

# Class frontiers: The view through *Heaven's* *Gate*

by

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Consider one of the most familiar of Western openings: a vast, empty landscape into which rides a solitary male figure. Perhaps he brings news of events which will pitch us into the action, maybe he is the action; often he'll be alone and pitted against an inhospitable and untamed world. Compare this with the opening of *Heaven's Gate*: a deserted street in Harvard substitutes for the empty frontier; into the street runs a solitary male figure - James Averill (Kris Kristofferson) - racing to catch up with a group of university students raggedly following a marching band. When he eventually reaches them, his friend Billy Irvine (John Hurt) is delighted to see him, but nobody is waiting for him, and in his absence nothing would be very different. It's a strange opening for a Western.

The opening sequence of *Heaven's Gate's* (set in Harvard) functions as more than just a prologue; it is central to an interpretation of the film, for it lays out value systems and patterns of behaviour which subsequently become the subject of the film's essential discourse: issues of class and ethnicity, the role of women, and of the relationship between individual and collective action. Whilst these issues had sometimes been implicit concerns of earlier Westerns, they had never before been examined so explicitly or so critically.

A group of expensively dressed women are crowding eagerly at a window to watch the group of white male students (with Averill having belatedly joined them) marching by to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. The students throng into a magnificent Lecture Theatre, where these same women watch and giggle (from balcony seats) as Billy Irvine (John Hurt), the 'Class-of-Seventy Orator' makes an irresponsible attempt to entertain his peers with a graduation speech which tellingly ends with him proclaiming that 'On the whole everything is well arranged.'

The women then join the students to take part in a magnificent swirling dance to a full off-screen orchestra playing The Blue Danube. James Averill (Kris Kristofferson) snatches a young woman from a fellow student. She's delighted. He tells her, 'You're beautiful.' 'So are you,' she replies. For wealthy young men of spirit, for men who know what they want and are prepared to go out and get it, everything does indeed seem well arranged.



The marching band returns; the beautiful young woman appears with friends at a window, again they are looking down (as if from a picture frame) on the action below, now watching admiringly as Averill and his fellow students battle for a bouquet attached high up on the trunk of a tree in the centre of the grassy area where previously they had been dancing. Averill wins; he plucks the bouquet from the tree and holds it aloft in triumph. The unnamed beauty at the window applauds. There may be bloody noses, the struggle for the bouquet may have been violent but it's been well worth it: the women watch excitedly and wholeheartedly approve what in retrospect appears to have been a violent and elaborate courtship ritual - conducted to the strains of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. The imagery, the language and the music in this opening sequence all serve to link Averill's courtship of the unnamed 'Beautiful Young Woman' with the values of the ruling class Establishment.

The only women we see in this opening sequence are young, beautiful, wealthy; and passive. They are only allowed to express themselves through formal dancing and by approving the antics of men; their sole means of expression is through response and reaction. The 'community' to which they belong is one which has institutionalised a form of competitive violence; privilege belongs to those who take strong individual action; even Billy Irvine's impertinent and convoluted speech is tacitly approved as mild eccentricity.

After the sumptuous rituals of Harvard, Cimino cuts abruptly to a close up of Averill asleep on a train, sun and shadows falling across him through a smoky atmosphere. At last, and quite unexpectedly, we're offered an image that's readily identifiable as belonging generically to The Western. But we're not on safe ground for long - there's an immediate cut to an exterior view of the train, and the familiar is disturbed: the engine (belching thick black smoke) is pulling a carriage, a flat wagon with a buggy on it, a large cattle wagon, an EMIGRANT CAR and a caboose. The cattle wagon is empty - not only does it have no cattle in it, but the roofs of both the cattle wagon and the EMIGRANT CAR are crowded with people - while Averill is alone in the only carriage on the train. All this against a magnificent backdrop of the snow-capped mountains of Wyoming. The familiar image of trains in Westerns is inextricably coupled with associations of trains in quite different contexts: Jews *inside* goods wagons being taken to concentration camps, peasants clinging to slow moving trains trundling through India. We're unused to trains being used in this way in the West. By juxtaposing the celebrations of the privileged class and Averill's comfortable (and solitary) journey with this mass of unidentified

humanity lurching precariously to God-Knows-Where, Cimino firmly establishes that issues of privilege, class and community will be amongst the central concerns of the film.

