

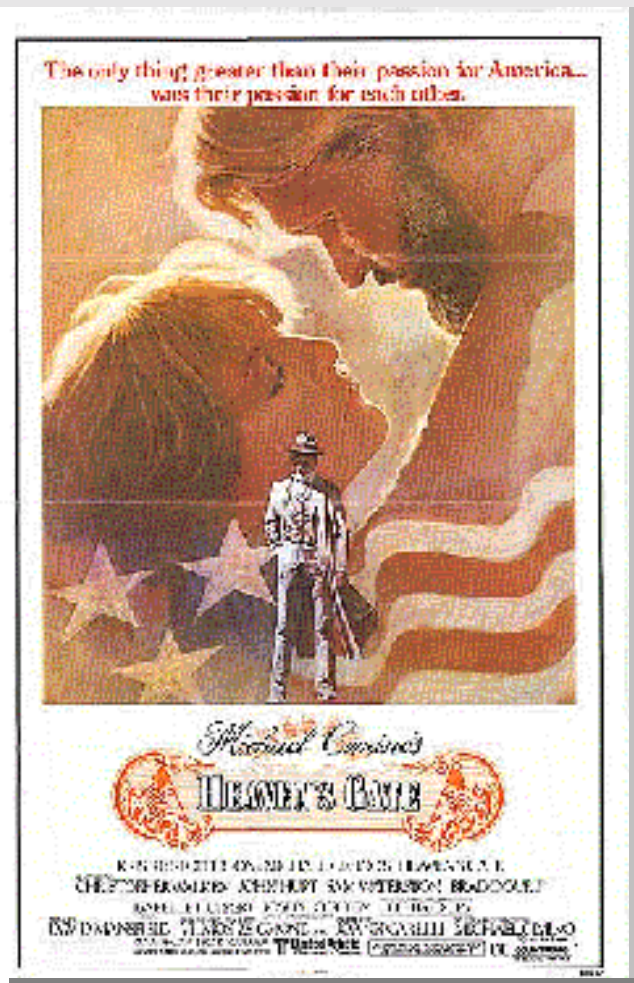
“Michael Cimino’s

# HEAVEN’S GATE (1980)

A Re-Appraisal”

Chapter extracts from  
completed research  
as submitted on  
graduation from the  
London Film School

by Alan Taylor, 1990.  
Updated 2006

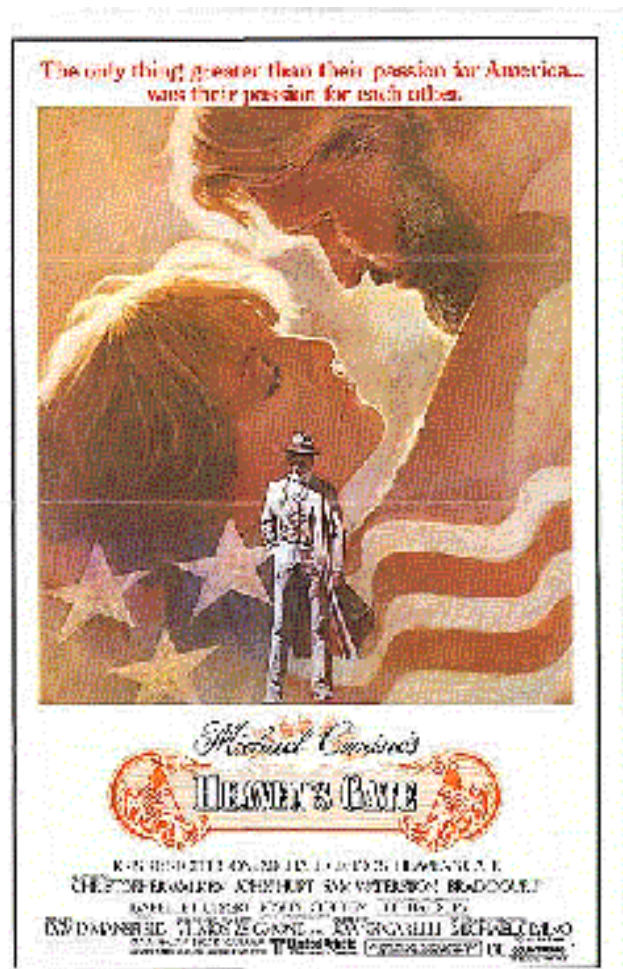


“I like the  
circle image.  
Life seems to  
be an infernal circle which gives us  
vertigo...to the point where you  
don't know where you are anymore”.

