

Rebel Citizens and Filmmakers

An Interview with Haskell Wexler and Pamela Yates

by Maria Garcia

Pamela Yates's *Rebel Citizen* begins with a close-up of cinematographer Haskell Wexler, the documentary's subject. Speaking directly to the camera, Wexler expresses his disbelief that anyone would be interested in what he has to say. That candid declaration is delivered in a Midwestern accent reminiscent of actor Jimmy Stewart—perhaps the only other man who could pull off that opening salvo as an expression of discomfort rather than false modesty. Accustomed to being on the other side of the camera on such iconic American films as *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978), and *Matewan* (1987), Wexler agreed to Yates's cinematic profiling of him as an extension of their shared passion for human-rights filmmaking.

For some audiences, the surprise of *Rebel Citizen* will be that the ninety-three-year-old cinematographer, the first to shoot a narrative film using a Steadicam camera mount, has also produced and directed dozens of documentary films. As Yates suggests, that career began in earnest with *The Bus* (1963), shot fly-on-the wall style by Wexler. His subjects in the documentary are headed to the protest march in Washington, DC, where Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. A scene in that black-and-white documentary, of a black woman and a white woman, the latter a pacifist, discussing how they would react to a violent attack, encapsulates Sixties-era preoccupations but also the divisions of color and class that continue to characterize race relations in America. As Wexler observes afterward, these encounters also highlight the distinction between "passivity" and nonviolence as a tactic for acts of civil disobedience.

Rebel Citizen unfolds through these extended clips, sometimes of Wexler's work as a cinematographer, followed by his commentary on shooting the footage, or on the human-rights or social-justice issues underlined. At times, Yates asks questions from off camera, but the film is largely in her subject's voice. Like all of her work, from *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983), about the Guatemalan military's genocidal campaign against indigenous Mayan peasants, to *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011), which marked her return to that country, *Rebel Citizen* is well-written and skillfully shot and edited. Yates, who is a Guggenheim Fellow, is also a co-founder of the New York City-based production company Skylight Pictures. She was born in a coal-mining region of Pennsylvania, an Irish enclave where storytelling, of which her father was a master, was the favored art form. He also always lionized the poor, she recalled.

To the end, the Oscar-winning cinematographer and director was feisty and opinionated, whether discussing his own work or Yates's new documentary focused on his activism.

When Yates was an emerging filmmaker, she worked as a sound recordist, including as head of the sound crew on Wexler's *Latino* (1986), the last of his two narrative films as a writer-director. In the early Eighties, Wexler asked Yates and cinematographer Tom Sigel (a co-founder at Skylight) to shoot footage of the Nicaraguan Contras as part of his research for that film. The footage was not used in *Latino*, although it was screened for Congress and influenced that legislative body's decision to withdraw aid to the Contras. *Rebel Citizen* also features excerpts from Wexler's better-known narrative feature, the

ground-breaking *Medium Cool* (1969), set during the 1968 Democratic Convention in his hometown of Chicago. In addition to a discussion of that film, Wexler recounts a humorous anecdote about his recruitment as cinematographer on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), as well as his unexplained dismissal from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975).

He also expounds on his belief that everyone lucky enough to have some notoriety has a responsibility to use it in the cause of social justice. In the documentary and in our interview, Wexler says, again with no hint of self-aggrandizement, that his reputation in Hollywood, secured by two Oscars (for *Virginia Woolf* and *Bound for Glory*), provided that platform for him, and that his inherited wealth allowed more than the usual freedom to work with those whose values and political beliefs matched his own.

Wexler and Yates had known each other for over thirty years. While

she called him a mentor, he was quick to point out how fortunate he was to have the benefit of Yates's expertise. Last year, Wexler invited Yates to accompany him to Paris when he was honored at *Cinéma du Réel*; it was their conversations during that festival that led to the making of *Rebel Citizen*. The two filmmakers, who witnessed horrific crimes against humanity in Central and South America, share an indefatigable commitment to social justice. After an hour or so in their company, anyone not inclined to believe that persistent vigilance and resistance to wrongdoing will improve the lot of humanity risks being the Grinch. Yates's documentary is not just an homage to a "rebel citizen," it is also a celebration of boundless optimism.

Wexler died on December 27, 2015, just a few months after *Rebel Citizen* premiered at the New York Film Festival, and not long after our October 7 interview, when we caught up with Yates and Wexler in Greenwich Village, at the home of a Wexler family member.—Maria Garcia



Haskell's first narrative film is recognized as a landmark American film and in 2003 was selected by the National Film Registry for preservation in the Library of Congress.



Haskell Wexler and Pamela Yates on location for *Latino* (photo by Susan Meiselas/Magnum).

Cineaste: At the New York Film Festival premiere of *Rebel Citizen*, someone asked about the final scene of *Medium Cool*. Pamela, you explained how with that film Haskell broke the proscenium.