The image of the train is complex and highly detailed, but Cimino demurs from pointing up its significance. We see it and we move on. It's only as the film develops that we fully understand what it is that we've seen. Soon we'll discover that the people on the roofs - denied access even to the comfort and relative security of a cattle wagon - are immigrants from Eastern Europe. Most of them are here in family units, and they're here because to them America is Heaven's Gate. They have been sold the dream, and they believe it: if only you have enough initiative and drive and are prepared to work hard, everything can be yours. It's the myth to which Billy Irvine subscribes: America is 'well arranged' if you're willing to go out and get what you want. That's the dream; and that's what they're here for. They're travelling to Heaven's Gate in the hope that they might be allowed in.

This strategy of offering rich, complex juxtapositions which initially seem to stand alone is wholly in keeping with Cimino's methods throughout the film. He shows us events but doesn't point them up; meanings becoming clear retrospectively. Robin Wood has developed this line of argument more fully in his excellent article, *Heaven's Gate re-opened* <sup>(1)</sup>, where he asserts that Cimino appears to renounce conventional, linear systems of narrative organisation in favour of more symbolic systems in which it is often the interconnecting resonance of the imagery which gives the film its meanings.

From the image of the train there's another unexpected and disturbing cut: to the Kovachs family - husband, wife and child - working together in mud and blood to cut up a steer's carcass. In marked contrast to the women at Harvard, Kovachs' wife is active and this is her work as much as her husband's. That they are immigrants is clear immediately, for they speak Polish (the film is sub-titled at these moments); or, rather, the woman speaks Polish, urging her husband to hurry, 'Faster, faster'. It could not be made clearer that these people are ethnically different. It is not just that they are immigrants, but that because they do not speak English they are 'other'.

The shadow of an unknown gunman falls on the canvas wall of their shelter. The shadow raises a shotgun. Kovachs is felled, his stomach blown apart by a shotgun blast. The incident is horrific and shocking because it's so sudden, in such stark contrast to what's gone before and because the killing is so brutal and so anonymous. Only when Kovachs' body is lying in a pool of mud do we see the gunman - later identified as Nate Champion (Christopher Walken). Framed by a hole in the wall of the tent, he turns disdainfully, calmly mounts his horse and rides away.



This, at last, is the type of action we might expect of a Western. But Cimino chooses to present the killing of Kovachs not as a crucial plot point but instead almost as background detail. Like the journey across the plains, it's one incident in a catalogue of oppression. The Kovachs family never assume *particular* importance; their significance is that they are immigrants; a small unit amongst the many who have emigrated to America from Europe. This formal strategy regularly shifts our attention away from the individual protagonists of the film (Averill, Champion, Canton and Ella) to 'bit-players' (such as Cully, the Station-Master) and the Sweetwater immigrants.

### Class

There have been other Westerns in which a group of settlers (rarely are they termed immigrants - the choice of vocabulary is significant) is seen battling against greedy, oppressive cattle barons; what makes *Heaven's Gate* so unusual is that the cattle barons, personified by Canton (Sam Waterson), are so clearly identified with the ruling class Establishment; the oppression is seen to be class based rather motivated by individual greed.

In earlier Westerns we frequently see the frontier as a place where justice needs to be established, where rigid systems of 'Eastern' justice seem ludicrous and out of place. Prior to *Heaven's Gate* those systems had rarely been explicitly identified as functioning in favour of a ruling class. What we have in *Heaven's Gate*, however, is a systematic attempt by 'Eastern speculators' - clearly identified as such by one of the more articulate members of the Sweetwater community - to crush a group of non-English-speaking working-class immigrants who want to work for themselves and not as wage slaves. And this oppression is wholeheartedly supported by the Establishment.

