

Medium Cool

Film review

George dePue

Review of "Medium Cool," written, directed and photographed by Haskell Wexler, starring John Forster and Verna Bloom.

"Medium Cool" is a loose-jointed narrative about a TV news cameraman in Chicago who begins to lose his professional detachment and drop his plastic lifestyle shortly before the movement's challenge to the 1968 Democratic Convention. He begins to fight to do stories of some human dimension. He is angered when he finds he has been used as a fink by his station, which has been turning his footage of draft-card burnings over to the FBI and the police.

He is fired, with a phony explanation, as a misfit. He goes freelance, and takes up with an unsophisticated young widow up from Appalachia. Then, almost unaccountably, he has an auto accident that kills her and sends him to the hospital in critical condition.

It is all finely photographed in excellent color, and cleanly edited. There is some very intelligent footage of the Black ghetto and poor white slums, and a lot of very well-thought and shot footage of motorcycle (behind the credits) and auto motion. But then Haskell Wexler is a very talented cameraman.

"Medium Cool" is his first feature length fiction film. Wexler has been known in the industry for years, as an independent producer-director of documentaries, and more recently, as an Oscar-winning Hollywood cameraman (on Mike Nichols' Oscar-winning film, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"). Now, at 47, he has brought forth his first feature, and it's not bad, just a little strange.

"Medium Cool" takes a strong position in that short, new tradition of independent Hollywood films that involve some feeling for and concern with people's lives. "Easy Rider," directed by Dennis Hopper and produced by Peter Fonda, is being heavily touted as the start of this trend, probably because of its enormous success in what the trade calls "the youth market." But the roots of the trend, which after all is only an effort to do honest commercial work, goes back to the mid-Fifties and the genre work (gangster, horror and Western movies) of such directors as Stanley Kubrick, Roger Corman and Robert Rossen.

Wexler fairly intelligently sentimentalizes the life and values of white and Black working class people, especially the rural white poor, and draws a clear, if not very incisive line between them and the alienated, rootless and culturally pale middle class. It works best in the terms of the nearly sexless love affair between the TV cameraman and the Appalachian widow.

She is a new arrival, with her 10-year-old son, and confused and a little frightened by life in a Chicago slum. At first he is superficially sophisticated, almost impersonal. She has him over for dinner, and they watch a television documentary about Martin Luther King, JFK and Robert Kennedy. They talk over dinner, along with the TV and afterward. He talks about memories of his slum boyhood ("I was a Golden Gloves boxer for the CYO") and his work, and comes into a feeling state distantly removed from his rather soulless frolic with a pretty nurse.

The scene is excellently played by Forster and Bloom, she especially well realizing a mix of warmth, timidity, curiosity and desire. And the dialogue and camera work are simple, gracefully fragmented and completely involving.

Other sequences, when the TV crew goes to a taxi garage and into the ghetto on stories, also capture the gray limits of middle class life. But in general, Wexler fails to render these people except in contrast. Sequences where the cameraman and soundman are alone are uniformly boring, incredible, as in the opening sequence when they painstakingly document an auto accident. including the groans of a hurt woman, before calling an ambulance; or both.

Not so the rural poor. There is a brilliant flashback sequence where the boy is being carefully indoctrinated in male chauvinism by his now-absent father as they walk away across a flower-strewn West Virginia field; and others. It seems that some kind of personal nostalgia or sentimentality, plus hard documentary experience guides Wexler in these scenes while he lacks sensitivity and understanding in treating the middle class.

But he must be credited with attempting this difficult discrimination between different levels of working people. Many of us are "middle class," and we are without any true cultural reflection. Hollywood has historically attempted to contrast only the rich and the poor.

Similarly Wexler's treatment of the media. There has never been a great deal of love lost between Hollywood and television, and that situation has not been much improved by the fact that Hollywood now makes the majority of its money from the sale of films, and more recently the production of films for TV. But that animosity has usually been expressed in films through broad slapstick of what is supposed to be TV's unique vulgarity: clearly a case of pot and kettle. Wexler does much more. He excoriates television for its commercialism, inhuman sensationalism and conservatism, and unwillingness to really serve the people.

Which necessarily brings me to his treatment of the movement: The Black movement in a short sequence where the cameraman is confronted by a roomful of patiently, articulately angry nationalists: the white movement in background presentation of the convention challenge demonstrations.

Wexler hates TV and throughout the film maintains a consistently unfriendly distance on the pigs. One of the early sequences concerns the TV crew filming a National Guard war game practice in suppressing different types of demonstrations. In the convention demonstration footage, Chicago police are shown trapping, beating and gassing demonstrators. In one sequence, real-life demonstrators are trapped in a sidestreet under a viaduct and real-life gassed by real-life pigs. One of the film's production assistants is heard clearly shouting, "Watch out, Haskell, it's real!"

One of the Newsreel crews that were shooting in the convention challenge were astounded when a 35-mm Hollywood crew did two complete takes of a scene, using the demonstrators in front of the Hilton as a backdrop; it was surreal.

The nationalist attacks on television are surreally coherent and articulate; it is realistically impossible that such neatly reasoned arguments would be made with such restraint in the dramatic situation he has constructed.

The sequence, all tightly cut close-ups into the camera, doesn't even splice with the preceding scene's naturalism—a young Black threatening the soundman, others jiving him as a "Hunkey flunkey." And using the convention challenge, with its passion, blood and pathos, as a scenic backdrop for a stereotypical search for a lost boy, is insensitive to the point of insensibility. Wexler exploits the movement, white and Black, in ways he would never exploit the people filmically or dramatically.

He finally fails to get the film together. Not only is there no internal logic for including the nationalist or demonstration footage, there is insufficient integration of the other parts of the rambling drama.

The completely arbitrary auto accident as an ending, is a dead giveaway to the fact that Wexler simply got in over his head and was unable to figure out where his characters and dramatic dynamics were going to go next, and cut it. Except for a final sequence in which the camera pans away from the burning wreck, and up to a platform. The soundtrack is the voices of demonstrators from a previous scene shouting to each other as the NBC television truck passes, "The whole world is watching, the whole world is watching:" pan to Wexler and camera, panning to cinematically "confront" the audience. Ecch.

But as the movement has learned, real confrontation is not only complex and difficult, but in the end, not really where it's at. The problem is one of power. And the clarity in practical terms that is necessary to achieve it, be it political and economic power for the people, or the ideological power to make a film That genuinely pulls together one's own and the people's experience and renders them imaginatively, in images that compel and impel the audience.

And Haskell just hasn't got it together. His nostalgia for rural poverty as some kind of human alternative to necessarily forcefully making a life in the modern world of cities is right off. He has allowed himself to be guided almost entirely by feeling, unaided by thought, and he has thus failed to achieve even genuine feeling, in concrete and practical terms. His characters are intermittently believable, their situations seem abstract, and the force of their drama palely diffuses. As the crisis of our country's imperialist position in the World, and the identical crisis in our national life—economic, political, cultural and moral—continues to deepen, and the people, especially Black people and young white people, continue to turn onto themselves, we will probably see more and more of this kind of film, and of "Easy Rider."

But as history catches up to America and the people turn on to the fact that what they do is history, that they make history, whatever it is, art and especially film will have to work their way more intelligently and sensitively through reality, as much to retain its magic potency as to help the people liberate themselves.

And at 47, after a couple of decades of sentimentally making his way through the pig media making deals, Haskell just ain't ready.

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