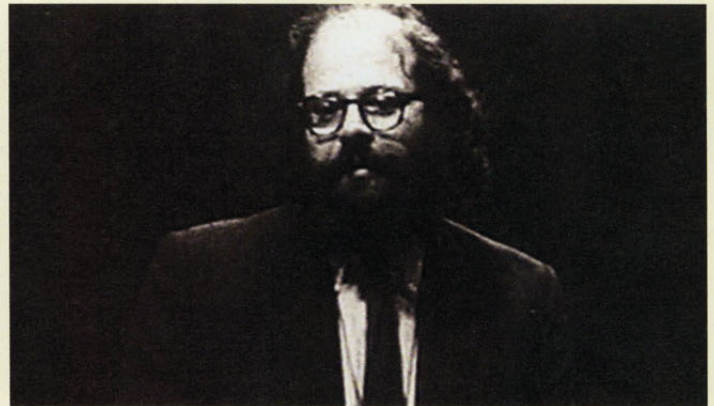


In a brilliant four-year burst, Peter Whitehead shot footage of some of the seminal events of the 1960s. And then, at the height of his powers, he gave it all up. **By Paul Cronin**

# The ceremony of innocence



BY STILLS, POSTERS AND DESIGNS (U)



**E**dinburgh, summer 1969. British director Peter Whitehead is attending the film festival to present *The Fall*, his semi-fictional take on the collapse of American legal protest against the Vietnam war. Shot in New York, the film details the city's highs and lows during one of the most troubled moments in modern US history. It is Whitehead's most ambitious effort to date, though in the preceding four years he has made a handful of now legendary films. The spontaneous *Wholly Communion* documents Allen Ginsberg's incendiary 1965 poetry reading at London's Albert Hall. *Charlie Is My Darling* (1965), starring the startlingly unguarded Rolling Stones, remains one of the finest examples of British *vérité* ever made. *Benefit of the Doubt* is Whitehead's version of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *US*,

a kaleidoscopic 1966 outburst against the Vietnam war directed by Peter Brook. And *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (1967) is both the quintessential Swingin' London document and a dark vision of a city at war with itself.

Whitehead is apprehensive about audience response to his complex new work. Two years in the making, *The Fall* has not only almost bankrupted him, but precipitated a nervous breakdown during its editing. To calm himself, he wanders through town before the screening, taking refuge in a quiet leafy square.

"I suddenly heard a noise behind me, a twittering and fluttering. It was like a Hitchcock film: hundreds of birds were flying behind me. Then I heard a strange shuffling sound, and around the corner walks a little old man. He stops about three yards from me, pulls something from his pocket and shouts: 'Charlie! Where are you?' Then I see a bird fly down, and the man takes his hand away, saying, 'Not you! You wait. Charlie!' Charlie comes down, sits on his finger and eats. 'Now you, Rose. Where are you?' And Rose flies down. He was there for half an hour, feeding all the birds, one by one, by name. At that moment I realised I would sooner have this old man's talent than the talent to make *The Fall*, so I quit

film-making, bought my first falcon for £8 and spent 20 years living in some of the most remote and beautiful places on earth."

Whitehead did pick up his camera again after his Edinburgh epiphany, however. He shot and edited the magnificent Led Zeppelin concert at the Albert Hall in 1970, as well as *Daddy* with French sculptress Niki de Saint Phalle in 1972 and *Fire in the Water* with Nathalie Delon, something like a greatest-hits collection, in 1977. But for the dashing young director (who will turn 70 this year), the film-making, which had only ever been experimentation, was essentially over. Whitehead's subsequent solitary travels as a falconer in the deserts and mountains of Asia and the Middle East might appear antithetical to his conspicuously colourful years documenting the bright lights and urban commotions of the era. But his need to explore, to move on, was always latent, waiting to erupt.