Pamela Yates: The end of *Medium Cool* revealed the artifice of filmmaking—in whose vision is the story being told? In *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator*, we also tore down that fourth wall to show that not only are there many different paths to being a human-rights defender but also that documentary filmmaking can serve as a path to being an activist. We start *Rebel Citizen* with Haskell speaking directly to the camera, which was an homage to *Medium Cool*. Haskell was definite that he wanted to start out speaking directly to the audience.

Haskell Wexler: Pam's film is not like a regular film. It's not even a documentary because usually there is a dramatic form to documentary. You don't feel her hand on this film. It was the same thing I felt about Laura Poitras's film about Snowden, *Citizenfour*. As important as what Snowden was saying, what was impressive was the honesty and the direction of her film, its intimacy. In Pam's film about me, you know that it reflects what she sees about me—not that I'm so important. It is her view without ontological diffusion, if that makes any sense.

Cineaste: At the premiere, Pamela was explaining you and your work. But you seemed impatient with her comments.

Wexler: Yes, but I feed on being ornery and contrary. Even when friends say good, smart things, and I reply to some aspect of it by saying, "That is not so smart" or "I would do it this way," I am aware of that and I try to control it, but at my age the controls are minimal. The thing about the proscenium in *Medium Cool* is that the break is obvious throughout the film. Some people refer to it as my "Godard movie." There are several scenes where the National Guard are training in preparation for the violence they expected in Chicago. At one point, you hear one of them say, "Let's get the guy with the camera." They meant Robert Forster, my actor with the camera, but then in the last shot there, they turn to me and put their hand over the lens. So, your awareness is of two things going on: the fictional story we are telling and the real story we are telling, or what we say is the real story.

There are also a number of actors in the black militants scene, and they speak directly to the camera. I invented that, but what I want to say is that when you shoot documentaries, you also make decisions. If I were shooting you now, Maria, I may want to zoom in and down to your glasses and your note pad, and then tip up to you. I'm telling what is the truth, what is *vérité*. Then, when I edit, I'm saying to the audience, "Somebody is telling this story." It is important nowadays to realize these things because so much of our communication comes from corporatized media. Their priority is to get your attention, to sell, and not to educate you. There are no social obligations with regard to education, truth, or what is newsworthy or not newsworthy.

Cineaste: *Medium Cool* marked an exciting moment in film aesthetics because of the mixing of real and fictional footage, but also because of the layers of meaning added to the narrative when you put fictional characters into the midst of a significant event in American history.

Wexler: I understand, and, by the way, the black militants that speak to camera worked in advertising agencies. The woman who talks about going to her place in Canada while all of this is going on, she is Beverly Younger, a famous Chicago actress who was in Studs Terkel's TV series, *Stud's Place*. The young boy I found was an amateur, but he, too, is a fictional character.

Yates: Haskell does documentary research to be able to write these fictional characters.

Wexler: Studs Terkel was my teacher. I knew him since I was a kid. Did you know that most of those people on his show would not talk to a camera if it were not for him?

Cineaste: I read in a New York Times article¹ that you led a labor strike against your father's factory. Is that true?

Wexler: It is not true. I did make a film about the United Packinghouse Workers of America union strike in Chicago, and another for the United Electrical Workers, who were complaining about my dad's company, Allied Electric, and who were thinking about striking against it. I never led a strike.

Cineaste: The story of you telling your father that you needed \$25,000 for a studio even before making your first film, is that true?



Haskell Wexler (top, holding pipe) and Mike Nichols prepare a scene with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Wexler: [Laughs] Yes, that's true.

Cineaste: And that led to you making your first film, *A Half Century of Cotton* [1946], an industrial about a cotton gin.

Wexler: That's right.

Cineaste: You made the first feature-length film with the Steadicam, *Bound for Glory*. That was a big turning point in cinematography.

Wexler: I worked with Garrett Brown [inventor of the Steadicam] before *Bound for Glory*, so I knew what he went through, especially in having to use an eyecup, an extension, so that we could look through the lens. We shot a commercial with the Steadicam. It had a fiber optic tube that went from Garrett's eyepiece, like a patch on his eye, but when you used it, you could get disoriented because you were using only one eye. When cameras became reflex [as opposed to earlier viewfinder cameras], that was another big change. I shot a film called *61** [2001], and I met Yogi Berra on that project. I asked him about the protective gear for catchers, and he said, "They're just the tools of ignorance." That is the way I think of changes in cinematography equipment.

Yates: I like that. I think we are always trying to figure out how to get the most out of whatever technology we have, whether it is 35mm, 16mm, or a small digital camera. For each project, what is the best "tool of ignorance"?

Cineaste: There is a proliferation of media today that is informational, but lacks a critical eye—

Yates: I think that in the documentary and social-justice genre, the films get better, more sophisticated all the time.

