

The Perception of Life by Ed Halter

“A culture in crisis favors the growth of individuality; deep down things no longer weigh so heavily to slow the surface play of experience. Hypothetically, if a culture could grow to full crisis, then everything could be expressed and nothing would be true.” — Philip Rieff, 1970

For Americans born after the 1960s, the events of that decade have come down to us as a package of moribund clichés: flower power, turn on tune in drop out, May '68, make love not war. “Liberal” is now a term of slander in our politics, and when those on the right criticize today’s anti-war efforts, they accuse protesters of wishing to “relive the Sixties”—wanting to regain either their own youth, or taste a youth they never had. Media shorthand has flattened the era between Kennedy’s assassination and Nixon’s downfall into a corny, overheard playlist of thwanging guitars, folksy rasps, British wails, Motown croons. Faint echoes of that time reverberate, unconsciously, in a younger generation’s fashion, seen on the streets or posted to MySpace: a bit of flare in a girl’s pants, a little shag to a guy’s long hair, referencing a moment only vaguely recognized as past: tenuous threads of evidence that life was once lived otherwise.

Such are vagaries of market-based memories. “Instead of dispensing a freeze-dried version of history from above,” Susan Sontag wrote in 1975, Western society “settles such questions by waiting for cycles of taste to distill out the controversy.” And yet—the Sixties remain a hard nut that has yet to be digested (why else would our conservatives still chase madly after phantom Hippies?) The extremes of that decade continue to reverberate, like a blinding-sharp mirror-image of the ever-more-modern modern age: the gloss of Pop and the grunge of folk, consumerist narcissism and the carnage of war, the increasing ubiquity of new electronic media to deliver both death and music, sex and delirium, hope and doom. We try to suppress the decade, demonize its memory, airbrush its image, because its rude contradictions haunt us still.

Consider the climax of British director Peter Whitehead’s 1967 film *Benefit of the Doubt*, his documentary—or one might say, documentation—of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s theater production of Peter Brook’s ingenious political play *US*. The play’s title can be pronounced either “U.S.” or “us,” as it points its British audiences towards their complicity in the events of the American war in Vietnam. The play consists of a raucous farrago of sketches, created from news reports, personal anecdote, presidential speeches, and Vietnamese legend—like a music-hall revue staged by a nation’s unconscious. At the finale, a young Glenda Jackson appears on the stage (the same Jackson who, today, as a Member of Parliament, remains in strident opposition to Tony Blair’s wartime engagements) and in a sonorous soliloquy, begins making demands of her

audience. Demands that superimpose the war in Vietnam from halfway around the world to the seemingly safe and cozy island of Britain, playing on ancient fears of the “sceptred isle’s” invasion.

“I want it—to get worse. I want it to come *here*,” she intones, in a deep prophetic tenor. “I would like us to be tested. I would like a fugitive to run to our doors and say, ‘hide me.’ And know if we hid him, we might be shot. And if we turned him away we would have to remember that, forever. I would know which of my nice, well-meaning acquaintances would betray. Which would collaborate? Which would talk first under torture? And which would be come a torturer?”

Whitehead cuts from the play’s stage to a different kind of theater: footage of British protests outside the American embassy in London. Jackson’s voice continues to run over the images:

“I would like to smell the running bowels of fear over the English Sunday morning smell of gin and the roasting joint and hyacinths. I would like to see an English dog playing on an English lawn with part of a burnt hand. I would like to see a gas grenade go off in an English flower show and nice English ladies crawling in each others’ sick. And all this I would like to be filmed and photographed so that someone a long way off, safe in his chair, could watch us in our indignity.”

This is an undoubtedly Shakespearean verbal strategy—the use of language to evoke something too horrible to enact onstage—whose terror levels have been cranked up for the post-Hiroshima age. The safety of distance collapses as cozy Britain transmutes into war-torn Vietnam. But watching *Benefit of the Doubt* now causes another sharp connection, one that cuts through not space but time. The burnt hands and exploding flower shows of Brook’s horror-show London could be Saigon then, or Baghdad now. The running bowels of fear by today have stained both My Lai and Haditha, Abu Ghraib and Lower Manhattan, Guantanamo and—indeed—London’s own Underground.

