

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



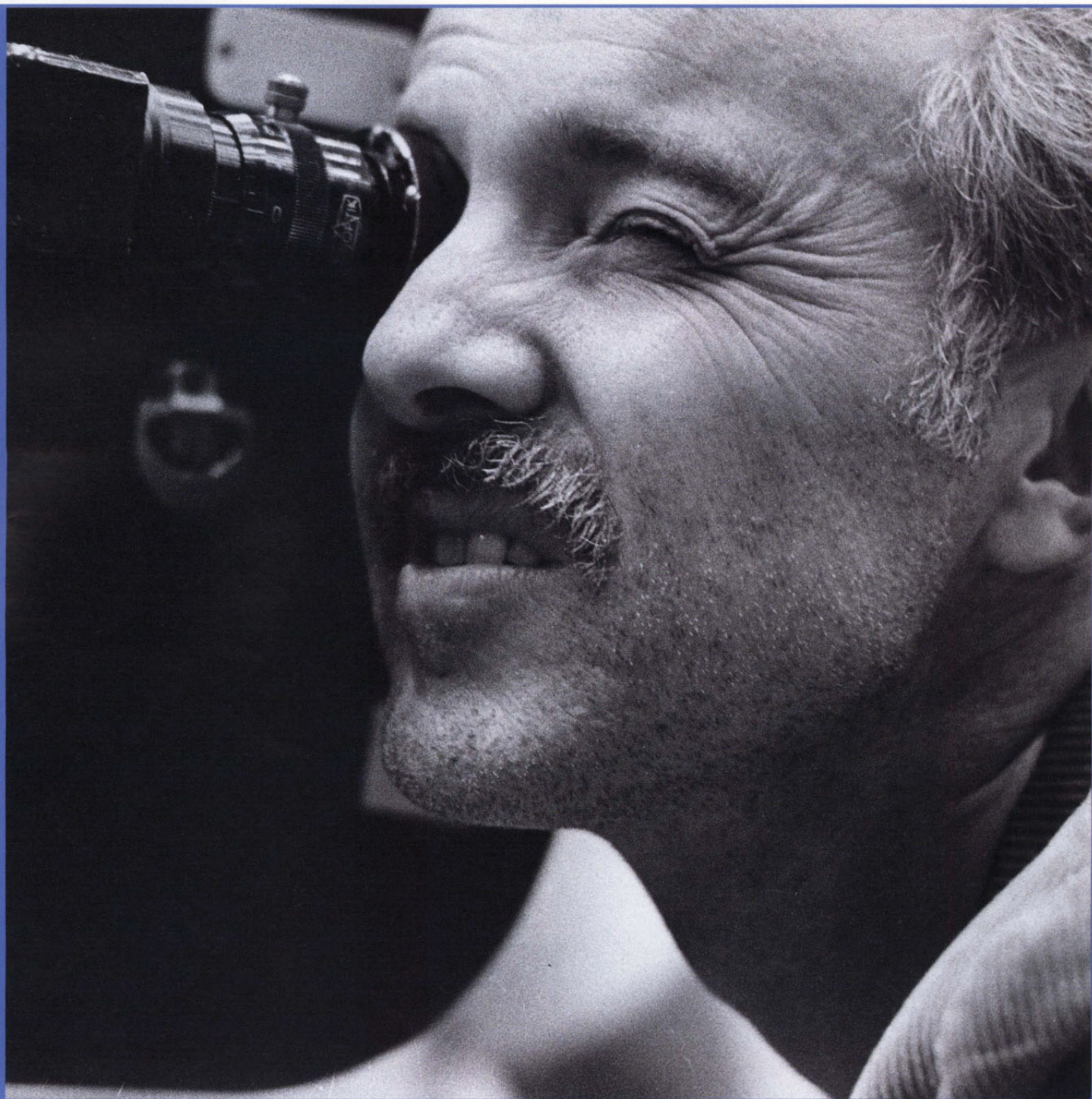
Medium Cool

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*

Woolf (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 ►

A ma soeur!

