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MOVIES

HOLLYWOOD'S WAR

The Deer Hunter invents cruelties to sell Vietnam

by Tom Buckley

"FOR ME, it's a very personal film," Michael Cimino, the director of *The Deer Hunter*, was quoted as saying in an article published in the *New York Times* on December 10, 1978. "I was attached to a Green Beret medical unit. My characters are portraits of people whom I knew ... the people who fought the war, whose lives were immediately affected and damaged and changed by the war. ... They were uncommon people who had an uncommon amount of courage."

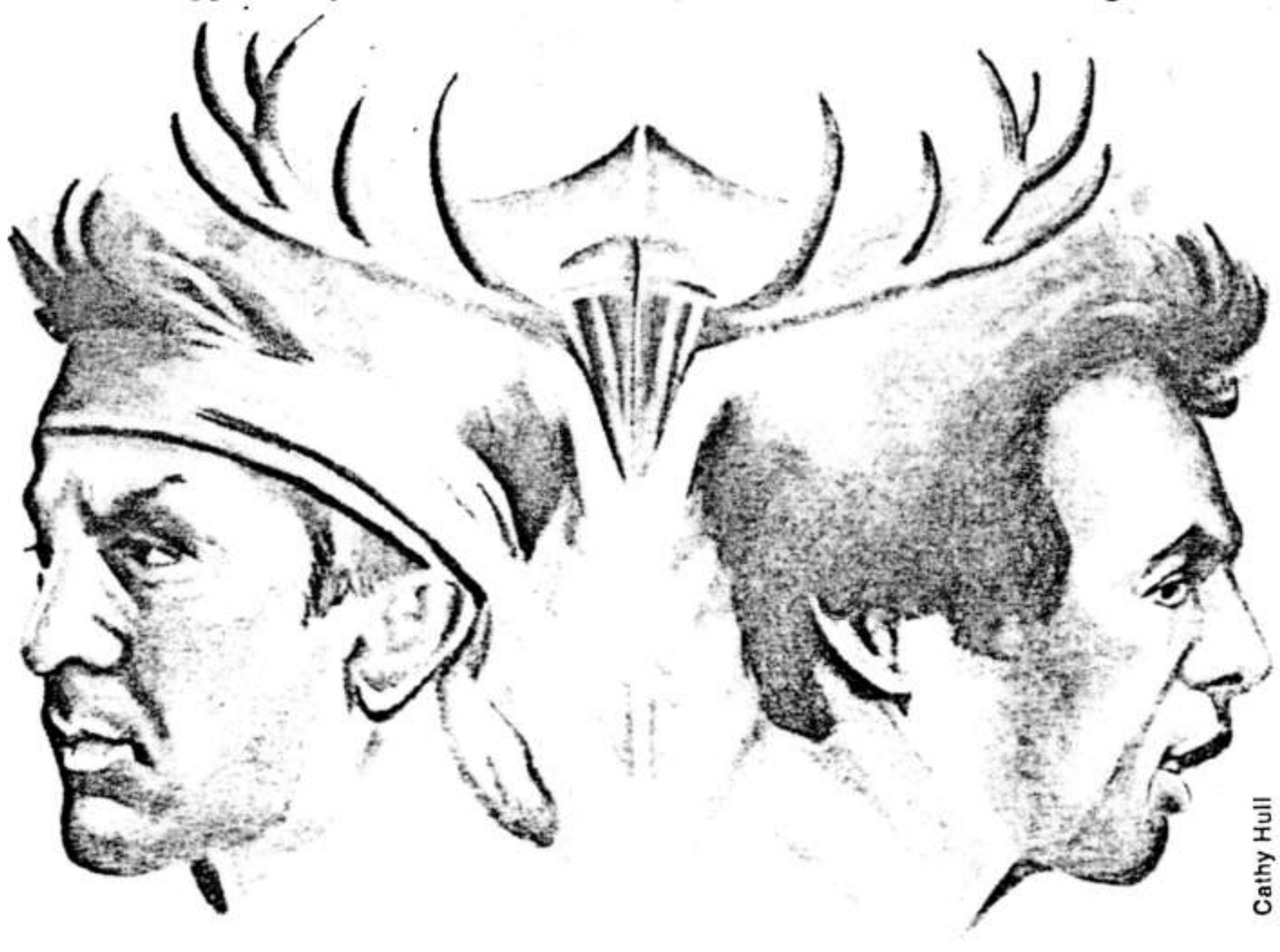
From Hollywood had come whispers that a searing, powerful film about the Vietnam war and its effect on ordinary Americans had at last been made, that a brilliant young director had risked his career as he fought for three years against the fear and inertia of the studio bosses to put his film on the screen. The article provided the climax for an advertising and publicity campaign that had been going on for months. It appeared just as *The Deer Hunter* was about to open for special one-week engagements in New York and Los Angeles, prior to its general release in February, to permit it to qualify for the 1978 Academy Awards and other honors.

