

The Digital Anachronisms of Ben Wheatley's *A Field in England*

Joel McKim

Joel McKim is Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies and Director of the Vasari Research Centre for Art and Technology at Birkbeck, University of London. His writing on architecture, media and digital culture has appeared in *Theory, Culture & Society*, *PUBLIC*, *borderlands* and *Space & Culture*.

Abstract:

This essay considers the unusual blend of historicity and digitality present in Ben Wheatley's Civil War period film, *A Field in England*. Focusing on the sometimes overlooked post-production techniques involved in the creative process (including colour-grading, sound design and editing), the essay argues that the film's affective intensity is generated, at least in part, by the use of 'digital anachronisms' to disrupt the historical integrity of the narrative. By making a comparison to the politically motivated anachronisms of Peter Watkins' historical films, the essay concludes by suggesting that a significant, but disturbing continuity may exist between *A Field in England* and Wheatley's films situated in the present.

A Field in England is Ben Wheatley's first foray into historical period drama, but the film is also in many ways his most technologically experimental project to date. The film, with its 17th century English Civil War setting, was the first full-length project produced through the Film 4.0 innovation hub, the digital arm of Film4. It was shot entirely in digital format over twelve days, drawing from a very modest budget of just over £300,000. Unlike Wheatley's previous features *Kill List* and *Sightseers*, shot in digital but delivered to 35mm print for their cinema release, *A Field in England* remained solely in digital format throughout its distribution run and was the first UK film to receive a simultaneous theatrical, VOD, DVD/Blu-ray and free-to-air television release (via funder Channel 4) on July 5th, 2013.

The film itself is a sometimes baffling and unabashedly psychedelic tale of seventeenth century occult mysticism taking place almost entirely, as suggested by the title, in a solitary English field. While the hapless characters of the film (Whitehead, Cutler, Jacob and Friend) are forced into an ungodly pursuit of buried treasure by the sinister necromancer O'Neil, Wheatley's audience is invited, or perhaps compelled, to map out the film's multiple and varied cinematic and cultural allusions. Thematic or stylistic reference points range from features similarly set in the Civil War period such as *Witchfinder General* and *Winstanley*, to 1960s LSD films like *The Trip*, to the repetitive purgatory of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (the play's abusive master-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky replicated in the film by O'Neil and Whitehead).

Often willfully obscure, the film may be frustrating to any viewers who ultimately decide that a degree of internal coherence has been sacrificed amidst Wheatley's many visual tributes. Yet it would be difficult to deny that *A Field in England* possesses a considerable affective charge (crescendoing in an unforgettable scene of demonic possession, in which Whitehead emerges from O'Neil's tent bearing a truly horrific look of rapture across his face). I wish to explore the idea that the film's disturbing power is derived, at least in part, from its unusual mix of historicity and digitality – what I'll call here its 'digital anachronisms'. While the film's technologically innovative release strategy is a remarkable example of convergent,¹ multi-platform² or transmedial distribution³, what interests me more in this short essay is the manner in which Wheatley's gradual insertion of digital techniques disrupts the film's illusion of historical integrity and helps produce a

distinctly unsettling and intense aesthetic experience. The film's anachronisms escalate in parallel with the proliferation of supernatural elements within the narrative, yet it is precisely these creative or fantastic interventions into factual history that produce a visceral engagement with the period.

