

This year's Edinburgh festival cherrypicks the best in art cinema and documentary. Below, Paul Cronin talks to 'Medium Cool' director Haskell Wexler about filming real bloodshed and anti-Vietnam protests. Overleaf, S&S previews the event's highlights

Programming a mid-sized festival like Edinburgh is a necessarily delicate balancing act. Edinburgh has rightly developed a reputation for showcasing the best in challenging auteur-driven art cinema. This year is no exception, with screenings of new movies from such acclaimed film-makers as Catherine Breillat, Jafar Panahi, Jan Svankmajer and Todd Solondz and the appearance of a new strand 'Persistence of Vision' dedicated to showing shorter experimental work

including a 13-minute Godard film. But as well as cherrypicking arthouse films from this year's Cannes and other major festivals, departing director Lizzie Francke has also managed to inject into the event an invigorating dose of glamour. The big talking point is bound to be the attendance of Sean Penn, in town to present his new film 'The Pledge'. Admittedly Penn's third film as director is a solemn affair, but there are also plenty of unabashed crowd-pleasers, notably Jean-Pierre

Jeunet's charming 'Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain', Terry Zwigoff's deadpan delight 'Ghost World' and perennial favourites the Coen brothers' 'The Man Who Wasn't There'. Originally dedicated to documentary films, Edinburgh retains a strong commitment to non-fiction cinema through its 'Imagining Reality' strand. Chris Hegedus and Jehane Noujaim's 'startup.com', a cautionary tale about the rise and fall of an internet company is worth checking out, as is 'Down from

the Mountain', a concert film featuring the musicians who contributed to the soundtrack of 'O Brother Where Art Thou?'. And the ethics of documentary film-making come under the spotlight in Haskell Wexler's 1969 'Medium Cool', which weaves such real-life events as the assassination of Robert Kennedy and the anti-Vietnam riots in Chicago into its tale of a disillusioned television-news cameraman.

The festival runs until 26 August. Telephone 0131 473 2001 for details

Mid-summer mavericks

Teargas and truncheons: Haskell Wexler, opposite, filmed his actress Verna Bloom walking among protestors during a violent anti-Vietnam demonstration for 'Medium Cool', below