Cimino, who had only three previous screen credits, told Leticia Kent, who wrote the story for the *Times*, that he was thirty-five years old, that he had been raised in New York City, and that, wishing to "unlearn" his formal education, he left Yale University shortly before completing work on a doctorate to enter the Army early in 1968. He was not sent to Vietnam, he said, with a touch of regret; he was assigned to a Special Forces medical unit in Texas, and it was there that he met the men who inspired him to make *The Deer Hunter*. After his discharge, Cimino said, he learned moviemaking with a producer of industrial and documentary films in New York, and then set out for Hollywood.

It's such a modest, straightforward account that you can't help wishing it were true. But Cimino wasn't thirty-five when he talked to the *Times*, he was a few months short of forty. According to the Pentagon, he enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1962, not 1968. He spent six months on active duty instead of the two years he would have served if he had been drafted. For about five months he was assigned to Fort Dix, N.J., with a month or so of medical training at Fort Sam Houston, Texas.

A small number of Special Forces troops were assigned to Vietnam as advisers in that relatively quiet period. Cimino may have seen a couple of them in a chow line or even been in a class with them, but he never wore the Green Beret himself.

Cimino did indeed attend Yale, and received a master of fine arts degree in 1963. The university has no record of his having done any work at all toward a doctorate. Later on, he was well known in New York as a director of television commercials rather than documentaries. He was very successful, made a lot of money, and, in 1971, like others before him in the same line of work, he left for Hollywood.



Cathy Hull

IF IT WERE NOT for the way they are mirrored in *The Deer Hunter*, Cimino's impostures would scarcely be worth noticing. People often abandon uncongenial identities when they go to Hollywood. Former corporate minions, shady lawyers, talent agents, rock-music impresarios, supermarket magnates, packagers and promoters, flimflam artists and racket guys,

Tom Buckley, who covered the Vietnam war for the New York Times *from 1966 to 1968, and returned there in 1969 and 1971, writes about films and television for that newspaper.*

usurers, accountants with four sets of books, pimps and prostitutes of both sexes, all transformed into poets of the cinema, recline on one elbow on chaises on the marble margins of their swimming pools, crowned by themselves with laurel.

But it's all makeup, wardrobe, location shooting. For these people what's important is the project, the deal, the hype, the power, the money. The contracts they laboriously negotiate, break, and litigate about are thicker and usually more imaginative than the screenplays they pass from hand to hand. It's not the movies that get made that cost so dear, it's the overhead, the caterer, the leased Mercedes, and the options, commissions, and kickbacks on the ones that don't.

The former maker of television commercials, adept in dramatizing the advantages of one brand of aspirin or detergent over the others must have felt right at home. He received his first screen credit soon after his arrival, as co-writer of *Silent Running*, a modest science-fiction film. He did the rewrite on *Magnum Force*, in which Clint Eastwood played a tough detective, when his friend John Milius went off on another assignment. In 1974, he was the writer-director of *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, with Eastwood starring. It made money, as Eastwood films usually do, and was a modest critical success.

During the next three years *The Deer Hunter* was one of several original screenplays Cimino worked on, but was unable to get produced. He also spent a certain amount of time hanging out with Milius and his circle. Milius is tall, burly, and athletic, a surfer and a marksman—all things Cimino is not. He is an admirer of the martial virtues who was prevented by a bad case of asthma from serving in Vietnam or even entering the armed forces. Nonetheless, he regards himself as an expert on the war and has written the screenplay for Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which has been scheduled for release in August after many delays.