The print of Whitehead’s film is old, and unfortunately, has not been preserved at optimal quality. Scratches and splice-tape appear once or twice, shattering the illusion of immanence that his camerawork so elegantly invites, but reminding us again of the battering passage of time. A deceptively straightforward genre, the filmed play is in fact a difficult form to pull off: think of the soporific versions of televised theater one is forced to watch in school, with deadening two-camera set-ups and flat clinical lighting. Whitehead’s documentary, in contrast, is gripping. The viewer is always aware of the man with the movie camera, moving about on the stage, zooming in, setting himself down on the ground for a low-angle shot, holding the view close for the soliloquy. Here is the commando technique of a you-are-there television reporter—or a dedicated witness—

married the solvent soul of an artist. The actors are not the only players here—Whitehead too has left a performance in his camerawork.

Interspersed with the scenes from *US* are other records of the moment: a press conference for the play, which becomes a discussion of the real war, and interviews with Jackson and Brook. “The situation seems to be lunatic” says one panelist. “That people still think you can change people’s opinion by killing them.” Brook tells Whitehead’s camera that “the only things that seem believable in Vietnam” are the “totally convincing objective realities: the suffering, the urgency, the confusion, the contradiction... To blow the legs off children at one moment, and then with deep, true concern, to sew them back on again.” Echoes again of our of 21st century humanitarian wars.

* * *

“It is important to realize that the British environment has never been conducive to the practice of the visual arts, including film,” observes filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin in his 1975 look back on the underground era, *Film Is: The International Free Cinema*. “It is one of prevailing literalness, of classification, of systematizing, a maze of labels, endless compartments and rigid class structures.” Perhaps Whitehead’s fascination with the incommensurate contradictions of modern existence stem from the then-atypical vantage point of his own background, a working-class Liverpool lad schooled on scholarship in an elite British boarding school as part of the UK’s early experiments in meritocracy. Such social short-circuiting has its own disorienting effect: the adult self emerges from a dialectical clash of cultural extremes rather, in the end achieving a bittersweet freedom of perspective via exile, never feeling at home in one class or the other. (Thus one finds in Whitehead a persistent searching, a journey that cannot end, always positioned from an outsider’s view.)

At Cambridge University, Whitehead’s colleagues included future poet laureate Ted Hughes (who would later dedicate his poem *The Risen* to him), actors Peter Cook and Ian McKellen, and Pink Floyd musician Syd Barrett. After graduating with a concentration in physics and crystallography, Whitehead attended the Slade School of Art in London for painting, then shot what he considers his first professionally-made film, *The Perception of Life*. Though it bears a title prescient of his later themes, *Life* was in fact a commissioned half-hour biology film, shot entirely through a microscope. Later, he spent a few months working as a cameraman for Italian television. His interest in the burgeoning world of new American poets—introduced to him via the pages of *Evergreen Review*—led him to gravitate towards London’s Better Books, the epicenter of Britain’s nascent underground culture. In 1966, Whitehead would be among the artists who met at Better Books to create the London Film-maker’s Cooperative, a collectively run

distribution and production center, modeled on Jonas Mekas' Film-Maker's Co-op in New York.

But even earlier, in 1965, the bookshop's proprietor Bob Cobbing provided Whitehead the opportunity for his first foray into independent filmmaking. Cobbing had hosted a reading by Allen Ginsburg at Better Books, which Whitehead attended with the plan to take photos of the American poet. Those in attendance began what must have seemed like a Quixotic plan to rent out the 7000-seat Royal Albert Hall for a massive Beat poetry convocation. Though New Yorker Barbara Rubin had planned to film the event, the honor fell to Whitehead, who shot what became titled the International Poetry Incarnation on forty-five minutes of silent black-and-white 16mm on a new-model NPR Eclair. For his soundtrack, Whitehead used a Nagra reel-to-reel tape recorder, but upon completion found the job completely botched; luckily, however, he was able to nick a full, clear recording done by BBC radio that same day, eventually marrying the BBC's soundtrack to his own images.

