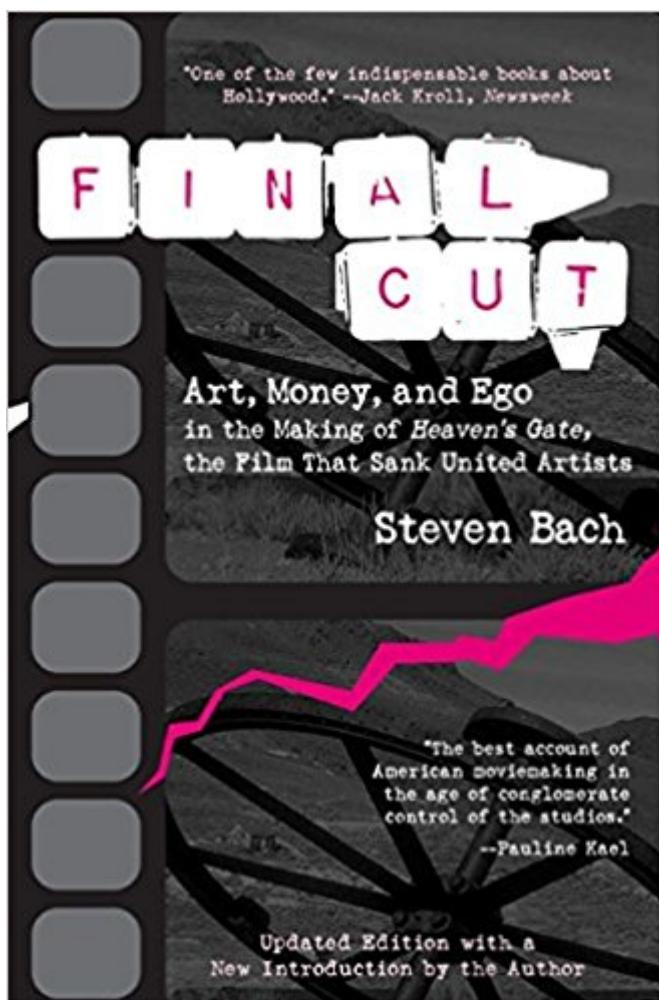


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Final Cut: Art, Money, And Ego In The Making Of Heaven's Gate, The Film That Sank United Artists



Synopsis

Heaven's Gate is probably the most discussed, least seen film in modern movie history. Its notoriety is so great that its title has become a generic term for disaster, for ego run rampant, for epic mismanagement, for wanton extravagance. It was also the film that brought down one of Hollywood's major studios—United Artists, the company founded in 1919 by Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, D. W. Griffith, and Charlie Chaplin. Steven Bach was senior vice president and head of worldwide production for United Artists at the time of the filming of Heaven's Gate, and apart from the director and producer, the only person to witness the film's evolution from beginning to end. Combining wit, extraordinary anecdotes, and historical perspective, he has produced a landmark book on Hollywood and its people, and in so doing, tells a story of human absurdity that would have made Chaplin proud.

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The best account of American moviemaking in the age of conglomerate control of the studios.

"The best account of American moviemaking in the age of conglomerate control of the studios."

• Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*"A landmark book on movies—must reading!"

• Kirkus Reviews"A compulsively readable account of adventures in the film trade. An intimate view of what goes on in the corridors of Hollywood power—distinguished by its awesome objectivity." • David Brown, *The Zanuck Brown Co.*"Buffs will love this one—inside and fascinating looks at Woody Allen, Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Sellers, writer

William Goldman, Dino De Laurentiis, Truman Capote, Martin Scorsese, et al."  "Newsday" A riveting, witty and essentially heartbreaking chronicle of a catastrophe"  "  "Peter Bogdanovich, director of *The Last Picture Show*"One of the few indispensable books about Hollywood."  "  "Jack Kroll, *Newsweek*

Great book on the inside story of one of the great movie disasters of all time. I was 25 when the Heaven's Gate debacle occurred, and was one of those who was fortunate enough to have seen the movie during it's brief national theater run. I recently watched it again on Blu-Ray. And despite attempts of some to "re-habilitate" this film, it still remains a boring and ponderous mess. The only quibble I have with Bach's book is that there are no pictures. Having pictures of the people involved with this film, and of the film itself, would have added tremendously to my enjoyment of this book. In 2005, TLC network made a 90 minute documentary on the subject matter in this book, entitled "Final Cut: The Making and Unmaking of Heaven's Gate". There are extensive interviews with Bach, David Field, and numerous others involved with the making of the film (but not Cimino). Unfortunately, this great documentary film isn't available on DVD, but you can catch it on YouTube. I advise watching the documentary first and then reading the book.