*Michael Cimino*

“So long as the supply of land could be considered practically limitless, the theory of the safety valve could be invoked without risk to prove the uniquely fortunate destiny of America.

But if opportunity, happiness, and social harmony and even liberty itself depended upon the presence of free land beyond the frontier, what became of these values in the event that the available land should all prove to be limited in extent...?”



Henry Nash Smith  
Virgin Land, 1952

## HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

### 2006 INTRODUCTION

The 3 hr. 45 min version of HG was pulled from distribution in November 1980. A shortened 148 min version was later released in April 1981, but failed miserably at the U.S box-office...By 1981 American Film, though, was already reflective on Cimino, that “his real offence was openly doing it all for art...but the impulse is basic is film’s allure. If others had not yielded to it we would not have *Intolerance*, *Greed*, *Napoleon*, *Citizen Kane*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *2001*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Barry Lyndon* and *1900*...”

Following positive acclaims Cannes, Venice and then in Paris, the full-length version was shown in the U.K. in 1983 - at the BFI and then for an 8-week engagement at the Plaza, Regent Street...



In subsequent years the full-length version was lost to the big screen but did appear on HBO and regularly on the Z Channel in Los Angeles. It wasn't until 2000 that it was finally released - along with David Mansfield's film score - on video.

Stephen Bach's 1985 book on the production of the film was itself turned by the author into a documentary and this emerged in 2004/5 just as the newly restored version of *Heaven's Gate* (1980) by UA/MGM archivist John Kirk was finally made available to a new generation of filmgoers at film festivals across the world throughout 2005.

All such details are now readily available on the Internet, (ie: Andrew Saunders and Michael Cohen, 21. October 2004, <http://www.thescene.com.au/hype>) - which wasn't in public existence in 1983 when the writer first saw the film in London, nor, in 1990 when he submitted the original analysis of the film on his graduation from the London Film School.



What follows is a shortened version of that original research work.

## OPENING 'HEAVEN'S GATE' (1980)

*"...The ravings of a lunatic, pathetic trash on an enormous budget...when we first meet Walken we watch him commit a brutal cold-blooded murder; then we are expected to sympathise with his character. That's the sort of putrid morality that suffuse this movie..."*

Garfield, Westerns, 1982.

*"Not a wholly satisfactory piece of work...lacking in pace and humour and being obscure and oblique, qualities not appreciated by devotees of the Western genre..."*



Script Feedback, 20th Century Fox, 1978 in Bach, 1985

*"...The film points out the good guy and the bad guy, and if that isn't clear you get the music cues hammering home the point. Life is more complex than that. Similarly, films shouldn't have to be simplistic or simpleminded. The story doesn't run on straight lines anymore. Films are meant to be different things to different people, like poems..."*

Michael Cimino quoted by Ernest Shaw in *Making Films* 1969

*"Reading a Michael Cimino screenplay is a very deceptive thing, because what you see when you read it isn't necessarily what Cimino sees..."*

Stephen Bach, 1985

*"They cite the Australian or Cuban cinema to point out the absence of ambition in our filmmakers...but they are the first to raise their fists when one of their own emerges with a new form..."*

Michael Cimino, *Positif*, 1981



# HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

## ABSTRACT

The ambition of this dissertation is to re-claim Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980) from the prevailing hell of critical disfavour.

The **opening chapter** provides a general account of the film's critical 'reception' and establish those areas of concern that made it virtually un-releasable in America.



**Chapter Two** puts these concerns into context by addressing more directly Cimino's earlier move to Hollywood from New York and more particularly his stated ambitions as a director. Reference will be made here to his highly successful feature, *The Deerhunter* (1978) and the unique structural devices said to be incorporated into that film and which worked against the grain of conventional Hollywood paradigm.

