

## Document Citation

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| Title         | <b>The award hunter</b>                |
| Author(s)     | Gerald Marzorati                       |
| Source        | <i>Soho Weekly News</i>                |
| Date          | 1978 Dec 14                            |
| Type          | article                                |
| Language      | English                                |
| Pagination    | 65                                     |
| No. of Pages  | 1                                      |
| Subjects      |  |
| Film Subjects | The deer hunter, Cimino, Michael, 1978 |

# The Award Hunter

When *The Deer Hunter*, Universal Pictures' \$13 million epic about male friendship and Vietnam, leaves town next week, it won't be because the critics chased it.

*Au contraire.* It's the heavyweight New York critics who Universal is wooing by opening the film by a one-week, reserved seating engagement starting this Friday at the Coronet. (Tickets for Friday and Saturday night are already gone.) With the New York Film Critics' and the National Society of Film Critics' awards looming ever more important in the Hollywood economic matrix, Universal decided to run the projectors just long enough to qualify for the 1978 batch of the two awards.

More importantly, Universal has used the brief N.Y. run to prod the mighty national magazines — *Time*, *Newsweek*, etc. — into running their reviews now, rather than waiting until the film's general release in mid-February.

"We invited the Jack Krolls," said Universal's eastern director of advertising, Jerry Evans, referring to the *Newsweek* critic.

Kroll beat everyone to the punch by running his lengthy rave notice last week, fully two months before most of his readers would have access to the film (but in plenty of time for Universal to pull a blurb from it to top its full-page ad in the Sunday *Times* Arts and Leisure section).

Along with the film critics, Universal has seen to it that other influential opinion-makers — disc jockeys, party-goers, editors, publishers — have had easy access to the film. Francis Ford Coppola, whose own Vietnam epic, *Apocalypse Now*, is long overdue, attended one screening. *New York Intelligencer* Neil Travis is said to have seen the flick three times, loved it, and even cried.

Universal acknowledges that there is a certain risk to this approach — if the critics pan it, it won't be around long to generate the word-of-mouth kudos that have "made" poorly reviewed films like *Grease*. But then that's not the audience *The Deer Hunter* is intended for. "There was a general feeling here at Universal that we had something of quality," Evans commented. Word has it, too, that Michael Cimino, who wrote the story, directed the film, and had a hand in its production, was actually promised a 1978 opening, but the theaters were still busy showing this year's mega-hits.

*The Deer Hunter* will also open this month for one week in Los Angeles in order to qualify for the Academy Awards. The L.A. end-of-the-year mini-run is something of a standard Hollywood tactic these days. But to everyone's best memory, *The Deer Hunter's* Manhattan award-seeking stint is a first, and, Evans believes, could be a precedent-setter.

Gerald Marzorati