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Is the Metaphor the Message?

By Andrew Sarris

THE DEER HUNTER. Directed by Michael Cimino. Screenplay by Deric Washburn. Produced by Barry Spikings. Released by Universal Pictures.

Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* is opening at the Coronet for a one-week engagement, presumably to be eligible for the 1978 New York Film Critics' Awards. The film is opening in the same abbreviated manner in Los Angeles in order to be eligible for the Oscars. 1978 may indeed be as bad a year for movies as this preemptive strategy suggests, and I must confess that at the moment I am finding it exceedingly difficult to draw up a plausible 10-best list. Unfortunately, *The Deer Hunter* does not so much supply a solution as add to the problem.

This three-hour saga of three Russian-American Pennsylvania steelworkers in and out of Vietnam turns out to be massively vague, tediously elliptical, and mysteriously hysterical. The script, credited to Deric Washburn (purportedly from a "story" by Cimino, Washburn, Louis Garfinkle, and Quinn K. Redeker), does not contain a single witty, sharp, or revelatory line of dialogue. As if to compensate for this verbal aridity, the players are encouraged to indulge in interminable wet-eyed sensitivity sessions reminiscent of such previously acclaimed exercises in ethnic emotionalism as Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part Two*. *The Deer Hunter* thus reflects in its operatic inarticulateness certain tendencies in the supposedly ambitious American films of the past decade, while at the same time it slips in a disturbing subtext for which Cimino alone must be held accountable.

Frankly, I suspect that this film has less to do with Vietnam or even male bonding than it has to do with a particularly devious expression of homosexual panic. This is a delicate subject, I know, but I cannot find any way to pussyfoot around it. In a sense, *The Deer Hunter* has thrust the subject upon me by failing to be convincing on the psychological, sociological, or historical surfaces of its narrative. All that is left is Cimino's personal mythology, and therefore a description of *The Deer Hunter* is in order before we commence with the diagnosis.

The hellish fires of the steel mills serve as the first ritualistic ceremony of the major characters: Michael Vronsky (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken), Steven (John Savage), and Stan (the late John Cazale). Still, the fires here are neither as demonic nor as dialectical as those of the Chicago steel mills in an early sequence from *Days of Heaven*. There is no feeling of an oppressed proletariat in Cimino's vision of industrial labor. At most there is an intimation of boredom, from which male camaraderie after working hours functions as a boisterous release. Michael and Nick and Steven and Stan and a few other of their buddies surge into a barroom where the Steelers-Eagles game is playing on TV, and there is some palaver about betting on the points. But there is no knowingness or conviction in the way the scene is handled. No one really seems to care whether the Steelers win or lose. The banter is all too self-consciously fleeting and perfunctory, and the atmosphere is already too hot-house actorish for cold beer.

Since there are few conversational contrasts established for the characters, we must rely on the expressions, gestures, and movements of the actors to determine the roles within the group. From the beginning De Niro is the leader, Walken the amiable pretty-boy, Savage the vulnerable baby, and Cazale the surly cynic. It is perhaps significant that the actors remain more interesting than the characters they play. Also, Walken's Nick projects a more narcissistically feminine image in the film than its token females (Meryl Streep, Rutanya Alda.) The very talented Meryl Streep actually has a fairly large

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De Niro: noble hunter, leader, do-gooder



Cimino: writer-director of personal mythology

part as Linda, a girl who, fleeing a drunkenly brutish ethnic father, moves into the shack vacated by Vietnam-bound Nick and Michael, but never really shakes up with either despite all her come-hither looks. By contrast, Rutanya Alda's Angela is virtually catatonic as the bride of John Savage's Steven.

The film spends a whole hour at the Russian Orthodox wedding of Steven and Angela without telling us anything interesting about either the characters or the community. Whereas *The Godfather* began with much the same narrative ploy, a considerable amount of exposition flowed naturally at the Italian wedding from Al Pacino's efforts to explain his "family" to Diane Keaton. She played the classic outsider to whom background information about the characters can be credibly imported. There are no such convenient outsiders in *The Deer Hunter*, and so the hour-long ritual drags on with just a hint here and half a hint there. Examples: A green beret veteran pops up at the bar, is cryptically bitter about 'Nam, but doesn't bother to communicate any first-hand information to Michael, Nick, and Steven; Angela spills some wine on her bridal dress, and a quick cut to the red liquid on the white fabric portends a bloody fate for Steven; Stan (Cazale) storms out to the dance floor when he sees his date being fondled by her dancing partner, and then avenges his honor by socking, not

the man, but the girl; as Steven and Angela drive off into the nuptial night Michael runs along the same route, discarding his clothes until he is finally "moonin'" it in moderately discreet darkness; when Michael finally plops down on the ground face-up, the ever solicitous Nick delicately drops his jacket on Michael's private parts, presumably for modesty's sake.

Because the viewer's mind may start idling during this first hour, the fact that only three young men, all apparently volunteers, are leaving for Vietnam and that one has just been married may seem statistically improbable. But despite all the American flags in view, the spectacle is never condescending or contemptuous. To his credit, Cimino never looks down on his characters or their milieu. The problem is that much of his material emerges as shapeless and undeveloped and, hence, boring.

When Michael and his merry ethnics set off for a deer hunt, the scene seems to be set at last for some sort of classy metaphor for machismo. At the very least one would hope for some inventive interplay among the hitherto opaque characters. All that is provided, however, is a desultory disagreement between Michael and Stan over the borrowing of boots, and a prolonged solo pose by De Niro as the Noble Hunter in a setting so idyllically idyllic that one would not be sur-

prised to see Bambi bounding out of the brush. De Niro dispatches his deer in a solitude of such splendor that it would seem the other members of the hunt are just along for the ride. There is some mystical mumbo-jumbo about De Niro's needing only one bullet for the kill. Cimino's tone here is that of a humorless animated cartoon rather than of a nuanced novel.