Wexler: Well, we have to look at our definition of success. Usually it's money, no matter what you are talking about, and that is certainly the case in film. So, we can't measure a film by how good it is technologically. We have to look at the images and stories, which are integral with the devices, and then the practicalities. You want your work to be seen. Sometimes, you feel very strongly about something, and you make a decision to go ahead because of that, regardless of any other considerations.

Yates: Look at the number of documentary films in the last two years, such as *Citizenfour* and *What Happened, Miss Simone?* One of the really welcome trends in documentary filmmaking is that we are not just making the films now, but we are also thinking about a multiyear strategy for getting the films out there. These are generally films that have a very strong point of view, such as those featured on PBS's *POV* and *Independent Lens* series. Filmmakers are also taking a more holistic approach to getting their films seen through specialized outreach and engagement campaigns.

Cineaste: Too often, what we see are advocacy documentaries. There are not a lot of documentaries, as both of you have said, where a filmmaker is "finding a story."

Yates: Advocacy documentaries are just one genre. The way that the field has developed, there are now many more documentary genres. In *When the Mountains Tremble*, it's *cinéma vérité*, but there are also carefully constructed scenes, such as Rigoberta Menchú who speaks directly to camera. I also had re-enacted scenes of the 1954 CIA coup and people said, "Whoa! Re-enacted scenes in a



Haskell Wexler with Garrett Brown and his newly designed Steadicam camera mount on location for a commercial directed by Wexler.

documentary? No!” Menchú speaking directly to camera was inspired by *Reds* [1981]. I had seen the movie six months before, and I thought it was so interesting to put fictional characters in a documentary setting. So, I thought, “Why not put documentary characters in what was considered a semifictional setting?”

Cineaste: Yes, but I assume that the construction of the documentary was arrived at later.

Yates: That’s true, but my point is that we can draw from many artistic expressions in documentary, not solely *cinéma vérité*.

Cineaste: I understand that, but fewer filmmakers are on a search for the truth. It is the quality Haskell talks about in *Rebel Citizen*, a truth they did not know when they began making the documentary.

Yates: I hear that.

Cineaste: Would you talk about how you met? Was it when Haskell asked you to shoot footage in Nicaragua?

Yates: Actually, Haskell went to shoot *Target Nicaragua* with Saul Landau. They shot Contras, counterrevolutionaries, who had been captured in Nicaragua. That’s when Haskell got the idea for *Latino* and started writing the script. He asked me, Newton Thomas Sigel, and Scott Sakamoto to find the Contras and film them. He said maybe he would use that material or just keep it as research for *Latino*. We filmed U.S. military maneuvers on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. Afterward, we actually tracked down the Contras. It took us about two months. The Contras allowed us to be the first crew to film them, as we walked together from Honduras into Nicaragua. It was so fresh and urgent that we also made five news pieces for the CBS Evening News. We then brought all the material back and it became part of the research.

Cineaste: But you had met already by then?

Yates: Haskell, did we meet because I made a film about the Ku Klux Klan in the American South? Haskell has always been interested in civil rights. *Resurgence: The Movement for Equality vs. the Ku Klux Klan* [1981] played at the Los Angeles Film Festival, and Haskell was at the screening.

Wexler: You have to understand that, in the first place, meeting a woman filmmaker, and one like Pam, that was worthy of attention.

Cineaste: In a 1968 interview in *Film Quarterly*, you said that you wanted to find a “wedding” during your career between features and *cinéma vérité*. Do you feel you have accomplished that?

Wexler: How would I measure that?

Cineaste: I don’t know. I’ll let you decide.

Wexler: I certainly took a good bite at that “wedding.” I was able to do it because I was inspired by what other people had done, by the directors I had worked with as a cinematographer.

Cineaste: For many films, I think you were chosen as cinematographer because of the *cinéma-vérité* quality you brought to your work, such as your talent for shooting in natural light. You also had been mentored by James Wong Howe, and I assume you learned something about deep-focus cinematography.

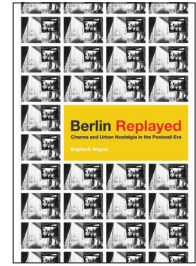
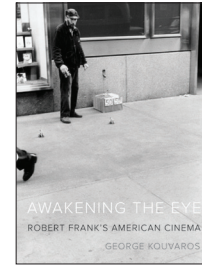
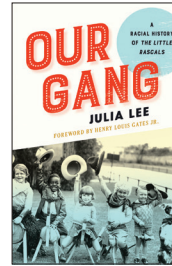
Wexler: Yes, that’s right. He became a friend because of his position on civil rights. There was a lot of prejudice against him because he was Chinese American. He gave me chances that I would not have had in Hollywood. As a matter of fact, in my career of making money and moving up the ladder, because of my left-wing politics and the comments of the FBI that I was not going to get too far because I was too finicky—

Cineaste: Finicky?