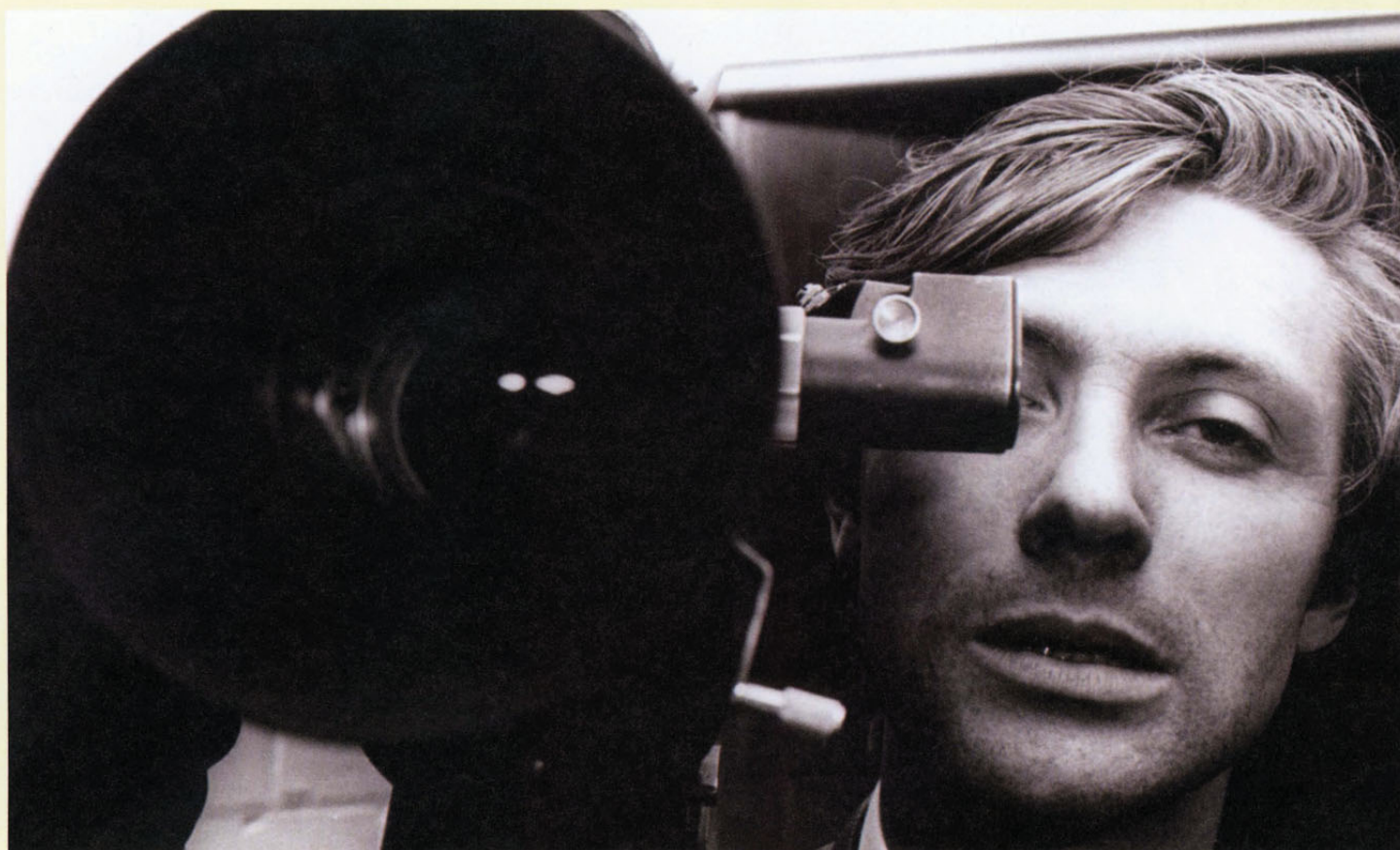
## Boys in drag

Born into a working-class family in the Liverpool slums, Whitehead was selected by Clement Atlee's welfare state to be educated in the public-school system. "As a working-class lad, my father died on me at an awkward age, according to Freud's theories. But the government coughed

up and sent me to a very privileged public school where I got the best education in the country, and where – thanks to a natural gift for memory – I was able to surpass everybody and get a scholarship to Cambridge. The problem is that I was educated to be posh, never actually being able to come to terms with the fact that I can never feel at home anywhere."

