

Milestone Film presents:
Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo's

Winstanley

"The most mysteriously beautiful English film since the best of Michael Powell... and the best pre-twentieth century historical film I can recall."

— Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Film Comment*

"Superb! A historical drama that centers on one extraordinary man. This film is a tour-de-force biographical study, rendered in precise, beautifully photographed black and white images that rival the best of Stanley Kubrick."

— F. X. Feeney, *L.A. Weekly*

A Milestone Film Release
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Winstanley

1975. Running time: 95 minutes. Great Britain. Aspect Ratio: 1:1.33. Black and White.

Credits

Director	Kevin Brownlow
Script	Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo
Based on the novel, <i>Comrade Jacob</i>	by David Caute
Produced by	Kevin Brownlow and Andrew Mollo
Cinematography by	Ernest Vincze
Film Editing by	Sarah Ellis
Art Director	Andrew Mollo

Cast (in alphabetical order)

David Bramley	<i>Parson Platt</i>
Phil Dunn	<i>Commune member</i>
Dawson France	<i>Capt. Gladman</i>
Alison Halliwell	<i>Mrs. Platt</i>
Miles Halliwell	<i>Gerrard Winstanley</i>
Terry Higgins	<i>Tom Haydon</i>
Pat Kearney	<i>Commune member</i>
Phil Oliver	<i>Will Everard</i>
Bill Petch	<i>Henry Bickerstaffe</i>
Barry Shaw	<i>Colonel Rich</i>
Jerome Willis	<i>General Lord Fairfax</i>

Background (Written by Kevin Brownlow, 1975)

April 1, 1649. St. George's Hill. Surrey, England. A Reformation-era religious sect called the Diggers sets out to form a commune and till the soil on "common land," which by law permits grazing — but not settlement and cultivation. Led by Gerard Winstanley, theirs is a nonviolent action to reclaim land for the poor who had been dispossessed by Oliver Cromwell's recent Civil

War. But the local villagers see the Diggers' "occupation" as a threat to their livelihood and led by the Presbyterian parson, John Platt, take action to harass and burn them out.

Winstanley is based firmly on historical fact. Gerrard Winstanley's pamphlets, sections of which act as a diary for the year that the settlement survived, have been collected together with a detailed and superb introduction by Christopher Hill under the title, "Winstanley: The Law of Freedom" (Pelican Classics).

Sir Thomas More's Utopia (1516) had sketched a communist society, but this was a jeu d'esprit, written in Latin, the language of the intellectual elite. Winstanley's pamphlets were published in the vernacular, at the height of the great revolution, and they aimed at rousing the poorer classes to political action. Winstanley himself took the lead in establishing a communist colony, which he hoped would be widely imitated. So neither Russia nor Germany nor France but England gave the world its first communist political programme.
— Christopher Hill, "Winstanley: The Law of Freedom"

The recreation of the 17th century was an enormous undertaking. Besides building the settlement, stage by stage, Andrew Mollo had to research every item shown before the camera. With a team of helpers he dismantled an ancient barn in Essex and transported it to the Surrey location. (Given the available resources, this was roughly equivalent to transporting the stones for Stonehenge). An apparently simple item like footwear involved a trip to Northampton, to examine one of the few pair's of peasant's shoes still extant, and to make special arrangements with a local boot factory to produce a result which would be correct and would last throughout the production.

Statement by Kevin Brownlow, 1997

We made the film to see if it is possible to make an absolutely authentic historical film. Even the animals came from rare breeds, and the armor for the battle scene came from the Tower of London. Winstanley was an exponent of religious communism and Marx is known to have studied the same pamphlets in the British Museum that we worked from. (Soviet means Soldiers Council, a term from the English Civil War.) With the execution of the King, the Diggers wanted the Royal lands, which were seized from the people, returned.

Historical Background

The central clash of the English Civil War was the challenge of the propertied classes of town and country to the established power of the monarchy. The propertied classes sought to extend their political power in and through the institution of Parliament. To fight the resulting civil war, they established the New Model Army, at first under Oliver Cromwell and then General Fairfax.

The social turmoil of the period also affected other social strata, and threw up many sects that tried to express their more radical social and political needs, though always couched in the terms of the prevailing philosophy-theology. The largest of these groups were the levellers, who campaigned for universal male suffrage, and had wide support amongst the ordinary soldiers of the New Model Army until they were defeated in the Ware Mutiny of 1647.

