

Medium Cool

Directed, written, and photographed by Haskell Wexler; produced by Tully Friedman and Haskell Wexler; music by Mike Bloomfield; starring Robert Forster, Verna Bloom, Peter Bonerz, Marianna Hill, and Harold Blankenship. Color, 110 mins, DVD. Released by Paramount Pictures.

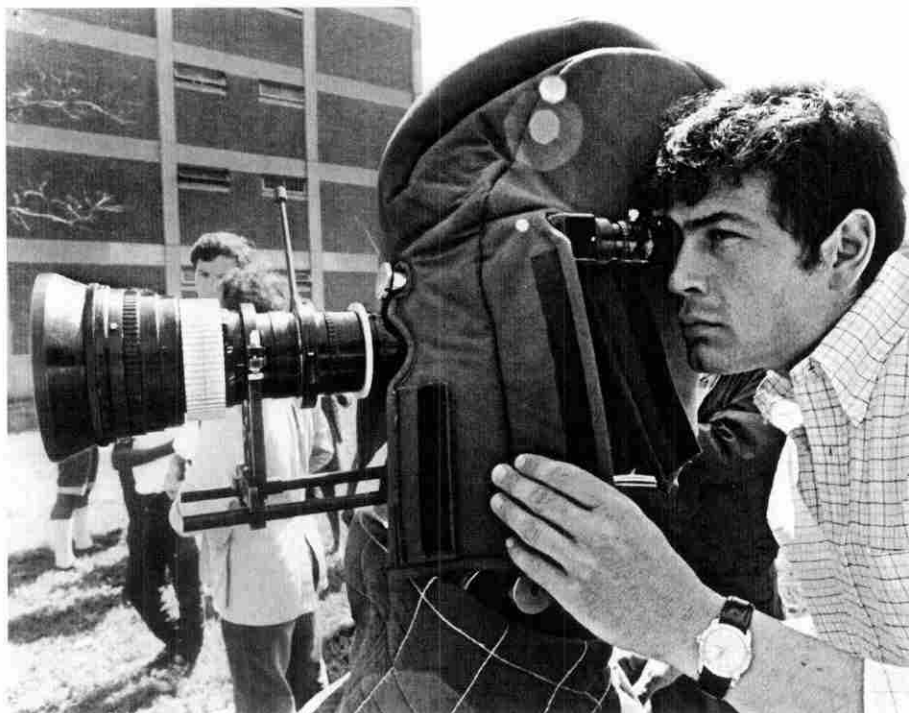
Perhaps the whole world *wasn't* watching; nevertheless, Haskell's Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969) was among the most talked about and, arguably, most influential American movies of the late Sixties. Lacking the commercial clout of *Easy Rider*, the radical cachet of Robert Kramer's *Ice* (both 1969), or the rock-star buzz of *Gimme Shelter* (1970), Wexler's fiction-documentary hybrid claimed heated attention on three fronts: de facto censorship, formal innovation, and utopian visions of industry reform. It became a minor *cause célèbre* due to an initial 'X' rating, levied not for sexual content but for inflammatory crowd noise like "Fuck the Pigs!"—in the audio commentary on Paramount's DVD release, Wexler calls the decision "a political X." Climactic scenes recorded in the midst of street demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago were hailed at the time as a sign of Hollywood's belated openness to narrative experimentation, bearing the vague promise of a style capable of reconciling the demands of European modernism, stark social realism, and conventional storytelling. Finally, in certain New Left circles Wexler's impeccable dual credentials as premier commercial cinematographer (including a then-recent Oscar for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* [1966]) and cultural activist (aside from personal ties to various organi-

zations, Wexler's first directorial outing was a civil-rights documentary, *The Bus* [1965]) augured nothing less than an imposition of a genuinely radical perspective on a seemingly disoriented studio system. Today Paramount, tomorrow MGM!

