

AN INTERVIEW WITH

HASKELL WEXLER

Renée Epstein

HASKELL WEXLER: 'I have rather complex feelings about film-making. Through instant replay, for example, which is the essence of the medium, it is possible to manipulate time. However, through this mechanical power, you lose a sense of immediacy, you alter the manner in which you perceptually relate to the world. I was on the beach yesterday and there was a young couple walking, hand in hand, by the shore. I looked at them and thought, "I cannot look at these people today as I looked at them when I was a young man. I see them behind a camera at seventy-two frames per second. I watch them in slow motion, following the movement of the woman's hair as she turns her head." I almost superimposed a coke bottle or Goodyear tyre as though I were shooting a commercial. We have expropriated so many of the private moments and sold them in the marketplace. And this is part of the corruption of the reproducible media. I know because I make commercials.

'I also am a film-maker. I use film-making as a way to explore life. It legitimatises my presence in interesting places at interesting moments. Whether the films are commercially shown is not the most important factor. I made a film for the farmers' union, years ago, which only the farmers saw. I made a film for the United Packinghouse Union in Chicago, and one for the United Electrical Workers Union. I shot a film on the returning My Lai veterans which was the first interview coverage. I did a film about Sister Coretta because I was interested in the Ecumenical Catholic movement. I did these films more or less to fertilise my own mind, to experience, to learn, to find out what was happening out there.

'When I say that I make documentaries for my own experience, I would be dishonest if I did not also say that, of course, I am interested in an audience. The documentary is a recording of modern history. History is, after all, a re-creation of the past by those who have the recording tools. The

Haskell Wexler has been one of the most talented and influential American cameramen of the last two decades. His string of credits includes *Stakeout on Dope Street* (1958), *The Savage Eye* (1959), *America, America* (1963), *The Best Man* (1964), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968). He was also photographic consultant on *American Graffiti* (1973). In 1969, he wrote, directed, produced and shot *Medium Cool*, which dealt with the involvement of a young television news cameraman in the situations his camera was recording—including the riots during the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968. *Medium Cool* remains Wexler's only feature as a director; but he has also directed or worked on a number of documentaries, including most recently *Brazil: a Report on Torture*, an interview with President Allende, *Interview with My Lai Veterans*, and, in 1974, *Introduction to the Enemy*. Haskell Wexler is at present photographing *Bound for Glory*, the story of Woody Guthrie, directed by Hal Ashby.

Church had its scribes, as does the State. In the Soviet Union, when personalities fall into political disfavour, the encyclopaedias are rewritten. In the United States, school textbooks are now slowly being rewritten in order to deal more honestly with the role the Blacks have had in the shaping of our country. I don't think that we can rely on governments, no matter how benevolent, to be the sole chroniclers of history. There must exist the statements of other witnesses.'

What served as a catalyst for my interview with Haskell Wexler was a televised press conference held to discuss the difficulties he was having in the completion of his documentary on the Weather underground. I met him early one Saturday morning at his home in the Hollywood Hills. He is a tall, slender man, energetic and articulate, with the rare attribute of knowing how to listen. However, he was very firm about remaining silent on the topic of the radical organisations.

'I welcomed the opportunity to do this project because it gave me an exposure to a political organisation about which I knew very little. Apparently, the people involved thought me trustworthy and I do not intend to violate their trust. The completion of the film is dependent upon our ability to gain access to it without surveillance and without another subpoena. Our contacts with the underground have ceased and the project is in abeyance. It is interesting because, even if the film is never completed, the experience has been informing. We have already learned how far the government will go in pre-censoring the work of a documentary film-maker. They have demanded the incomplete film, which is tantamount to confiscating a reporter's notes. We also noted that the Hollywood community, which does not have a reputation for political courage, spoke out in our defence, even though most of them are unsympathetic to the politics of the Weather people. They were defending a very basic freedom.

