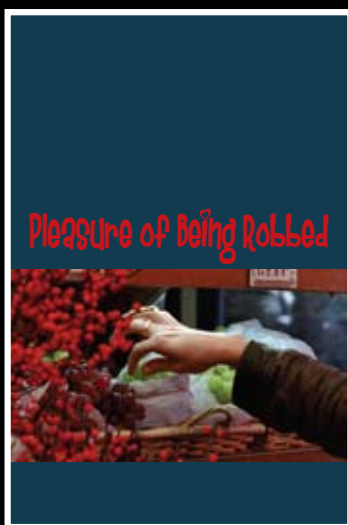


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Sherlock Jr., 1928
Manny Farber (1917-2008)
40 inches diameter

On April 23, 1968, outraged students occupied five buildings on the upper Manhattan campus of Columbia University. They saw their rebellion as a demonstration against the university's hegemony and as an act of solidarity with sister revolutions worldwide. The protest—which soon split along racial and political fault lines—continued for six days, and brought the institution to a standstill. Forty years later, Paul Cronin has made a first-person documentary on the subject, *A Time to Stir*, which closes the Toronto International Film Festival's documentary section, and will be followed by a discussion with several of the film's interviewees. The (as of now) four-hour-long film may have covered more exhaustively than ever before the events the British-born director now simply calls "Columbia," yet he still considers *A Time to Stir* a work in progress. In fact, the self-proclaimed "visual historian" isn't even sure that it's a film at all.

It is, indisputably, an absorbing collection of on-camera interviews documenting "Columbia" in minute historical detail. Cronin, 36, had already completed a Masters degree in criminal law from the London School of Economics when he played the role of interviewer for the first

STIR IT UP

Paul Cronin's Visual History

by Livia Bloom



time nearly ten years ago, with Werner Herzog in the hot seat. “I wrote him a letter proposing an interview book. He said no,” Cronin explains sheepishly. “This was before the God-like status that Werner now has. He was big—but not quite God, more like Moses. His rejection fax read, ‘Dear Mr. Cronin, I do look into the mirror every morning, but it is only to shave. I do not know the colour even of my own eyes. I do not do self-scrutiny. There will be no *Herzog on Herzog*. Yours sincerely, W.H.’ So I went back and re-read my letter. It was too formal—I would have said no to it myself. So I sent another letter—much more relaxed, more *me*. He told me he wanted to see Arsenal play, so I scalped some tickets for that Saturday and a few days later I’m sitting in a pub after a football match, drinking a beer with Werner Herzog! He moves over and sits directly opposite me. He looks me in the eye and says, very slowly and ominously, ‘I have thought about this book. And I think... all things considered... that it would be best... if I co-operated with you.’ I nearly fell off my chair!”

Their discussions eventually flowered into the book *Herzog on Herzog*. Cronin went on to edit numerous other interview books, including collections with Roman Polanski and Arthur Penn (co-edited with Michael Chaiken), as well as the collected writings of British director Alexander Mackendrick, who is gaining recognition as one of the great teachers of film. Documentaries also followed, and these were also interview-based, often highlighting erudite or little-studied subjects. *Film as a Subversive Art: Amos Vogel and Cinema 16* (2003), (which Cronin simply calls “the Vogel,”) introduced moviegoers to the Jewish Viennese immigrant who was one of the first “non-mainstream” film curators in the US. Luminaries such as Jonas Mekas, Joseph Campbell, and Norman Mailer came together in New York to watch Vogel’s imported prints and inspired pairings of medical films, foreign films, and previously unseen avant-garde art cinema.