In retrospect, *Medium Cool* was burdened with so many extratextual, naively hopeful expectations that what is actually *there*, in the sense of narrative and visual execution, may well have been obscured. Looking at the film thirty years removed from the original hype, it is, in the period vernacular, a decidedly mixed bag. "How does it feel to stop feeling?" This paradoxical question is embellished through an allegory of callous, self-serving, politically complicit TV journalism—epitomized by the opening scene of a camera crew blithely abandoning the still-breathing victim of a car crash—yet at the same time it is belied by the film's romantic or, more properly, humanist agenda. An awkward budding relationship between hardened TV cameraman John Cassellis (Robert Forster) and Appalachian war widow and single mom Eileen (Verna Bloom) provides a premise for the spontaneous coverage of street demos as it affirms Cassellis's temporarily stifled compassion. More to the point, his fatherly, feel-good attachment to Eileen's young son Harold (Harold Blankenship, a recently-urbanized Appalachian kid introduced to Wexler by Studs Terkel) serves to deflect any broader critique of media institutions onto a realm of personal-as-political. That is, alienation is couched as an occupational hazard, not a pervasive condition in our Society of the Spectacle—a sentiment no doubt appropriate to intense countercultural energies of 1968 America.

The near-simultaneous appearance of Daniel Boorstin's book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* and *Primary* (1960), Drew Associates' pioneering documentary on electoral politics in the age of mass media, had established a popular framework for addressing the 'theatricalization' of public events, and to some extent *Medium Cool* follows their lead. An amusing scene at a roller derby arena, replete with fake violence and voyeuristic sexual pleasure, registers as an obvious metaphor for the Democrats' staged debacle, yet it also inadvertently ropes in the battles between police and protestors. On the other hand, Wexler leans heavily on philosophical lessons plied by New Wave directors, especially Antonioni and Godard—whose work is repeatedly either quoted or alluded to—resulting in an overarching, if by now shopworn, theme of 'image versus reality.' On several distinct levels, esthetic as well as ideological, the viewer is forced to consider the authenticity of what we see, the degree to which fiction is intermingled with, or overtaken by, *vérité* observation, found footage/sound, or improvisation. In a striking scene, Wexler scans mundane activities in a restaurant kitchen as the soundtrack replays the finale of RFK's ill-fated speech at L.A.'s Ambassador Hotel, as if to reconfigure his assassination from the point-of-view of subminimum wage service workers, a key group in Kennedy's mythologized constituency. Among its many virtues, *Medium Cool* displays a consistently sensitive handling of class divisions, a motif that is intertwined with a generally appreciative portrayal of Chicago's urban matrix; a native Chicagoan, Wexler clearly cherishes the city's brash mix of ethnic neighborhoods and disjunct architectural styles.

The film wears its digressive, episodic, peekaboo-reality structure like a badge of honor, using the celebrated gambit of *Man with a Movie Camera*—or less auspiciously, the still-photographer figure in Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966)—to motivate intermittent glimpses of a roiling ideological spectrum. Unfortunately, the mandate to survey ostensibly telling sites of political resistance or reaction sometimes rings false. A scene of middle-class white women on a pistol firing range, and a staged interview with an affluent matron, come off as gratuitous jabs, while a visit to a 'psychedelic' nightclub is almost risibly phony. Wexler is better at handling the mounting anger and frustration in a domestic gathering of Black Power advocates who rip the propensity of racist media to distort their lives—as one hostile interviewee explains the lure of violence for disenfranchised youth, "The tube is life, man"—yet the effect, here as elsewhere, is overly didactic. Often the brief against dominant media, and the political interests it serves, is rendered not by verbal rants but by visual or sound/image devices. When Cassellis learns that his TV station is supplying local police and FBI agencies with raw news



Robert Forster portrays a cameraman in Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*.

footage, he charges along a series of empty corporate corridors looking for someone, anyone, with whom to file a protest. Similarly, shots of raucous street activity will suddenly revert to eerie silence, as if to underscore the oppressive pall cast by Mayor Daley's thuggery.

Not surprisingly, the film's (mostly) 35mm cinematography is scintillating, marked by richly-saturated exteriors and a variety of lighting-enhanced interior moods. Less felicitous is the reliance on Mike Bloomfield's soft-rock music score to smooth over gaps in nonsync shooting (although a wickedly satirical song by Frank Zappa enlivens the aforementioned club scene). The audio commentary supplied by Wexler, actress Marianna Hill, and editorial consultant Paul Golding—nearly the only added feature on this DVD—has a standard array of soporific filler and fascinating factoid. In the latter category, we learn that the role of Cassellis was originally slated for John Cassavetes, that the use of Zappa music was a cinematic first, and that Wexler's knowledge of the antiwar protest scene allowed him to script fictional scenes against a backdrop of violent demonstrations *seven months in advance* of the Democratic convention.