Focusing on Wheatley's digital anachronisms also provides an occasion to consider seriously the post-production processes involved in contemporary cinematic creation, an area of study that remains under-examined. While excellent work has emerged on the growth of post-production industries⁴ and on blockbuster digital special effects as cinematic spectacle⁵, the more subtle or technical digital processes of colour grading, editing and sound mixing sometimes escape consideration. The post-production agencies specializing in these technical processes have been referred to as a 'non-creative' sector of the film industry, exacerbating their critical invisibility.⁶ *A Field in England* presents a rather unique opportunity to reevaluate the importance of these digital techniques and look more closely at the impact of a filmmaker's post-production choices on the experience of a final work. This is true in large part due to the unusual fact that the film's release was accompanied by an online 'Digital Masterclass' (a component of the Film 4.0 initiative), detailing the various stages of the film's completion, from development to post-production.⁷ It's an interesting and perhaps risky decision for Wheatley to expose the tricks behind his own cinematic alchemy through this form of online documentation, for as Lisa Gitelman argues, 'the success of all media depends at some level on inattention or "blindness" to the media technologies themselves (and all of their supporting protocols) in favor of attention to the phenomena, "the

content,” that they represent for users’ edification or enjoyment’.⁸ By revealing the technology and protocols of post-production involved in creating *A Field in England*, Wheatley may risk demystifying the ‘magic’ of the film, but he also provides significant insight into the implications of its very particular blending of the historical and the digital.

The concept of the film and the interest in the period sprang, according to Wheatley, from his involvement with The Sealed Knot, an English Civil War reenactment society, one of oldest and largest reenactment organizations in Europe. Wheatley filmed several staged battles and produced a recruitment video for the society, while still working as a corporate video producer at the start of his career.⁹ Perhaps inspired by The Sealed Knot’s commitment to period accuracy and despite the film’s supernatural subject matter, a considerable amount of effort is made towards establishing a sense of historical veracity in *A Field in England*. The attention to detail placed on the film’s costuming, for example, is discussed at length in the Digital Masterclass and the spoken language, physical ailments and bawdy humour of the characters rings true to the age. Yet the issue of authenticity is, of course, a tricky one in even the most earnest of period dramas – filmic representations of the past presenting an inevitably complicated blend of historical accuracy and stylistic convention. And Wheatley’s film is far from being an exercise in historical realism. His evocation of the Civil War era is as concerned with the mythologization of the period (the way we come to know it through its representation in folk narrative and cinematic fiction) as it is with the factual details of history.

A Field in England is shot in black and white, providing a vague sense of historicity that actually refers more to the pre-colour era of British television than to the Civil War period. The masterclass references the post-production process of colour grading the film – digitally adjusting the contrast and brightness of the image to achieve a very specific visual atmosphere. Wheatley suggests that he was trying to achieve a –‘dark crushed look’ reminiscent of ‘1960s drama like *Culloden*’, in reference to Peter Watkins’s docudrama produced for BBC TV in 1964, Watkins’s first full-length project. Like Wheatley’s film, *Culloden* was shot on a restricted budget and takes place almost entirely within the confines of a single field, the site of the tragically lopsided Battle of Culloden during the Jacobite rising of 1745. Despite its profound impact on the final appearance of a film, the process of colour grading is seldom discussed in film criticism. In a rare acknowledgment of its expanding role, Richard Misek notes, ‘Digital colour grading makes possible such extreme chromatic alterations that it is not enough to say that a film’s colour can now be *adjusted* in postproduction; rather, a film’s colour can now be *created* in postproduction’¹⁰ (italics in original). In the case of *A Field in England* the precise black and white tone developed in post-production helps invoke a complicated set of overlapping historical temporalities – the Civil War setting of the film viewed through the prism of a 1960s television aesthetic created via a contemporary digital technique.

The film’s deliberate intermixing of historical periods is further intensified through its musical score and sound design. Wheatley worked with the composer Jim Williams on this element of the film, continuing a longstanding collaboration

(Williams also scored Wheatley's previous films *Down Terrace*, *Kill List* and *Sightseers*). As the supernatural elements of the narrative begin to escalate, the historically-inflected soundtrack of the film takes on an increasingly technological character. In conversation with Williams, Wheatley describes the film as being split into two halves, 'the first half is period instruments that the characters might be able to play', while the second expands into a kind of psychedelic electronic field, becoming gradually 'much bigger and synth-ier'.¹¹ The ballad 'Baloo, My Boy', memorably sung by the character of Friend near the beginning of the film, was adapted by Williams from a traditional Scottish folk song popular during the period and sits in sharp contrast to the ambient electronic soundscape of Blank Mass's composition *Chernobyl* that underscores the horrific slow-motion emergence of Whitehead from O'Neil's tent.

