

The Buffalo Film Seminars



HASKELL WEXLER (6 February 1926, Chicago) has shot 48 films and directed 9. He is best known as a cinematographer, for which he won two best cinematography Oscars—*Bound for Glory* 1976 and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* 1966—and was nominated for three others: *Blaze* 1989, *Matewan* 1987, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* 1975. Some of the other films he shot are *From Wharf Rats to the Lords of the Docks* 2004, *Silver City* 2004, *Bus Rider's Union* 1999, *Mulholland Falls* 1996, *The Sixth Sun: Mayan Uprising in Chiapas* 1995, *The Secret of Roan Inish* 1994, *Colors* 1988, *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip* 1982, *No Nukes* 1980, *Coming Home* 1978, *Underground* 1976, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* 1972, *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* 1971, *The Thomas Crown Affair* 1968, *In the Heat of the Night* 1967, *The Loved One* 1965, and *The Savage Eye* 1960. He was uncredited additional photographer on *Blade Runner* 1982 and he shot the industrial and railroad sequences in *Days of Heaven* 1978. He directed *From Wharf Rats to the Lords of the Docks* 2004, *Bus Rider's Union* 1999, *Latino* 1985, *Bus II* 1983, *Underground* 1976, *Introduction to the Enemy* 1974, *Brazil: A Report on Torture* 1971, and *The Bus* 1965.

VERNA FIELDS (21 March 1918, St. Louis—30 November 1982, Encino, California, cancer) edited 16 films including *Jaws* 1975, for which she won a best editing Oscar, *Daisy Miller* 1974, *The Sugarland Express* 1974, *American Graffiti* 1973 (nominated for best editing Oscar), *Paper Moon* 1973, and *What's Up, Doc?* 1972

ROBERT FORSTER (13 July 1941, Rochester, NY) has acted in 88 mostly-forgettable films and numerous television programs. Of late, he is best known for his performance in *Jackie Brown* 1997, for which he received a best supporting actor Oscar nomination. Some of the others: *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* 2003, *Mulholland Dr.* 2001, *American Yakuza* 1993, *Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Silence* 1993, *Satan's Princess* 1990, *Alligator* 1980, *Justine* 1969, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* 1967.

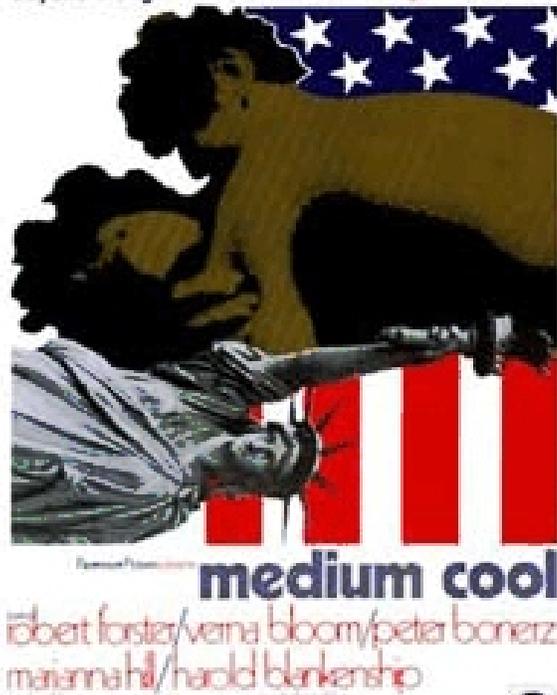
VERNA BLOOM (7 August 1939, Lynn, Mass.) has acted in 21 films and appeared in several television series. Some of the films are *The Last Temptation of Christ* 1988, *Animal House* 1978, *High Plains Drifter* 1973, *The Hired Hand* 1971 and *Children's Games* 1969. She has appeared on "The West Wing," Dr. Quinn, *Medicine Woman*, "The Equalizer," "Cagney & Lacey," "Lou Grant," "Police Story," "Kojak," "Bonanza" and "NYPD."

HAROLD BLANKENSHIP was a Chicago street kid Wexler found with the help of Studs Terkel. He never acted again.

