# Michael Cimino, director of *The Deer Hunter* and *Heaven's Gate*, dead at 77

**David Walsh**
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American filmmaker and screenwriter Michael Cimino died in Los Angeles on July 2 at the age of 77. Cimino is best known as the director of two films that had quite different fates, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which won numerous Academy Awards, and *Heaven's Gate* (1980), which was denounced by leading critics, lost a great deal of money and severely damaged Cimino's career.

The ferocious, politically motivated attack on *Heaven's Gate*, a drama about class conflict in the American West in the late 19th century, marked a watershed in the history of American filmmaking. Industry complaints about Cimino's over-spending and general "excess," coming on top of difficulties surrounding the production of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), directed by Francis Ford Coppola, became part of the rationale for "reining in" independent directors and turning Hollywood into what it has now almost fully become, a platform for turning out politically inoffensive, noisy "blockbusters."

In the wake of the controversy surrounding *Heaven's Gate*, Cimino was able to direct only four more feature films (*Year of the Dragon*, *The Sicilian*, *Desperate Hours* and *Sunchaser*), the final one two decades ago.

Born in New York City in 1939, Cimino grew up on Long Island and attended Michigan State and Yale universities. After graduate school, Cimino went to work on Madison Avenue in New York in advertising, where he eventually directed television commercials. He moved to Los Angeles in 1971 and began writing screenplays. One of them came to Clint Eastwood's attention and Cimino was able to direct *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), a relatively undistinguished and violent heist film, featuring Eastwood and Jeff Bridges.

Cimino next took on an ambitious subject, the Vietnam war and working class life in America, in *The Deer Hunter*. The film follows three young steelworkers from western Pennsylvania (Robert De Niro, Christopher Walken and John Savage) and their physical or moral destruction in the Vietnam war.

The scenes set in Vietnam, where the trio are tortured by the "Vietcong," are the weakest. As Robin Wood noted, in a generally perceptive essay, "Two Films by Michael Cimino:" "The film, of course, presents the war as a terrible thing, a trauma, but it was terrible because 'our boys' suffered so much. As in almost every other Hollywood film about Vietnam … political analysis is totally repressed and the possibility that it might be regarded as a war of American aggression/imperialism never permitted to surface."

However, there are other, striking elements in *The Deer Hunter*. First of all, it is one of the few films produced by the so-called New Hollywood that took the conditions and sentiments of the American working class seriously. Cimino's work is unusual in that it adopts a respectful and genuinely sympathetic attitude toward everyday life in Clairton, Pennsylvania (although the film was actually shot elsewhere), even its backward, religious, conventional, patriotic features, while ineluctably leading the viewer toward the conclusion that this is all going to end in catastrophe, through no individual fault or weakness.

Whether Cimino was fully cognizant of it or not, the horrors of the Vietnam war are associated in the film with the brutalities and confusions of American life, everything ugly, careless and corrupt about it. That the steel industry was on the eve of being virtually wiped out in western Pennsylvania only adds poignancy.

In *The Deer Hunter*'s most perceptive sequences, the chasm between the sincerity and essential decency of the characters, on the one hand, and the fate America has in store for them, at home or in Vietnam, on the other, is almost terrifying.

Not everything is successful here, by any means. The suggestion that various forms of psychological and sexual repression—including the suppression of the feelings that the leading male characters (played by De Niro and Walken) have one for another—are, in some sense, driving forces in the events, is simply misplaced. Nonetheless, this is a disturbing film that cannot, as Wood suggested, "be read as an endorsement of contemporary America."

On the contrary, the critic argued, in contrast to the picture of America found in the classic films of John Ford, for example, Cimino's film offers "the hysteria into which the Clairton wedding celebration is imminently in danger of collapsing: in place of harmony and unification, one finds incipient chaos, tension, disruption. The ominous proximity of Vietnam (the three men are to leave for the war the next day) is only one of the sources of this hysteria, albeit the decisive one."

As for the singing of God Bless America, which concludes the film, Wood noted, "the only America the film has validated is that of Clairton—a community of eastern European immigrants which the dominant America has virtually destroyed. On whatever level the film is read, it is clear that if the song affirms anything, it is something already perceived as lost."

