

Film

Heaven's Gate

Starring Kris Kristofferson, Isabelle Huppert, Christopher Walken and John Hurt
Directed by Michael Cimino
Playing at Springfield Cinema

Hollywood loves a winner, and in 1979 that's what director Michael Cimino was. He was in the glowing spotlight of critical and popular acclaim for his film *The Deer Hunter*, which won five Academy Awards, including Best Director and Best Picture.

But Hollywood often forgets the fact that a winning director can produce a turkey of a film. Enter *Heaven's Gate*.

Cimino is described as being visionary, egotistical and a perfectionist, all of which can be seen in *Heaven's Gate*, but the latter characteristics eventually infect the vision. The film is a study in overindulgence by Cimino: He got all he wanted from a studio that had faith in his artistic abilities. For example, when Cimino said he needed a thousand extras for a scene instead of a hundred, United Artists said yes, and all extras were outfitted with period costumes. The original budget for the film was \$7.5 million. When shooting began it was \$11.6 million, and by the time it was screened that figure had nearly quadrupled.

Yet while the filming proceeded on remote locations in Montana and Idaho, no one expected the damning reviews that were to come. The studio liked what Cimino was showing them, and Cimino liked what he had done. Both agreed there was a good film to be had in the five hour rough cut.

The edited version first released to the critics was over three hours long. The length was the least of their complaints.

Cimino was taken aback by the intensity of the critical distaste for his film. He wrote a letter to United Artists' president Andy Albeck, saying in part that "So much energy, time and money have gone into the making of *Heaven's Gate* that I am asking you to withdraw the film from distribution temporarily to allow me to present to the public a film finished with the same

care and thoughtfulness with which we began it."

Again the studio backed its director's vision. *Heaven's Gate* was yanked from circulation to allow Cimino to cut it down and tighten it up.

Cutting done, *Heaven's Gate* has opened once again, but what the public has been handed is a movie that remains inflated, dull, confusing, and ill-paced. One wonders if Cimino, having been given the chance to bring his vision into sharp focus, ever knew what he was after. Apparently, Cimino has been so engrossed in the task at hand, that he lost track of what the end to his means was supposed to be.

From a technical point of view *Heaven's Gate* has much to offer. The locations, sets, and costumes are meticulously detailed — as if to advertise authenticity. During scenes like one at a cock fight where both Rus-

sian and English are spoken, we're provided with subtitles for the Russian when it's hard to understand what's spoken in English.

The cinematography of Vilmos Zsigmond is impressive: His frequent use of the magic hour between sunset and nightfall in outdoor shots is especially noteworthy. Yet, even the photography seems overdone at times: over-nostalgically diffused, and over-mustily sepia-toned, making for a murkiness that seems accidental and ultimately bothersome.

The opening scenes at the 1870 Harvard graduation festivities are the best in the film because they appear to accomplish what they attempt: To introduce James Averill (Kris Kristofferson), and Billy Irvine (John Hurt), in a jousting, spirited, and yet Victorian exhibit of youthful exuberance. Unfortunately, they also have little to do

with the rest of the movie. Kristofferson pipes in with the film's only voice-over narration, drawing a comment about the injustice of the world. The next thing we know it's 20 years later and he's on a train to Casper, Wyo.

Here, as marshal, he deals with the central conflict: A large association of rich cattle ranchers with connections in high places, has decided to protect its interests against immigrant encroachment by simply killing off the immigrants.

The resulting battle of the Johnson County War, a major part of the story, is filled with all the graphic details we've come to expect from directors like Cimino. We even get treated to the over-killing of a character, gunned into swiss cheese a la Sonny Corleone in *The Godfather*.

But the audience has little empathy with the characters,

despite the amount of time devoted to them and their relationships. Who cares if they get shot?

Kristofferson's Averill is, for all purposes, a typical Western hero — hard drinking, fast-fisted, and basically a loner. The only thing that distinguishes him is his Ivy League past. Hurt's Irvine, who overshadows Kristofferson in the first scenes, later falls flat and eventually dies. The French whore Ella Watson (Isabelle Huppert) is by far the most endearing and courageous figure in the film. Her story would seem more interesting than Averill's, but hers isn't the story we're told.

There's no doubt that *Heaven's Gate* had potential. There are some good scenes in it, but they are fragments of a vision unguided by the omniscience required of a director with an epic tale to tell.

— Richard Laliberte

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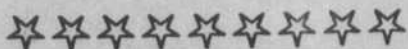


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