PETER BONERZ (6 August 1938, Portsmouth, NH) acted in 21 theatrical and made-for-tv films (among them *Man on the Moon* 1999 and *Catch-22* 1970, but he has spent most of his career as a television director for such series as "Shacking Up" 2004, *The Stones* 2004, *My Big Fat Greek Life* 2003, "Friends" 1994, "Home Improvement" 1991, "Archie Bunker's Place" 1979, and "The Bob Newhart Show." 1972

November 2, 2004 (IX:12)

beyond the age of innocence...into the age of awareness



MEDIUM COOL(1969) 112 min

Christine Bergstrom...Dede
Harold Blankenship...Harold
Verna Bloom...Eileen
Peter Bonerz...Gus
Peter Boyle...Gun Clinic Manager
Robert Forster...John Cassellis
Charles Geary...Buddy
Marianna Hill...Ruth
Doug Kimball...Newscaster
Robert McAndrew...Pennybaker
Sid McCoy...Frank Baker
William Sickinger...News Director
Karlin
Haskell Wexler...Cameraman on
Scaffold
Beverly Younger...Rich Lady
Marrian Walters...Social worker

Directed and written by Haskell
Wexler

Produced by Tully Friedman,
Jonathan Haze, Haskell Wexler,
Jerrold Wexler
Original Music by Mike Bloomfield

Cinematography by Haskell Wexler

Film Editing by Verna Fields
Mothers of Invention incidental
music
National Film Preservation Board,
USA 2003 National Film Registry

PETER BOYLE (18 October 1935, Philadelphia) has acted in 77 films, among them *Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* 2004, *Monster's Ball* 2001, *Doctor Dolittle* 1998, *While You Were Sleeping* 1995, *The Shadow* 1994, *Malcolm X* 1992, *Conspiracy: The Trial of the Chicago 8* 1987, *Yellowbeard* 1983, *Hammitt* 1982, *Outland* 1981, *Hardcore* 1979, *Tail Gunner Joe* 1977, *Taxi Driver* 1976, *Young Frankenstein* 1974, *Crazy Joe* 1974, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* 1973, *Slither* 1972, *The Candidate* 1972, and *The Virgin President* 1968. He won a bunch of awards for his performances on the tv series "Everybody Loves Raymond."

Steve Leggett, Intro at the National Film Registry presentation, 1998:

A seminal film of 60's independent cinema, *Medium Cool* came into existence as a pet project of renowned cinematographer Haskell Wexler (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Days of Heaven*). Wexler spent \$800,000 in personal funds (much later reimbursed by Paramount) to craft this angry blend of reality and theater, set against the backdrop of the tumultuous 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Interspersing actual footage from these chaotic events (ironically some of the riot footage was later subpoenaed by the government), Wexler used the character of a TV newscamerman to discuss weighty issues of personal/professional ethics, idealism and responsibility. Whose purposes should news footage serve? What is the place and responsibility of an individual in a society marked by out-of-control chaotic turmoil?

The film's title is a not-so-subtle play on Marshall McLuhan's designation of television as "the cool medium." Despite *Medium Cool's* idiosyncratic, forceful pushing of the traditional filmmaking envelope, critical comment was laudatory. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* called *Medium Cool* "a film of tremendous visual impact, a kind of cinematic Guernica," a picture of America in the process of exploding into fragmented bits of hostility, suspicion and violence."

Unfortunately, despite enthusiastic critical reviews, studio indifference to the film and the "X" rating (result of a creatively ecstatic bedroom scene--one that Vincent Canby dryly noted: "should give lust a good name") diminished the number of people who saw this complex, challenging, at times perplexing film, dubbed by Wexler as "a wedding between features and cinéma vérité." Disillusioned by the bitter experience, Wexler for the next several years abandoned commercial filmmaking for experimental forays into radical cinema (*Brazil: A Report on Torture*, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* and others).

Roger Ebert September 21, 1969

...Five years ago, this film would have been considered incomprehensible to the general movie audience. Now it's going into a big first-run house, and you don't hear the Loop exhibitors talking so scornfully about "art films" anymore. So what's going on when an experimental, radical film like "Medium Cool" can get this sort of exposure?