Robin Wood has argued that "the alleged Marxist content does not progress very far beyond what is implicit in the saying of Christ to which Cimino's title refers. It might better be described as adolescent idealism...." (2). Whilst the film may not present us with a sophisticated proposal for socialism, it is far from naive politically. Events in Wyoming are all firmly placed in an economic and political context: the imagery, the juxtapositions, the resonances and reverberations, and even the dialogue constantly remind us that property and ownership are ethnic, gender and class issues. The immigrants who've come to Sweetwater have done so in order to own their means of production. Although none of them ever articulate their precise reasons for leaving Europe, it is clear that what they want in Johnson County is land on which they can raise their own cattle and the freedom to build a democratic, self-regulating community free of external interference.

When Averill's train arrives in Caspar we find ourselves in a town seething with traffic and overcast with smoke pouring from high chimneys; a heavily industrialised town. Cimino offers us a dense and complex image of urban life - the antithesis of the sort of towns we might traditionally expect to find in a Western. The visual extravagance of the image has sometimes been remarked on pejoratively, almost as if Cimino chose it at random; but this perversely ignores its unmistakable function: to establish that industry and commerce, the solid foundations of capitalism, are already firmly in place in

Wyoming; and furthermore (by implication) that the town is supported by a large wage-earning working-class population - who do not own their means of production.



Surrounded by the intense activity of Caspar, Averill and Cully, the Irish Station Master (Richard Masur), attempt a conversation. Cully tells Averill that the Stockgrower's Association is carrying out summary executions of those immigrants they believe are stealing their cattle. Cully is embarrassed by his own inactivity. "I can't afford to get involved," he asserts. "I just started this job." The economic context for acquiescence could hardly be stated more baldly. Earlier in the sequence he has remarked: "If the rich could hire others to do their violence for them, the poor could make a wonderful living." The naiveté of his assertion comes from the fact that the system *depends* upon the rich hiring the poor to do their violence for them - again made explicit in a subsequent sequence where Canton seeks out additional recruits for his mercenary army.

The end of the Caspar sequence is marked by another remarkable cut: from the frenetic commercial activity of the industrialised town to the hallway of an opulently furnished mansion - into which walks a perfectly dressed butler carrying a silver tea service on a silver tray. In silence he moves slowly towards the sound of voices. We follow him into a large room where we encounter Canton for the first time - making a speech to the Stockgrower's Association about producing wealth from land.

Cimino uses the Association meeting to relate issues of class and gender, employing the strategy of unmarked juxtaposition to draw attention to the distinction between the different roles assumed by women of the ruling and working classes. While Canton proposes placing the names of 125 immigrants on a Death List, the camera watches the reactions of various members of the Association; Billy Irvine doesn't much like what he's hearing and, in a remarkably economic revelation of character, he looks away. We follow his gaze out through the window to see two women (dressed much as the women had been in the Harvard sequence) promenading with parasols whilst the men continue to discuss the Death List. The women of this class are of the Establishment. Although there is a clear proposition that the action by the Stockgrower's Association will make America a better place for all to live in, women have no part in the decision making process -

unlike the women of Sweetwater, who not only participate actively in all public meetings, but also butcher cattle, work the land, and go to battle.

After the meeting Canton finds himself confronted by Averill. "You offset every effort we make to protect our property and that of your own class," says Canton. To which Averill replies: "You're not of my class, Canton. You never will be." It's impossible to tell whether Averill's scorn of Canton is motivated by snobbery or disgust at his actions. 'Not of my class' could as easily be a reference to a moral position as to Averill's opinion that Canton is not Ivy League. The productive ambiguity of the exchange arises from the question posed by Averill's behaviour here and subsequently - and is not just to do with his personal motivations, but also to his position as a highly educated U.S. Marshall meting out justice in a town which is trying to function as a collective and seeking its own democracy. The ambiguities of this position are developed in the brief sequence immediately following the Association meeting: Averill is driving his gig to Sweetwater; he meets a woman whose husband has been gunned down. She and her son are struggling with an enormous and crude cart (looking less like a settlers' covered wagon than something that Mother Courage herself might have disdained). Averill stops and talks with her sympathetically: he asks her what she's going to do now that her husband's dead, whether she'll stay "without a man." She responds that they paid \$150 for the land and then referring to her child: "It's our land. We'll stay and work it." As Averill drives away, Cimino cuts repeatedly between the woman and her child bent over, struggling to get the heavy cart moving and Averill sitting upright in the expensive gig - a birthday present to Ella (Isabelle Huppert). Averill has everything (as he later says to Ella - 'I could buy you anything'), the immigrant woman has next to nothing; Averill wants to leave, the immigrant wants to stay and work.