After *The Deer Hunter* had been turned down by the major American studios and producers, EMI, the British entertainment and electronics conglomerate, provided financing (a reported total of $13 million), and Cimino and his cast and crew set off for locations in Thailand, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the state of Washington.

From what is on the screen, it is not difficult to see why Cimino had to go so far for his money. There is no story, only a succession of unconnected episodes strung together for what seems like an interminable three hours and four minutes. Cimino has refused to be trammeled by dramatic convention. Problems of motivation, plausibility, relationship, even chronology, are ignored. There is no development or illumination of character. Instead of dialogue there are grunts and obscenities.

Cimino has said he was not, after all, *trying* to make a realistic film. The implication is that he could do so if he wanted to, but that would be like setting Picasso to painting a barn. *The Deer Hunter*, he has said, is surrealistic, a dreamscape. He is wrong. His characters, their milieu, his version of the Vietnam war, all suffer from the same defect. They are neither real nor surreal—merely pretentious and false.

"De Niro's acting is perhaps his purest yet, you sense a power in him. 'The Deer Hunter' places director Michael Cimino right at the center of film culture. The film dares to say that things have come down to life versus death, and it's time someone said this big and strong without fear."
— NEWSWEEK, Jack Kroll

"So real, you can feel it in your bones. DeNiro has accomplished an amazing characterization and the others make you see a world you've never known. Director Cimino has made a picture that resounds and echoes with a true American voice."
— N. Y. POST, Archer Winsten

"Directed by Michael Cimino, written by Deric Washburn, 'The Deer Hunter' has qualities that we almost never see any more — range and power and breadth of experience. What really counts is authenticity, which this movie has by the ton...An epic."
— NEW YORK, David Denby

"A big awkward, crazily ambitious motion picture that comes as close to being a popular epic as any movie about this country since 'The Godfather.' Its vision is that of an original, major new filmmaker." — N.Y. TIMES, Vincent Canby

THE DEER HUNTER doesn't hold the mirror up to nature. It holds it up to Cimino. In his narcissistic fantasy, the leading character is also called Michael, but the director's soft, round face becomes the impassive, unyielding bearded countenance of Robert de Niro, who plays the role, or John Milius, who may have inspired it. This Michael works in a blast furnace, testing his strength and skill against molten steel. He is the natural and unquestioned leader of his crowd, but keeps himself alone, private, aloof. He is a superman, beyond the need for a girlfriend or a wife, children, home, or possessions, aside from his old Cadillac and his hunting rifle and telescopic sight.

From the blast furnace, where the film begins in an atmosphere of Stakhanovite intensity, the scene shifts first to the changing room, where the leading characters hug, pat, and goose each other as they do all the way through the film, and then to their local bar. It is the last day of work for Michael, Nick, played by Christopher Walken, and Steven, played by John Savage. The next day they are to leave for the Army. For some reason, never made clear, they are all certain they will be sent to Vietnam.

That night Savage is married. His bride is stupid and sluttish, as are most of the women in the film. She is pregnant, perhaps by someone else. Since the three buddies are presented as being of Russian descent, it is an Orthodox service, colorful but tedious for nonparticipants. After that, there is a combination farewell and wedding party at the local American Legion post, marked by much drunkenness, shouting, dancing, and fighting. Then there is one last deer-hunting dawn. Michael, scrambling over crags that look more like the habitat of mountain goats, bags his buck in what for him is the only permissible way—with a single shot.

These scenes run for more than an hour and they provide little more than negative inferences. The dominant impressions one gets are that Mike, Nick, Steve, and the three others who make

up their circle prefer the company of one another to that of women, and that they are the only six men in the United States who have never talked about the Vietnam war. Mike, Steve, and Nick are going to get into uniform as unquestioningly as their fathers might have done after Pearl Harbor. In the fall of 1968, when the film begins, at a time when Richard Nixon was campaigning for the Presidency on a promise to "Vietnamize" the war, this seems incredible.

In fact, as presented by Cimino, these relatively prosperous, strongly unionized steelworkers of western Pennsylvania are revenants of the 1930s. Their houses are little better than shacks, enveloped in the acrid smoke of the mill. They don't read the papers or look at television except for sports events, they haven't traveled and are without curiosity about the land beyond the Alleghenies.

