

Spinoza, assuring him that his love for the pigs is equivalent to a belief in God; this splendidly ambivalent interpolation is gone, but the sense of the self-destructive nature of any dedication remains, the theological aspects being brought out more by the cannibal's ceremonial disposal of heads in the marvellously gaping mouth of the volcano and his condemnation at the hands of some dishevelled clerics than by Julian's more amiable martyrdom.

In the last resort, *Pigsty* never quite reconciles its two halves, shot as they are with totally different camera styles (hand-held for much of *Orgia*, formal face-to-face and low-angle for the Klotz saga), but the resonances between the two provide their own remarkable harmony. If one can conclude anything from the film, it is that Pasolini has transcended the efforts of any of his contemporaries to define the Italian dilemma in both poetic and cinematic terms.

PHILIP STRICK

MEDIUM COOL

HASKELL WEXLER has for some time been recognised as one of America's most talented cameramen—certainly since 1963, when he wrote a letter to SIGHT AND SOUND drawing attention to his credits on movies made outside Hollywood like *Angel Baby*, *The Savage Eye*, *The Best Man*, *America*, *America* and *Studs Lonigan*. 'For years I have worked on the fringes and behind the scenes because of archaic union restrictions,' he wrote. 'Credit and discussion of my contributions to these films had to be clouded or hushed. Now if my work deserves criticism or recognition, I would like to have it.' Having apparently attained full industrial recognition he photographed *The Loved One*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *In the Heat of the Night*, and now he's put himself squarely up for

judgment as producer, director, screenwriter, director of photography and principal camera-operator of *Medium Cool* (Paramount). He emerges from the test with considerable distinction.

The issues the film raises are complex, but the basic plot and its moral tendency are extremely simple. During the spring and summer of 1968, a Chicago television cameraman, John (Robert Forster), gradually appreciates the responsibilities and dilemmas of his vocation as a result of the merging of his private and professional lives and the impingement upon them of public events.

As a private citizen, John is reaching the end of an apparently satisfactory affair with an attractive nurse who chases round his apartment with him in *Blow-Up* style, and raises questions about whether the cameramen on *Mondo Cane* helped reorientate the poisoned Bikini turtles they had so lovingly and indignantly photographed, whether John feels any responsibility for the material he gathers. But he's really more concerned with the techniques of his trade and the electronic trappings of his flat, on the walls of which are giant posters of Jean-Paul Belmondo and the celebrated picture of the South Vietnamese officer blowing a Viet Cong prisoner's brains out. That the girl friend should be a nurse is no more a coincidence than that her successor should be Eileen, a West Virginian widow living in Chicago's newly created ghetto of poor whites who've moved in from the impoverished Appalachians. John meets her through her young son Hal, a fellow pigeon-fancier, who'd tried to rob his car. Hal's father—as revealed in flashback—was an exponent of traditional rural wisdom and folkways, bringing up his son to respect the gun and acknowledge the accepted subservience of women. John thus gains awareness of a new social reality and becomes a sort of surrogate father as wielder of the harmless gun—the camera having become the respectable weapon for both urban and African safaris.

Professionally, John is apprised of his

problems when he realises that his film is being handed over to the F.B.I. and local police by his TV station and that he's being blocked from following up a human interest story about a Negro cab-driver who found 10,000 dollars in the back of his taxi. The cabman is accused by his friends of acting as a 'Negro' as opposed to a 'Blackman' for turning the money in to his employers; the White community wishes to suppress the story because the money was intended to finance some vigilante organisation. As a result of pursuing the case in his spare time, John is fired for unauthorised use of his employers' film.