This will foreshadow **Chapter Three**, where *Heaven's Gate* (1980) itself becomes more fully investigated – in terms of its own narrative challenges, visual design and production histories.

Thereafter **Chapter Four** focuses on Cimino's latter work on *Year of the Dragon* (1985) and what has become known as post-HG Hollywood. Linking all critiques is how the narrative structure and thematic concerns of Cimino's films reflect upon prevailing American cultural myths and political beliefs.

By reflecting upon a range of critical responses both invariably negative and reassuringly positive, a steadier and more useful account may then be forthcoming of *Heaven's Gate* (1980), still infamous for being one of the greatest commercial losses in Hollywood history.



## 1. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

The **opening chapter** provides a general account of the film's critical 'reception' and establish those areas of concern that made it virtually un-releasable in America.

*"Something was wrong, I couldn't hear anything. they stayed there mesmerized by the spectacle, the enormity of the miscalculation, the perfection that money can buy, the caring it can't. They were stunned into submission"* (Bach, 1985)

As the following analysis will hope to show, Cimino's intention was to break the traditional hold over storytelling.



*"An epic vision isn't worth much if you can't tell a story...what's really amazing is that all the crucial scenes seem to be missing..."* (Ansen, Newsweek).

It should be safe to assume...that the shortfalls in Cimino's film should not be attributed to whatever difficulties encountered in the actual production of the film. The problems are in the script and located in the director's own conception...of narrative...

*"...not a wholly satisfactory piece of work...lacking in pace and humour and being obscure and oblique, qualities not appreciated by devotees of the Western genre..."* (American Film, Nov 1980).

All the critics were agape at his naïvity in narrative storytelling yet none started with the assumption that the structure that did emerge may have been a deliberation - to uncover and expose an aspect of American frontier history which confused audience's cultural assumptions by way of a narrative which itself served to counter their expectations in terms of traditional Hollywood conventions. Perhaps this was Cimino's naïvity...

*"I don't believe in words and dialogue.  
They are quickly useless.  
One only gets near people when  
taking the time to live with them".*

Michael Cimino

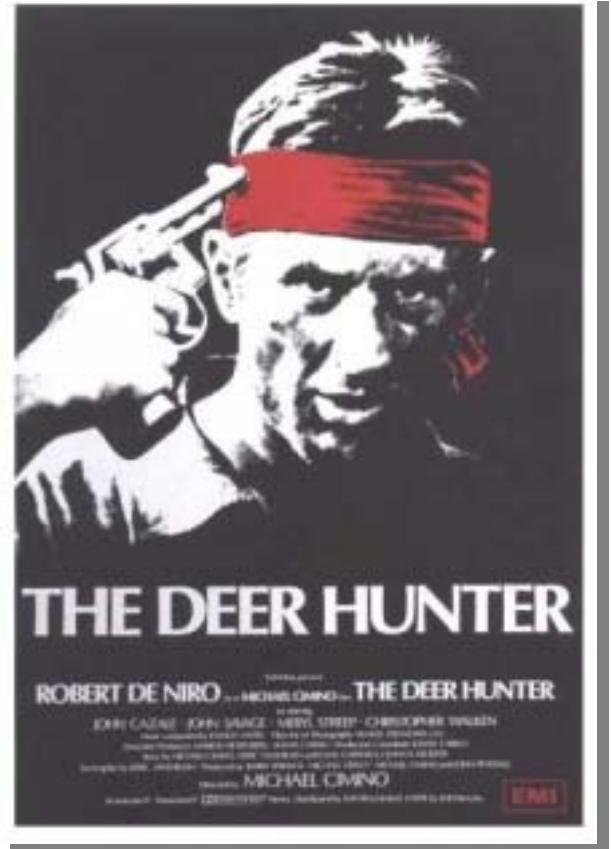
## 2. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Two** addresses more directly Cimino's earlier move to Hollywood from New York...

“Nick, talk to me...” *The Deerhunter* (1978)

...Angela and Steve advance in a complete circle during the wedding ritual itself - also insisted upon in the script and described as a ‘symbol of eternity’ - and similarly, when Mike/de Niro later returns from Vietnam and is told that Steve is in fact alive, he circles his friends slowly, almost in conscious deliberation...