Stranger still, in this close-knit town, scarcely anyone has a family. Steve has a mother, who virtually drags him to the altar. Linda, played by the incongruously elegant Meryl Streep, who is involved in a curiously ambiguous relationship with both Mike and Nick, has a drunken father who gives her a black eye. Everyone else, so far as the picture is concerned, is without kith or kin.

De Niro, who for some reason wears a beard and moustache, must be close to forty and looks it—too old to be playing a draftee. Far from seeming Slavic, he remains what he is ineradicably by birth and upbringing. That is, the big-city Italian-American he has played in virtually all his films. De Niro is, nonetheless, a powerful screen actor, and his presence gives *The Deer Hunter* whatever flickering life it possesses. If De Niro seems virile and strong, Walken and Savage, both slim, blond, and looking no older than, say, their early thirties, seem oddly passive and vulnerable as tough steelworkers.

From their hometown there is an abrupt transition to a setting that resembles a montagnard hamlet in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. It has apparently just been overrun by North Vietnamese troops, although only one is shown, throwing a grenade into a bunker in which women and children are cowering. Mike, dazed and covered with soot, hauls himself out of the rubble, picks up a flamethrower, and incinerates the enemy soldier. As he burns to a cinder, like one of those self-immolated Buddhist monks in 1965, two helicopters arrive with reinforcements, including, amazingly enough, since Mike has joined the Green Berets and they have not, Nick and Steve. The ensuing engagement is not shown, but the reunited buddies apparently do not cover themselves with glory, because another abrupt cut reveals them, unwounded, among a group of prisoners confined beneath a large hamboo hut built on stilts over a wide, swift-flowing river.

THE FOLLOWING SCENE reveals Cimino's undeniable accomplishment in *The Dear Hunter*. In a medium that has been soaked in depictions of cruelty and violent death since its earliest days, he has hit upon a novel and, it must be said, particularly repulsive method of presenting torture and murder. One by one the prisoners are pulled up into the hut by a grinning giant. While their implacably cruel captors, most of whom are played by Thais, perhaps on the theory that all Orientals look alike, giggle and bet heavily on the outcome, they are forced to play Russian roulette with the survivor of the previous coup. Those who refuse are beaten and confined in a cage submerged in the river, there to be nibbled by rats and eventually to drown. On the other hand, there doesn't seem to be any reward for playing and winning—that is, pulling the trigger on an empty chamber. You apparently continue against other opponents until you lose.

The first loser is a South Vietnamese captain. The referee inserts a single bullet in the revolver, spins the cylinder, snaps it shut, and hands it to him. The captain places the end of the barrel against his temple. He holds it there for long seconds while conflicting premonition and fatalism contort his face. When he finally pulls the trigger, in closeup, naturally, the sound of the shot echoes through the theater and his blood spurts across the screen.

Steven's turn comes. He is the smallest of the three, and the most dependent. Despite Mike's urgings to "do it, do it," he lets the phallic barrel slide upward as the discharge occurs. He was right to do so because the chamber had a round in it. With a graze on the side of his head he is dragged off to the floating dungeon.

Mike is a different story. He curses his captors, takes their savage blows without turning a hair, pulls the trigger quickly, with obvious contempt for the possibility of death, and, of course, wins. Eventually Mike has to go up against Nick. It is a possibility he has anticipated. He dares the referee to load the revolver with three bullets instead of one. The referee is so stupid he does it and the guards are so slow that they allow Mike to get off a few fast shots. He and Nick grab a couple of automatic rifles, riddle their captors, free Steve, and start floating down the river on a convenient tree trunk toward friendly territory.

It is a brilliant scene, acted with ferocious intensity, directed and edited in staccato flashes, and all the more exciting because it comes after so much tedium. But the effects that Cimino learned in the Eastwood school of violence must be pushed to the limit because they occur in a dramatic vacuum.

The three make good their escape, but somehow lose track of one another. Steve loses both legs under unexplained circumstances. He is sent back to a hospital near their hometown, but refuses to see his wife. Nick has an emotional breakdown. Leaving the military hospital in Saigon where he is being treated, he wanders the streets until he is led somehow to a mysterious house at the end of a long, dark alley. Persuaded to enter, he finds it is a gambling casino, and the only game that is played is—you guessed it—Russian roulette.

