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## preserving disorder

by

thomas beard

For me, as an ethnographer and filmmaker,” Jean Rouch once remarked, “there is almost no boundary between documentary film and films of fiction. The cinema, the art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics, where losing one’s footing is the least of the risks.” Through works like *Jaguar* (1967), which concerns the migration of three young men from rural Niger to the urban centers of Ghana, Rouch advanced a hybrid form by foregrounding the elements of self-dramatization inherent in ethnography. His predecessor Robert Flaherty put the paradox more bluntly: “Sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth.” It’s notable that one of documentary cinema’s most iconic sequences, when the hero of *Nanook of the North* (1922) hunts a walrus, was an entirely staged affair, the protagonist armed with a harpoon even though the Inuit had by then replaced such weapons with rifles. Indeed, one could trace a compelling history of documentary film form by focusing on its relationship to fiction.

The beginnings of this genre, such as it is, can be found even in cinema’s earliest moments, long before the current usage of *documentary* was introduced by John Grierson in the 1920s. Edwin S. Porter’s 1903 *Life of an American Fireman*, for instance, signaled new possibilities in film narrative with its shrewd, relatively seamless intercutting of documentary “topicals” with scripted scenes. In the 1930s, Luis Buñuel would derange the still-nascent conventions of nonfiction filmmaking with *Land Without Bread*, a surrealist riff on ethnography that imaginatively distorts the film’s supposed object of inquiry, the impoverished Las Hurdes region of Spain. Much later, Lionel Rogosin achieved the flophouse realism of *On the Bowery* (1956) by engaging his subjects in loosely improvised scenarios and combining that material with footage recorded on hidden cameras. But it would be the advent of portable sync sound for



16 mm shortly thereafter that ushered in the most significant strains of this richly variegated tendency within independent cinema. The new technology granted an unprecedented agility to the observational style of nonfiction filmmakers, forever altering the popular understanding of documentary's look, its feel, its claims to truth. And just as cinema verité became ascendant as a technique, figures like Jim McBride, Peter Watkins, and many others would cannily deploy its style in the service of fiction.



A crucial entry in this peculiar canon is Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool* (1969), a quasi-scripted narrative played out against the backdrop of the actual 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the tumult surrounding that event. The film revolves around John (Robert Forster), a television news cameraman who has become disenchanted with his profession, and Eileen (Verna Bloom), a young war widow from West Virginia who has just moved to the city with her son. Both, to their surprise, become embroiled in the political swirl of the moment—he is furious to discover that the film he shoots for work is regularly handed over to the police and FBI for inspection, and she finds herself suddenly in the midst of a very real protest that's met with a very violent response from the Chicago police. *Medium Cool* is a film remarkable for its insistence that no one exists outside of politics, whether one experiences it as a backdrop to daily life (a wrinkled Bobby Kennedy poster in a cramped apartment) or as a nightstick to the gut.

The unusual strategies of *Medium Cool* can be partially explained by a perusal of Wexler's expansive filmography. On the one hand, he's regarded as among the most influential cinematographers of his generation, having lensed the dinner-party-as-blood-sport theatrics of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), the Vietnam vet love triangle of Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), and the miner strike saga of John Sayles's *Matewan* (1987), to name only a few. On the other hand, he has a long-standing commitment to political documentary. Before making *Medium Cool*, Wexler traveled with a San Francisco delegation to the March on Washington for his first nonfiction feature, *The Bus* (1965), and his next documentary project was the powerful witnessing of *Brazil: A Report on Torture* (1971), one of several films he codirected with Saul Landau. He was also responsible for filming the interviews with soldiers in *Interviews with My Lai Veterans* (1971) and the interviews with Weather Underground radicals in *Underground* (1976). Wexler has

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had a kind of double life as an artist, known both for his poetic reportage and for his role as a studio craftsman, and his bifurcated career is mirrored in the dual nature of *Medium Cool*. The collision of Hollywood and global politics would also be particularly dramatic in *Introduction to the Enemy* (1974), a film he made with Tom Hayden and movie star turned activist Jane Fonda that documented their trip to Hanoi and the liberated Quảng Trị province.

"When I was in Vietnam with Jane Fonda," Wexler has recalled, "I was filming a farmer walking through a field when, all of a sudden, he stepped on a land mine. 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!' and the other was to put my camera down and help the farmer. In the end, I carried on filming, even though I couldn't even see what I was shooting because I was crying so hard. I have thought about that moment many times, about the question of when you have to put the camera down, when to stop observing and get involved." These issues were already on Wexler's mind during the production of *Medium Cool*, and they resonate deeply with the film's central questions: When one is tasked with representing a subject, what kinds of obligations does one have to that subject? When is intervention appropriate, even necessary? Such ethical prompts are immediately apparent in the film's opening scene, which features John hunched over the body of a barely living car crash victim, filming her for the evening news. His soundman, frustrated by the horn blaring from the wrecked vehicle, cuts it so as to better record the woman's last gasps. Money shot in the can, the two men walk away and pack up their equipment. John makes a blithe suggestion: "Better call an ambulance."