“*There is no precedent for Cimino's structural experiments in the Deerhunter...by a conscious pattern of doubling, correspondences and ironies within the acts...*” (Andrews, *The Economist*).



Other motifs that associate the two worlds of Vietnam and America include the appearance of the bouncers at the wedding with their counterparts in the gambling dens of Saigon; the film opens, in fact, with a move by the mineworkers from their blast furnaces to showers and this is replicated thereafter in Vietnam as they move from burning villages to salvation in the river...

Even in *The Deerhunter* script itself, Cimino concerns himself with the degree to which dialogue itself can be a conveyor of accurate meanings. Angela's mother cries to the priest, confused about the marriage of her pregnant daughter: “Can you explain it? Can anyone explain it?”, and Linda/Streep says later to Nick/Walken, “I guess what goes through your mind comes out your mouth”...

The point which focuses the personal experience with greater national concerns about identity occurs at the military hospital where Nick/Walken has been recovering from his brutal imprisonment. He is approached by a doctor who asks if his name is Nikamor Chevotarevich and isn't it Russian? Nick resist a sardonic smile and explains quietly that, no, it is an American name...

By the time Cimino was handed four Oscars for the *Deerhunter* (1978) he was already three months into the preparation of his first screenplay of 1972 - ‘Paydirt’- now entitled ‘Heaven's Gate’.

The substantial and surprising success of *The Deerhunter* (1978) confirmed in the eyes of the Untied Artist executives their ‘catch’ and they were duly looking forward to further financial and critical rewards in the coming year with their Western ‘locomotive’...

### 3. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Three/ 1** : narrative challenges, visual design and production histories

CULLY

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what next?

AVERILL

Time to get out, Cully. Head west

CULLY

I already been there.

-

*“The implications of range wars have been avoided. A western about land hunger in all its brutality and greed would challenge much more directly than the present trend in anti-heroic Westerns many treasured aspects of the myth...”* (Calder).

We have already noted how in *The Deerhunter* (1978), Cimino employs an elaborate system of echoes and contrasts that serve to embroider his narrative ‘blocks’ (Wood), inviting comparisons to be made across the narrative's subtext. In similar fashion, HG is webbed by a subtle network of like correspondences in imagery, choreography and dialogue that inform the film’s main themes...

In her essay on *The Deerhunter* (1978), Pauline Kael describes the wedding scene and celebratory dance in terms of, “sweeping movements with detached clarity - we’re storing up memories..”, and this is Cimino’s adopted approach during the Prologue of HG where the choreography of individuals and groups acquire thematic depth through subtle repetition. Averill/Kristofferson, for example, runs against the opposing movements of carriages just as in the range war itself he counters the prevailing forces of history...

Circular movements...abound in the film, but not as visual embroidery but as embodiments of the narrative itself, mirroring the internal contradictions in the characters themselves... motifs and grand configurations are woven within a narrative design that informs more local sequences that give coherence and body to the violent wrenching turns that engulf the characters and audiences alike...Nate’s/Walken’s fate is typical of other narrative encirclements that close in on characters when they can no longer avoid the implications of decisions made and actions taken, or, as in the case of Averill, not taken...The train, the great symbol of industrial progress thrusts itself into the virgin but inhospitable wilderness yet contains all the racial and class discrepancies which such ‘progress’ it embodies assumes to eradicate...The on-going relationship between the three characters revolves around the same single location and this follows the similar pattern of repetitions throughout the film whereby the same location is witness to the tortured revolutions in human behaviour...



### 3. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Three/2:** narrative challenges, visual design and production histories

Cimino's radical narrative structure, therefore, flies against the traditional hermeneutic conventions and expectations of Classic Hollywood - particularly as it applies, in of all genres, to the Western:

*"I encountered the same difficulties with The Deerhunter. The American public are accustomed to have characters solely developed by dialogue more than behavior. They want to know everything about a situation, they listen to a quick exposition which provides information about the heroes. This is one of our national characteristics...For me, on the contrary, that one understands a character at the end of a film, having understood the full measure of his evolution.."* (Cimino, Positif, 1981).