The casino is not, as might be supposed, a hallucination, but as reality. Cimino's notion is ludicrous. There was plenty of gambling in Vietnam, of course, but it was carried on privately, mainly among the Chinese and Vietnamese, with cards and Mah-Jongg tiles. Nor does it have validity as metaphor. In the latter stages of the war, American troops were taking no chances they could avoid and often rolled grenades under the bunks of officers who insisted that they carry out orders.

Traumatized by his experience as a prisoner, Nick becomes one of the professional players. For months, apparently, he bucks the 5-to-1 odds, perhaps using a *loaded* loaded revolver. He wins a fortune in bets, which he sends

to Steve, becomes a narcotics addict and a deserter, and remains in Saigon long after the last American troops have been withdrawn.

Suddenly, it is 1975. Mike, who has disappeared from the film for a while, turns up in his hometown, presumably after prolonged service with the Green Berets in Antarctica. Catching up on news of his buddies, he flies back to Saigon. He has promised the frightened Nick, after all, that he will not leave him "over there." Mike arrives just as the city is falling, and finds Nick, a zombie by now, still pulling the trigger and still not being able to kill himself. In the denouement, the two exchange tokens of love, Mike sits down for one last game, and Nick finally gets lucky. Mike brings his body home. As the film ends Mike is sitting in the kitchen of his favorite bar with his old pals singing, tremulously at first, then with conviction, "God Bless America."

IT WOULD BE a remarkable conclusion if there were ironic intent, but there isn't. The political and moral issues of the Vietnam war, for ten years and more this country's overriding concern, are entirely ignored. By implication, at any rate, the truth is turned inside out. The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong become the murderers and torturers and the Americans their gallant victims.

Cimino's ignorance of what the war was about, symbolically and actually, as reflected in *The Deer Hunter*, is incomplete and perverse to the point of being megalomaniacal. He had no technical adviser and no one who even served in Vietnam on his production staff. It is as though he believed that the power of his genius could radically alter the outlines of a real event in which millions of Americans took part and that is still fresh in the memory of the nation.

The Deer Hunter is a version of commradeship in the factory and the battlefield as it might have been rendered by Luchino Visconti, the late filmmaker, or Helmut Newton, the fashion photographer, both of them experts in the lush presentation of perversity.

Intense male friendships have always existed in wartime, of course, but for several reasons the Spartan virtues seemed rare in Vietnam. The relatively high incidence of death, wounds, and illness in combat units, the individual replacement system and the one-year tour of duty all helped to make Vietnam a lonely place for the infantryman. No sooner did he begin learning the names of the members of his squad and platoon than they began, one way or another, going home.

The Deer Hunter does not examine cruelty, it exploits it. Cimino, in a small way, seems to be as insulated from reality as the Marquis de Sade in his cell. To invent forms of cruelty—the Russian roulette game—where so much suffering actually occurred seems doubly perverse.

But literal truth or the higher truth of art is not what *The Deer Hunter* is about. EMI doesn't back art with $13 millon, and Universal, a part of the MCA entertainment conglomerate, doesn't distribute it. In fact, Universal specializes in junk movies and knows how to sell them. *Jaws* has returned $121 million in rentals, *Jaws II* $50 million, *Airport* $45 million, and *Earthquake* $36 million.

Until six months or so ago, Universal was known to be unenthusiastic about *The Deer Hunter*. Its executives may have possibly been misled by its long dull stretches and thought that Cimino had put over a work of art on them. What may have changed their minds was the success of *Midnight Express*, a film about a young American confined in a Turkish prison. It, too, is a pornographically violent, sadomasochistic fantasy with even stronger elements of homosexuality. The fifteen-to-thirty age-group, which makes up the bulk of the movie audience, loved it, perhaps being less bigoted about such material than their elders.

In any event, *The Deer Hunter* is on its way. Business is reported to be very good at the reserved-seat engagements that began February 2. The New York Film Critics Circle, taking, I believe, the pretension for the artistic fact, voted it the best film of what everyone agreed was a very bad year. Some of its members, who spend most of their time in screening rooms, praised its truth to life. Now Cimino stands just below the summit of Parnassus, which in the movie world these days is scarcely more than a hillock. According to *Variety*, the show-business paper, *The Deer Hunter* is a 6-to-5 favorite to win the Academy Award. □