On the streets of Chicago, Wexler discovered a way to both keep observing *and* get involved. Hollywood's relationship to social life in America is often understood as one where our collective desires and anxieties enter the dream factory raw and return as a more refined, allegorically shaped product—the



ultraviolence of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) obviously had its origins as much in contemporary Indochina as in Depression-era Texas. But what if the reverse were true? What if the raw stuff of Hollywood was fed directly into the social machinery of American life? What if a riot doubled as a film set? This is precisely the gambit of *Medium Cool*.

The first half of the film follows John on and off the job—while he's doing a spot about middle-aged women unloading rounds at a firing range, or taking a date to a roller derby match. And though these sequences are counterposed with the comparatively tranquil domestic scenes of Eileen and her son, it's often fascinatingly unclear throughout *Medium Cool* where the constructed world of the film ends and reality begins. As the story progresses and these narrative threads become braided together, something of a romance ensues and the slippages between documentary and fiction become more and more pronounced. By the time the two characters visit what appears to be a Mothers of Invention concert, its psychedelic mise-en-scène in full effect, *Medium Cool* has established itself as a movie about a society on the brink of violence, about the counterculture bleeding into mainstream consciousness, and how the whole world is watching it unfold. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film's finale: the Democratic convention and its accompanying street protests. When actor Verna Bloom, in her canary yellow dress, walks in a daze along a phalanx of cops in azure helmets, who stand ready to crack skulls, it becomes apparent that the ultimate American media spectacle of 1968 was not simply *like* a movie, it *was* a movie. Following the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. earlier that year, and with pressure mounting as the result of an increasingly unpopular war, the convention proved to be a climax for the film and the nation both.

Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley's response to the police violence that erupted in the city was this: "Gentlemen, get the thing straight once and for all—the policeman isn't there to create disorder; the policeman is there to preserve disorder." It's a legendary malapropism, and an evocative one. Preserving



disorder is, in another sense, a primary achievement of *Medium Cool*. In one of the film's most memorable shots, a can of tear gas is released directly in front of the camera; smoke fills the screen, and we hear someone shout, "Look out, Haskell—it's real!" For viewers, this moment is often understood as one of the film's many thrilling ruptures, but although the tear gas was real, the warning was actually fabricated, recorded and edited in after the fact. To watch a fiction film and subordinate its plot and characterizations to the documentary value of the world it depicts, or, alternatively, to watch a documentary and constantly question its veracity, is to read the work against the grain. Given the design of *Medium Cool*, a film that explicitly functions as both document and fantasy at once, to view it at all is to read it against the grain. It's a movie whose very composition not only allows for but demands multiple kinds of perception and visual thinking; it preserves its own disorder.

*Medium Cool* takes its title from Marshall McLuhan's description of television as a "cool" medium—one that offers less information than a "hot" medium like print, thereby requiring more audience participation and yielding different effects. His uncannily prescient ideas pervade the film, like the concept of media as an extension of man (John's sound guy, Gus, half-jokingly describes himself as an "elongation of the tape recorder"). Dubbing it "the medium, or process, of our time," McLuhan declared that "electric technology is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted." For Wexler, the electric technology in question was undoubtedly television, a medium that shaped the political imagination of the period yet often failed to fully articulate the intricacies of its political reality. In a pivotal scene, John travels to a predominantly black neighborhood with the intention of shooting a human interest story about a cabdriver who found and returned ten thousand dollars left in his car. Once he arrives, however, the cabbie's friends have other ideas about what the report should look like: "You came down here to do some sort of jive interview . . .

came down here with fifteen minutes of a black sensibility, and, see, you don't understand that. You came down here to shoot fifteen minutes of what it's taken three hundred years to develop."

And while *Medium Cool* endures as a complex and revealing chronicle of a turbulent age, it feels especially relevant to a contemporary situation as well. Just as the film pulses backward and forward in time, it's difficult to think of that summer in Chicago without also conjuring up images of the Occupy movement (one of Wexler's most recent documentary subjects). Both episodes in our country's history involved the theatricalization of social crisis; the former was catalyzed by television, the latter by viral videos and hashtags. Yet while the terms of representation have evolved significantly between these two eras, newer technologies likewise have their limits. Any number of public earnings reports can readily prove the ability of television and Facebook, of media old and new, to deliver us to advertisers—but it remains uncertain and unlikely that they will be able to deliver us otherwise, to set us free.

Of all the indelible sequences in *Medium Cool*, the one I most can't stop thinking about is easily overlooked; what first seemed to have merely the air of exposition now bears the weight of prophecy. Early on, the two-man television news outfit visits Resurrection City, the protest tent village on the National Mall in D.C., and we see a close-up of their boots as they trudge in circles through the mud, somewhat lost. Nearby, demonstrators are singing an old spiritual, "This May Be the Last Time." It's a description of a struggle, a reminder of unfinished business. The call keeps changing—"Well, this may be the last time you march on the Capitol . . . Well, this may be the last time you march on Congress . . . Well, this may be the last time you march for your freedom"—but the response is always the same: "May be the last time, but I don't know." ■

Thomas Beard is a founder and director of Light Industry, a venue for film and electronic art in Brooklyn. In addition to organizing screenings for Artists Space, the Centre Pompidou, the Museum of Modern Art, and Tate Modern, he recently cocurated the cinema for Greater New York 2010 at MoMA PS1 and the film program for the 2012 Whitney Biennial.