The clash is between the hermeneutic thrust of the plot - mercenaries attack townspeople - and the involved sequences that explore the subtle inflections between characters in between. It's as though we have a chamber piece injected in the middle of a bloody range war that's approaching on the wheels of a thundering Pullman locomotive...

*"The immigrants themselves lost their ideals. They become as cruel as the exploiters. Already emerging is a new class of collaborators who seem to imitate the invaders... The circle closes, the ambiguity is everywhere present"* Cimino.

As entrepreneurial whore, woodland elf, prospective farmer, even cattle merchant, Ella is perhaps the richest contradiction in the film...for Averill she embodies the future potential of his youthful ideals...while Nate, another traitor to his class, offers her stability and commitment in the form of marriage and a home on the range...

CANTON

You were hired to enforce the law.  
And we are the law

If as Wood, following Barthes, suggests, Hollywood narrative equates with "ideological reinforcement", then Cimino's own chosen innovative devices are themselves analogous to the efforts of the immigrant to counter the dominant ideological and social mechanisms that Canton's own "rules" enforce.

### 3. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Three/3:** narrative challenges, visual design and production histories

*“The Western tradition expresses our conception of existence...it begins here with a line all through and finishes there. The Indians do not recognise this mathematical progression, they live in a spiritual continuum...”* Cimino.



The principles at stake, both in the story accounted for by the film, and in the tussle over the film itself round on similar ideological concerns - over narrative, culture, and the definition of America itself - who, that is, gets the flag?

CANTON

You are trespassing. We could have you shot for this.  
You offset every effort we make to protect our  
property and that of members of your own class.

Canton's final triumph effectively endorses the rights of power over morality, history over experience, thus countering the alternative myth of that 'newfoundland' that heralds new beginnings free from the social inhibitions and political, ideological constraints of a dead past...Cimino's HG takes the familiar theme of westward expansion to its logical extreme and confronts thereby the profound contradictions highlighted by Marx and others that lurk in its guiding philosophic and political premis. Cimino likewise employs a radical narrative structure which itself challenges the conditioned expectations of his audience...

*“Hollywood films are supposed to take you by the hand and guide you safely, step by cause-and-effect step to the final resolution...Whether one attributes the elliptical nature of Cimino's narrative to oversight or to deliberate strategy, HG seems to me one of the few authentically innovative Hollywood films”* (Wood).

Canton's victory re-establishes the dominant ideology both within the films narratology and, more damningly, beyond it - to include the traditions both of the Western genre and the hermeneutic code itself.

*“They cite the Australian or Cuban cinema to point out the absence of ambition in our filmmakers...but they are the first to raise their fists when one of their own emerges with a new form...”* Michael Cimino

### 3. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Three/4:** narrative challenges, visual design and production histories

The overall aim of this thesis has been to counter the weighty criticism of HG by insisting on the structural cohesiveness that informs its innovative narrative and by referring directly to the director's stated claims to beak Hollywood's dominant paradigm...

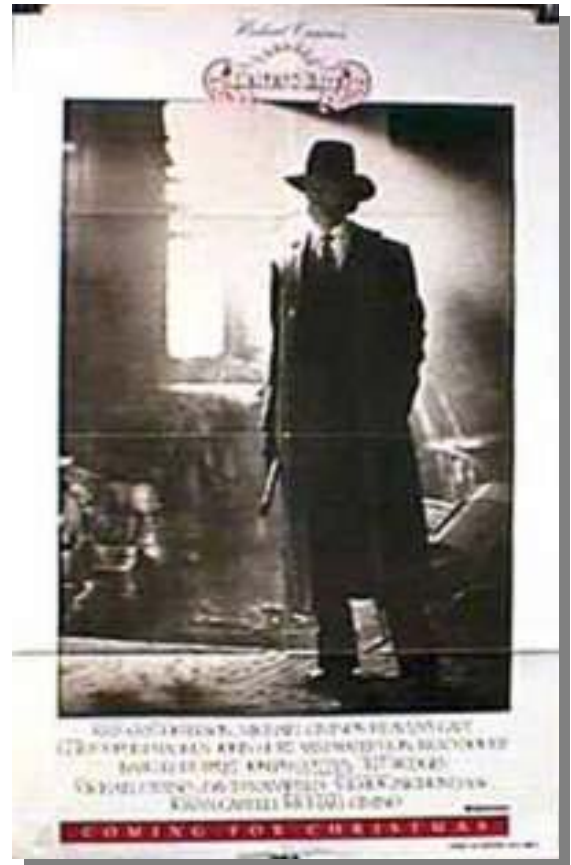
In choosing the event of the Johnson County War as an objective correlative he was able to combine this obsession with a subject matter that itself seemed to undercut the cherished myths which the traditional western format had provided for the mainstream American audience...