Digital anachronisms surface again in the escalating editing rhythm of the film. Whitehead's consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms towards the end of the narrative, unsurprisingly, launches the film into its most sustained psychedelic sequence. A segment of the Digital Masterclass features Wheatley in the editing suite describing his approach to the sequence. It provides a view of Wheatley in the process of post-production, his non-linear editing software visible on the screen of his desktop computer behind him (and his cup of pistachio nuts at the ready). The video clip is an interesting presentation of the various visual interfaces of digital editing: the double screen view of current and subsequent shots, the database of available footage, the multi-layered timeline below. It recalls the 'desktop

documentaries' of video essayists like Kevin B. Lee in which the multi-windowed editing software used to create the video is fully on display.¹²

Wheatley describes the transition from the extended, natural and 'warm' editing pace of the early scenes to the frenzied rhythm of Whitehead and O'Neil's mushroom-fueled final showdown. In addition to a mirrored, vertical split screen effect, the sequence makes heavy use of a technique involving rapid and repeated crosscutting between multiple scenes. Wheatley describes an editing process of 'punching a hole' in a shot, '[cutting] into it every five frames'.¹³ It's a technique he claims to have adopted from Sam Pekinpah, but it appears here in an intensified version afforded by digital editing, such that the film appears to be, according to Wheatley, 'folding in on itself'. He goes on to explain in some detail the experience induced by the technique: 'you're understanding two things at once . . . I really like what it does to your brain as you look at it. It feels like your opening up your head to take in more and more and more information . . . you're kind of processing in a way you never normally process stuff when you look at film'. This is clearly not the first time a drug-induced altered state has been replicated on film through post-production techniques (Wheatley's appreciation of the psychedelic films of the 1960s has already been mentioned), but *A Field in England's* particular fusion of historical content and digital technique provides the film a quite unique affective resonance. It bears mentioning that this psychedelic cross-cutting sequence is prefigured by the appearance of one of the only instances of digital visual effects within the film, the appearance of a gaseous black sun or planet that gradually engulfs Whitehead's field of vision. The digital animation, seemingly the only

element of the film – ‘shopped out’ to a post-production studio, comes courtesy of Electric Theatre Collective, a visual effects company self-described as ‘a hot white light in the post production stratosphere’.¹⁴

But apart from developing a better understanding of Wheatley’s post-production techniques, what might a focus on the film’s inclusion of digital anachronisms ultimately provide? Or put another way, does the mash-up of the historical and the contemporary visible in *A Field in England* serve anything other than an aesthetic purpose? Wheatley, after all, is recognized as being a master of producing powerful cinematic moods and affects with limited resources, yet whether his films are as thematically or conceptually developed as they are technically accomplished or genre-aware, is perhaps open to question. Peter Watkins has already been mentioned as an aesthetic reference point for *A Field in England*, but his strategic use of anachronism to interrogate the past may also provide an insight into the film’s possible thematic dimensions. In *Culloden* Watkins develops his trademark style of using the contemporary media format of the direct to camera interview within an otherwise ‘authentic’ historical setting, as if a modern documentary crew had arrived via time-travel with camera and microphone to capture the views of the eighteenth-century soldiers participating in the battle. The use of technological anachronism in films like *Culloden* and the more recent *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* has been characterized as a method of employing historical inaccuracy in the service of political potential. In her discussion of *La Commune* Roxanne Panchasi argues, for example, that Watkins’ use of anachronism is a way of bringing history alive, placing ‘the events of 1871 in complicated dialogue with the

urgent concerns of present-day France'.¹⁵ Or as Daniel Strand suggests in reference to Watkins' films, 'If the past is to stir up political sentiment in our own time, history has to be produced in anachronistic spirals where past and present can intersect'.¹⁶ There is more than a hint of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of historical redemption in these readings of Watkins' creative engagement with the events of the past. As Benjamin suggests, 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.¹⁷

