sound movies, start listening to the sound track. The 1932–1942 audience did, very closely, and so heard both Porter, Kern and Gershwin (the “glamor” issue again) and most of the best scripts that ever got produced in Hollywood, from Trouble in Paradise to the Palm Beach Story. It would be a very pleasant assignment for most of us; but the problem with the first two-thirds of Ray's book is, one cannot be convinced he would share in our anticipation.

—JAMES MARK PURCELL

Miscellaneous

FINAL CUT
Dreams and Disaster in the Making of Heaven's Gate

If ever a book made grimly fascinating reading, this is it. Final Cut is compulsively readable, like a thriller, even though most readers will know the outcome in advance. To quote the dust-jacket, “Michael Cimino's Heaven's Gate did not merely fail (failure is forgivable, sometimes even embraced, in the strange labyrinths of the Hollywood psyche). Heaven's Gate did the unthinkable: It sank a studio. Less than a month after the picture's second release, United Artists—the company founded by Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin—for all practical purposes ceased to exist. What happened? Why? How?” In providing an answer to these questions Final Cut also procures for the reader the satisfaction of frisson of a story in which nobody—the author included—comes out particularly well. Reading it, I was constantly reminded of Larry Gelbart's quip during the 1986 Academy Awards that a screenwriter might have "water on the brain that the director has no problem walking across"—except that with Heaven's Gate it wasn't just (or even primarily) writers who had the mushy brains in the first place.

Final Cut is a view from inside all this confusion and a cautionary tale. Not only was Steven Bach the senior vice-president and head of world-wide production for United Artists throughout the hideously protracted period of Heaven's Gate's production; he was also the only person present at the creation (of Heaven's Gate) and destruction (of United Artists). That no one else, apart from the film's director and producer, witnessed the evolution of Heaven's Gate from beginning to end is just the first of many facts recorded by Steven Bach that never quite stop being startling.

The whole sorry story—for which we as moviegoers are still paying—begins at the point when Michael Cimino's agent, in an atmosphere abuzz with rumor and "advance word" about The Deer Hunter, offered Cimino's next project, then known as The Johnson County Wars, to United Artists. Cimino had had it in mind for some time, and had reluctantly shelved the project in order to make The Deer Hunter. His original idea boggles the mind. He wanted John Wayne for the part played eventually by Kris Kristofferson. Jeff Bridges for that played by Christopher Walken, and Jane Fonda for that played by Isabelle Huppert. That Cimino was already (in David Ansen's words) "aching for great- ness" becomes even more apparent when we run down the list of people he proposed, in all seriousness, for walk-on parts: Henry Fonda, Burt Lancaster, James Stewart, Rod Steiger, Burt Reynolds, James Caan, Ingrid Bergman, Gene Hackman, George Kennedy, Richard Widmark, Jon Voigt, Kirk Douglas, Joel McCrea, and Arthur Kennedy. Jack Lemmon was to round it out as Billy Irvine ("the former Harvard classmate of the John Wayne character"—"a startling academic image," as Bach puts it), who was eventually to be played by John Hurt. The second time around Cimino's project looked more realistic, or at least less ridiculous. What was to become Heaven's Gate was offered to UA as a much less ambitious package ready to begin preproduction immediately. Cimino asked for what is known in the trade as a "go" commitment with "play or pay" provisions, meaning that a positive response from UA would obligate the company to an outright purchase of all negotiated fees whether the film was made or not. These fees totalled $1.7 million; Cimino at this time projected the cost of Heaven's Gate at $2.7 million. Even though this is a far from outrageous figure—it was to turn into a bad joke with unsettling rapidity
(Heaven's Gate was to cost UA a full $40 million as well as its identity) the warning signs were already there if anyone wanted to read them. The Deer Hunter had cost $15 million, twice its original budget. Cimino's fights with EMI, the film's production company, over length and cost were already grist to the rumor mill. It was even known that Cimino had threatened to kidnap the negative if The Deer Hunter's US distributor, Universal, tried to edit it without his consent. "I felt I could have killed somebody if they mutilated it," Cimino told Horizon. (It was not until after the Los Angeles premiere of Heaven's Gate had been cancelled that anyone at UA remembered with a shudder of horror, and a desire to have the locks on the storeroom changed, that another long-standing favorite fantasy of Cimino's was to make a film—it would have been Hollywood's third—of Ayn Rand's The Fountainhead—in the course of which Howard Roark, the architect with whom Cimino palpably identified, blows up his housing project rather than let it be defiled by Philistines.)