Wexler: Not acceptable to the system. Remember, in those days, just forty or fifty years ago, people who might have had an opportunity to have a voice bigger than a barking dog were characterized as potential enemies of the state. As filmmakers and communicators, it should give us some understanding of how important we really are to deserve that attention. In other words, James Wong Howe gave me a place when others might have rejected me for my beliefs.

Yates: It’s important because the surveillance that the FBI did on Haskell actually backfired. Haskell, it gave you an added sense of the worth of your documentaries. You say in *Rebel Citizen* that you couldn’t believe that anything you did or had to say would generate such a reaction from the state. When the state reacted, you realized

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that we documentary filmmakers are powerful communicators. That was a catalyst for your continuing to make documentaries.

Wexler: I responded that way partly because I had a family with some money.

Cineaste: Pamela said that she wanted to include your fictional films in *Rebel Citizen* to point out the intersection between fiction and non-fiction work. I would like to follow through on that idea and ask about your *cinéma-vérité* methods in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* For instance, in the exterior evening scenes, you appear to use only available light.

Wexler: Filmmaking is an unnatural act, and I don't think that you can ever call it "natural," even if you are talking about ambient light. When you shoot using sunlight, for instance, you would adjust the density. You would take a big, solid gobo [a device used to shape or diffuse the illumination from a lighting source] and make a slight shadow on someone. You would also use a cucaloris, a big panel with different shaped holes in it, so the sunlight on a building or a person would create the effect of leaves or shadows, rather than a flat light. You just make intuitive decisions.

Cineaste: What is Haskell Wexler's legacy?

Yates: He has a vast legacy because of shooting more than eighty features and documentaries over five decades. As a social-justice filmmaker, I am acutely aware that Haskell's documentary films represent the way he relates to the body politic. That's what I want to say in *Rebel Citizen*. Haskell, you are still making movies. You are technologically forward. You very much have your hand on the pulse of political trends and movements, such as in *Four Days in Chicago* [2013], about the NATO meeting held there. Plus there is Haskell's collegial relationship with Joan Churchill and other *cinéma-vérité* cinematographers. Many of those people were in the room last night, at the New York Film Festival premiere. They came out for Haskell and filled the theater.

Wexler: I think my relationship to women filmmakers is worth talking about. We had no women assistants in the union and certainly none in filmmaking per se. I broke that habit. Others would say that the equipment was too heavy for women. There are a couple of women documentary filmmakers who have given me compliments.

Yates: Haskell loves to be around women, in the sense that he finds them just as interesting as men, and likes working with them on the set.



Haskell Wexler on location in Chicago for *Medium Cool* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

"We have to look at our definition of success. We can't measure a film by how good it is technologically. We have to look at the images and stories, which are integral with the devices."



Wexler prepares a scene for *Latino* (photo courtesy of Carol Wexler).

Cineaste: I think we all remember that historical moment when we felt there was a revolution underway, when radicals believed they could bring down the U.S. government. Haskell, you shot a film about it, *Underground* [1976], along with Mary Lampson and Emile de Antonio. How do you both feel about the present political situation?

Yates: I believe in the power of story to create change. It is hard-wired into my DNA. I am a congenital optimist. That is not to say that I am not critical of the current moment or policies of our government. It is very dispiriting to see advances in reproductive rights or civil rights lost. That's why I said last night at Lincoln

Center that no victories are permanent, and that we have to keep the struggle alive from generation to generation. In all my films, including *Rebel Citizen*, there is always a way forward. There is always a person, a people, an organization, or an entire country, that have forward-looking ideas. Even in the direst situations, there are always those courageous individuals who are opening a path. I think that human-rights filmmaking can be hopeful.

Wexler: I agree with eighty percent of what Pam says. You have to be hopeful, but we are losing the ability to sort the information we are getting. People feel that things have become so complicated, that they often do not act or say anything, and instead just trust that good things will happen. That is terrible. You have to break that pattern by not letting the authorities recount history—by history, I mean even two years ago. Look, for example, at the big lie that put us in Iraq, the complicity of media in that lie, and all those in authority, and realize that there is absolutely no accountability for all the deaths that caused. We have gone beyond accountability. If you have no serious accountability for crimes, which are antihuman, you will be open to dangers now and in the future. Lack of accountability is a disease that is spreading with militarism. Militarism is more than guns and shooting. It is what President Kennedy referred to in his June 1963 speech at American University, where he spoke about a Pax Americana "enforced on the world by American weapons of war." ■

¹ "A Moviemaker Seen Through the Lens of His Son" by Stephen Holden in *The New York Times*, May 20, 2005, discussed *Tell Them Who You Are*, Mark Wexler's 2004 documentary about his father.

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