The Albert Hall was fully packed that day; Whitehead recalls over 5000 additional poetry aficionados turned away at the door. Beat saints Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Ginsburg, and Ernst Jandl read, along with a junta of lesser-known British poets who stormed the event and nearly stole the show. Presaging *Benefit of the Doubt*, Michael Horovitz spoke of "the doom-boom of the fighter jets" while Adrian Mitchell asked the audience to "tell me lies about Vietnam"

"It was first of all about participation," Whitehead wrote in the journal *Films and Filming* in 1974. "It was about me being there. I had to film it that way because I had no choice. The sequence I shot of Gregory Corso, which is between two heads and two people talking, I shot because Ginsberg grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me on the floor. And that was the only position I could actually film from. So arty pretensions I had about making an objective statement on what happened in the Albert Hall that night are absolute nonsense. One of the qualities of the film, though, for all its wobbly camera-work and its zooms is the feeling that you are there."

Wholly Communion caught the attention of Rolling Stones impresario Andrew Loog Oldham, who then commissioned Whitehead that same year to make the documentary *Charlie is My Darling*, with the hopes that Whitehead's underground style would help rustle up funds for a commercial feature film built around the group. In *Charlie*, Whitehead follows the band on a tour of Ireland, shooting them offstage and on. Due to rights issues with the film's producer, it has been seen rarely since, circulating today mostly in bootleg form. "What I liked most about that film was the fact that when the Stones were talking they were really quite inarticulate," Whitehead has said, but yet they could create "this amazing direct, instinctive communication with the audience"—another kind of communion.

Though *Charlie is My Darling* didn't drum up investment for the more mainstream movie Oldham had hoped for, it still had some influence: Antonioni's *Blow-Up* reportedly drew inspiration from it, and Whitehead himself afterwards enjoyed a brief but seminal career making music shorts for the BBC's rock program *Top of the Pops*. These "pop promo" films have been cited as ancestors of the modern music video. Low-budget in comparison to today's lavish productions, Whitehead's promos retain the direct-cinema documentary feel of his longer works, shooting bands like Small Faces horsing around on the London streets, Jimi Hendrix hanging backstage, or the Stones working in the recording studio. But some take on the fantastical, dreamlike elements that would enter his later works. Eric Burden sings "When I Was Young" over grim footage of bomber jets shot off a television screen, while instrumental outfit The Shadows run through the desert and hunt a girl dressed up as a bird.

Whitehead's migration from the Beat demimonde of *Wholly Communion* to the commercialized counterculture of *Top of the Pops* paralleled the journey taken by Britain's own youth scene. In 1966, the British flocked to see the Albert Hall poets import the American underground vibe, but by 1967, Americans were looking to Britain and "Swinging London" as the epitome of a new chic, filled with mod fashions and playful psychedelia. Its title taken from a Ginsberg poem, Whitehead's *Let's Make Love in London* documented the brief but boisterous moment between the days of earlier underground of the mid-Sixties and the more politicized culminations of '68. This "Pop Concerto for Film" opens with a druggy Pink Floyd riff ("Interstellar Overdrive") playing against a streaky bit of streaky London neon, then sets off on a free-association of mod club footage, chat-style interviews with the celebrated and famous (Oldham, Michael Caine, Mick Jagger, Julie Christie, David Hockney), and political theater staged by Vanessa Redgrave in solidarity with Castro's revolutionary government in Cuba. After Caine discusses the psychic ramifications of the fall of the British Empire, Whitehead plays a boppy tune over footage of the changing of the guards:

"Can't you see
The way things used to be?
Life was different then..."