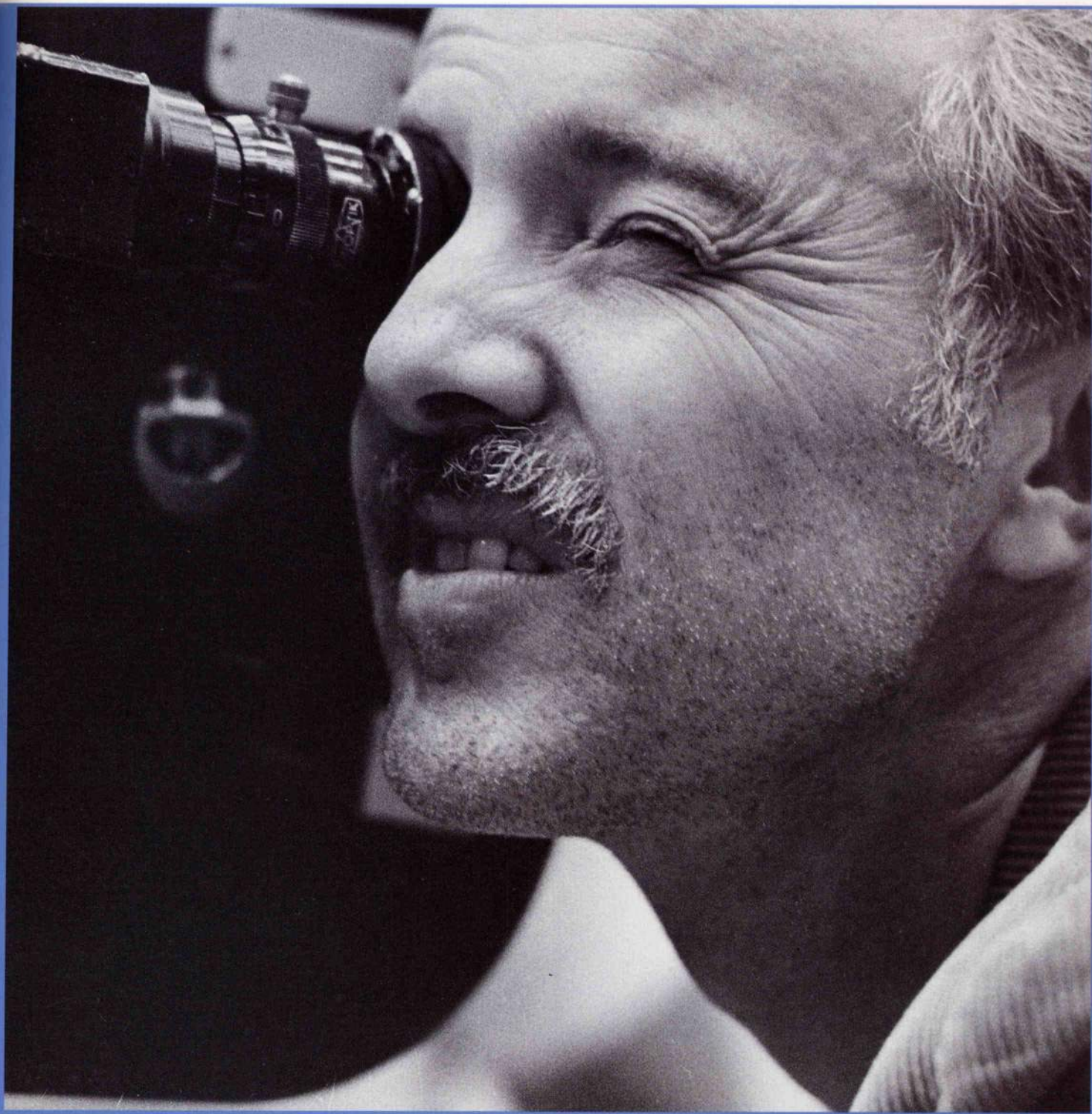
Medium Cool

Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*, shot in 1968 and released the following year, is a complex film with a simple story. Its chief protagonist is John Cassellis (Robert Forster), a punchy and insensitive Chicago television-news cameraman who's seemingly oblivious to many of the responsibilities his profession entails. He calls an ambulance for an injured crash victim only after he's finished photographing her, but when he discovers his boss has been showing the station's outtakes to the FBI, he protests in disgust and is promptly fired. In the meantime Cassellis befriends Harold, a pigeon-obsessed young boy newly arrived in the city from Appalachian West Virginia. Eventually Cassellis falls for the

boy's mother Eileen (Verna Bloom), whose husband has died in Vietnam. When Harold disappears one evening, the film's memorable climax has Eileen scrambling through the crowds of protesters and police at Chicago's Democratic National Convention as she searches for her lost son.

Medium Cool's plot might seem contrived, but the film was ground-breaking in its blend of documentary and fictive narrative techniques. If it seems more confusing for today's cinema-goers than it did 32 years ago, it's primarily because it would be inconceivable now that a fiction director would ask his or her actors to wade into real riots surrounded by truncheon-waving police just to get the shots s/he wanted. Though best known today for his Oscar-winning cinematography on such Hollywood films as *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

Wolf (1966), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Bound for Glory* (1976) and *Coming Home* (1978), the septuagenarian Wexler is also one of America's finest unsung documentarists and since the early 60s his politically impassioned shorts have chronicled key episodes in US politics. *The Bus* was filmed at the 1963 march on Washington where Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech; 10 years later in Vietnam Wexler shot *Vietnam Journey: Introduction to the Enemy* with Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden; in 1975 he and Emile de Antonio tracked down some of the Weathermen revolutionaries and made *Underground*, a work subpoenaed by the US government; just last year his cinematography on *Bus Riders' Union* won international acclaim. But what Wexler claimed he was after in 1968 was to "find some wedding between features and *cinéma vérité*. I have very strong opin-



ions about us and the world, and don't know how in hell to put them all in one basket."

By late 1967 Wexler had already started writing a feature-length script based on Jack Couffer's novel *The Concrete Wilderness*. "Paramount offered me Couffer's book, a property they'd had for a while," Wexler said earlier this year. "At the time I felt certain it wasn't the sort of film I could make in good conscience with all these momentous events going on in that vital election year when there was still some hope there might emerge within the Democratic party a viable candidate who would come out against President Johnson's waging of the war in Vietnam. As I was active in the anti-war movement I knew that the Democratic National Convention, due to be held in Chicago in August 1968, was to be the focal point for our protests, so I junked most of the book's plot

and wrote a script about a cameraman and his experiences in the city that summer. I knew I wanted to film in the uptown community of Chicago where the Appalachian immigrants lived, so I wrote a story about how he falls for a young Vietnam widow."

Much of the vitality of Wexler's state-of-the-nation portrait stems from his autobiographical identification with his lead character, who demonstrates how difficult it is to work within a system (and maybe a profession) that co-opts even the highest-minded of individuals. "When I was in Vietnam with Jane Fonda," Wexler recalls, "I was filming a farmer walking through a field when all of a sudden he stepped on a landmine. Two Vietnamese guys ran out there to help him and I ran after them to shoot the scene of them bringing this guy in, his legs all bloody. The whole time

I had two overwhelming feelings. One was 'I got a great shot!', the other was to put down my camera and help the farmer. In the end I carried on filming even though I couldn't see what I was shooting because I was crying so hard. I've thought about that moment many times, about the question of when to stop observing and get involved."