'The point I would like to make is that people are unaware of how sensitive the power structure is to the potential force of film. There is a novel by E. L. Doctorow called *The Book of Daniel* which is based on the Rosenberg case. A script was written from the book and it dealt not only with the Rosenbergs but also with the 1950s. Because the script alludes to the FBI frame-up in the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the film was never made, and may never be made. The industry is very sensitive to the subject-matter of films. Producers are primarily governed by commercial self-interest. So there exists a political system of censorship and an internal system of artistic repression.

'In the making of *Medium Cool*, the FBI came to me and to Gulf and Western Corporation with the accusation that I had intentionally caused riots in the streets of Chicago for the purposes of my film. It was necessary for me to sign affidavits saying that nothing that I photographed in Chicago, in relation to the riots, was staged by me. Of course, the government does not have to support its accusations. All the government has to say is "We are in receipt of information that Haskell Wexler, in the streets of

Chicago, was inciting riots for his own selfish purposes." What actually delayed the release of the film in 1969 was the fear of the attorneys for Gulf and Western Corporation that, after seeing the film, people would go out into the streets and perpetrate illegal acts. And if that did happen, the officials of the Corporation could then be subject to court action.

'It is naïve to think that film-makers cannot create powerful reality images. I feel confident enough to defy anyone, after they have seen *Medium Cool*, to discriminate between an actual happening and a rehearsed scene. What is ironic is that *Medium Cool* was written before the riots took place in Chicago. Its registry date can be checked at the Writers' Guild. In this case, historical event was preceded by a feature film which forecast that event.

'I find people's reactions to "real" death and "movie" death fascinating. For example, in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*, perhaps twenty people are dramatically killed. But there is one scene in which the throat of a pig is cut. I have seen the film several times, and each time that scene appears, the audience gasps. They know that they are seeing an animal die. They know that, unlike the actors, when the director says "Cut", the pig will not get up and walk away.'

I vividly recall watching the news coverage of the riots in Detroit, in Newark and in Harlem during the summer of 1967. The spectacle on the television screen was both terrifying and fascinating. The cameramen and the reporters were highly visible in the streets of these embattled cities. Unlike filmed 'stories' of social unrest, these scripts had not been completed. The only certainty the viewer had was that, at regular intervals, the 'news special' would be interrupted by an 'important message from the sponsor'. I, myself, had conflicting feelings about the images that were being projected across the television screen. I was aware of the illusory spatial distance between myself and the panicked men and women and children running through the streets. I gauged the dimensions of the screen and was reassured that it would contain the violence. And yet I wanted that television tube to explode, and the splintered glass to fall amongst the rubble of broken shop windows. The news coverage ended along with the frenzied hopes of people in the streets of Detroit, of Newark and of Harlem.

In Antonioni's *The Passenger*, there is an execution scene. Only those familiar with cinematic technique discern the textual differences between the newsreel footage of the execution of the African rebel and the film story. Wexler also incorporated documentary footage within his feature film. A question that disturbs me is whether an audience has the critical ability to discriminate between fact and fiction. Perhaps the information that is conveyed to us through the news media and our responses to the format which contains that information engage us in the same manner as a film feature or a television series. After all, are we not 'entertained', perversely perhaps, by a dramatic news story, a photograph, an on-the-spot TV news event? What has allowed us, up to now, to differentiate between reality and fiction has been the

context in which the images appear and our own desire to make the distinction.

'What we are talking about is theatre,' Wexler comments. 'Theatre doesn't only happen on a stage or on celluloid, it happens out in the streets. And all kinds of people are now aware of what will play and what won't play. Politicians, for example, have their scenario writers and their make-up men. If they are clever, they understand the importance of timing. This awareness of the utilitarian value of theatre is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the public must become more conscious of it. They must be able to recognise it. We are a consumer society that traffics in images.