Two encounters with Egyptian mythology affected the young Whitehead deeply. At the Louvre, aged 17, he was possessed by a statue of Horus, the falcon-headed shaman. Later at Cambridge, where as a student of physics and crystallography he worked as an assistant to Nobel Prize-winning biologists Francis Crick and James D. Watson, Whitehead wandered into the Fitzwilliam Museum. In the Egyptology department he was captivated by a small sculpted head of Meritaten, the daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. It was also at Cambridge, after seeing Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, that he became, in his own words, "ripe for shamanistic possession". His rebirth years later in an unassuming Scottish square was a return to these passions.

After Cambridge Whitehead won a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Art. On his first day he walked through the studios looking at the work of other



**MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA**  
Whitehead, above, captured 1960s London figures such as album-cover illustrator Alan Aldridge, far left, in 'Tonight Let's All Make Love...'; Allen Ginsberg in 'Wholly Communion', left

students, and quickly realised: "I wasn't an artist." Ending up in the office of head of film Thorold Dickinson, he started shooting 16mm films around the corridors and before long was working as a documentary cameraman for Italian television. Soon after his graduation he made *The Perception of Life*, shot almost entirely through a microscope, a process that helped solidify his belief that non-fiction cinema had nothing whatsoever to do with objective truth.

The opportunity to make what became *Wholly Communion* arose when Whitehead attended a reading by Ginsberg in a London bookshop, after which he volunteered his services as a cameraman should the mooted Albert Hall event take place. A week later, after borrowing £90, he found himself standing before 7,000 people, listening to Gregory Corso, Harry Fainlight, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Alexander Trocchi, Ginsberg and others while trying to thread film into a camera he didn't know how to operate. He ended up with 40 minutes of film and an unusable soundtrack; discovering that the BBC had

recorded the readings, he then spent days synching sound to image, eventually constructing a 33-minute film that documents the opening volley of the British counterculture movement.

*Wholly Communion* helped lay the groundwork for Whitehead's next three projects. Rolling Stones manager Andrew Loog Oldham saw the film and telephoned its director. "He asked if it were possible to shoot a film without lights and with a small crew, then offered me £2,000 to make a film about the Rolling Stones." Shot over two days during the Stones' mini-tour of Ireland, *Charlie Is My Darling* led to Whitehead following the group to New York, where he made the classic promo 'Have You Seen Your Mother Baby', featuring the boys in drag. He later conceived the infamous 'We Love You' promo, shot the day before Jagger and Richards' appeal for possession of marijuana (they were let off). With Mick as Oscar Wilde, Marianne Faithful as Bosie and Keith as a high-court judge, the film was promptly banned by the BBC. Whitehead was soon shooting clips for *Top of the Pops*, and pioneered the form through his work with Nico, the Shadows, Eric Burdon and the Animals, Jimi Hendrix and Pink Floyd.

Peter Brook then asked to screen *Wholly Communion* and *Charlie* to

his RSC actors, who were devising what would become *US*, and Whitehead spent a day filming with the company at the Aldwych Theatre. In between his vibrant colour footage of the production's more physical scenes are monochrome interviews with actress Glenda Jackson and Brook himself, who at a press conference suggests that the chances of a piece of theatre affecting government policy are "absolutely nil", foreshadowing Whitehead's own feelings of irrelevance when it came to *The Fall* a few years later.