In *the Beginning Was the Image: Conversations with Peter Whitehead* (a.k.a. “the Whitehead thing”) weighed in at more than three hours, chronicling the career of the news cameraman-turned-filmmaker who captured the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Led Zeppelin, Allen Ginsberg, and Pink Floyd in vivid portraits. During his trip to New York in late 1967, Whitehead was allowed into the halls and libraries that Columbia students barricaded, and emerged from the campus in April 1968 with unique colour and synch-sound footage that provided the climax for Whitehead’s *The Fall* (1969). Extracts from this remarkable material are included in *A Time to Stir*, bringing further symmetry to Cronin’s work. Along with additional archival material and thousands of newly unearthed photographs, the Whitehead footage plays under and

between interviews with a seemingly unending parade of former Columbia students (including many members of the organizations largely responsible for the occupation), their professors, and many more. Well into middle age, the one-time activists speak from their well-appointed libraries, offices, and living rooms. The excitement of recounting their student days crackles like electricity in their voices and sparkles in their eyes. Watching and listening, it’s easy to imagine their youthful passion for a cause that seemed at the time to represent justice. Much as an oral history turns audio into a unique historical document, the thoroughly researched and detailed interviews compiled in *A Time to Stir* represent a deeply cinematic undertaking.

CINEMA SCOPE: Growing up in London, Columbia ’68 must have seemed pretty far from home.

PAUL CRONIN: It wasn’t, actually, because although I grew up in London, my mother is from New York and ours was really a mid-Atlantic household. When I interview people for Columbia ’68, I see the same books on their bookshelves that I saw in my mother’s study: Daniel Bell, C. Wright Mills, Marx and Weber, books on slavery and civil rights; and from my father’s shelves Nabokov and Lawrence Durrell. I recently found a photocopy I made 15 years ago of an extraordinary publication that came out in May ’68 called *Who Rules Columbia?* by NACLA, the North American Congress on Latin America. It details all of Columbia’s connections to the outside world and to military think tanks, as well as its ownership over Harlem. At the back is a list of all the buildings that Columbia owned in the neighborhood, and all the links that Columbia trustees had to corporate America. Who rules Columbia? The trustees. So it then analyzes who the trustees are, who controls them, and what they control. I’ve been interested in 1968 and Columbia in particular for as long as I can remember.

In *the Beginning Was the Image*, *A Time to Stir*, and “*Look out Haskell, it’s real!*”: *The Making of Medium Cool* are a kind of 1968 trilogy, although I never set out to create such a thing. It might be a red herring; I really just found *Medium Cool* fascinating as a film. Is this a film? A documentary? What the hell is it? Now I probably know more about *Medium Cool* than anyone. I’ve interviewed almost everyone involved. In literally every scene I could tell you what’s going on and who these people are.

On the other hand, the Whitehead thing came out of my desire to document an amazing guy. I was introduced to him by a mutual friend at a screening of *The Fall* in London nearly ten years ago. I’ve spent a lot of time with Peter over the years. I know Peter about as well as any man *can* know Peter. Peter is, in

his own way, more respectful to women than any man I've ever met in my entire life. He *worships* women. He *loves* women. He *literally cannot function* as a human being and as a creative being without a woman. He's a serial monogamist.

SCOPE: Do you relate to that?

CRONIN: Not really, no! I once asked Peter how many times he's been married, and only half jokingly, he couldn't remember. He has these very intense relationships with women; they give him children—of which he has eight—and a fertile environment in which to work. I'm not Peter Whitehead. Peter Whitehead is one of the smartest guys I've ever met. There's a sense that all the people I'm drawn to are the smartest people in the room. I don't have the hubris to think that I have anything really to contribute to the world beyond being able to act as a coherent conduit for certain people and, with Columbia for example, certain historical events. My working relationship with Peter, for instance, has been the closest he's ever had with a man.

SCOPE: What's the closest working relationship you've ever had?