'Images that are charged with emotion and sensationalism can be politically very powerful: a photograph of a Vietnamese child burned by napalm or of a picket line in South Boston. People are moved by their emotions and not by a list of facts or a sum of figures, even if those figures are totals of the number of civilian deaths in Vietnam. When people say, "I have decided after careful thought to do the following . . .", what they are really saying is, "I will act on the basis of what I know and what I feel." Film operates on people in the same way.

'Film, because it is a reflection of society, its values and its attitudes, has always had an impact upon the audience. An honest film functions as a catalyst. But for the reaction to be effective, there have to be workable forms within the social structure. Often, there is a time-lag or a problem of geographical distance. And the institutions resist critical pressure. So we put our concern, our energy into a grab-bag and we wait until conditions change. But we usually wait too long and then we forget.'

In August 1963, Wexler filmed *The Bus*, a behavioural study of freedom marchers travelling by bus from San Francisco to Washington D.C. I saw the film for the first time twelve years later. It has become a historical document. The racial riots of the late 1960s have cat-called the innocent rhetoric of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King's 'dream' was murdered by an assassin's bullet. Changing attitudes within the black community today have resulted in white liberals licking their wounds by the roadside—alone.

What is interesting is the dynamic interplay between viewer and image. This is the inevitable consequence of the passage of time. It is said that 'images speak'. The face of an elderly black man photographed by Wexler in 1963 has been appropriated by the popular imagination, now twelve years older. The man's words, which were then a living text, appear now on a written page, vulnerable to fictionalisation: 'In 1919, after WWI ended, I came to Washington D.C. and worked as a packer. I wasn't there very long because, that same day, there was a race riot. I left immediately. I didn't know where I was going. With just the clothes on my back, I jumped a freight train that was going west. . . I decided to go on this march because my conscience said that I had not done enough to promote better race relations. This time I won't be afraid. There are 100,000 people marching with me.'

Wexler's camera offers this man's face to be read by us. We imagine a history of pain,

humiliation and hunger. We see strength, dignity and courage. This particular man's face becomes a symbol of the Black Man. His words tell us stories of man's injustice toward man. The 'folk-tale' arouses strong feelings in us. His pain is our luxury.

"The people on the bus were at first suspicious of us. I had not been politically active for a number of years, and they were also aware of the manipulative power of the filming. I respected that. But they responded to the way we listened to them: we really tried to find out what had brought them together, who they were. By the end of the trip, we had become good friends. When the film was completed, we arranged a screening for them and they seemed to like our work very much.

"I worked with a guy named Conrad Benson. He edited the film. If it weren't for him, the film would never have been completed. I had become too involved with the people and I felt my obligation so

strongly that I lost all editorial judgment. Conrad, for example, by juxtaposing conversations that had perhaps occurred days apart, was able to make a meaningful synthetic statement. It was not literally accurate, but because his perceptions were sensitive, it became honest.

"I don't believe there is a given "reality". All that we have are people's perceptions of what is. When you proceed to make a documentary, you should be as aware as possible of the historical baggage that you, as an individual, carry. I could also use the phrase, an awareness of your personal psychology. The more aware you are of what you bring to a subject, the more chance exists that what you take from that subject has universal validity. I purposely avoided the word "truth".

It was the truth that took Wexler to Santiago, Chile in 1971 where he filmed *Brazil: A Report on Torture*. A group of Brazilian

political prisoners had been released by the government and flown to Chile. Wexler's film was used as evidence in the United Nations investigation on torture.

"I realised that this was an opportunity to present documented evidence that brutal torture was perpetrated on people who opposed the Brazilian regime. When a woman is seen standing in front of the camera and recounts what has happened to her, to her husband, to her children, then besides the facts, there will also be the emotional impact of her statements. And this might influence the Congress' vote on military aid to Brazil.