The exchange with the immigrant woman exemplifies the ambiguities of Averill's position, but it also highlight the way that men and women of Sweetwater are seen working to gain a living from the land - (the Kovachs family butchering the steer's carcass, tree trunks being dragged through the mud, women taking the place of oxen to pull a plough). In contrast, Canton maintains he owns the land, but what we see him doing is organising others and making speeches. He cannot, however, maintain a grip on his empire without recruiting his mercenary army from amongst the wage-earning working class. The crucial meeting at which he offers a bounty for executing those on the Death List takes place outside a factory. Although we don't see the nature of the work inside the factory, it is characterised by harsh lighting and the sound of heavy industrial machinery at work.

Here, however, as elsewhere in the film, the presentation of class interaction is complex and far from sentimental. Canton's reliance on the working class to do his dirty work is double edged: the factory workers join the mercenary army for money; they show no recognition that they share anything with the people they are hired to kill. Perceptions of what is effectively a class war vary widely. The political and economic situation demands that characters act against their own wider interests in order to survive - as exemplified by Cully's initial inaction and by Nate Champion's role as a killer.

### **Nate Champion**

Nate (himself a recent immigrant if we are to believe an overheard conversation in the Sweetwater dormitories), has been bought by Canton. "You were hired to enforce the law. We are the law," says Canton. But Nate is presented as a complex character; he is not simply Canton's stooge. Although willing to shoot Kovachs in cold blood, he contemptuously prevents another of Canton's mercenaries from killing a young immigrant (in spite of finding the 'boy' with a steer); he is hated and feared by the people of Sweetwater, and yet it is Nate who confronts Canton, accusing him of cowardice (an act that is far more dangerous than Averill's earlier altercation with Canton in the Gentleman's Club). Nate is the character who changes most in the course of the film, yet he remains curiously equivocal about his own motivation and the effect of his actions.

When Nate meets Averill in Sweetwater we are led to expect a showdown, even a gunfight; what we get is an exchange of words: "What do you want, Nate?" asks Averill. "How the Hell do I know? Get rich. Like you." Nate doesn't know why he's doing what he is. As with the earlier moment between Canton and Averill, the exchange is ambiguous. It seems that for Nate there is no easy rationalisation of his actions: the materialist explanation (that he's driven into this by force of economic and political circumstances) is as unsatisfactory as it is to ascribe his motivation to personal envy.

From our knowledge of other Westerns we might expect Nate's denunciation of Canton in the mercenary camp to contain at least the possibility of a positive resolution for the immigrants of Sweetwater, but Cimino refuses to allow individual actions to have the primacy we have become accustomed to. Whilst Nate exposes Canton as a coward, the confrontation is motivated primarily by his romantic attachment to Ella (he acts to save her, not to protect those on the Death List), rather than by any growing awareness of the political realities of his situation. The shift in Nate may be set against a background in which the economics and politics of his situation are constantly stated, but it is a background to which he appears blind: after the encounter with Canton (which has forced the latter to reveal the full extent of collusion between Association and Establishment: "I represent the full authority of the Government of the United States and the President...") Nate returns to his newly 'wall-papered' shack and what he hopes will be domestic bliss with Ella, shutting out the political realities of their situation. His actions appear to indicate that he believes individual action is sufficient. He has confronted Canton; that will suffice.... The charges of nihilism against the film (examined in detail below) seem to arise partly out of the film's refusal to accept the primacy of individual action; a refusal which is in itself a strong critique not only of the Western, but also of most mainstream Hollywood films.