CRONIN: I generally work on my own. I know how to shoot and take sound well enough that I can pretty much make it look like there are professionals doing it. Ninety-five percent of what I shoot I'm very, very happy with. It looks and sounds fine. Not great, but good enough. Clearly I miss a few things. If I had a guy working camera exclusively, it would be different. Would it be noticeably better? Maybe. But only to five percent of the people watching. Most people don't notice if the lighting is off; or the eyeline is off; or the background is boring; or there's a pop on the soundtrack because I should have moved the microphone two inches down. Most people don't notice that stuff, especially if what the people are talking about is interesting, and I hope it is. Just this morning I arranged to do an interview. On Tuesday I'm going to jump on a train with a little bag that has everything I need, and I'll come back with an interview! It's going to look great, it's going to sound great—and that evening it will be cut into the film.

I couldn't cover the ground I've covered over the years with my work, and particularly with Columbia, if I had to do it with a crew, however small. You also can't discount the intimacy of sitting there one on one. I've gotten to the point where I can call someone cold, explain what I'm doing, show up in their house the next day and within 90 seconds be set up on the sofa, talking to them. Two minutes later they're saying, "Oh, are we recording?" And I'm saying, "Forget the camera. Just talk to me." Thanks to Mackendrick, I can walk into a room and immediately see—maybe not the best angle, but a perfectly good angle to shoot

in. You just always shoot along the longest axis; don't shoot against a wall. That said, sometimes it can't be helped. But the whole documentary world? It's pretty basic stuff. It's not rocket science.

SCOPE: Do most of the people you meet know about Columbia '68?

CRONIN: Not really. Some people have a vague sense as to what it is: students occupied buildings. They don't know any of the nuances. But then the nuances have never really been analyzed or historicized. This is *new history*. To a certain extent, my films *aren't really films*. They don't use any reconstruction. I rarely use music. There aren't any gimmicks. They're not journalism. I don't know if my films are even pieces of cinema...I see them as "visual history." I *think* they work visually, even if at some points I hold on one talking head for 60, 90 seconds. Only some of the events related in the Columbia film have ever been written about; this film is built on original historical research. Almost none of the photos in the film have ever been seen before. I pulled them out of the garages and attics of former Columbia students who happened to have taken pictures. Twelve, thirteen *thousand* photographs. The archive footage from the commercial archive houses? Almost all of it was transferred, was telecined especially for us, which leads me to conclude that it hasn't been seen, really, since '68. I was trying to think, has there been a really good, contemporary archive- and interview-based history of student protest in the late '60s? I don't think there has. Columbia is the focal point of that—it's the eye of the storm. I see this film as the missing link between Helen Garvey's *Rebels With A Cause* (2000) and *The Weather Underground* (2002).

SCOPE: Are there other people you consider fellow visual historians?

CRONIN: I'm certainly not claiming to be inventing a genre here. Take a look at BBC documentaries. The ones by the company Brook Lapping, for instance, are unbelievable historical pieces. *The Fall of Yugoslavia* was made right after it happened, in 1996, 1997. It's a five-hour series where they interviewed everyone—including Milosevic and Karadzic. The clarity of this thing is extraordinary, it's full of emotion, *and* it's built on interviews and archive footage. They also did series on Arab/Israel; Northern Ireland; six hours on Watergate—and it's all first person. In the Arab/Israel one, no one is saying, "Clinton did this." It's *Clinton* saying, "I did this." They're history. These films are generally not seen at festivals, though Adam Curtis at the BBC has been taking it to another level. His work is clearly important, and it's being seen more widely. To my mind, this work represents the most interesting strand of British non-fiction filmmaking.

