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Obituary: Michael Cimino

The price of perfection

Michael Cimino, a film-maker who tasted both triumph and disaster, died on July 2nd, aged 77

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WHAT people did not understand about him, Michael Cimino said—briefly emerging in 2005 from his seclusion in Los Angeles—was that he was not a film-maker. He had read one book on film-editing, but never got to the end of it. His training consisted of going to the movies every week with his grandmother, and getting the feel of a Movieola camera when he went to New York to make commercials. The fact that he ended up directing seven films was a mystery and a wonder to him.

And to others. With only his second film, "The Deer Hunter", a story of three steelworkers before, during and after their service in Vietnam, he became a star; in 1979, it won five Oscars. America's most humiliating war had not been touched before; the film proved emotionally devastating. But his third, "Heaven's Gate" (1980), a vast narrative of struggle between cattle barons and immigrants in late-19th-century Wyoming, was the biggest flop in Hollywood history. Its 1.3m feet of film were edited to five and a half ravishing, snail-paced hours. It cost \$44m, 300% over budget, and almost sank United Artists. He withdrew the film after a week, with no regrets, though it had cost his reputation; he had wanted to make the best Western ever and, in his view, he had.

He spoke as an artist. A precocious one, who at the age of five could draw perfect portraits. A student of art, who had studied painting and architecture at Yale. His chief influences, he proudly said, were Degas, Kandinsky and Frank Lloyd Wright. His predilections showed in the way he placed extras in his shots, as though painting them in; the way he favoured interiors with shafts of light playing through smoke, as Caravaggio might have done; his love of big choreographed dance scenes, in which swirling human beings built a structure of beauty; his habit of driving thousands of miles to find just the right range of mountains, or line of trees, to frame his shots; his readiness to wait, for hours if necessary, for the right cloud to appear.

In pursuit of perfection he did everything himself, including the screenplays and, he claimed, the photography. He wanted to inspire such total belief that the screen would be demolished and the audience transported. He insisted on location shooting because he believed, as firmly as native Americans did, in a spirit of place that could change the

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texture of a film (a theme he developed in "Sunchaser" (1996), his last work). And he would go on, obsessively on, until he was satisfied.

UA should have known this when in 1978 they allowed him to make "Heaven's Gate". He was already a slow worker in his commercial days, taking an infinity to provide a minute of stunning visuals for Kodak or Pepsi-Cola. When Clint Eastwood gave him his first big break to direct "Thunderbolt and Lightfoot", a buddy movie, in 1973, his finnickyess was forever bumping against Clint's impatience. He even spoke slowly, as if with effort, from behind near-perpetual sunglasses and a glossy-smooth tan, and walked slowly, in stacked Western boots that gave his small body an air of Napoleonic command. On set once, needing some wind, he raised his hand; and the wind, from nowhere, blew.

The burning fiery furnace

"The Deer Hunter" also went over-schedule and over-budget. The search for authenticity led Mr Cimino to use eight locations for Clairton, the town at the film's heart; to put his actors on the furnace floor of a real steelworks, and make a wedding last for a real hour; to strip leaves from trees, paint them orange and reattach them, in order to make summer autumn; to shoot the Vietnam scenes in Thailand, deliberately on the River Kwai; to make his actors really slap each other, jump out of helicopters and fall into waters full of live rats, for as many as 50 takes. He drew the best out of his devoted cast, and it cost \$15m.

This came to seem a pittance. "Heaven's Gate", "the real West, not the fake West", required an even higher pitch of perfection, including the restoration of a buggy at workshops in three states; the building of an irrigation system under a wide area of prairie to make it lushly green for the climactic battle scene; the training of the cast in rifle-shooting, horse-riding, roller-skating and Slavic accents, and the demolition of a street in order to rebuild it a mere six feet wider. UA tried to rein him in. He refused to speak to them or let their people on set and, once the film was in the can, edited it behind barred windows and locked doors.

After the debacle, with critics cold and studios no longer wanting him, his quest for perfection turned inward. His mouth was too small, his cheeks too plump; LA cosmetic surgeons turned him into an unrecognisable waif. His career seemed over, but he was writing novels, which the French liked, and noting that his new cut of "Heaven's Gate", released on DVD in 2013, was murmured by some to be a masterpiece. He said he was never happier. After all, he had never aimed to be a film-maker.

A mountain of unproduced scripts remained in his house. They included adaptations of "Crime and Punishment" and Malraux's "La Condition Humaine". His favourite, worked on for decades, was Ayn Rand's "The Fountainhead": the story of an architect ready to destroy all he had built rather than betray his perfect vision. Truly he had been there, and done that.

Correction: This article previously stated that the town of Clairton is fictional. It is not

From the print edition: Obituary

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