On the strength of the success of *The Deer Hunter*, Cimino undertook an even more ambitious project in *Heaven's Gate*: to represent America at the dawn of the modern age, the era of the emergence of giant corporate interests. As his framework, he used the Johnson County War, which was fought in Wyoming between large cattle companies and small settlers and culminated in a pitched battle between the companies' hired killers and a group of small farmers and ranchers in April 1892. The mercenaries were only rescued by the intervention of the federal government in the form of the Sixth Cavalry.

Cimino transformed the beleaguered farmers into a group of Central and Eastern European settlers, drawn to the area by cheap land. Reduced to near starvation, the immigrants resort to stealing individual cattle. The Stockgrowers' Association determines to exterminate them with the help of hired gunmen, paid $50 for every "thief" shot or hung. The wealthy cattle barons have made a list of 125 settlers to be murdered.

Jim Averill (Kris Kristofferson) is a federal marshal in Johnson County. He is involved with Ella Watson (Isabelle Huppert), a brothel keeper, who accepts cash or cattle as payment. Ella is also in love with Nate Champion (Walken again), who works for the cattle companies as an enforcer.

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(Cimino borrowed these names from individuals involved in the Johnson County War, but little else adheres to the immediate historical facts.)

Frank Canton (Sam Waterston), the leading figure in the Stockgrowers Associations, is a vicious, cold-blooded defender of wealth. In one of the film's early scenes, Canton explains to the members of the Association, "This is no longer a poor man's country. These emigrants only pretend to be farmers. But we know many of them to be thieves and anarchists openly preying on our ranges. … I had a very satisfactory talk with the governor [of Wyoming] yesterday. He asserted in the most positive terms his wholehearted support, as well as that of the Senate and the House of Representatives and the president of these United States."

When the gunmen invade Johnson County and begin their work of assassinating those on the "death list," which includes Ella, the immigrants discuss and debate how they should respond. There are voices urging compromise (some have even suggested handing over those on the list to the killers), but the most outraged and militant newcomers choose to take up arms against the companies. "They [the companies] advanced the idea that poor people have nothing to say in the affairs of this country." The final confrontation between the hired assassins and the immigrant settlers, with whom Averill belatedly joins forces, is a prolonged, savage battle. When, early in the film, one of the locals observes to Averill, "It's gettin' dangerous to be poor in this country," he replies, "It always was."

When the 3 hour and 40 minute version of *Heaven's Gate* opened in New York City, almost two weeks to the day after the election of Ronald Reagan as president, it was savaged by the leading critics. There are certain similarities in this to the assault on *Free State of Jones* currently under way.

The film played for only one week before it was withdrawn from the theaters. A two and a half hour version opened in April 1981.

In a May 1, 1981 review of the shortened version ("The Lynching of 'Heaven's Gate,'"), the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, described the attacks:

"*Heaven's Gate*, the film by Academy Award-winning director Michael Cimino, has been bombarded with abuse and outright vilification since its new version was released last week.

"The *New York Times* called Cimino's film a 'desperately muddled compromise' lacking both 'substance and purpose.' *Time* magazine denounced him for his alleged 'notion of Hollywood Marxism: the poor are better than the rich because they are more photogenic.'

"And the *Washington Post* proclaimed *Heaven's Gate* a 'humiliating white elephant' and 'grotesque folly,' branding Cimino as a 'simpleton overwhelmed by the discovery of revisionist history' who achieves only a 'peculiarly outmoded form of caricature.' …"

The *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby had been extraordinarily foul in his original review in November 1980. He termed the film an "unqualified disaster," asserting that "Mr. Cimino's approach to his subject is so predictable that watching the film is like a forced, four-hour walking tour of one's own living room." More to the point, Canby snidely commented, "The point of *Heaven's Gate* is that the rich will murder for the earth they don't inherit, but … this is not enough to carry three hours and 45 minutes of screentime."

As the *Bulletin* correctly noted in 1981, "The heart of the criticism of *Heaven's Gate* … is the subject matter itself.

"They [the critics] are enraged that such a great amount of talent, time and resources should be expended in accurately recreating a bloody chapter in the struggle against American capitalism."

This argument is certainly supported by a viewing of the restored, 3 hour and 40 minute version now available.