What's happened, I think, is that moviemakers have at last figured out how bright the average moviegoer is. By that I don't mean they're making more "intelligent" pictures. I mean they understand how quickly we can catch onto things.

...Conventional movie plots telegraph themselves because we know all the basic genres and typical characters. Haskell Wexler's "Medium Cool" is one of several new movies that knows these things about the movie audience (others include "The Rain People," "Easy Rider," "Alice's Restaurant," etc.). Of the group, "Medium Cool" is probably the best. That may be because Wexler,

for most of his career, has been a very good cinematographer, and so he's trained to see a movie in terms of its images, not its dialog and story.

In "Medium Cool," Wexler forges back and forth through several levels. There is a fictional story about the TV cameraman, his romance, his job, his girl and her son. There is also documentary footage about the riots during the Democratic convention. There is a series of set-up situations that pretend to be real (women taking marksmanship practice, the TV crew confronting black militants). There are fictional characters in real situations (the girl searching for her son in Grant Park). There are real characters in fictional situations (the real boy, playing a boy, expressing his real interest in pigeons).

The mistake would be to separate the real things from the fictional. They are all significant in exactly the same way. The National Guard troops are no more real than the love scene, or the melodramatic accident that ends the film. All the images have meaning because of the way they are associated with each other.

And "Medium Cool" also does the second thing — sees not the symbols but their function.

Wexler doesn't see the hippie kids in Grant Park as hippie kids. He doesn't see the clothes or the life style, and he doesn't hear the words. He sees their function; they are there, entirely because the National Guard is there, and vice versa.

Both sides have a function only when they confront each other. Without the confrontation, all you'd have would be the kids, scattered all over the country, and the guardsmen, dressed in civilian clothes and spending the week at their regular jobs. So it's not what they are that's important -- it's what they're doing there.

Wexler does the third thing, too. He evokes our memories of the hundreds of other movies we've seen to imply things about his story that he never explains on the screen.

The basic story of the romance (young professional falls in love with war-widow, gradually wins friendship of her hostile son) is certainly not original. If Wexler had spelled it out, it would have been conventional and boring.

Instead, he limits himself to the characteristic and significant aspects of this relationship (the boy likes pigeons, the woman is a teacher, the location is Uptown, the time is the Democratic convention, the woman seems more genuine to the cameraman than the model he's living with). And these are the scenes Wexler shoots. The rest of the romance is implied but never shown; we skip B on our way from A to C.

"Medium Cool" is finally so important, and absorbing because of the way Wexler weaves all these elements together. He has made an almost perfect example of the new movie. Because we are so

aware this is a movie, it seems more relevant and real than the smooth fictional surface of, say, "Midnight Cowboy."

This is even true of the last scene -- that accident that happens for no reason at all. Accidents are always accidents, and they always happen for no reason at all. When we get it, it occurs to us that it's the first movie accident we've ever seen that we weren't expecting for at least five minutes.