This brings us to the third aspect of John's education—the American political scene of 1968, and the necessity for commitment that its traumatic events dictated. John and his sound man Gus (Peter Bonerz—the *Funnyman* of John Korty's San Francisco picture and the only moderately familiar face in the film) drift around interviewing Robert Kennedy supporters at their local campaign headquarters and through the Negro poverty camps in Washington as if on any ordinary assignment. After Kennedy's death in Los Angeles has been rendered by a few suggestive shots from the hotel kitchen before the assassination, Wexler cuts to John and Gus in the national capital for the funeral. The slow progress of John's uncompleted politicisation is partly registered through his increasing impatience with Gus, but even at this late stage he remarks admiringly of the TV network preparations for covering the funeral that 'These guys are all set up—they had the experience of J.F.K. in 1963, of course.' Later, while viewing a TV obituary programme on Martin Luther King, he discusses whether TV excites violence or only drains off national passions and anxieties, but still remarks: 'Jesus, I love to shoot film.'

These elements are all drawn together in the confusion attending the Democratic Convention in Chicago, during which John is employed as a freelance cameraman in the Convention Hall and Eileen, while searching for her lost son, is caught up with the demonstrators outside. Paralleling John's own groping towards involvement, Eileen is unconsciously drawn into the protest march, moving forward with the marchers, sitting down when ordered, and finally running when the police brutally disrupt the proceedings. When eventually she meets up with John they detach themselves from the crowd to carry on the hunt for Hal by car. (These scenes have a good deal in common with the politically conscious Russian and German movies of forty years ago.) On the car radio they hear the news of their own deaths among the various accident reports and accounts of Convention atrocities, and a split second later skid off the road into a tree. Echoing the pre-credit sequence which showed John and Gus coolly filming an accident before calling an ambulance, a family drives by without stopping and John's own death is snapped through the back window by a teenager. All this is observed by a TV camera which pans from the wrecked car to the audience, and the Chicago riot cry 'The whole world's watching' is heard again on the soundtrack as we return briefly to the street battle.

This is clearly a very personal film for Wexler. First, it takes him back for closer scrutiny over much of the ground covered in the service of others, e.g. the superstitious, backward rural America of *Angel Baby*; the political mechanics and

rituals of *The Best Man*; the Chicago of *Studs Lonigan*; the morbid obsession with the random cruelties of urban life (punctuated with anonymous car smashes) that *The Savage Eye* dwelt on; the racial confrontations so slickly handled in *In the Heat of the Night*. Secondly, there's a constant debate about the role of the professional observer and his responsibilities.

The first scene after the credits is a *cinéma vérité*-type treatment of a party at which photographers discuss the ethics and hazards of their job. This is followed by the coverage of a National Guard riot control exercise in which the left-wing demonstrators are played with frightening relish and to the life by (presumably) soldiers, police and right-wing volunteers; when recorded it differs little from the real thing. And 'the real thing' when we see it is the genuine Chicago riots, the dramatic possibilities of which Wexler must no doubt have foreseen as did most of the participants, even if they didn't anticipate their scale. At one point, as a tear gas bomb explodes and an orderly progression breaks up into a chaotic *mêlée*, someone on the soundtrack shouts, 'Look out, Haskell, it's real!' which could well be used as the epigraph of the movie.

At another level, of course, the cameraman represents the public in a world dominated by the images and vicarious experiences provided by the mass media that control and distort our sense of reality. How true a picture of our society are we getting? To what extent does the unceasing barrage of information and sensations lead to a brutalisation of the sensibility and indifference? Does the mere presence of the media, not to mention their rigging of affairs, alter an event? Do the media encourage people to act, or relieve them of responsibility, or merely make them feel increasingly impotent? These and a dozen others are perennial questions, not easily answered but raised by Wexler in a particularly honest and forceful way.

Medium Cool, it goes without saying, is

brilliantly photographed, and throughout it has a sense of total conviction in its dialogue and an exact feeling for place in its observation. The laconic, elliptical style, eschewing all exposition, is admirable, though it tends to leave the characters without much depth. In consequence we are not much moved by them as individuals, which may or may not be intentional, and while we're never in doubt about Wexler's perceptiveness we feel curiously uneasy about his hero's. The main fault of the film, however, is the too overtly ironic cutting: from a roller-skating brawl to love-making; from a TV interview with a rich lady talking about 'getting away from civilisation' on a Canadian vacation to the Chicago slums; from a series of angry into-camera testimonies by Black Power advocates to suburban housewives at pistol practice, and so on. The objection is not to the validity of the associations made but rather to the glibness of the editing, in contrast to the subtlety and avoidance of rhetoric in the individual sequences and the film as a whole.