The film focuses on a crucial historical time in American history when the nation itself underwent a perceptual change in its self-image. Henry-Nash Smith (1950) notes how, for example, by 1990 more than 35% of all farmers had become tenants and that,

*“the agrarian utopia in the garden of the world was destroyed, or rather, aborted, by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist. These were in turn expressions of larger forces at work in American society after the Civil War - the machine, the devices of corporation finance, and the power of big business over Congress...”*  
(Nash-Smith, 1950, p. 223)

To its credit, Cimino's film reveals those unsavoury aspects of this point and attempts to reflect upon those democratic ideals which were said to have been lost in the era of Manifest Destiny.

As an event itself, though, the film was already, in 1980, an anachronism - more in keeping with the questioning cynicism of the early 1970s when it was originally written as *Paydirt* than in Reagan's America when it was eventually smuggled through United Artists and to celluloid...

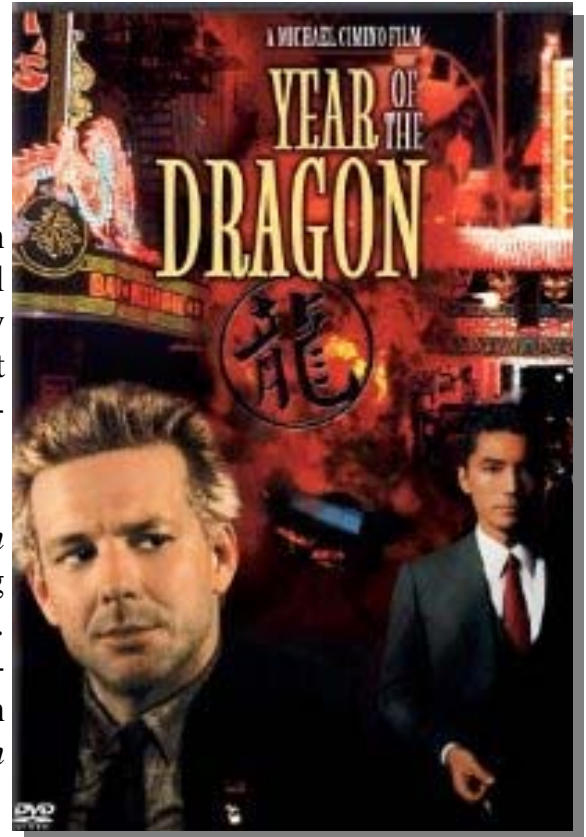


## 4. HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

**Chapter Four:** Post-HG Hollywood, counter evaluations, and *Year of the Dragon* (1985)

In his 1985 book that detailed the woeful production history of HG, Stephen Bach wryly noted that of all the leading protagonists involved in its making, only one remained employed in 1985 by the company that folded as a direct result of its dismal returns: Michael Cimino.

During that year he had made *Year of the Dragon* (1985) for Dino de Laurentis and the film was being distributed to some success by United Artists/MGM. It prompted a review of the HG debacle since it confirmed yet again, though in a different context, an obsession, “*with immigrant communities and even with the definition of what it is to be an American*” (The Economist, Aug 1985)...



Howevermuch his attention to logistics seemed in keeping with acceptable practice, the narrative and character portrayal of the film’s ostensible hero, Stanley White/Mickey Rourke still played against the grain of narrative conventions. The film posits the conflict between Vietnam veteran Detective White (Polish/American) and racketeer Joey Tai/John Lone (Chinese American). White begins the film as an outright racist bigot whose marriage is falling apart while Tai, by contrast, is a devoted family man of community standing.