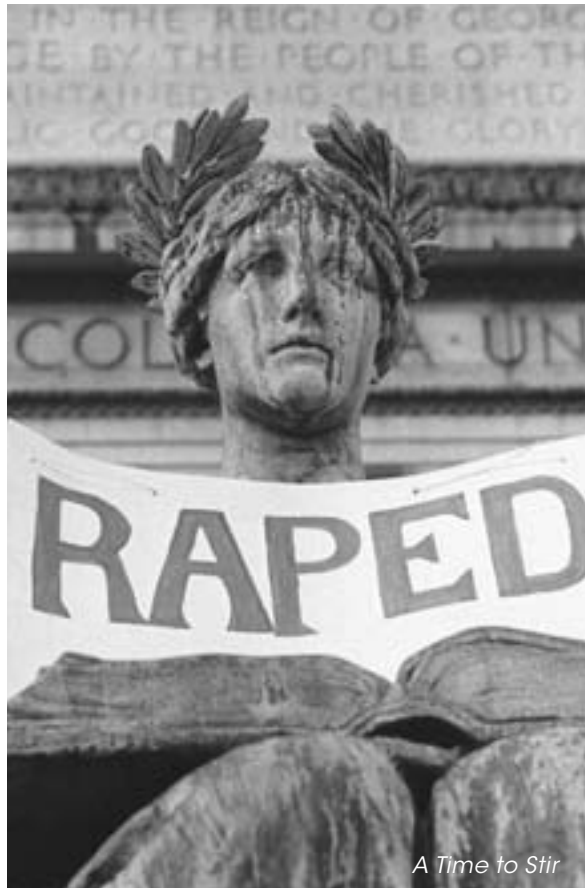
Everyone in *A Time to Stir* was on campus. There are no historical commentators. Of the Whitehead thing, people say to me, “Why didn’t you include interviews with Mick Jagger?” That’s really of no interest to me. A first-person account is much more interesting. I think of Errol Morris talking about *The Fog of War* (2003); that was “McNamara on McNamara.” I did “Whitehead On Whitehead” and now this is “Columbia on Columbia.” With Columbia, it’s amazing because the world’s press was there and all the freaky countercultural outsiders were there—from Abbie Hoffman to Tom Hayden to the Lower East Side group The Motherfuckers. You’ve also got this incredible array of European émigré faculty guys like Fritz Stern and Peter Gay. “We survived war-time Europe,” they said. “Not only did America save us, but the American higher education system saved us. Specifically, Columbia saved us. This institution saved my life and gave me a place of refuge! How dare you attack it?” Or people like Immanuel Wallerstein, who describes faculty members exclaiming, “For years I’ve been a bastion of leftism, and you’re telling *me* I’m the enemy? What are you talking about? I’m not the enemy; it’s those people who are the enemy!” But who are “those people?” For the students and the leaders of SDS, it was liberalism that was the enemy. It was Eugene McCarthy. It was Robert Kennedy.

When it comes to Columbia ‘68, pretty much all those people you’d expect to be alive are alive. I could not—would not—be making the film otherwise. That said, one of my favorite documentaries is Maximilian Schell’s documentary on Marlene Dietrich (*Marlene*, 1984). She said, “I’ll talk to you as much as you want, but you can’t film me.” So he has these extraordinarily beautiful audio recordings of the two of them talking in English and German, and he just found images. It’s fantastic. I had a VHS of it in London, but I threw most of my tapes away. I’m always just going through bookshelves, throwing shit away.

SCOPE: But when it comes to your films, you’re exhaustive. Not throwing *anything* away.

CRONIN: Things are never thrown away, as such. The most unbelievable quantity of material needs to be assembled in order to pull together that which is interesting and usable and important for a finished project, whether it’s a book or a film. I’ve already given lots of my primary research material to the Columbia archive. I have about 350 hours of interviews, thousands of photos, hours of archival footage...and there are so many more interviews I still need to shoot!

SCOPE: What do you think unites the men you’ve focused on in your books and films?