As it happened 1968 soon turned into America's *annus horribilis*. In January the Tet Offensive was launched and North Vietnamese forces overran major US military and diplomatic bases. In March President Johnson – having failed to grasp the groundswell of anti-war sentiment – announced he wouldn't run as a candidate in the election later that year. In April black civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr was murdered in Memphis, sparking riots in US cities including Washington and New York. Two months later ►

◀ leading anti-war Democrat Robert Kennedy was also assassinated.

Wexler decided to weave these events into his fictional tale. "Kennedy was killed a couple of weeks before we were due to start shooting, so I got a small crew together along with my two principal actors and we all went to the funeral in Washington DC to shoot scenes I thought would have a use in the final film. We also went to watch the Illinois National Guard which was preparing for the expected troubles in Chicago later that summer and got some great footage of them in training. The troops were split into two teams and groups from each unit would dress up as hippies and protesters while the rest of the soldiers would be instructed in how to deal with these so-called deviants."

Wexler's first-draft screenplay contained imag-

ined scenes of protests at the convention, which hadn't yet taken place. "We all knew for months beforehand that there would be clashes," he says. "What surprised us was their extent. For my film I'd planned to hire extras and dress them up as Chicago policemen, but in the end Mayor Richard Daley provided us with all the extras we needed." Though Bloom made her way through the battered and bloodied crowds in the parks around the convention hall without mishap, Wexler and his crew were tear-gassed. As the canister comes flying towards the camera, a voice on the soundtrack exclaims: "Look out Haskell, it's real!"

"I was out of action for a day and a half. But I have to admit that the line 'Look out Haskell, it's real!' was put in afterwards," says Wexler. "It's actually my son speaking the line, recorded months later. But if someone had read my mind

that's what they would have heard." It's a piece of trickery that crystallises the dialectic between fact and fiction that permeates the film's structure, as Paul Golding, *Medium Cool's* editor, has pointed out: "The words made an important point about the razor's edge of what's real and what's not real, what's fiction and what's fact, that the film sits on. Of course we used them!"

Though *Medium Cool* is very much of its era, it's still less dated than such contemporary studio productions as *Midnight Cowboy* or *Zabriskie Point*. A skillful synthesis of documentary and fiction and perhaps the most coherent political feature ever released by a Hollywood studio, it's also suffused with the techniques pioneered by John Cassavetes (who was originally slated to play the leading role) and Jean-Luc Godard (the final shot is a direct homage to the surprise ending of *Le*

Mépris, 1963). Yet in 1969 Paramount sat on the finished film for months, wondering whether they could distribute it. "They put all kinds of obstacles in its path," says Wexler. "The executives told me I had to have releases from all the people in the park sequences, then said that if people saw this film and then committed some violent act the officers of Paramount could be personally liable. They also objected to the language and the nudity, things which ultimately meant the film received an 'X' rating. What no one had the nerve to say was that it was a political 'X'."

The film has been tremendously influential. Writer-director John Sayles (for whom Wexler shot *Matewan*, 1987, and *Limbo*, 1999) says: "Though my films are very planned and written, during the shooting I attempt to make them as 'found' as possible, always reminding the actors

they don't know what's going to happen next. That's something the documentary style of *Medium Cool* set me on a path to." And director Andrew Davis (second-unit cameraman on *Medium Cool*) attests: "My whole style of lighting and improvisation is based on my work with Haskell on *Medium Cool*. The direct connection to this is the St Patrick's Day parade scene in *The Fugitive* where I just threw Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones out there with a couple of cameras."

Wexler is pleased that people all over the world still tell him how much the film meant to them. But for him what matters most are the ethical issues it raises. "Look at the first scene with Cassel-lis filming the injured woman before he even calls the emergency services," he says. "Artists and craftsmen have to ask of themselves how much of their life is just doing the job, keeping in focus and

keeping the scene lit well, and how much of being an artist involves a responsibility to your own ethical beliefs. I believe that because of our ability to influence others we do have a responsibility beyond just doing our job, and because I made *Medium Cool* it doesn't absolve me of the guilt I'm accusing us all of, the guilt of not recognising individual responsibility for social ills. With this film I'm throwing that challenge back at the audience. I know that's a lot of baggage to expect from a movie that basically stole its whole structure from Jean-Luc Godard, but these ideas were very much a part of my life back then, and still are."

A screening of a digitally remastered print of 'Medium Cool' plus Paul Cronin's documentary "'Look out Haskell, it's real!': The Making of Medium Cool' followed by an on-stage interview with Haskell Wexler are programmed for 19 August