The Diggers, who emerged a few years later, had an even more radical aim — the establishment of a utopian rural communism — for they believed "the earth is a common treasury for all." In 1649, they set about cultivating St. George's Hill, Surrey, (in the 17th century, "to dig" meant "to plow") and founding a communal settlement there. St. George's was a piece of common land on which free grazing was traditionally allowed, but not cultivation. However, the recent war had rapidly increased the number of dispossessed peasants, and had left many soldiers discharged without their pay. (Gerrard Winstanley himself, the Diggers' leader and teacher was an ex-soldier and a former cloth merchant who had been bankrupted by the war.) For such people, following the Digger philosophy offered a way of scratching a subsistence living. Digger settlements spread — to Aylesbury, Dunstable, Bosworth, Cox Hall and Iver.

But to cultivate the common land was to break the law by trespassing. Winstanley's settlement attracted comparatively benevolent opposition from the local landowner Francis Drake and the commander-in-chief of the army, Lord General Fairfax. But it was also to threaten the livelihoods of local villagers by removing their grazing land. Their more violent hostility — crystallized by the Presbyterian parson, John Platt — was to lead to several attacks upon the commune, which finally destroyed it.

Filming the Diggers

By Kevin Brownlow, BFI Bulletin

Miles Halliwell started it all. Having played a small part in *It Happened Here*, he was anxious for Andrew and I to make another film. He was impressed by David Caute's novel *Comrade Jacob*, and showed it to Andrew who, equally impressed, handed it to Woodfall producer Oscar Lewenstein as an example of a film we'd like to make. Lewenstein generously financed a script, and we took a short option on the book. But now commercial company expressed any interest.

The idea of approaching the BFI never occurred to us, since we knew how hard up they were. But when he took over at the Production Board, Mamoun Hassan hoped that — with an increase in the government grant to the Board — the BFI would make some of the many features rejected by the industry ... While I was on a visit to California, I received a cable from Mamoun: "Come home. Your problems are just beginning."

We tried first to cast the film with professionals, and either agents turned us down because we could only pay the Equity minimum, or the actor we selected (i.e. Eric Porter for Parson Platt) rejected the script. With some relief, therefore, we decided to cast non-professionals (with the exception of the role of Lord General Fairfax, for whom we wanted Jerome Willis). Miles Halliwell was already cast as Winstanley, and he was extremely helpful in suggesting people for other parts ... Using non-professionals obliged us to settle for a sporadic schedule and weekend shooting, which meant that we had to hold a sizeable cast together for a daunting length of time. But we could capture the changing seasons — very important in so visual a film, and, to Andrew's and my delight, we could grow our own crops!

Casting the Ranters — and extraordinary sect opposed to Winstanley's philosophy, and one of many who split the radical movements of the 17th century — was straightforward. We had contacted a group calling themselves the New Diggers, and their spokesman, Sid Rawle, became most enthusiastic about the film ... "Although I call myself a Digger," he said, "I identify more with the Ranters." He agreed, therefore, to play the leading Ranters and to cast the others of his retinue himself. Though we had set the introduction of the Ranters in the village, before they reach the Diggers' commune, we were forced to delay their appearance when Sid Rawle became involved in organizing the first Windsor Pop Festival.

The cast and crew of *Winstanley* endured everything from violent rainstorms to Force 10 gales without a murmur of complaint. They stayed with the film to the very last moment, and their fascination with the period and the subject made the whole experience profoundly rewarding. They are the reason we can still look back at the period of production as something of a pastoral idyll, suffused with nostalgia.

"*Winstanley* and the Historical Film: An Interview with Kevin Brownlow"
— Lenny Rubenstein, *Cineaste*, Fall 1980.

David Caute's novel, *Comrade Jacob*, was extremely clever, with a great deal of imaginative action ... But so much of the novel depended on Caute's imagination. We realized this as we researched further and further into the subject. The film was made at intervals over a long period. You can see it

start along the lines of the novel, and then diverge as Andrew Mollo and I became more and more fascinated with the facts...

We felt the original words had a specific meaning, and an eloquence, that would be impaired if we altered them. We felt the same about the incidents. It was a very insignificant revolution compared to the Civil War. A few soldiers and dispossessed peasants gathered together on a hilltop. But the fact that they had fought in the Civil War, yet refused to use violence to advance their cause, fascinated us. Winstanley was a remarkable character. For a film to be true to him, it had to have something of the same attitude...

We were fortunate that so much of the dialogue was provided from the Winstanley pamphlets, which survive in the British Museum, and which act as a diary for the year the Diggers spent on the hill...

Andrew has a passion for accuracy that far exceeds Erich von Stroheim, believe me. I have caught that passion from him, which makes working with him very exciting. He has the uncanny ability to summon up the past by producing elements from it. We had hardly embarked on *Winstanley* when he acquired a seventeenth century helmet which even the Tower of London acknowledged was unique...