Vietnam engulfs the screen in the first of Cimino's jolting ellipses, but it is not the Vietnam of American self-flagellation that we have come to know from previous movies in the cycle. Cimino actually shows the VC committing atrocities against both Vietnamese civilians and American prisoners of war. Up to now the prevailing cinematic impression has been that the VC were Franciscan monks winning the hearts and minds of the populace with their good works, and that it was only the Americans who introduced firearms into the region. *Coming Home* and *The Boys in Company C* make a strenuous effort to dissociate the VC and the North Vietnamese from any complicity in the misadventures of American servicemen. In that way the filmmakers can shed tears over the American wounded and dead without arousing the audience's hostility toward the armed forces responsible for the wounding and killing. After all, no news photographer ever

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Members of the Wedding: De Niro, Savage, Alda, Walken, and Streep in roles that provide more hints and portents than character development

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won a Pulitzer prize for photographing a VC or North Vietnamese planting the land mine that would blow up the legs of an American infantryman.

Not that *The Deer Hunter* is cast in the mood of the anti-Commie polemics of John Wayne's *The Green Berets*. For Cimino, the VC are brutal simply because war is brutal, and because life itself is brutal. The ideological issues seem to count for little in what explodes on the screen as the ultimate test of one's courage and manhood. A strange version of Russian roulette is introduced into the proceedings by the VC as they offer their American prisoners the option of either playing the game or remaining confined in river cages where only part of their heads can rise above the water. With water rats infesting these ingeniously fiendish enclosures, the setting is the most expressively excremental for men in war since the muddy rat-infested trenches in Joseph Losey's *King and Country*, another film with very morbidly suggestive gunplay with a cocked pistol.

Later in the film the game of Russian roulette is seen as a popular pastime in downtown Saigon on the eve of its downfall. The obvious question has already arisen. Was this game with widespread wagering around the

heads of the two "contestants" practiced in Vietnam, North or South? Or did Cimino and his writers make it up? Curiously, this question is more important than it seems. If the Russian roulette episodes are found metaphors they satisfy the irreducibly realistic requirements of the cinema, but if they are merely fictional metaphors they degenerate into immoral and irresponsible fantasies of the artist. In the same way, the complete fabrication of the biting-off-the-tongue Grand Guignol in *Midnight Express* made that movie an exercise in reprehensible sensationalism. The problem in both instances is that blood-soaked violence is too easy a means of audience arousal when everything else in the movie purports to be authentic. The problem is compounded when the violence escalates into audacious and fairly original kinkiness.

Thus far I have been unable to find any definitive answers on the presence or absence of Russian roulette casinos in war-torn Vietnam. Of course, it is easier to prove that something has happened than that something has not happened. Either way, I remain suspicious of Cimino's artistic intentions in the matter. His previous credits—for the writing of *Silent Running* and *Magnum Force*, and for the writing and directing of *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*—suggest a penchant for malignant-

ly gratuitous bloodshed even for genres that revel in it, and an indifference, if not an aversion, to the female of the species. The most memorable incidents in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* involve Clint Eastwood's being serviced by a woman with chilling haste and efficiency, Jeff Bridges prancing about in drag, his nervy kissing of the homophobic George Kennedy character full on the lips, his brutal beating by Kennedy, and his slow, lyrical death from a brain hemorrhage at the side of a concerned Clint Eastwood in the front seat of a flashy convertible—a somewhat glossier version of the Dustin Hoffman-Jon Voight/Camille-Armand ending in the bus in *Midnight Cowboy*.

The "clues" in *The Deer Hunter* are even more clinically obtrusive. Michael mysteriously refrains from sleeping with the very eager Linda despite his apparently strong attraction to her. One of Michael's buddies even makes a reference to his peculiar reluctance to take advantage of sexual opportunities. To this imputation of strangeness Michael remains stoically silent. Nick walks out on a whore in Saigon because her baby is in the same room. And the most passionate reading of a line in the whole movie occurs when Michael seeks to dissuade Nick from playing what turns out to be an apocalyptic round of Russian roulette. "I love you," Michael sobs tearfully.

Of course, the fact that Michael's last name is Vronsky may mean that he is graced or afflicted with a Tolstoyan largeness of spirit. He thinks nothing of intervening boldly in other people's lives. After he discovers that Steven has lost both legs he blithely drags the resisting paraplegic home to his traumatized wife and child. At times Michael so reeks of disinterested do-goodness that he makes the Jon Voight character in *Coming Home* look like a used-car salesman. And he becomes almost completely magical when he strolls casually through Saigon in civilian clothes in search of his self-destructive buddy on the very night the city is falling.

Far from achieving Tolstoyan heights, however, Cimino fails even to attain a Scorsese or Coppola level. The structure of the film is so rickety, and the details so incongruous, that whatever feelings were intended finally peter out in a half-hearted chorus of "God Bless America," again, mercifully free of derision or condescension but hardly transfigured into national poetry.

Critical raves have already been written for *The Deer Hunter*, as they have for *Days of Heaven* and *Interiors* and *Autumn Sonata*. Once more, the outline for a great film has been mistaken for the actual achievement of the film itself. We all want to believe that 1978 can still be redeemed cinematically, but time is running out, and *The Deer Hunter* just doesn't have it either for the short or long haul.