to make the film, Brownlow and Rollo?s conviction and focus come across, helped by the fact that they were in some ways echoing Winstanley himself. In addition, they used mainly non-actors, and real-life activists such as Sid Rawle (who played a Ranter), which gave it authenticity (bringing to mind this time the works of the Soviet realists Eisenstein and Vertov), as did their attention to detail. However, the amateur nature of *Winstanley* does mean that it is lacking in narrative structure and the character arc is weak, and the film is somewhat repetitious, with some of the supporting performances smacking of am dram. Nevertheless it is a rare film which does, to some extent, illustrate the political times of the English Civil War, showing why this period is still so important to us today, as it is where we can trace the beginning of many of the major issues in modern society.

Winstanley himself is portrayed as a Christ-like proto-communist figure, and the film ends with him leaving the struggle for others to carry on, asking ?Will England by the first land or some other wherein truth shall sit down in triumph?? This is an obvious and stark illustration that these inequalities and injustices have not been resolved.

Similarly, in a *A Field in England,* Whitehead is in some ways the film?s moral compass, as without him it would a bleak and depressing portrayal of ignorance and selfishness. He finds ?pages easier to turn than people? and it is his ministering a poultice to his fellow deserter?s penis, which has become so painful that he thinks he has ?lost his balls in the field? that begins their friendship and which is an oasis of compassion for the audience. If Whitehead is a force for eventual ?good? (though I hesitate to use such clichés) then O?Neil is the Devil. His supernatural qualities are evinced by the fact that he remains standing and seemingly not in pain after having had half his leg blown off ? either that or he has eaten a heck of a lot of mushrooms.

In fact I think that both these films reflect their times and the concerns of the day. *Winstanley* began shooting in the late 1960s at the end of the period where Marxist historians? interpreted the English Civil War as a revolution. It was released in 1975 and this, rather neatly, coincided with a shift in the interpretation of these events in favour of new revisionist interpretations. So the earnest and urgent call for revolution which began in the 1960s had, by the time of the film?s release, been taken over by a reinterpretation of the Civil War as being more evolutionary, stressing the importance of attempting to understand events and evidence in context rather than as a stage in a Marxist interpretation of history.

*A Field in England*, too, reflects our current times. Religion, a fundamental part of society during the 17th century, hardly features, with only one of the five characters being in anyway religious and the others sneering or indifferent to his prayers and his god. They would rather go to the pub to have a beer and a good stew than go to church. Nor are any of the characters interested in politics or the huge events taking place around them. Cromwell and the King are mentioned but these soldiers are self-interested and self-absorbed, fighting for an unknown cause with little conviction. They make a total contrast to *Winstanley?s* New Model Army, who carry copies of ?The Case of the Armie? in their hats and debate at Putney their rights within the society for which they have fought.

*A Field in England* has no Marxist revolutionary ideology, indeed no ideology of any kind. O? Neil?s

motivation is the accumulation of wealth and to instil fear. He says that the ?World is turned upside down, and so?s its pockets?. For the others, their motivation is merely to get out of the war and to hide, with only Whitehead?s character having a veneer of loyalty to his master. However, they are not completely unsympathetic. Although they do not fight for or believe in a bigger cause, it is their eventual friendship coupled with the drive to survive which becomes the motivation for the two survivors to fight and to ultimately defeat O?Neil. Whitehead does not kill O?Neil to achieve political freedom or out of religious zeal, he kills him to preserve his own life and avenge his friend?s death. As Friend says, ?I have never had so many friends as I have in this field?, and Whitehead later states that the, ?treasure is here between us, it is not friend??

In our post-Thatcher, post-New Labour, Coalition era, where political ideology seems to have fallen out of fashion in mainstream politics, where a reduced percentage of the population vote and where we are *managed* by politicians of similar hues rather than inspired, it is perhaps vain to hope for a film which can do justice to a period where religion and politics were so intertwined and where ideas for a new society and a new future were not only written about and read, but were also seen as achievable and imminent.

However, *A Field in England,* instead of calling for some form of communal equality to solve society?s ills, perhaps posits the notion that the solution is found within our own individuality and the bonds and responsibilities which we have to each other. So perhaps both films do end up saying the same thing albeit in very different ways.

Watch *Winstanley* via Love Film [2].

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