Two highly libidinous French films enlivened last winter's Berlin Film Festival. While Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* took home the grand prize, Catherine Breillat's more disturbing and more finely wrought *A ma soeur!* generated the most passionate discussion, particularly among women. The bad-girl intellectual of French cinema, Breillat has returned to the subject that inspired her early films *Une Vraie Jeune Fille* and *36 Fillette*: adolescent female sexuality. But *A ma soeur!* is a far more complicated treatment of girlhood, involving, as the title suggests, not a single heroine, but a pair – two sisters symbiotically tied together as much by anger as by love. For Breillat, sisterhood is indeed powerful, although not in any way that would be considered politically correct.

The sisters, 15-year-old Elena (Roxane Mesquida) and 12-year-old Anais (Anais Reboux), are on vacation with their parents. Hungry for romance, the nubile Elena is not allowed out of the house unless she's accompanied by her little sister. The parents presume that Anais' presence will have an inhibiting effect on Elena but instead Anais becomes the witness to Elena's defloration. While Elena, with her movie-star beauty, quickly learns to take her socially approved place as an object of desire, Anais finds power in the more suspect position of the voyeur. Believing that she is unlovable, especially in comparison with Elena, Anais defiantly (and

compulsively) over-eats, using food to choke back the rage and the hunger for affection and attention that threaten to erupt from deep within her. Cocooning herself in fat, Anais secretly fantasises a love life to rival her sister's. Reboux's performance is extraordinary, but it's also discomforting in a way that's external to the narrative. Given the tyranny of the super-model in young women's imagination, one can't help but worry about how Reboux (who was the same impressionable age as her character when the film was shot) will react when she sees herself on the screen.

The first two-thirds of the film are filled with a brilliantly detailed depiction of nuclear family life. Blatantly uncomfortable at being cooped up with his wife and daughters, the father (played by director Romain Goupil) makes a quick exit, returning to Paris on business. The mother (Arsinée Khanjian) becomes increasingly anxious as Elena's blooming sexuality raises the memory of her own adolescent traumas and as she realises her own beauty has been eclipsed by her daughter's. But the centrepiece of the film is the 20-minute bedroom scene in which Elena is seduced by a quick-tongued law student as Anais watches from the adjacent bed. The unsparing eye of Breillat's camera is trained on Elena as she's torn between resistance and compliance, fear and desire, her conflicting emotions revealed in every twist and turn of her body. Breillat 'uses' Anais' reactions to cut away from Elena and her boyfriend whenever the sex threatens to become hardcore. It's an

ugly, painful business in every way.

Elena's transgression cuts short the vacation. Chain-smoking as she grips the steering wheel, Mom drives her daughters back to Paris so that Dad can take care of the situation. Day changes to night as monster trucks loom and rumble by. It's a terrifying ride and transports the film into another register. Beginning as a comedy of manners, *A ma soeur!* ends as a baroque horror film. Whether the finale is read as reality or fantasy is almost irrelevant. *A ma soeur!* is a projection of the killer within. **Amy Taubin**

Ghost World

Those twin American folk arts of jazz music and the comic book loom large in the work of Terry Zwigoff. His last picture, 1994's *Crumb*, was a peerless documentary study of jazz-loving cartoonist Robert Crumb, spotlighting his provocative work and the dysfunctional family that spawned it. For *Ghost World* Zwigoff has turned to the cult graphic novel of Daniel Clowes, about a rebellious teen who falls in with an oddball record collector.