In some sense, the cameraman protagonist of *Medium Cool* can be read as a stand-in for Wexler himself, negotiating professional and political dilemmas he and other left-leaning media workers faced as the idealistic bubble of Sixties' optimism began to implode. The prospect of converting Hollywood into an instrument aligned with progressive social change was of course a pipe dream. Even those wishing to cite Wexler's film as an avatar of so-called indie production of the last two decades have to ignore the astonishing absence of political critique in the careers of all but a handful of recent nonstudio directors. Similarly, the method of fiction-documentary blending proposed by *Medium Cool* failed to make an impression on even a younger generation of self-conscious *auteurs* just then entering the studio system. Soured by compromises forced on him at Paramount, Wexler abandoned the struggle for directorial independence while continuing to lend his distinguished artistry to projects on both sides of the commercial divide, shooting such politically-cogent dramas as *Bound for Glory* (1976, for which he received a second Oscar), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *Matewan* (1987). Coincidentally, he has functioned as crucial collaborator on a number of important documentaries, including *Brazil: A Report on Torture* (1971, which he codirected with Saul Landau), *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* (1972), and, perhaps most notoriously, *Underground* (1975, cowritten and codirected with Emile de Antonio and Mary Lampson).

As David James remarks in *Allegories of Cinema*, it is hard to imagine how the political insight gained by John Cassellis in the course of his adventures could have been

implemented within the corporate context of network television. Or, for that matter, Hollywood. A fatal car crash at the end of *Medium Cool* makes the issue moot. If, from our current perspective, Wexler's film was not in the vanguard of a wider incursion, it is worth revisiting both for its laudable aspirations and its unique attributes.—Paul Arthur

Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*

Produced by Angelo Rizzoli; created and directed by Federico Fellini; screenplay by Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, Ennio Flaiano and Brunello Rondi; cinematography by Gianni di Venanzo; music by Nino Rota. Black and white, 138 mins, two DVD discs. Released by The Criterion Collection.

Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* is one of the early landmarks of postmodernism. If the myth is to be believed, Fellini had signed with producer Angelo Rizzoli to direct something like a sequel to his enormously successful *La Dolce Vita*. Actors were hired. The crew was ready. And a large set had been built: a rocket launching pad. But where was the story? In early drafts of the scenario, Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) had been a writer. Only when Fellini turned the character into a film director did the elements fall into place. This would be a film about director's block: about not being able to make a film. About what the scholars call 'the creative process.' Weaving together fantasy, flashback, fear, and celebration—all orchestrated, as usual, by Nino Rota—he

achieved an overwhelming international success.

8 1/2 remains the key Fellini movie because it is freer from the tyranny of narrative than anything that came before or since. In the Fifties Fellini had been a storyteller in the neorealist tradition. But that wasn't his real calling. The meandering plot of *La Dolce Vita* had given him a more accommodating framework for his collection of gorgeous images, extreme characters, and musical setpieces. In *8 1/2* he is free entirely to organize these quintessentially cinematic tropes in a way that fits the curious logic of cinema (not the demands of narrative.) The film is more like a night at the opera than an afternoon at the movies.

It's not the quotes from Rossini and Wagner; it's Nino Rota and Fellini. To me, Rota has always been Fellini's *co-auteur*. There's a powerful interplay between Rota's evocative music and Fellini's musical images. Both of them use their images and themes over and over, reworking variations in interesting ways. *8 1/2* gives Rota more room to elaborate on Fellini's visuals than he had had in earlier films.

The musical nature of *8 1/2* makes it a perfect candidate for DVD. This is one film, like music, that you want to play again and again. About the only feature missing from this Criterion edition is a random player that would allow you to run through the twenty-six chapters in arbitrary order! I'm not joking; restructuring *8 1/2* would reveal a lot about Fellini's art. You can see from the DVD's chapters that the maestro's unit of thought was the sequence, not the narrative. You could make four smaller films from the material—the women, the dreams, the production, the spa. You could reverse the



Sandra Milo and Marcello Mastroianni in Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