Whitehead took the title of *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* from Ginsberg's poem 'Who Be Kind To', written specifically for the Albert Hall event. "With *Tonite* I was trying to examine the mythology that everybody in London was having fun. Ginsberg's poem, which is very much about the theft of British culture by American cultural and capitalistic imperialism, is actually very dark. For me the 1960s was the Aldermaston march, the war in Vietnam and the Dialectics of Liberation. The only miracle about those years is that it was a moment of extreme change that managed to get through without savage violence." Whitehead's antagonistic feelings towards 'the 1960s' and America were to lead him straight into the belly of the

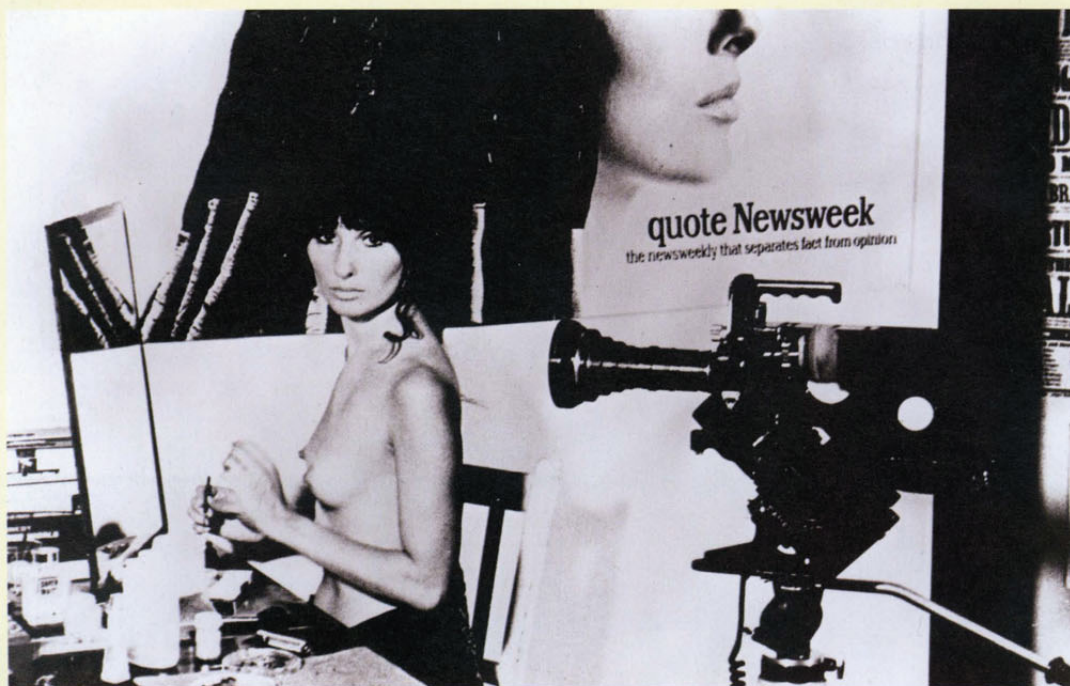
beast. "There seemed nothing more to film in London except my boredom, despair and apathy," he wrote in 1969. "The beat, hippie, underground, pop scenes had all become indulgent or fashionable. If something was to be done, by me or anyone, it would not be done in 'America-owned' England."

### Calculated anarchy

*The Fall*, filmed between October 1967 and June 1968, is a remarkable example of the kind of self-reflexive project that was influencing non-mainstream cinema at the time. Immediately after attending the New York Film Festival, where he presented *Benefit* and *Tonite*, Whitehead started shooting protest meetings, pro-war rallies, poetry readings and public performances. Seeking to impose some kind of structure on these hours of material, he devised a fictional story about political assassination into which he could incorporate the documentary footage. The result is an astonishing hybrid of fiction and non-fiction, a subjective take on the American left and its confrontation with the power elite that was waging war on Vietnam.