A Time to Stir

CRONIN: To a certain extent, the people I’ve focused on—Whitehead, Herzog, Mackendrick, Vogel, Polanski, Penn—are all outsiders. That’s kind of pro-saic—everyone wants to think they’re an outsider or to focus on outsiders. But these men all stuck out like sore thumbs, and theirs are all stories of men wandering the desert. My undergraduate thesis was about Paul Bowles, who I met several times. He was an extraordinary character. I was 17 when I read *The Sheltering Sky*, and I went down to Tangiers to meet him and spent a day with him there. I didn’t interview him; I just hung out with him and talked with him. A few years later, he was in Paris and New York for concerts of his work, where I met him again—because he was also a musician who wrote the music for some of the original Tennessee Williams productions on Broadway. He also translated a Sartre play that was directed on Broadway by John Huston. He was at the centre of a kind of Brooklyn revival. He lived in a brownstone called February House right here in Brooklyn with his wife Jane, Auden, Carson McCullers, Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, and all these extraordinary people. I have literally hundreds of Bowles’s books in different editions and printings.

The Bowles thesis is unbelievably badly written, but the basic idea is there: the man in the desert. It’s



the outsider wandering off, leaving all of civilization behind. Being authentic. It's something that a lot of us think about, but Paul Bowles and Peter Whitehead *actually did it*. In his 40s, Bowles left America and Europe, and spent close to 50 years in the desert. Peter moved there at the age of 33, in 1970. He went to the desert to breed falcons and stayed for 20 years, until 1990. He would probably still be there were it not for the fact that in 1991 the Gulf War kicked in, and he had to get out. To this day, he keeps on telling me, "I want to be in the desert." Today, the "desert" for him would be the Hebrides Islands off Scotland. He isn't well enough to go as far as the actual desert at his age. I suppose what I'm interested in is some kind of metaphorical desert.

The Whitehead film is the one I feel the most connected to, because I feel very connected to Peter. I feel connected to this notion of wandering away from everything, searching, retreating, whether into my own head or a distant landscape. It's my myth, to use Peter's word. I spend so much time in a room on my own, just working, and there's a sense that going to do a Ph.D. at Columbia on a full scholarship this fall, to sit amid all these brains and resources, will help facilitate that wandering. The desert happens to be at 116th Street, but it's still a desert.

SCOPE: What's your policy on film festivals like these days?

CRONIN: I don't know if it's a policy, but there is certainly something about film festivals that doesn't sit right with me. I have a terribly ambivalent feeling towards them, even if I've travelled the world thanks

to them and through a festival found initial funding for the Columbia film. But at this point festivals don't interest me. Most festivals are not about films; they're about everything *but* films. Bollocks to that! I don't want my films to play at any festivals in which there is any element of a competition. I don't make films to compete with people; I don't like it. The fact is that last year I submitted what I think is one of my best films, a lyrical and probably quite pretentious study of life at the top of the Appalachian mountains, to a few festivals. It was turned down by all of them, at which point I realized I didn't need the affirmation of those people. I had been moving away from film and festivals for some time anyway, but that was, in some sense, the last straw.

Someone might say, "Ha ha, sour grapes!" because I've never, ever, to my knowledge, even been nominated for any awards. If I were, I would not be interested in accepting them. Unless...some of them give money, right? Occasionally I've seen the films that do win awards at festivals. I've been on festival juries, and I know what that's like. It's the pit of banality. There's a sense of, "What is the least worst film here? Golly, we have to give *something* an award." People need to understand that if your film doesn't win an award at a festival or if your film doesn't even get into a festival, it means only one thing: that your film didn't win an award or get into a festival. It doesn't mean it's not good; it doesn't mean any films are better. It probably just means that the film that did get in had a bigger PR company behind it, or the film that did win an award had bigger stars attached

to it, or it's already won an award. After spending time with Amos Vogel, I have tremendous respect for the curators, but some seem to be afraid of stepping over the line unless someone else has already told them to do so. Anyway, it's essentially meaningless, and I just don't want anything to do with it.

SCOPE: I just heard a sigh of relief from the film community at large.

CRONIN: Correction: I was given a lifetime achievement award once. It was about eight months after I started making films. The Westchester County Underground Self-Loathing Jewish Film Festival gave me a brass tack.