It's a shrewd move. *Ghost World* is a bracing portrait of adolescence under siege, a bubblegum teen movie that conspires to be at once slyly exaggerated and painfully truthful. Its off-centre antics play out in an American everytown of strip malls and lower-middle-class 'burbs. Its heroines are Enid (Thora Birch) and Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson), "a little Jewish girl and her Aryan friend", both idling in a post-high-school limbo as they take bored pot-shots at the kooks and losers who surround them. Of the pair, Rebecca seems more plugged into society's demands, accepting a McJob behind a coffee-shop till and hunting out an apartment of her own. Enid, by contrast, is still clinging to her artistic ideals. Days are passed doodling illustrations in her comic-book diary, nights playing match-maker for Seymour (Steve Buscemi), a twitchy fortysomething jazz aficionado given to placing lonely-hearts ads. "I can't stand the idea of a world where a guy like you can't get a date," she tells him.

In converting *Ghost World* to the screen, a more traditional narrative arc has been imposed on the original's tart



anecdotal observations (the longer the film goes on, the more conventional it becomes). Elsewhere, though, Zwigoff strives to stay true to his source material. Aping the panels of a comic book, *Ghost World* unfolds in formally structured two-shots and close-ups, its dialogue a series of one-line zingers. The protagonists (Birch in black bob and geek-chic spectacles; Johansson frowning below a severe hairband) are grunge-youth archetypes made flesh.

Ghost World marks Zwigoff's first foray into the deeper waters of the fiction feature. Happily this spry, confident debut hasn't entirely exorcised the ghosts of his previous work. The character of Seymour looks a Crumb surrogate if ever there was one. Later, a glance at the end credits informs us that Enid's diary illustrations were penned by Sophie Crumb, Robert's daughter. **Xan Brooks**

This Filthy Earth

This Filthy Earth is the much anticipated second feature from Andrew Köting, who five years ago at Edinburgh won Channel 4's Best New Director award with *Gallivant*. *Gallivant*, an unforgettably idiosyncratic documentary road movie, distilled a personal vision out of a trip around the British coastline, celebrating eccentric, often isolated characters and societies. *This Filthy Earth*, set in just such a hermetic community, revives the first film's preoccupations with animism and the mystical bond between people and the land, but foregrounds the sheer



◀ 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*



grimness of impoverished rural life. Two sisters – the strong-willed and independent Francine (Rebecca Palmer) and the more hearty and carnal Kath (Demelza Randall) – live with Kath's three-year-old daughter Etta on a run-down farm left them by their parents. Etta's father is neighbouring farmer Buto (Shane Attwooll) – hardworking, fleshy, weatherbeaten and bullish (a far from abstract adjective in this context) – who despite having had little to do with Kath since Etta's birth proposes to her when he realises she will inherit her land when she reaches 21.

There seem to be three types of people in this sparse community – those battling with the land for a living, those who have given up, and the outcasts. The tolerated outsiders include Buto's alcoholic brother – known as Jesus Christ for his straggly beard and his penchant for collapsing next to the dry-stone walls Buto painstakingly builds in a vomit-encrusted parody of the crucifixion – and their father (Dudley Sutton), a toothless, puss-filled monument to the impotent rage resulting from reaching the end of a lifetime of toil only to be abandoned by his sons. The real outcasts, though – and the focus of the film's tragedy – are vagabond siblings Joey and Megan, the former blind and the latter scraping a living by begging for them both and doing casual labouring work, and Lek, a mysterious, well-meaning unspecified Eastern European (he speaks a Russian-sounding nonsense language Kötting calls gramlot) with a benign smile and an old tractor, who begins to attract Kath

and who is savagely beaten as a scapegoat when the land and the weather turn against them.

The film's conception of peasant life is based on Kötting's reading of Zola's *La Terre* and John Berger's *Pig Earth* and his stays at his family's house in the French Pyrenees. True to its inspirations, *This Filthy Earth* seems to fill the cinema with a smell of damp earth, sweat, piss and manure and a sense of growing malice. Berger's stories begin with the detailed description of the slaughter of a pig; Kötting opens his film with Francine helping her bull copulate with a neighbour's cow and getting her hands covered in semen in the process. And Buto's lust for the sisters' land and the village men's assumption that his marriage to Kath would also involve sexual access to Francine precisely mirror Zola's 19th-century descriptions of the sexual mores of rural communities.

