

MEDIUM COOL



The mix of fiction and reality in Haskell Wexler's angry political film raises tough questions for the media and its place in society

By Paul Cronin

By the closing years of the 1960s, new film technologies had allowed the camera to be hand-held, a liberation quickly embraced, for different purposes, by groups across the political spectrum. Haskell Wexler's unique film from 1969 is an intriguing hybrid of fiction and reality, featuring professional actors carefully integrated into moments of authentic protest and activism. But the film also turns our attention to the responsibilities of those behind the camera.

The primary turning point in Wexler's story arrives when John (Robert Forster), a Chicago television news cameraman, discovers that his bosses have been giving the police and FBI footage he has filmed of street protests. The powers-that-be are, he presumes, using his images to identify troublemakers. By 1968, those protesting had also cottoned on, all too aware that the fastest way to announce a cause was to stand in front of a camera. Images and messages transmitted by the mass media could, within seconds, open the eyes of millions (see the recent *Selma*, which makes clear how important the broadcasting of the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery was in galvanising support for the Civil Rights Movement).

Wexler's work as a cameraman on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) might have furnished him with an enviable reputation as a Hollywood

aesthete, but when it came to his directorial debut *Medium Cool* – over which he exercised full control – his time spent as an activist and political documentarian fuelled a need also to express ideological tendencies. The best way to dramatise his feelings about American society? Wexler fashioned his lead character after himself: an image-maker struggling to know which path to take in an era when – as Marshall McLuhan suggested – “the medium is the message”. McLuhan's reading of modernity and his articulations about the spread of information – thanks, in part, to television and the modern news media – helped transform *Medium Cool* into an experiment in self-reflexivity. Wexler's camera is constantly being pulled into the action, with numerous instances in the film of the fourth wall being broken, including that grand line of dialogue, “Look out Haskell, it's real!” heard at a particularly thrilling moment, as teargas drifts toward the lens. The cameraman's involvement in the fact and fiction of *Medium Cool* is a phenomenon that plays out most provocatively in the film's closing seconds.

A tree-lined road. John and his friend Eileen (Verna Bloom) are driving along, listening to the radio as it broadcasts details of a violent mêlée at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, 1968. The car careers out of control and crashes. Another car drives past, the accident fascinating to its voyeuristic occupants, who stare and then drive off, but not before a boy in

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the back seat takes a photograph of the death and destruction. We see the crash from a distance, smoke pluming from the bonnet, before the camera pans slowly right and a platform appears, constructed upon a high scaffold, which holds a camera mounted on a tripod. One camera films another as the protesters' chant of “The Whole World is Watching” intones on the soundtrack. Behind the tripod is a middle-aged moustachioed gentleman, one eye obscured, looking through the lens of a 35mm camera. This is Wexler, finally revealing himself, having taunted us with so many close calls throughout the previous 109 minutes.

The ending of *Medium Cool* (a kind of homage to Godard's *Le Mépris*) mirrors the opening minute, in which John films the victim of a car crash before calling the emergency services. Two car crashes, two acts of callousness, and the film is brought full circle with the point well made: filmmakers – documentarians and otherwise – would do well to consider the wider implications of their work. “I try to use the cameraman as symbolic of a kind of professional,” explained Wexler in a 1970 BBC interview. “It could be a scientist working on some minute problem, the end result of which would be for bacterial warfare, but whose mind is totally on the microscope and the technical problem afoot. Specialisation is a refuge, a way to avoid one's social responsibility, and a way to avoid the consequence of one's work. I imagine there are probably some very active German plumbers that ran gas into the chambers that killed the Jews. They had all the same rationalisations as our scientists have. All those complications are involved in being a professional and just doing your job.” A succinct distillation of this endlessly fascinating piece of quasi-Hollywood cinema. **S**