All this was overlooked by a group of people new in 1978 to their rungs on the corporate ladder, to whom Cimino looked like hot property and the deal he was offering irresistible. These were Steven Bach and David Field, both production executives at UA, Danny Rissner, UA's head of production, and, not least, Andy Albeck, the president of UA who, employed as he was by UA's then parent, the Transamerica Corporation, was mainly concerned with return on investment, and was busily educating himself about movies, or about which ones made money, to this end.

The decision to go with the Cimino deal was taken on the crest of a wave. The year 1978 had been a good one for UA, whose net earnings were $28,830,000, up by $2.2 million from 1977, which meant a contribution of a cool $28 million net to the coffers of Transamerica. UA in other words contributed to Transamerica 13 percent of the latter's net earnings that year, a very high percentage for a film subsidiary. In this atmosphere of euphoria, "our first official act" as a new team of studio executives, as Steven Bach puts it, wryly as usual, "a fairly routine one at that, [was] to make the deal that would destroy the company." They made the mistake of "betting that Cimino would deliver a blockbuster with art written all over it, a return to epic filmmaking with epic returns." They lost.

It was not the star shenanigans of Hollywood legend that sank Heaven's Gate and brought down UA with it, if only because the only real "star" was Cimino himself, the heir to and comeuppance of a watered-down "movie-brat" auteur theory. The Deer Hunter somehow gave him enough clout to get his deal with UA signed and sealed without a leading lady. He later foisted on to UA Isabelle Huppert, an actress nobody had heard of, and whose English was uncertain. This was done after Jane Fonda and Diane Keaton had turned the part of Ella Watson down; it seems not to have occurred to anyone that these actresses—or anyone else on UA's "A" list—would scarcely have consented to second billing after Kris Kristofferson. But Isabelle Huppert was a mere foretaste. One quickly comes to see why Steven Bach claims that Cimino acted "as if he had invented ego . . . in Hollywood yet." Once Cimino learned in March 1979 that UA wanted Heaven's Gate released by Christmas, he sent them a memo stipulating that "any and all monies in excess of the approved cash budget expended to complete and deliver the picture in time for a Christmas, 1979, release should not be treated as over-budget expenditures for any purpose unfavorable to [Cimino's own production] company . . . even if it is finally decided that it is not feasible to complete and deliver the picture in time for such a release." The passive voice in this last clause speaks volumes. Production companies do not usually waive all over-budget penalties and cost overruns with no guarantees; they never do so if a director's proposal provides no way of distinguishing overruns designed to meet a specific release date from other excesses. UA, incredibly, did both, at a time when Coppola had had to scrape up collateral for Apocalypse Now's well-publicized overruns and Stallone's Rocky has had to rely on its producers' mortgages when it went $100,000 over budget. That Cimino was playing with a stacked deck is perhaps less startling than the fact he found people to play with. Without their money there would have been no game, and this effectively enmeshed and trapped them. The project had its own momentum, its own crazy logic; the more it was nursed along, the more
its nurses needed it. Once The Deer Hunter had won five Academy Awards (having been nominated for nine) UA was happy to be exploited by Hollywood’s “newly anointed star director,” even if he proved quick to display the “star temperament” of Hollywood folklore. Here the record speaks for itself, and Steven Bach lays it all out. “In the first six days of shooting . . . Cimino had fallen five days behind. He had shot almost 60,000 feet of film and had approximately a minute and a half of usable material, which had cost roughly $900,000 to expose.” By late May, it was evident to aghast executives that “Cimino was shooting a daily average of 10,000 feet of film (slightly under two hours’ worth) to cover a daily five-eighths of a script page, resulting in a daily minute and a half of usable screen material, and was spending nearly $200,000 a day to do so . . . these figures had varied hardly at all from the first day of production through May, and now into June, on the twenty-second of which Cimino’s original schedule had predicted an end to principal photography.” The schedule was of course abandoned, and Cimino in effect substituted his own. Nor was it even simply a matter of creeps-on-this-petty-pace, since by the end of May shooting had actually fallen behind “schedule” at a rate of one day lost for each day shot. But this was not carelessness, at least not on Cimino’s part. Observers agreed that on the set “there was no chaos; there was its opposite: a calm, determined, relentless pursuit of the perfect.” There were no “acts of God” so beloved of insurance companies. Cimino was indulging himself, to be sure, but in a specific way. “What he was adding was takes and retakes and retakes of the retakes. And retakes of those. Michael Cimino was taking—and retaking—time. Getting it right.”

What persuaded the UA executives to be remarkably unhard-headed about this night-marish snail’s pace was of course their belief that “a lousy picture at $5 million is no bargain; a great one at $50 million might be.” But, ironically, this piece of conventional “wisdom” should have been uncharacteristic of United Artists, which “had never had, and never would have, a single blockbuster mega-hit on the scale of Star Wars, The Godfather or E.T. . . . Go for broke had never been the company’s style, and would not be with Andy Albeck, whose mix of so many low-budget thieses and so many medium-budget thats was a deliberate policy to perpetuate stability, to arrive at a more predictably favorable bottom line than the make-or-break blockbuster sweepstakes.” Corporations like Transamerica are more interested in predictable cash-flow than in huge windfalls, unless (as we are about to see) the cash flow is all outwards.