While the comparison between the socially engaged films of Peter Watkins and Wheatley's hallucinatory mushroom trip may seem an unlikely one, suggesting that there is a political dynamic at play in the way that *A Field in England's* digital anachronisms connect past and present may not be an entirely absurd proposition. In explaining the appeal of the Civil War period, Wheatley has stated, 'It's the part of history that influences how we're living in the UK now. I think a lot of troubles and complications that the characters deal with in my other films start with the Civil War period'.¹⁸ In its own esoteric way, *A Field in England* brings to life the violence, uncertainty and instability of the era, a historical moment characterized by political upheaval, social division and a psychic tension between reason and superstition. That Wheatley sees in the Civil War period a historical point of origin for his characters of the present day is revealing – the dysfunctional petty criminals of *Down Terrace*; the damaged ex-soldiers of *Kill List*, no longer suited to domestic life; the frustrated and resentful working-class killers of *Sightseers* all somehow flowing from a nation's conflicted and violent past. Through his deployment of digital anachronisms, Wheatley helps bring the characters and themes of his period-based

and contemporary films into dialogue, producing a frightening and disturbing historical continuity.

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

² Gillian Doyle, 'From Television to Multi-Platform: Less from More or More for Less?', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16:4 (2010), 431-449.

³ Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴ Andy C. Pratt, Rosalind Gill and Volker Spelthann, 'Work and the City in the E-society: A Critical Investigation of the Sociospatially Situated Character of Economic Production in the Digital Content Industries in the UK', *Information, Communication and Society*, 10:6 (2007), 922-942.

⁵ Leon Gurevitch, 'The Cinemas of Transactions: The Exchangeable Currency of the Digital Attraction', *Television & New Media*, 11:5 (2010), 367-385; Sean Cubitt, 'The Supernatural in Neo-Baroque Hollywood', in *Film Theory & Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. W. Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47-65.

⁶ Allain Daigle, '(Post)Production: Classification and Infrastructures of Digital Visual Effects', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 32:3 (2015), 168.

⁷ A Field in England: Digital Masterclass website, <http://www.afieldinengland.com/masterclass/>, accessed November 23, 2015.

⁸ Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006), 6.

⁹ Alice Jones, 'From Sightseers to Civil War', *Independent*, June 6, 2013.

¹⁰ Richard Misek, 'The "Look" and How to Keep It: Cinematography, Postproduction and Digital Colour', *Screen*, 51:4 (2010), 405.

¹¹ A Field in England: Digital Masterclass website, <http://www.afieldinengland.com/video-transcript-scoring-the-film/>, accessed November 23, 2015.

¹² Birkbeck PhD researcher Tiago Baptista is doing excellent work on the rise of this format, which he terms 'the digital audiovisual essay'.

¹³ A Field in England: Digital Masterclass website, <http://www.afieldinengland.com/masterclass/post-production/editing-the-film/>, accessed November 23, 2015.

¹⁴ Electric Theatre Collective website, <http://electrictheatre.tv/pages/about>, accessed November 23, 2015.

¹⁵ Roxanne Panchasi, 'If the Revolution had Been Televised: The Productive Anachronisms of Peter Watkins's *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*', *Rethinking History*, 10:4 (2006), 556.

¹⁶ Daniel Strand, 'A Plea for Anachronism', in *Making Cultural History*, ed. Anna Källén (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2013), 144.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

¹⁸ 'Ben Wheatley Explains *A Field in England's* Multi-Platform Strategy,' *Screen International*, July 5, 2013.