


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


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 newscameraman 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 eclectic 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 Bozola, 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 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 surrealism 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, Haskel 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 could 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 moralistcally 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.