"A Swiss ambassador was kidnapped in Brazil. In exchange for him, the Brazilian government released seventy political prisoners who had been selected by the underground. These people chose to flee to Allende's Chile. I was in Chile at the time to film an interview with Salvador Allende. Sol Landau and I decided to meet these people who were compounded in Santiago. Allende would not cooperate with us in establishing contact because he was wary of unsettling Chile's relations with Brazil. We had some difficulty with the Brazilians as well. They were in terrible physical and psychological condition. But after a number of meetings, they consented to the interviews.

"We were interviewing true revolutionaries. We were recording the words of people who died for those words and for their guerrilla acts: "The only democratic thing in Brazil is torture because it is applied to everybody." . . . "They made crocodiles walk over our bodies." . . . "There were two torturers, we recognised them, again and again, who carried their instruments in briefcases. Before each torture session, they would put a cloth on a table and display the equipment. It resembled an exhibition or a party. There was a doctor present, not for humanitarian reasons, but to prevent them from going too far." . . . "I withstood torture out of hatred. Hatred prevented me from betraying my compañeros. Our ideological convictions reinforced us . . ."

"Most of those people have since been killed. I had a Chilean assistant cameraman who was captured by the Junta after Allende was murdered. He has been tortured. I have tried to get word of him through the Red Cross and through senators, but I have heard nothing. I wanted to stage a re-enactment of the *pau de arara* torture, which is the suspension of the victim's body. In this position, other tortures are then committed. The Brazilians refused to "play" the part of the victim. So I asked my assistant. When you see the film, you will see him playing a victim. Here lies the terrible irony. He has been brutally tortured by the Junta.

"I chose to do the re-enactments for propagandist reasons. I wanted their words to be as graphic as possible. I wanted people to see the *pau de arara*, which means the "perch of a bird".

The victim became the torturer in Wexler's dramatic re-enactment. The 'victim' becomes a victim as a consequence of his involvement with the film-making. Pain, psychological and physical, is contained within the nouns and the verb tenses. For Wexler, words were not strong

enough. The people's faces were not expressive enough. He needed artifice to come closer to reality.

'That evaluation is correct,' he says. 'I mean that a re-enactment taking on elements more real than the actual statements is an accurate description. I did not feel uncomfortable with my decision. I wanted to present to the world information in the most dramatic way possible, given the film resources at my disposal at the time. I feel guilty about only one thing—I did not like having the Brazilians demonstrating the torture techniques. They were visibly upset by the experience. Some of them concealed their feelings by laughing, and saying, "Imagine me, a torturer!"'

Social psychologists have a term—behavioural engineering—which refers to the manipulation of behaviour in environments where the authority figure supports a defined role playing. Recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in exploring the exchangeability of roles. Their cues have come from history. What seems to fascinate them is determining the thresholds of pain. How far can a human being be pushed before he rebels? How much electric shock is required to break down a man or woman's ethical judgment? In what circumstances will a victim become an oppressor?

As I watched Wexler's film, these questions were dramatically raised. The men and women who stared through the camera into my eyes forced me to consider other questions as well. Would I have been able to endure the torture to which these people had been subjected? Would I have exchanged my humanity for my life? Was I a potential torturer? The context in which I posed these questions—the unthreatening comfort of the screening room—did not mock them. Rather, it revealed how well our society has managed to contain the dynamics of violence and heroism. They are terms which have been de-realised. 'Responsible' men and women do not include them within the lexicon of their daily lives. We do not recognise their markings in the ordinary gestures of our experiences. But we see them played out in newsprint and on the screen. How inconceivable it is that a forty-year-old woman, a mother of children, Sarah Jane Moore, could, for political reasons, attempt to assassinate President Ford. The only explanation, intimated by officials, is that she is psychologically unstable. Perhaps she is. However, what the popular imagination in this country finds difficult to entertain is that an individual or groups of individuals can either perpetrate violent acts or be the victims of violent acts because of their political beliefs.

Wexler's simulation of the *pau de arara* was gratuitous. The words and the faces of the Brazilian revolutionaries were powerful. Their experiences need not have been reduced to play-acting in order to be affecting.