Our work together is totally non-competitive ... As Andrew says, "How can you analyze a partnership? It's like trying to analyze a marriage." We prefer to say that, like Laurel and Hardy, it works.

[The lack of professional actors] reinforces the realism. Even the occasional rough delivery serves to remind you that these are ordinary people — farm laborers, factory workers, craftsman — and not highly paid actors ... In fairness, I should add that our one professional actor, Jerome Willis, who plays General Fairfax, was both enthusiastic and easy to work with — and he gives an outstanding performance...

The inspirations for *Winstanley*? From Andrew's point of view, I should say the engravings of Jacques Callot of the Thirty Years War. The execution scene at the beginning he set up from one of the Callot drawings. From my point of view, a little-known German silent film called *The Chronicles of the Grey House*, directed by Arthur von Gerlach. This is a film Andrew loves, too. The art direction — somber rooms filled with wood-smoke, twisted trees, rough stone walls — was superb, and the staging of the scenes, particularly a duel in a windstorm on a lonely heath, had an obvious influence as well. Also, Dreyer's *The Parson's Widow*, another seventeenth century story, shot at a museum of buildings in Norway. The great pictorialists of the silent era, Maurice Tourneur, Rex Ingram and Clarence Brown, must also be acknowledged. Mostly, the Dutch and Flemish paintings which supplied a myriad of tiny details, as well as the general photographic style for household interiors ...

Winstanley isn't really a political film. It is a trip in a time machine back to the seventeenth century; a glimpse of a heroic attempt to change the way people lived. The fact that Winstanley was a couple of hundred years ahead of his time in his political thinking gives it the political relevance. He was a true communist, but his compassion and his humanity made him a pacifist. The Diggers were nonviolent, despite the violence used against them. The film has resonances for today, but we tried not to make the obvious parallels. We even dropped the references to Cromwell's troops fighting in Ireland. Winstanley's own words — and his actions — are eloquent enough.

Milestone Film & Video

Milestone is a prestigious boutique distribution company with eight years experience in art-house film distribution. The company has earned an unparalleled reputation for releasing classic cinema masterpieces, new foreign films, groundbreaking documentaries and American independent

features. Thanks to Milestone's rediscovery, restoration and release of such important lost films as Mikhail Kalatozov's award-winning *I am Cuba*, Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, and F.W. Murnau's *Tabu*, the company now occupies an honored position as one of the most influential independent distributors in the American film industry.

Amy Heller and Dennis Doros started Milestone in 1990 to bring out the best films of yesterday *and* today. The company's new releases have included the films of famed artist Eleanor Antin, the art documentaries of Philip Haas (*Music of Chance* and *Angels and Insects*), Wim Wenders' *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, Bae Yong-kyun's *Why Has Bodhi-Dharma Left for the East*, Luc Besson's *Atlantis*, Yoichi Higashi's *Village of Dreams* and Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Maborosi*. Currently Milestone is releasing the Venice Golden Lion winner and critically acclaimed, *Fireworks (Hana-Bi)* by Japanese superstar Takeshi Kitano.

Milestone's re-releases have included restored versions of Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers*, F. W. Murnau's *Tabu*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's *Grass and Chang*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*, and Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman in the Dunes* and *Antonio Gaudi*. Milestone is also working with the Mary Pickford Foundation on a long-term project to preserve, re-score and release the best films of the legendary silent screen star.

Milestone is also known for rediscovering, acquiring, restoring and distributing unknown "classics" that have *never* been available in the US and Canada. These include Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma*, Alfred Hitchcock's "lost" propaganda films, *Bon Voyage* and *Aventure Malgache*, *Early Russian Cinema* (a series of twenty-eight films from Czarist Russia from 1908–1919), Mikhail Kalatozov's astonishing *I am Cuba* and Jane Campion's *Two Friends*. The new discoveries for 1999 are Roy and John Boulting's anti-Nazi drama *Pastor Hall* (1940), Roland West's *The Bat Whispers* (1930), and Kevin Brownlow's feature films, *It Happened Here* (1964) and *Winstanley* (1975).

Milestone received a Special Archival Award in 1995 from the National Society of Film Critics for its restoration and release of *I am Cuba*. Five of its preserved films — *Tabu*, Mary Pickford's *Poor Little Rich Girl*, Clarence Brown and Maurice Tourneur's *The Last of the Mohicans*, Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur* and *Grass* — are listed on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry.

Fumiko Takagi joined the company in 1995 and is now Vice President of acquisitions. Megan Powers started working at Milestone as an intern in 1997 and is now Director of non-theatrical sales.

Milestone would like to thank:

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