Lucia Bozzola, *All Movie Guide*

"I love to shoot film" is the sanguine motto of TV lensman John Cassellis (Robert Forster) in Haskell Wexler's 1969 *Medium Cool*, a semi-documentary investigation of image-making and politics. With his soundman Gus (Peter Bonerz), John films such events as gruesome car wrecks with frosty detachment, considering himself a mere recorder of circumstances, his only responsibility to get his film in on time. Even his girlfriend Ruth (Marianna Hill) cannot understand or penetrate John's complacency. Encounters with signs of the late '60s times, however, raise John's consciousness about the implications of his job, as he films a verbal attack by black militants on the media's racism, gets fired after he objects to having that footage turned over to the FBI, and meets Vietnam War widow Eileen (Verna Bloom). John witnesses the violence of the state first-hand as he and Eileen search for her son amidst the real-life demonstrations and riots at the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention. Even though he realizes the political power of pointing a camera at anything, John finally cannot extricate himself or his loved ones from a culture obsessed with recording any sensational, gory incident. Scripted (from a novel by Jack Couffer), directed, and shot by Oscar-winning cinematographer and political activist Wexler, *Medium Cool* systematically questions the ideological power of images by combining documentary techniques such as "talking heads" and *cinéma vérité* with staged scenes between the actors. By the time Wexler and his crew start filming Forster and Bloom among the actual events at the Convention, all barriers between fiction and fact are broken down, as Wexler's assistant can be heard warning "Watch out, Haskell, it's real" when tear gas is thrown. The footage of cops clubbing people in the crowd is real, but Wexler's presence also turns it into part of a fictional story, revealing filmed "reality" to be as artificially constructed as any other fiction, subject to the interpretation of whoever holds the camera and, perhaps, to larger institutions of power. Funding *Medium Cool* partly out of his own resources, Wexler had free reign during production, but when the execs at Paramount saw the result, they were not pleased. Despite the timely subject matter, Paramount delayed and then curtailed the film's release, tempering its impact on critics and audiences. Regardless of that record, *Medium Cool* stands as a vital late '60s film for its incisive narrative and formal dissection of the visual politics of "truth," and its awareness of how coolly seductive televised violence might be as entertainment, especially in a historical moment marked by incendiary images of political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and counterculture protests.

from *Second Sight; Notes on Some Movies 1965-1970*. Richard Schickel. Simon & Schuster NY 1972

Medium Cool—the title has two obvious meanings. It refers us, by the simple reversal of McLuhan's fashionable term, to television, for which the film's protagonist (Robert Forster) works as a cameraman. And it alludes to Forster's own emotional climate,

which he is seen struggling to escape for the length of the movie.

More important, however, is what the title suggests about the nation's predominant attitude toward violence, an attitude that has grown ever more common—without our being completely aware of its growth—since we became enmeshed in the media web. Haskell Wexler, the great cameraman who wrote and directed *Medium Cool* as his first feature, is suggesting in it that we have become voyeurs of violence, at once disturbed and titillated by it as we vicariously participate in it via television. He is saying, I think, that whether we pretend to deplore or ignore this material we get a cool kick out of it at the deepest levels of our being. And that as a result we are hooked on the stuff, requiring ever stronger doses to feed our habit, just like the other junkies.

Item: Forster and a girl friend getting so turned on sexually by the semi-fraudulent violence of a roller derby that they leave early to rush home.

Item: A *cinéma vérité* sequence in which we are invited to observe a group of middle-class ladies taking shooting lessons. Their interest and excitement are comically but frighteningly out of proportion to their need for this form of adult education.

Largest item of all: The fact that Forster is seen at the outset as rather like a surgeon, unable to pursue his profession if he lets himself become involved in his subjects' lives or thinks about the social effects of his works. He is fired when he follows a black militant's story farther than his station's management thinks necessary. He's caught the thrill of their activities—who needs understanding?

It turns out that he does. And once he is free to lift his eye from his viewfinder, he begins really to see. At which point, of course, he begins really to feel, not only about his subjects—he involves himself with a young mother and her son who have exchanged the poverty of Appalachia for the poverty of a Chicago slum—but about himself and what he has been doing. And he is appalled by the contribution to anarchy that "professionalism" (i.e. emotional neutrality) can make.

In this state of heightened awareness he signs on as a cameraman covering the recent Chicago Democratic convention. Into its violent orbit his Appalachian "family" is accidentally drawn, and out of it a final tragedy, appropriately accidental, evolves.

The power of the media to magnify events and to involve the unprepared and the innocent in history is powerfully demonstrated in these sequences, though I am not sure Mr. Wexler has entirely solved the aesthetic and technical problems that arise when fictional characters are juxtaposed with great events. He gives us a more intimate view of the Chicago riots than TV ever did ("Look out, Haskell, it's real," a voice on the sound track cries as a canister of tear gas explodes near the film maker), but he never quite succeeds in melding his people believably with his superb documentary footage. Nor does he make his interpretation of their motives or the larger meaning of their acts entirely clear or dramatically sharp. One must read a good deal into *Medium Cool*.