The more immediate irony was that given the standard formula by which a film must return at the box office 2 ½ to 3 times its cost if it is to break even, Heaven’s Gate, once it began to look like costing United Artists $40 million, would have to take in $100 million at the box office not to lose money. This figure of $100 million catapults Heaven’s Gate right into the middle of the blockbuster category UA had always eschewed. But what were the alternatives? Theoretically, UA could have cut bait, either by abandoning the project or firing Cimino. Neither option was considered for long. “By the start [emphasis mine] of production UA had spent $3,026,690.22 [I like the 22 cents], which did not include the pay-or-play commitments of almost $2 million, or all the commitments made to a permanent crew numbering 118, a cast of 70, hundreds of extras, rentals of lands that had been agreed to (not least with the Blackfoot Indians and the National Park Service) and the hundreds of other commitments large and small that had been made in UA’s name. We could do no more than estimate what the cost of pulling the plug might be”—just as UA could only estimate what the price of not pulling it might be, since costs were mounting on Cimino’s say-so. So was length. Even though Cimino’s right to final cut was supposed to depend on a running length of less than three hours, Heaven’s Gate when first shown to UA executives lasted five hours, twenty-five minutes. One might say that there was no accounting at all until it was too late; studios have accountants, but UA was not a studio but a company. It could of course have fired Cimino, but this would have meant shutting down the set, with the meter running at $1 million or so per week just to hold the production together while UA scurried around trying to find a replacement director. Such a
substitute would probably have to have been either a hack or an unknown, who would have undercut the whole *raison d’être* of the film, which was that it was Cimino’s latest.

So while UA “had the power to take the film from Cimino,” this was in Steven Bach’s words “a power I deeply did not want to exercise. Doing so would have thrown the finishing process into chaos at best, would have attracted widespread public attention of a sort that could only damage the picture, and would in all likelihood have further prolonged the post-production period . . . without having the at least theoretical advantage of the creator’s presence.” The creator, knowing this, pressed home his advantage not only by remaining reclusive and secretive in his Montana retreat, but also by sitting on his footage. There was a lot of it to sit on. By August 1, 3 million feet of film had been printed. This amounts to 220 hours, or almost ten days of nonstop viewing, or more than 100 normal-length feature films—“probably a record,” as Bach tersely observes. And not one foot had been seen outside Montana. “Seeing how the picture played before an audience was both pointless, because Cimino knew how it would play, and ignoble because a question of mere Commerce. Besides, there wasn’t any time. The man who could take days to shoot a page of dialogue could not now figure out a means of sparing four hours to see how that dialogue played before viewers unadmitted to the pantheon.” Cimino “reminded everyone that all public previews had accomplished in [the case of] *The Deer Hunter* was to prove to Universal he’d been right all along, so what was the point?’’

The point became clear soon enough. *Heaven’s Gate* opened disastrously. It was immediately treated to an avalanche of criticism and a fusillade of *Schadenfreude*. Jean Vallety reported for *Rolling Stone* that when Vincent Canby’s *New York Times* review, which called *Heaven’s Gate* “something quite rare in movies these days—an unqualified disaster” came to the notice of the Hollywood cynics, “they didn’t laugh in the Polo Lounge . . . the room erupted in cheers.” Nor is it clear that the celebrants worked for UA’s rivals. Many people inside the company had taken the two-year Cimino cure for auteur worship.” In Steven Bach’s words, “by inten-