The change in Nate echoes an earlier shift in Cully, the station master. When Averill arrives in Caspar, Cully is determined not to get involved: "Every citizen's business is his affair - not mine dammit," he insists, unconsciously articulating an attitude that Canton and the Association rely upon (it echoes both Irvine's and Averill's), and which undermines any possibility of collective solidarity against Canton's fascist repression. But when Cully understands the scale of force that Canton is planning to use against the immigrants he finds himself compelled to take action. He sets off with the intention of warning the people of Sweetwater that Canton's force is on its way. The subsequent killing of Cully, though less graphic than the great set-piece battle sequence near the end, is one of the most chilling moments in the film - partly because the killers turn it into a ruthless cold-blooded game, partly because it illustrates so clearly that Canton will stop at nothing in his attempt to prevent collective action against the Association, but chiefly, I



suspect, because the economic context of the killing is spelled out so explicitly: "What do you think of my new suit here?" asks the mercenary. "I paid \$50 for it on credit. More 'n likely pay it off real soon though."

The personal nature of Nate's motivations - and his failure to make the link between the limited personal view and the broader social and political context - appears in a clearer perspective when seen in contrast with Cully's. Whether Nate is naïve, so embedded in the complex social realities of his situation that clear-sightedness is virtually impossible, or wilfully unseeing, the 'blind spot' is even more pronounced in Ella.

### **Ella**

Ella's bordello is a commercial undertaking (sex is a commodity for sale, barter and exchange); but whilst Ella strives for financial independence (she 'likes money'), she also frequently expresses a yearning for domesticity, for isolation from the world of commerce and capital exchange. This tension echoes those surrounding Nate and is effectively an inversion of those surrounding Averill. It creates the most difficult of the film's ambiguities, but also yields up its most provocative discourse. On the one hand we have Ella the hard hearted, strong headed business woman who makes Nate pay for his time with her, who insists that she can love two men equally, who is seen on several occasions working on her accounts.... ; on the other, there is Ella who spends all day baking a pie for Averill, who is moved to tears by Nate's attempts to turn his shack into a haven of domestic bliss complete with newsprint for 'wallpaper', who wants Averill to marry her, and who allows her bordello to become a place where the men of Sweetwater can come for a sing-song with her girls.

A charge of sentimentality has been levelled against Cimino in connection with many of the scenes involving Ella; but the charge sticks only if his method in these sequences is fundamentally different to that employed elsewhere in the film. But what we have in these 'sentimental' sequences is surely a series of personal visions, in some cases bids by Ella to realise her own fantasies, in others deliberate attempts to postpone a confrontation with the social and political realities of her world. The fantasy is one of independence, in which she believes she is 'free'. The irony is that she has gained her economic 'freedom' through commercial transactions with the world outside; she is dependent on it. Her refusal to acknowledge this dependence is perfectly imaged in her acceptance of stolen cattle - with all its appalling consequences - despite Nate's request that she "stop taking steers for payment from these people."

Consider Ella's role in the Heaven's Gate roller-skate dance sequence - an exhilarating and joyous celebration of community. In the sequence she is not just a part of the community, she is a central figure within it: nobody objects to her dancing publicly with Averill; she's surrounded by women who are active (who invite men to dance) and by vivacious smiling children who take an active part in all the proceedings. The sequence appears to be a joyous celebration of a working class community in which difference and diversity appear to be tolerated. But the almost dream-like ending and sepia toning of the sequence offers a key to its broader function. At the end of the sequence Averill drags the drunken John Bridges (Jeff Bridges) out to lay him down to sleep on a cart. We cut to close up on Ella, who looks back into the hall: the rest of the community have mysteriously disappeared. The meaning of this is not clear, but there is a strong

suggestion that we should read the exhilarating joyousness of the dance as a self-consciously Utopian vision; a dream of what might have been possible. More specifically, it seems to be Ella's vision. But if this is Ella's dream, it is Ella's dream as an immigrant, the American Dream: the dream of a world in which the community is strong, joyous, supportive and tolerant of difference; a world in which the individual can achieve financial independence and commercial success, and simultaneously gain all the joys and benefits of community life.