But that, of course, is no bad thing. It is refreshing to have an American film released by a major studio that is not "well made" in the conventional sense, that does not insist on reducing everything to a single simple point and that bears the mark of a single creative hand. Any reservations about *Medium Cool* fade to insignificance beside the importance of Mr. Wexler's achievement. His is, I believe, the first entirely serious commercially sponsored basically fictional film born of the time of troubles through which this nation has been passing. Alone of American movie makers

Mr. Wexler has asked one of the most difficult, pressing, *right* questions that hover constantly in the back of all our minds. He does not pretend to solve the problem posed by television's mindless ability to convert real violence into a peculiarly grubby form of surreality simply by its presence on the scene. But by posing it in fictional rather than purely documentary terms he has intensified our awareness of the problem's human dimensions. In short, he has been about the proper business of the concerned artist, which is not drafting manifestoes but trying to understand what's happening to us all. 8/15/69

from *The History of World Cinema*. David Robinson. Stein and Day NY 1974

A characteristic phenomenon of the late sixties was the attempt of the commercial companies to take a lead from the underground cinema in trying to recapture the teenage and twenties audience. 1970 was a peak year for dissent and youth alienation as big box-office themes, with Arthur Penn's *Alice's Restaurant* (actually released in 1969), Stuart Hagmann's *The Strawberry Statement*, Richard Rush's *Getting Straight*, Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* and Michael Wadleigh's *Woodstock*. The anarchic scepticism of Robert Altman's *M.A.S.H.* and Mike Nichol's adaptation of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* perhaps went deeper.

However misty the future, it was clear by the 1970s that nothing could ever be quite the same again. The cinema had been created as a mass medium; now it was a mass medium no longer, but had to make its appeal to a whole lot of minority audiences. The old industrial organizations were obsolete: if the cinema as we had known it were to survive to its second century, it could only be with new conceptions and new economies of film production, film exhibition, film, *tout court*.

Survival would depend on new techniques. The experience of the underground and the pressures of finance together forced the development of what had previously been dismissively styled 'sub-standard' equipment and film materials. In the fifties the fight against television had excited the development of bigger and clumsier film-stock—the 70mm film. In the seventies there was accelerated experiment in the development and use of small-gauge film, 8mm and 16mm, previously confined to the amateur only.

Still more important, and even more imponderable in its

probable results was the development of the video-cassette as a means of disseminating film or television material. When every kind of moving picture could be made readily available for home viewing, the mass audience would finally be splintered into its smallest individual units. Fast as was the technical development of the video-cassette no-one could foresee the ultimate effect upon the nature and the uses of the moving image.

The start of the seventies found us as blind before the future as our ancestors must have been. For Barker and Daguerre, Plateau and Muybridge, Reynaud and Edison can have had no idea what it was that—in their unknowing collaboration—they were creating. They cannot have guessed that, thanks to them, the image would become the primary and indispensable means of communication for the 20th century, whether for entertainment, education, propaganda, information or record. They cannot have imagined that for several of the most momentous decades in the history of the world, the instrument that would be created out of their labours would be the mirror and the medium of man's dreams and hopes, fears and tragedies; his master and his servant, his voice and his demon.

Deeper Into Movies. Pauline Kael. Warnerbooks NY 1980

It is one of the insanities that grow out of the photographic nature of the movie medium that a great deal of the death and destruction now being so moralistically flung in our faces is probably a response not so much to a political situation as to the dramatic problem of finding images powerful enough for a flash finish. Much of the hopelessness in movies like *If. . .* and *Easy Rider* and *Medium Cool* and the new thrillers that kill off their protagonists is probably dictated not by a consideration of actual alternatives and the conclusion that there's no hope but simply by what seems daring and new and photogenic. The moviemakers, concerned primarily with the look of their movies, may not even realize that audiences are—rightly, I think—becoming resentful of the self-serving negativism. The audience is probably just as much aware of the manipulation for the sake of beautiful violent imagery as it was of the manipulation when Hollywood gave it nothing but happy endings, and it probably knows that these apocalyptic finishes are just as much of a con.

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 **University at Buffalo** *The State University of New York*

Join us next week, Tuesday November 9, Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek in Terrence Malick's *BADLANDS 1973*

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