PHILIP FRENCH

BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID and TELL THEM WILLIE BOY IS HERE

IN AN AGE dominated by the anti-hero, Polonsky's Willie Boy boldly flaunts his difference. Even the title, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (Rank), rings like a gauntlet flung down in the face of society; and as the dark, unsmiling Paiute Indian jumps off a train in the opening sequence to make his way home through the desert scrub to the reservation where he has become an outsider to his own people but remains unacceptable to the whites, one knows that he is as doomed to die as the hero of that archetypal Forties protest, *They Live By*

Night. The whole film is predicated on the irony that Willie Boy is presumed guilty of a crime defined by circumstance rather than by fact, and behind his eyes, as in those of Keechie and Bowie, lies the puzzled, secretive query: is *this* justice, is this man's inalienable right . . . ?

It isn't difficult to see *Willie Boy* as an allegory of Polonsky's own presumed crime, the one for which he was blacklisted and kept off the screen until 1968 and a writing credit for *Madigan*. Luckily—and with an authority surprising since he hasn't directed a film since *Force of Evil* in 1948—Polonsky keeps such a firm control over the film that there is no reason, or occasion, to intrude with interpretations upon his bleak symphony of inscrutable desert wildernesses: literal, in the majestically rocky landscapes over which Willie and Lola (Robert Blake and Katharine Ross) flee in order to preserve their love; and metaphorical in the impassive way in which Willie and Sheriff Cooper (Robert Redford) pursue their duel, their faces revealing no hostility but secreting—perhaps—oases of feeling as dried out yet secure, strange and beckoning as the ghost village shrouded in gracefully decaying palm fronds where Willie and Lola fail in their last, despairing stand.

Lazily, almost too methodically, but with direction which grips like a vice, Polonsky builds the complex jigsaw which will result in the picture one has already seen on the box, of Willie's funeral pyre: the needling by white storekeeper and poolroom bums ('Goin' to make some squaw happy tonight, Willie Boy?'); his rejection at gunpoint by Lola's father, and his flight with Lola after killing her father in self-defence; the posse which lets loose the trouble-mongers and the Indian-fighters yearning for the good old days; the visit to California of President Taft, security-mad after the assassination of McKinley in Buffalo to a point where Willie's flight becomes magnified in the mind to a full-blown Indian uprising.

Underneath all this, firmly subordinating the décors of civilisation (the tired little railway station where one of the posse is carried to die, the voluptuous plush-and-gilt of the hotel where Taft's presence is felt but not seen) to his central image of a desert, Polonsky relentlessly pursues his theme: the fatalistic irony whereby Willie (they *made* me a criminal, the outcast of the Thirties and Forties used to say) reverts to being an Indian when accused, in effect, of the crime of being an Indian.

At the beginning of the film, as Willie returns from a ranching job in Arizona to pay his court to Lola, his behaviour is simple and direct: love means love, and an American dollar buys a bottle of whisky, not the rotgut supplied by appointment to the reservation. But once he has married Lola by the Paiute custom of marriage by capture—acknowledged as his right by the Indians, but not by their white protectors—he begins to change, and the deliberate ambivalence of the scene where Lola's dead body is found (did she kill herself because she was holding him back, or did he kill her because there was no hope left?) underlines his metamorphosis into an emotional being whose emotions one can no longer share. Padding silently, tirelessly over the hillside, now alone and wearing an old shirt of his father's, dug up like a reminder of the past from the earthen floor of the long dead and forgotten village, Willie is as alien and unfathomable as those painted, screaming scalphunters who used to haunt the Hollywood Western.