It’s the push-and-pull between these two contrasting characters, the nominal hero who lacks heroic stature and a villain with heroic qualities that challenges and makes awkward reading of the genre recipe...“*I wanted people in this film to want to fight to like the good guy and fight to dislike the bad guy, which is the opposite of what they are normally called to do...*” Cimino, Economist, Aug 1985...

Cimino’s film once again continues a strain of work which confronts the American audience with the contradictions and ambiguities of the national identity.....Once again, ironic juxtapositions in characters, doubling images and complex leit-motifs in image and structure are all employed to create a mise-en-scene where established prejudices and expectations are challenged and continually undercut.

In keeping with Cimino’s decaled conviction that a film is a journey and that characters must evolve rather just exist as a given, so White/Rourke ends the film as its most ardent supporter of the rights of immigrant labour and the values of the Chinese community. His final embrace of his adopted Chinese/American interloper/Ariane confirms the film’s final celebration of the richness and multiplicity of America - all to the strains of Mahler’s *Resurrection* and a Chinese cabaret song...

## HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

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- Cinema 1981
- The Economist, Feb 23rd 1985 & August 31st 1985
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- Making Films, Feb 1969
- Newsweek, Nov 1980
- Positif, 1981
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- Time Magazine, Location report, Sept 3rd, 1979
- Variety, Nov 23rd, 1980



## HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

### Addendum to the Bibliography (1)

For anyone searching for critical analysis of the film...Wood, Bliss and de Courdeso have written what are perhaps the most incisive accounts.

For the technician, contemporary accounts were:

- American Cinematographer (Nov, Dec, 1980)
- American Film (Nov 1980)
- Films Illustrated (Jan 1981)

The first is the most exhaustive, including a full interview with Cimino, an article by guest camera operator Herb Lightman (!), and even an account by Vilmos Zsigmond who details the thinking behind the adopted visual style - a determined wish to duplicate the photographs of the time.



Thus the negatives and shot film all underwent ‘tone flashing’ down to establish a low contrast pastel sepia look to, “create a romantic, nostalgic look...”. In many ways, this is precisely what is achieved, the canvas of browns and whites combine with the smoke of the Sweetwater location shooting is speckled with tints of strong primary colours all of which contrast ironically and recall the vibrancy of the opening prologue.

Bliss has been alert to how such visual style contributes to the story since, “*by shooting through dust-clouded atmospheres which soften and tone the image to pastel vagueness whose colour seems a perfect corollary to the kind of images we summon from memory, Zsigmond gives us in every shot stunning chromos whose tenderness perfectly evokes the bittersweet sensations the film’s story means to create*”. Almost to whet the appetite, a plethora of like stills accompanied the extensive article...

Zsigmond’s professional pride in shooting the record 1.5 million feet of film without a scratch - and the due paid to his director (“it is his vision up there on screen”) ironically suggests he blissful naïvity of the Sweetwater immigrants before the on-coming critical bloodbath that was to befall the film a few months later...

‘*Life*’ magazine also ran an article replete with glossy still from the film and an account of the story which, with a n eye to favoured conventions, ominously noted that “the meaning of the film may be more ambiguous...”. At the same time, Rex McGee’s piece for ‘*American Film*’ (Dec 1980) was a longer, more detailed history of the making of the film, the script and the director’s filmmaking credentials. An even fuller timetabled account of the troubled pre-production history, from script to film emerged finally in ‘*Film Illustrated*’, 1981.

# HEAVEN'S GATE (1980)

## Addendum to the Bibliography (2)

No viewing of the film or, for that matter, understanding of Hollywood itself in the late 1970s, is complete without reference to Stephen Bach's own insider account *Final Cut: Dreams and Disasters in the Making of Heaven's Gate* (1985).

It speaks for itself, being an often ironic and understandably self-serving account covering the writer's plunge into Hollywood executive life as joint Head of Production at Untied Artists.

He accounts ruefully that his first executive decision was to make *Heaven's Gate* (1980) - without nailing Cimino to a contract.