SCOPE: So festivals are out; how do you want to get your films into the world? The work-in-progress cut of *A Time to Stir* is now five hours long, and counting.


CRONIN: It will be six hours when I finish and there's a part of me—and I say this only half joking—part of me wants to make films so long that festivals have no idea what to do, and *can't* play them! I've been re-editing my film about *Medium Cool* that's now twice as long as *Medium Cool* itself. I have an eight-hour educational documentary based on Mackendrick's teachings. I'm very happy to make a film, make sure it's as good as I can make it, watch it once and then put it on a shelf.

SCOPE: That's also what Whitehead did.

CRONIN: I didn't want to make the film about Whitehead for years. A week after I first met Peter, I sat down and shot a six-hour interview with him at his house. Years later he called and said, "The British Film Institute is interested in releasing some of my films. Would you come and do two 15-minute bits about *The Benefit of the Doubt* (1967) and *Wholly Communion* (1965)?" I went in and we really just got into it—we filmed the whole day. I suddenly realized we should make the film. It was only then that I realized why the story is so interesting to me *and* why I couldn't have told it years ago: because Whitehead's story is that of a man who turns his back on film. When I first met Peter, I was just starting out and I wasn't ready to make a film about giving up film. Now I'm *very* ready to make a film about giving up film.

We actually started making the Whitehead film in February 2006 and by October we premiered at the Viennale. It was an amazing event. Peter came over with five of his daughters. Vienna showed all of his films, including the incredible *Led Zeppelin at the Royal Albert Hall* concert from 1970. Since then, we've shown the Whitehead film at something like 40 or 50 festivals and venues over the last two years. It was wonderful to see him so lauded over. Last

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month in Italy, they published a little book on him. Peter was just over the moon. I saw him in London last week, and he said, "You got your Ph.D. at Columbia, I got my book." He was overjoyed because he's finally being taken seriously as a filmmaker.

I'm *not* a born filmmaker. I'm *not* a filmmaker! Absolutely not. Mark Rudd came up to me after the screening of two hours of the Columbia footage on campus on April 23 this year, the 40th anniversary of the events *to the day*, and said, "For a year, you've been telling me you're a historian not a filmmaker. Now I finally understand what you're talking about." I'm not that interested in film per se, even if there are a few film-related projects I still want to do, like a book on Kiarostami. That would be very interesting, to go to Iran to research.

SCOPE: You'd be in the desert at last. It's a bit ironic to receive a scholarship from Columbia in order to document its checkered past. Do you consider this biting the hand that feeds you or enshrining the hand that feeds you?

CRONIN: When I started it, I was biting the hand—but the hand wasn't feeding me! Now it's feeding me, but I'm too involved in the project to pull back and temper myself. I have to say, if I look at the history of it and the politics of what happened in '68, I have clear and serious issues with what Columbia was doing—and what it continues to do. But I have almost as many issues with what the protesters were thinking—and what *they* did. I'd like to sit at Columbia for the next few years and write the most definitive history thus far of what happened at Columbia back then.

SCOPE: At what point do you write a book, and at what point do you make a film?

CRONIN: The Whitehead film is called *In the Beginning Was the Image*. There's a struggle in Peter's life—that I see mirrored in my life—between the word and the image. For almost every project, there have been both visual elements and written elements, so there's always this conflict. What is film? I have no idea what film is. I've always been much more interested in the ideas behind my films than the actual films themselves. At a certain point, it tips over and there are enough visual elements to warrant a film. In other cases, things become too complicated for talking heads. Too horrendously complicated, frankly, for film. That's the stuff that really has to be written. That's why my films, I'd like to think, are interesting: people can sit through them and actually learn things. But they're not going to revolutionize the documentary form. No way. I'm just not that good! The people I talk to, the ideas, the historical events, *they are that good*. I just hope I'm good enough to convey the special nature of their relationship to the world. ☐