Despite *London's* value as a document of the street fashions and musical styles of its moment (one suspects the film was studied assiduously by the creators of *Austin Powers*), Whitehead injects a more subtle feeling of chaos and nihilism beneath the apparent fun and flash of psychedelic body-painting, nightclub revels and high-fashion model shoots. Jagger, Oldham and Christie are portrayed less as generational icons than vapid narcissists. "It seems to me that a good time is much easier had by all now than ever before," Christie philosophizes. "Pleasure I think is terrific...and if you haven't got anything else, then you're lucky to have

that.” An interviewed “dolly girl” sums up the *esprit du temps*: “Do what you like, and no one cares;” Whitehead loops her phrase in an ominous echo.

Perhaps the cynical, even mournful undertones of otherwise frothy *London* are due to the fact that Whitehead shot the picture while producing the deadly serious *Benefit of the Doubt*, and the pair screened as a double bill at the New York Film Festival. New York Times critic Bosley Crowther observed that *London* “just bounces and tumbles ahead, scattering agitation and confusion, and, in the breezy, bumbling things that are said by the very mod people who are talked to, putting across the idea that 'swinging London' is a mere manifestation of commercial encouragement of kookie cults that will pass.” (Pressed by his financial backers, Whitehead completed the film in a mere three weeks, perhaps contributing to its disjointed, free-form quality.)

The New York Film Festival’s ‘London Scene’ program proved a success with audiences, and Whitehead was offered funding to create a parallel documentary on the “New York Scene.” But Whitehead was thinking less along the pop lines of *London* and more the anti-war engagement of *Benefit of the Doubt*, as protests against Vietnam began to escalate. “There seemed nothing more to film in London except my boredom, despair and apathy,” he wrote in 1969. “All the movements seemed to be dead, the beat, hippie, underground, pop scenes had all become indulgent or fashionable. If something was to be done, by me or anyone, it would not be done in 'America-owned' England. I might add, I was right. We are still 'protesting.' Other countries are in revolt...I agreed to stay in America and make a documentary film, with complete freedom fortunately, so I could do, find and film whatever I liked.”

After shooting footage in New York (“the city in which were all the symptoms of the disease that, I believe, was carelessly destroying the world”), Whitehead returned to London to begin thinking about the ultimate shape of the work that would become *The Fall*. At first, he considered turning it into a fictional narrative that ended in assassination, but when the real-world murder of Martin Luther King occurred, he abandoned the concept. Instead, upon his return to New York, Whitehead took a Godardian turn, transforming the film into a documentary about his own process of making a documentary. This self-referential logic culminates in *The Fall*’s climax, in which the director, camera in hand, becomes a participant in a protest at Columbia University that ultimately descends into violence.

The Fall would represent Whitehead’s cinematic apex, and his most fully realized work: an act of total engagement and attempt at communication that nevertheless delivers an ambiguous statement on the value of the actions it depicts, quite out of step with some of the more strident political filmmaking of the era. In the decades since 1969, Whitehead has embraced a wide variety of projects, including a sexually explicit film made with artist Niki de Saint Phalle

(1973's *Daddy*), a stint serving Arabian princes as one of the world's premier falconers, early experiences with Internet-based literary forms, and the publication of a novel, also titled *Let's Make Love in London*, that mixes fact with fantasy in retelling the history of the Sixties.

"I sometimes wonder if all my films, especially the last two, aren't acts of aggression against film, against limits put on me by the nature of film itself," Whitehead wrote in 1968. "The outside world no longer seems worth looking at, so you have to turn inwards. The problem is to develop a film language that is equivalent to this inward search for significance and meaning."

Whitehead's films are travelogues of a wandering soul, once only through geography, but now also through time. Like those of his contemporaries, Whitehead's search entailed wrestling with "the Now," but he never fully succumbed to the self-serving mythologies of the Sixties that have since been handed down to younger generations, today prone to conceive of the era as one of brilliant pop tunes and heroic protest. For us now, in 2006, the eternal present of Whitehead's films becomes a mirror of our own crisis. We want lessons, but as we look closer, learn only that the denizens of those fabled years of 1966, 1967 and 1968 were just as ambiguous and uncertain and lost in contradiction as we are today.

(Published, in German, in the catalogue of the 2006 Viennale)