"What I was actually filming was the collapse – the 'fall' – of an increasingly ineffective and impotent protest movement," Whitehead says. "As a group, the

# Peter Whitehead



## The film was lowered from a window in a bucket. He was certain the FBI was after it

← anti-war activists were fragmenting, crossing some kind of threshold, tipping over into something more radical. The breakdown of legal protest and the shift to calculated political anarchy were just around the corner." In April 1968 the students of Columbia University took control of several buildings on campus, prompting Whitehead to spend five days and nights filming alongside them. His driver would pick up the exposed film – lowered in a bucket from a window – and take it to the laboratory. When several reels were mysteriously ruined during processing, Whitehead was certain the FBI was after his footage, and following the violent struggle between students and police that ended the university occupation he flew to London, feeling lucky to have escaped intact. At Heathrow airport he discovered that Robert Kennedy, with whom he had been filming only three weeks earlier, had been shot. Whitehead slowly pieced himself back together by sitting for months in front of his Steenbeck, making sense of the 60 hours of footage he had collected.

Whitehead's American experience, specifically his time inside Columbia University, where he was able to participate in the rebellion rather than just sit on the sidelines filming it, was the

culmination of all he had been preoccupied with as a film-maker and at the same time the event that detached him from everything. "I was continually asking myself if I was being an activist by making *The Fall*. The question was: could I change the world by making the film? When I realised the answer was no, I gave up film-making and decided to change myself instead."

The way to do this, Whitehead sensed, was a return to nature. "I had reached a point where I couldn't do anything without relating it to the possibility or necessity of filming it. I couldn't walk past a person or a shop window without thinking they could be filmed. I couldn't read the newspapers in the morning without wanting to go off and film what I was reading about. I was going crazy, constantly zooming and panning and editing with my eyes and ears. Having discovered that the film camera was the very thing severing me from authentic existence, I went off into the wilderness. When you're hanging on

**OUT OF OUR HEADS**  
Peter Whitehead with Mick Jagger during the filming of 'Charlie Is My Darling', right; 'The Fall', with Italian photographer Alberta Tiburzi, top

a cliff ledge 250 feet over the Atlantic Ocean in north Morocco, not sure whether to go up or down, you don't stop to take photographs. In the end I spent 20 years of my life relating to falcons, breeding them, travelling thousands of miles with their eggs on my stomach, hatching them here in my garden and bringing up the chicks. I've never known such ecstasy as when I said to myself: 'I don't want to make any more films.'"

### Breeding birds

Escaping from the west and its post-1960s disappointments and political reversals, Whitehead spent years wandering through Afghanistan, Alaska, Algeria, Iran and Morocco – including a transformative experience working with a Pakistani shaman in the 1970s – before realising he was more concerned with saving endangered species than just flying birds. In 1981 he accepted the

patronage of Prince Khalid al Faisal of Saudi Arabia and together they built the world's largest private falcon-breeding centre atop Jebel Soudah, the country's highest mountain. For ten years Whitehead honed his technique of breeding birds in captivity by imprinting them from birth, and the hours of video footage of him practising his courtship rituals – pacing up and down in front of his birds, feeding them live mice, mewing and clucking at them, allowing them to preen his hair – are almost beyond belief.

Never a self-promoter, Whitehead has always been an outsider, something that from the start of his film-making career equated to a paltry distribution of his work. But fortunately for historians, he served as producer on most of his films, and unlike many of his contemporaries whose work was made for television and has either been lost or purposely destroyed, the compulsive archivist – who directed, edited and photographed almost all his films – has kept nearly every frame in a barn near his home. A cinema obsessive from an early age, he has also published screenplays through his publishing house Hathor, including his translation of Godard's *Alphaville* and works by Bergman, Renoir and Eisenstein. His archives contain hundreds of notebooks stretching back to his childhood, and in the past ten years he has self-published five novels as well as three new full-length fictions recently posted on his website: [www.peterwhitehead.net](http://www.peterwhitehead.net). This year – in production on his first major film since *The Fall* – he has seemingly come full circle to return to film-making.

"To stand and observe is to be alienated," Whitehead wrote in 1968. Forty years later he continues to wander and explore with the intensity that has pushed him, since childhood, from one life to the next. "I did not go off and eat mushrooms or become a solicitor like everybody else at the end of the 1960s. I've never been on holiday, never wasted a single day. I would consider it a waste if I'm not pursuing my myth in some form or another."

■ A season of Peter Whitehead's films is at the NFT, London, from 1 to 11 March