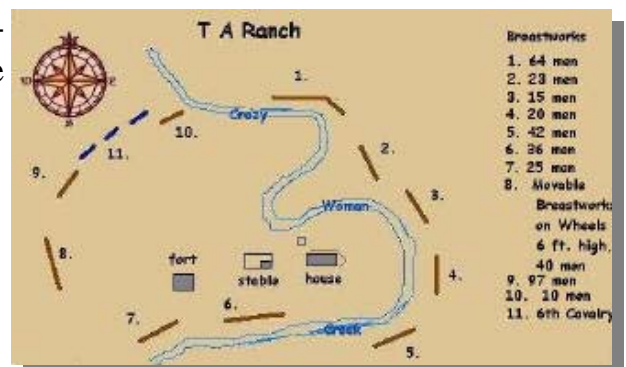
The actual history of the Johnson County War is more elusive, though internet sites now provide a wider range of sources and articles not available when the film was made.

Readers can find useful accounts in Jenny Calder's *There Must Be A Lone Ranger* (1974) and TIME Life's *The Gunslingers* - one of a series that accounts for the Westward expansion of the 19th century. Calder provides insights into the harsh winters of the early 1890s, the local political situation in Johnson County and its bearing on the national scene in general.

*The Gunslingers* includes photographs of Champion (top) Averill and Ella Watson, and the honoured members of the Stockgrowers Association. These and more are all readily available through Internet sites...

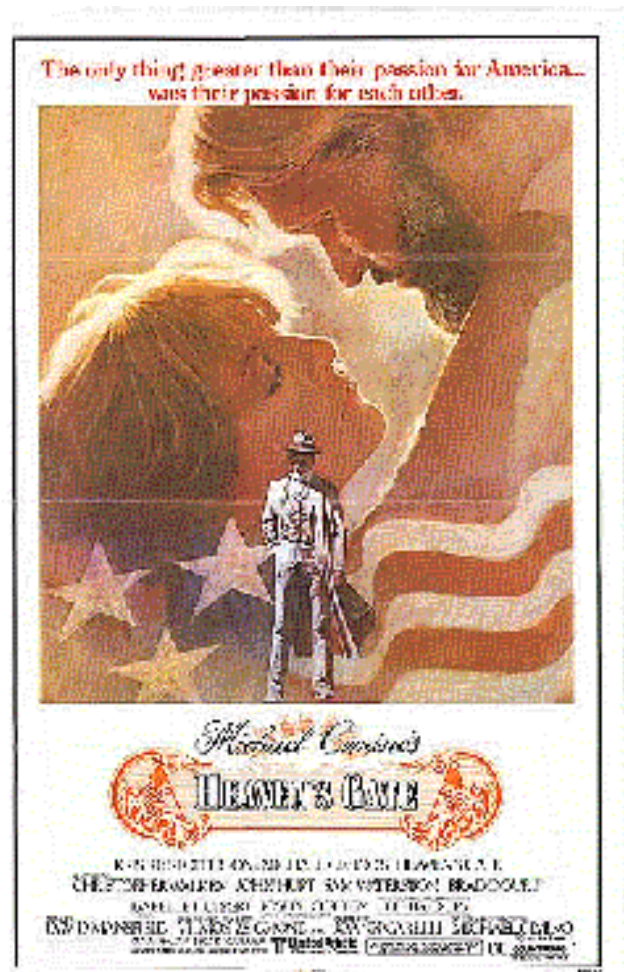
On seeing the state of Nate Champion's bullet riddled body, the local doctor collapsed and died of apoplexy. They were buried together...

As for the film's central protagonists, Averill was in fact a local postmaster, Ella the local brothel madam, yet both were hung side-by-side a full two years before the actual invasion. Their son witnessed their lynching, was shot and left for dead. He was taken in by local Indians, fought in the Boxer rebellion in China and lived into the 1950s...



## CONCLUDING

“The most popular stories achieve an unambiguous conclusion to the tension between wilderness and civilization; less popular yet aesthetically successful westerns equivocate not only the resolution but the terms of the conflict as well.



Originality is only permissible in popular formulae only so long as it strengthens and extends without transgressing the anticipated conventions...”

*Robert Self*

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