Whatever criticisms one might make of the work, the verbal assault, including claims that *Heaven's Gate* was one of the worst films ever made, was so absurdly out of proportion that only ideological and political considerations could have motivated it.

*Heaven's Gate* stands up today as a significant, and often fascinating and moving work. The early scenes of Averill's graduation from Harvard in 1870, where the pious Reverend Doctor (the marvelous Joseph Cotten) lectures the departing students on their responsibility to "educate the nation," succinctly sets out the ideological atmosphere, as the *Bulletin* reviewers observed in 1981, at "the intellectual center for an American ruling class which, five years after the Civil War, was convinced that it was destined to be the master of the world."

There is extraordinary and "infectious energy" (in Robin Wood's phrase) in such scenes as Ella's roller-skating birthday celebration attended by the entire town, one of the means by which Cimino sought to suggest that another America than the one controlled by huge corporate interests was possible.

There are mistakes and excesses and languors as well. Cimino perhaps deluded himself at times, confusing the demands of his personal demons for artistic perfectionism. Reportedly, one brief sequence that lasts a minute or two on screen took up an entire day of shooting and 52 takes. A performer in the film told the WSWS, Cimino "had a brilliant idea about Eastern Europeans coming west and the Johnson County War, but he took all the spontaneity out of the acting by doing twenty takes of everything."

At any rate, *Heaven's Gate* was not attacked for its weaknesses—or, at least, these were wielded in an entirely dishonest manner, as part of the general assault on the film's great strength: its careful, clear-eyed, fierce condemnation of modern capitalist America and its brutal methods of rule. Cimino's work substantiates, in no uncertain terms, the view that the wealthy in America, in Trotsky's words, are "in essence ruthlessly rude, predatory, in the full sense of the word, and criminal."

This was not what the upper middle class, moving rapidly to the right in 1980, wanted to hear. The radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s had receded very far. The critics, and the circles in which they traveled, were throwing in their lot, with varying degrees of cynicism, selfishness and self-delusion—with the wonders of the market, with Reagan's attacks on and contempt for the poor, with the struggle against the "Evil Empire," the Soviet Union. *Heaven's Gate*, in the end, fell victim to this reactionary shift in the political winds.

In response to the news of Cimino's death, Jeff Bridges (who plays a character loosely based on one of his relatives, John Bridges) wrote on Facebook that *Heaven's Gate* was a "movie about a particularly fascinating time in American History when Cattle Barons, sanctioned by the United States government, waged war on emigrants—the Johnson County Wars. … The many months of shooting in Montana were a one of a kind movie making experience. When *Heaven's Gate* came out, many critics called it a flop, a disaster. Well…that's just their opinion, man. To me, and many others, it's a masterpiece, and grows in beauty each time it's seen."

Indeed, the critical appraisal of *Heaven's Gate* has altered considerably. As Nicholas Barber of the BBC observed in December 2015: "But he [Cimino] may just have the last laugh. His original cut of *Heaven's Gate* earnt rapturous reviews when it was shown in Britain in 1982. Thirty years after that, he presented a restored-and-tweaked version at the Venice Film Festival, and its reception was even more euphoric. It was Canby and his fellow critics who looked ridiculous now; *Heaven's Gate* looked magnificent." Richard Brody of the *New Yorker*, in 2012, referred to the film as "the victim of a critical assassination. With their reviews, the most famous American film critics brought shame on themselves and their profession."

At the conclusion of their comment on *Heaven's Gate* in 1981, the *Bulletin* reviewers once again condemned the hostile reaction to the film, which "has everything to do with the attempt to swing the arts to the right." The authors continued, "We unreservedly recommend this film. Its director, Michael Cimino, has taken great care to honestly and faithfully present history as it was. And in this film, as in his earlier one, *The Deer*

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*Hunter* , he shows great concern in portraying the life of the working class.

"We urge Cimino to fight for this film. We are sure that it will find its audience among intellectuals, the best sections of the middle class and above all in the working class itself." Cimino wrote to the *Bulletin* editorial board, thanking the socialist newspaper for its stand.

Thirty-five years later, *Heaven's Gate* has been restored to its rightful place in the history of American filmmaking, and the late director has been thoroughly vindicated.

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