Must read for anyone interested in film making and the business of distribution. While art is important to some this still is a business that needs "product." Self indulgence too often results in a product that no one wants except the individual who indulged himself. This is an inside baseball book that the late Mr. Bach wrote with honesty and passion.

Steven Bach's FINAL CUT about Michael Cimino's ego run amok and the consequent dismantling of United Artists has long been considered the great insider's tale of Hollywood's actual doings and follies. For both Bach and the reader, it is easy to see the perfect storm that surrounds giving Cimino free reign on "Heaven's Gate." Coming off of an Oscar for the "Deer Hunter," Cimino gets whatever he wants, does whatever he wants, and basically acts like the most conceited jerk of all time. No one seems to disagree with assessment. The conflicting opinions exist on what Bach and others could have done as management. Their every decision ends up wrong and United Artists uses the disaster to sell itself off to MGM, for a profit no less.

After seeing a reissued "director's cut" version of "Heaven's Gate," the movie so expensive to produce and so poorly received by the critics in 1980 that it destroyed Michael Cimino's reputation

as a director and led to the demise of United Artists, I sought out this book by one of the United Artist producers involved in the project (and who also lost his job in the aftermath). It's a fascinating story. How could Cimino--who had just come from making "The Deer Hunter," which netted him Academy Awards for best picture and best director--have created such a mess? Vastly exceeding its budget, "Heaven's Gate" was visually spectacular but had a poor sound track and a story that verged on incoherence at times. Why did United Artists let him do it? This book tells the story in great detail and Steven Bach was a fine writer. The most interesting parts, however--the Cimino story--gets lost from time to time in Bach's efforts to paint a comprehensive picture of United Artist's glorious history (it was founded by Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks) as well as describing the Hollywood system of movie making in general. I found myself skipping parts. But, that being said, it's a great read and a fabulous story of hubris and Hollywood finances.

Not so much that it is horror (people aren't dying or being stalked by monsters), but in how the process of making the film started out wrong, and continues to get more and more wrong at every step. As a history, you know how it'll end, but it's still almost depressing how at each step the execs make wrong decision after wrong decision, throwing good money after bad. If Bach is to be believed, he and his confederates were so desperate for a defining hit that they simply talked themselves into a disaster, didn't have the guts or experience or self-preservation instinct to cut their losses and then the piper was paid. Cimino comes across as someone who simply needed to be told no on occasion and forced to work within limits, and the early rejection of his Fountainhead idea shows that that was probably possible. But once the train started rolling, nothing save a miraculous Citizen Kane level result would have saved the day, and Heaven's Gate was no miracle. You could tell by the way they caved in to his demand to cast Huppert that the only real option had become ditching the project altogether, but that's not how ego works. Some say it's a masterpiece (though with the sound issues, absurd length and lack of narrative dynamism that's pretty hard to support), but it didn't need to be a masterpiece; it needed to be a hit. It wasn't and it destroyed Cimino's career and UA along with it. We are left to wonder whether a fictional account of a war that never happened was worth it.

I picked this book up due to a recent interest in film history, and while the content is wonderful, I will let the other reviewers focus on that. Instead, I just wanted to say that this book is so beautifully and cleverly written that even people who aren't particularly interested in United Artists or Heaven's Gate will likely enjoy it. One thing that can be fun (or frustrating, depending on how you look at it) is that

Bach often coyly avoids mentioning names of specific people or films that aren't directly related to the Heaven's Gate fiasco- particularly if failure or controversy are involved. He leaves enough breadcrumbs for knowledgeable readers to figure out what he's talking about, but I admit to being stumped several times. It can be rewarding to solve these little insider puzzles though, when you figure them out. I'm very sad to learn that mister Bach has passed away because he was a true literary talent. I am adding the rest of his books to my wish list as soon as I'm finished with this mini review!

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