tion or accident Cimino and [his producer Joann] Carelli had made the process, the idea of *Heaven’s Gate* so unpleasant, so punishing for virtually every department of the company, from accounting to photocopying, that every employee affected by it wanted nothing more than to see it released and be done with it”—except of course that on its release they were not done with it at all. The nightmare continued. Cimino himself felt impelled to withdraw *Heaven’s Gate* from exhibition and cancel its Los Angeles première, a move which had the effect of turning it from being another failed movie into the kind of “I-told-you-so” media event the *New York Times* had prophesied. The press had little to report, since Cimino had frozen it out during shooting, and few people in any case had actually seen the film. But it had a lot to speculate and attitudinize about. (This was the era of David Begelman’s peculations and filmic disasters at Columbia as well as Coppola’s “Apocalypse Never.”) It also led into yet another irony. Pauline Kael put it like this: “While watching the three-hour and thirty-nine-minute *Heaven’s Gate* I thought it was easy to see what to cut. But when I tried afterward to think of what to keep, my mind went blank.” She had a point. The ignominious withdrawal of *Heaven’s Gate* made necessary the kind of re-editing the loose and baggy form of the film actually precluded. The trouble all along was that “there were no sub-plots [and] few characters subsidiary to the central trio,” and that “the paucity of character and narrative detail was not enriched by the inundation of production detail . . . but . . . buried by it.” The obvious re-editing strategy—in fact the only possible one—of paring away expensive “production value” in order to bring out the story line didn’t *strengthen* the story line so much as expose it in all its thinness. Since *Heaven’s Gate* had no basis for recovery, it never recovered. It bombed. As Bach tersely puts it, it was as though somebody called every household in the country and said “there will be a curse on your family if you go see this picture.” Nor is this even the final irony in Bach’s account. The final irony was dealt out at a corporate, not aesthetic level by the Transamerica Corporation which in the wake of the Heaven’s Gate débâcle contributed its own bolt from the blue: it sold United Artists,
lock, stock and barrel to Kirk Kerkorian, a Las Vegas real estate speculator who had already acquired MGM, and who could afford to buy UA because he’d been forced to sell Columbia stock on antitrust grounds. (These were of course the Carter years.) The drama here is one those who care about film might as well get used to. It involved not directors, producers, actors or exhibitors but Fate in the form of Olympian corporate high-rollers on the look-out. Kerkorian wanted UA for its distribution network. *Heaven’s Gate* lost UA $40 million and made it easy prey, but in another sense Cimino’s profligate venture may actually have *made* money—for Transamerica, which was able to extract a premium price for UA from Kerkorian. Mel Brooks was making a joke in *Silent Movie* when he invoked “Engulf and Devour.” These days, the joke is on all of us. —PAUL THOMAS

**IMAGES OF MADNESS**
The Portrayal of Insanity in the Feature Film

By Michael Fleming and Roger Manvell. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985. $49.50

From the days of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, film has been the ideal medium to stalk disturbed mental states, zoom in on twisted egos and follow a character through Daliesque hallucinations, convoluted motives, and random acts. How can anyone begin to systemize this coverage?

*Images of Madness* attacks the problem on several levels. Psychologist Fleming groups key films into nine categories, like “The Family and Madness,” “ Murder and Madness,” “Eros and Madness,” etc. Recognizing that historical periods perceive madness differently, he analyzes at least one modern film and one antique for each group, like *Straw Dogs* and *M*. Sometimes the contrasts are brilliant. “Society and Madness” pairs *The Snake Pit* (1948) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975). *The Snake Pit* appeared when the United States was just beginning to become conscious of its appalling institutionalization of the insane and helped draw public attention to the issue. But the film’s impact cut both ways. The rosy, doctor-knows-best ending foreshadowed the authoritarian fifties, an era which prescribed drastic treatment or confinement for the obstreperous malcontent with no questions asked. In contrast, *Cuckoo’s Nest* ended with the futile, symbolic rebellion of its patients, Laingian victims whose only sin was their violation of social norms. Between the two films, the bold “antipsychiatry” movement spoke of the self-fulfilling prophecy that came with institutionalization of the “mentally ill.” So clearly does Fleming back up his case with quotes from R. D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, and Thomas Scheff that it seems as if Milos Foreman directed *Cuckoo’s Nest* with one eye and consulted these texts with the other. Similarly, Fleming documents psychoanalytical theories of the forties, unearthig rare quotes that show a stodgy faith in scientific “miracle cures” for mental illness. Fleming competently researches his “Possession as Madness” section, with histories of Mesmerism and other “cures” for hysteria and some documentation of Freud’s dabbling with hypnosis. However Fleming’s method soon gets snagged on the obvious. On *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931): “Where possession emphasizes takeover by a force outside the self, the concept of multiple personality presents the other force as part of oneself.” This time he doesn’t compare and contrast eras; he segues directly into *The Exorcist*, the most discussed film of the early seventies. But in confining himself to discussing the film as a proponent of possession/hysteria, Fleming misses the golden chance to talk more about its power to manipulate audiences—those subliminal messages of death’s heads and crosses, the carefully timed jolts, its short-circuiting of adolescent sexuality. He could have then dissected its audience appeal, as others did. Conspiracy theorists even pointed out that author William Peter Blatty was once the Policy Branch Chief of the US Air Force Psychological Warfare Division. Who’s “possessed” here?

For Fleming, *The Rose* is a textbook depiction of the “borderline personality” (a.k.a. “failed ego identity”), a polydrug user who fears closeness, unable to appreciate anyone beyond a projection of her own needs. Rose (Janis Joplin) cannot maintain a stable identity and needs constant affirmation from her friends and audiences. Fleming surmises that