In 1974, a social psychologist, Stanley Milgram, published a highly controversial book called *Obedience to Authority*. His research concerned the above questions. He wanted to see how much electric voltage one individual would administer to another. It was a simulated experiment. He enlisted volunteers. In a laboratory, a professional

played the part of the 'victim'; the volunteer played the part of the 'oppressor'. Milgram was present as the authority figure.

'I know Milgram's work,' Wexler says. 'I've been in correspondence with him. By placing the "oppressor" in a particular environment, he detached him from the consequences of his actions. I think that Milgram's work has to do with the killers of the modern world. It explains how a military bomber who flew at 75,000 feet above a Vietnamese village could drop tons of napalm. The bomber never saw human beings. He had a complex technical job which involved radar and computers and release factors, and not value judgment.'

During April 1974, Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden and Haskell Wexler received permission from the North Vietnamese government to visit Hanoi. Under the auspices of the 'Indo-Chinese Peace Campaign', *Introduction to the Enemy* was completed in September of the same year. Although he was assisted by a North Vietnamese director, the crew consisted of one man—Haskell Wexler. I viewed the film in October 1975. It was screened for me by the two editors, Christine Burrill and Bill Yahraus.

The film is essentially a travelogue of Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden's visit. Wexler's hand-held camera travels the road from Hanoi to Quang Tri province capturing the beauty of the countryside which defies its own devastation. We are told by a peasant that they have begun planting in the bomb craters. The camera unexpectedly

watches a young farmer being brought into the surgery of a provincial hospital. A land mine had exploded in his field. Moments later, his body is brought out, covered by a sheet. In a close-up shot, a very old man is asked if he can remember a time when there was no war. He looks into the camera, smiles and says, 'What did you say? Peace? No, I really can't remember.'

The war has ended and *Introduction to the Enemy* has become a historical document. There are questions about the North Vietnamese people whose answers might be found in this film. The images are there for interpretation, but the probing never goes beyond the surface. The information is prescribed by the interviewers, Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden. The victory of the North Vietnamese people only makes us more eager to understand them. How do men and women endure the conditions of prolonged warfare against their own people? Why did these people choose to fight for a social vision that they might not have lived to see? What were the personal histories which led them to become revolutionaries? The answers to these questions were political assumptions which the interviewers took for granted. We see in the thin bodies and worn faces an overwhelming expression of conviction. They embody a human translation of political ideology which is incomprehensible to many people. Wexler photographed them with great sensitivity, but as individuals they remain remote figures in a landscape, merely propagandist pawns.

In June 1975 I visited Camp Pendleton (California), where I interviewed refugees from South Vietnam. Most of them had fled their country out of fear. A small number were opportunists who took advantage of the confusion. Each of them responded initially to my questions by saying, 'I am not political.' Those who were not military officers were generally victims of superstition and rumour. Young girls who had worked for American agencies in Saigon heard stories of forced marriages with wounded and incapacitated Viet Cong. 'The North Vietnamese are the enemy. They are communists. They are not Vietnamese.' A young man described the rape and murder of his wife and child. A Colonel quite openly assessed the desertion of his soldiers to the highest bidder. And repeatedly I heard the astonishing statement, 'I will return to my country with the American soldiers. In the meantime, I will work very hard and build a life for my children.' What was commonly understood about the communist way of life was that they would be denied freedom. Their buying power would be controlled. They would all have to dress alike. 'I know nothing about the political ideology of the North.'

This was the prologue to my *Introduction to the Enemy*. Objectivity strained between image and ideology. What would a South Vietnamese sitting with me in the screening room have thought of the film? Would the abstract enemy become recognisable to him? 'Every Vietnamese knows that this is one country. The partition is artificial, imposed by foreigners.' (North Vietnamese author interviewed by Jane Fonda.) Every statement, in itself, constitutes a fact. And truth is perceived from a selective point of view. ■