But Kötting's film, with its startlingly earthy production design, speeded-up camera sequences, use of various film stocks and shock sound effects, is no slavish literary adaptation. Co-written by acclaimed stand-up Sean Lock, it occasionally feels like a 70s German anti-Heimat film (a carnival sequence recalls the travelling circus of Herzog's *Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*) filtered through a healthy tradition of British grotesque – witness Kötting's cameo as the unlucky loser of a head-butt competition in the village pub. As Terry Jones says in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*: "There's some lovely filth over here..." **Richard Falcon**

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

What Time Is it There?/Ni Nei Pien Chi Tien

Tsai Ming-Liang is the odd one out of Taiwan's three best-known directors. While no one could mistake a Hou Hsiao-Hsien film for one made by Edward Yang or vice versa, these two veterans share a magisterial aesthetic of elegant camera moves and a respectfully unintrusive sympathy for their characters – as seen most recently in the UK in Yang's *One and a Two* (Yi Yi, 1999) and Hou's *Flowers of Shanghai* (Haishang Hua, 1998). Tsai Ming-Liang's approach is more intimate and sometimes claustrophobic, using the cramped accommodation of modern Taipei to telling and witty effect. This was demonstrated in his last film, *Hole* (Dong, 1998), in which a porous apartment block in the monsoon rain was the setting for a strange relationship between upstairs-downstairs neighbours – a young man above and a woman below – conducted via a hole in the floor. While there was a touch of almost Beckett-like humour in their ridiculous neighbours-from-hell avoidance of each other, the constant downpour and their miserable plight were alleviated by bizarre musical numbers, performed in full costume, that were unpredictably interjected into the slow-developing relationship.

With *What Time Is it There?* Tsai Ming-Liang reveals a much lighter though still caustic wit. It's a meditation on superstition and fate whose attitude to its subject could be described as respectful mockery. Hsiao-Kang (Kang-Sheng Lee), a young male street watch-seller whose father has just died, is being driven crazy by his mother's increasingly demented attempts to bring her husband back to life. These are often quietly hilarious: the boy has to pee in plastic bags every night because his mother won't let him use the toilet; she makes him eat meals at strange times because she's decided her husband is hungry right then. And there's a brilliant deadpan gag involving a tropical fish which explanation would spoil.

The boy's fantasy of escape takes shape when a young girl, Shiang-Chyi (Shiang-

Chyi Chen), comes to his stall and tells him she's going on a trip to Paris and needs a watch. The only type she likes is the one he's wearing on his wrist. He hasn't any more of that model, but she insists he give it to her, even though he warns her it will bring her bad luck because his father has just died and the mourning period isn't yet over.

Shiang-Chyi arrives in Paris where a series of unfortunate coincidences blights her trip, not least her revelation of her lesbian desires to a new-found friend who offered her a bed for the night but now instantly rejects her. In the meantime Hsiao-Kang has become infatuated with his memory of her and goes round changing every clock he can lay his hands on – even a huge one on the side of a skyscraper – to Paris time so he can imagine what she's up to.

I saw *What Time Is it There?* while standing at the back of a full Cannes screening room – not the best of circumstances to watch a film of such sly revelation. But from the first few mesmerising images it was completely gripping and very amusing. The trademark Tsai Ming-Liang motifs of water and physical discomfort remain to the fore, as do characters who are, as Tony Rayns puts it, "disaffected, disconnected heirs of a society that once set great store by tradition." Yet *What Time Is it There?* is much more of a crowd-pleaser than either *Hole* or Tsai Ming-Liang's epic masterpiece *River* (Helü, 1997). It should prove one of the stand-out successes at Edinburgh. **Nick James**



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