The fantasy is very appealing (both to Ella and to the audience), but it bears little relation to events in the rest of the film - in which Ella is NOT accepted by the community as a whole, the 'community' of Sweetwater is frequently riven with dissent, and Ella's presence is often bitterly resented. Everything she does is against a background of commerce. She lives in a world in which everything is shown in its economic context - but in which she insists that all her dealings with Nate, Averill and her other clients are her own personal decisions, motivated only by her own desire for personal freedom. Even after the women in her brothel have been slaughtered and she has been raped by the Association thugs, she still asserts to Averill that she wants economic independence. When Averill then leaves her, however, cattle can be heard lowing, a poignant reminder that this independence is inextricably linked into a pattern of commerce that Canton is set on destroying. It's the sort of understated masterstroke which clearly frames Ella's actions in a critical perspective, and which characterises Cimino's methods throughout the film.

It is the tension between these differing perspectives (the Marxist, materialist view that all these events are underpinned by economic, social and political conditions and result from class-based oppression; and the Liberal Humanist view of individuals struggling to do right both for themselves and for each other) which animates the film. The film does not, however, resolve these tensions. The narrative closure is limited - the community is defeated; Nate and Ella are both gunned down in cold blood; Averill survives, but is desolate - and numerous questions remain unresolved. Perhaps the most important of these relates to the nature of an appropriate response to oppression on the scale seen in *Heaven's Gate*.

## The charge of nihilism

In amongst the early tirades against the film was a frequent charge that it is a profoundly nihilistic work. Certainly the battle, the gunning down of Ella and the epilogue are all deeply pessimistic. But pessimism and nihilism are not synonymous.

Cimino's representation of the immigrant community at Sweetwater is patently not a simple attempt to offer up a 'realistic' slice of late nineteenth century life, but rather a complex exploration of the possibilities of diversity within a working-class immigrant group struggling to establish its identity as a community in the face of violent oppression. Although the community is ultimately defeated, the epilogue offers a telling commentary on that defeat. Averill is seen as an old man languishing with his wife (?) on a steam yacht off Newport, Rhode Island. We're not given any indication of how he comes to be there. It's not important. What does matter is that he is extremely rich and that he has set himself apart from any sort of community. The only dialogue in this sequence is the woman saying: "I'd like a cigarette." Averill hands her one and lights it. She appears incapable or unwilling to do anything for herself - in stark contrast to the world of Johnson County where women showed themselves clearly capable of accomplishing all those tasks traditionally held to be the reserve of men.

Averill's life is empty and meaningless. He has returned to his position of privilege and material wealth, and he appears to have resigned himself to the bleak implications of his class position. This is undeniably pessimistic, but those who charged Cimino with nihilism seem - quite unjustifiably - to have equated Averill's actions (which are indeed nihilistic) with Cimino's film in which he constantly frames his character's actions in a critical and broadening context. *Heaven's Gate* clearly proposes that those who have power and privilege but fail to act against repression are guilty of an appalling nihilism. This is disturbing and provocative, but it is far from nihilistic itself.

It is rare for a Hollywood film, and particularly a Western to propose any sort of alternatives to individual action, let alone to articulate a proposal that individual action is an inadequate response to the sorts of oppression that we see in *Heaven's Gate*. But although the film is centrally about class based and ethnically motivated oppression, it does not offer a panegyric in praise of the working-class. And although it manifestly proposes the need for collective action, and is highly critical of those who renege on their individual responsibilities to a community, it veers between examination of the effects of economic, social and political conditions and an account of events in which actions are seen to be driven by individual acts of personal loyalty or betrayal. It is this tension between the materialist and the liberal humanist perspectives which makes the film both so rich and so fascinating. And it is this tension which is at the root of many Westerns, but which had hitherto never been explored so explicitly, nor with such formal inventiveness.

The view through *Heaven's Gate* has been perplexing. That the film bombed at the box office, bankrupted a studio and finished off United Artists is common knowledge; and that is the commonly accepted reason for the 'death of the Western' (reports of which have been greatly exaggerated). Might it also be that *Heaven's Gate* began a process of questioning class and gender roles, and of problematising the primacy of individual

action, which no subsequent director of a Western could ignore, but which very few have been prepared to pick up and run with?

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September 1994

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, R. *Heaven's Gate re-opened* in **Hollywood, from Vietnam to Reagan**  
Columbia University Press. 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.313