

an expensive failure

It's easy to say a film is good or bad; the tough part is explaining why. The following criticism centers on the film's failure to come to grips with the elements of Indian mythology which it exploits, and analyzes the shoddy production from the point of view of the spectator.

by Katherine Gilday

Shadow of the Hawk is a terrible film. Not that its makers had any pretensions to meeting the kind of challenge Le Pan's poem (see box) throws out or providing a serious consideration of Indian mythology. But isn't it a shameful state of affairs when one of the few films that does manage to get made in this country, even partially by Canadians – on a subject which many of our strongest writers are struggling to come to terms with, whose enormous potential for film treatment I've tried to suggest, and which at the very minimum doesn't fit automatically into one of the deadly American formulas – **is a dismal failure**. And someone somewhere in the history of this production had pretensions of some kind, maybe just to produce a slightly different kind of thriller but at least to do something with a measure of originality. Only what has actually happened is that a bunch of semi-digested clichés from a standard action/adventure format with some elements from police-drama thrown in have been tossed with an equal number of schticks from occult/horror fare and the whole crazy unjelled jelly salad dumped into a supposedly Indian milieu.

Chief Dan George plays an aging medicine man who seeks out his half-breed grandson in the city in order to enlist his aid against the powerful magic of an evil sorceress. The young man, played by Jan-Michael Vincent, thoroughly "citified" and skeptical of the old man's story, ends up, nevertheless, driving him back to his village, accompanied by a

young female reporter who has decided to come along for the (600-mile) ride. Most of the film is taken up with this trip and the trio's attempts to save themselves from the stratagems of the sorceress and her henchmen – including a phantom car that forces them off the road, a poisonous snake, cut-throat gas station attendants, a killer bear, a dismally unreliable hanging bridge and a murderous Indian warrior.

Having been chased, burned, gouged, stabbed and bitten, Little Hawk (which is what his grandfather insists on calling our young computer technician) decides finally that something strange is going on. He consents to the old man's wish that he undergo initiation as a medicine man – a rite which for complete novices apparently takes part of one evening and a night. During his solitary vigil he succeeds in destroying the sorceress in the shape of a wolf, bringing peace to the village and agreeing to serve as their new medicine man, on a sort of freelance basis.

It's a toss-up which is more atrocious in this film – the script or the acting. Jan-Michael Vincent with that pouty, vaguely infantile face manages to run the gamut – fear, anger, exhaustion, pain, surprise, etc. – without once suggesting the slightest trace of inner motivation or growth in his character. Part of the problem, of course, is that the script keeps him so busy running and fighting and generally reacting to all kinds of external dangers, there's not much time left for him to ponder the identity crisis this whole adventure is supposed to bring on.

The dignity and authority of Dan George's voice and presence, though virtual clichés by now, held more conviction for me than anything else in the film but were quickly rendered ludicrous by a thoroughly ludicrous context. (The

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audience at the Coronet, a theatre usually given over to soft-core porn, decided about a third of the way through that what they were watching was really a comedy. Those who stayed had an uproarious time.) As an example of the sort of thing the chief was working against – just after the hero has succeeded in defeating the bear, his grandfather intones, “I am proud of you, Little Hawk. You have done well,” while a particularly infelicitous cut shows us the young man lying on the ground with his tongue hanging out of his mouth, looking like a complete idiot.

Nobody, however, has worse lines or a more unconvincing presence than Marilyn Hassett. During much of the film she wears a tentative little smile which is meant to express the superior wisdom of one whose heart and convictions are in the right place – but which ends up looking merely arch and insufferable. She gets to say things like “You’re not so bad – a little rough around the edges but...” (I’m not making this up) and looks acutely stiff and uncomfortable during the entire proceedings, as well she might. No rapport ever develops between her and the hero – which is *not* solely a matter of bad lines – so that we never really understand why she’s around in the first place. When it comes to the obligatory lovemaking scene it is so unmotivated it seems vaguely indecent, as if two strangers exchanging casual, cold conversation in a supermarket line-up were to suddenly go into a passionate clinch.

But then people in this film just don’t have complicated relationships. We know it’s over between the hero and his old girlfriend, for example, as soon as he phones to tell her that he’s not driving the old man to the bus station, but all the way home to the village – and she kicks up a fuss. “Thanks a lot, Fay,” he yells righteously and slams down the phone, completely free, we realize, to get involved with the cute reporter who picked up his grandfather.

One of the film’s themes is supposed to be the contrast between the concerned, liberal lifestyle of the heroine (she talks to seedy-looking old Indians) and the hedonistic, high-rise existence the grandson is leading (he owns or has access to a pool). Except for some ham-fisted conversation near the beginning – he: “You rich girls are lucky; guys like me have to work hard for our money.” She: (looking dazedly off into the distance) “What’s *rich*?” He: (grinning) “Now you’re starting to get philosophical” – this conflict is pretty well abandoned. I take it that his becoming a medicine man and his decision to return to the city with the girl are intended together to represent a synthesis of the best aspects of his dual heritage. Only we never do get any sense at the end that he differs at all from the way he started out – either as white man or as Indian.

The film is full of such dangling and unresolved elements – partly, I think, because it is too ambitious a project for its makers, who seem to have trouble just figuring out how to get from point A to point B at the most basic level of film narrative. The young man, for example, is supposed to resist his grandfather’s supernatural explanation of events until quite late in the proceedings. Since the fright action keeps coming, however, and no one seems to have figured out how to reconcile obviously magical events with the logic of the character, we are left with some truly anomalous situations – as when Jan-Michael watches a car which had been appearing and disappearing behind them collide thunderously with some invisible barrier in the middle of the highway and burst into flames; rushes over to save its passenger who, all ablaze but apparently suffering no ill effects, tries to drag him into the burning car; after a life-and-death struggle extricates himself; and returning to his companions coolly makes small talk, as though the whole incident had been nothing more than a minor accident, the kind of thing you run into all the time. →

Reflections on Indian Mythology and Canadian Culture

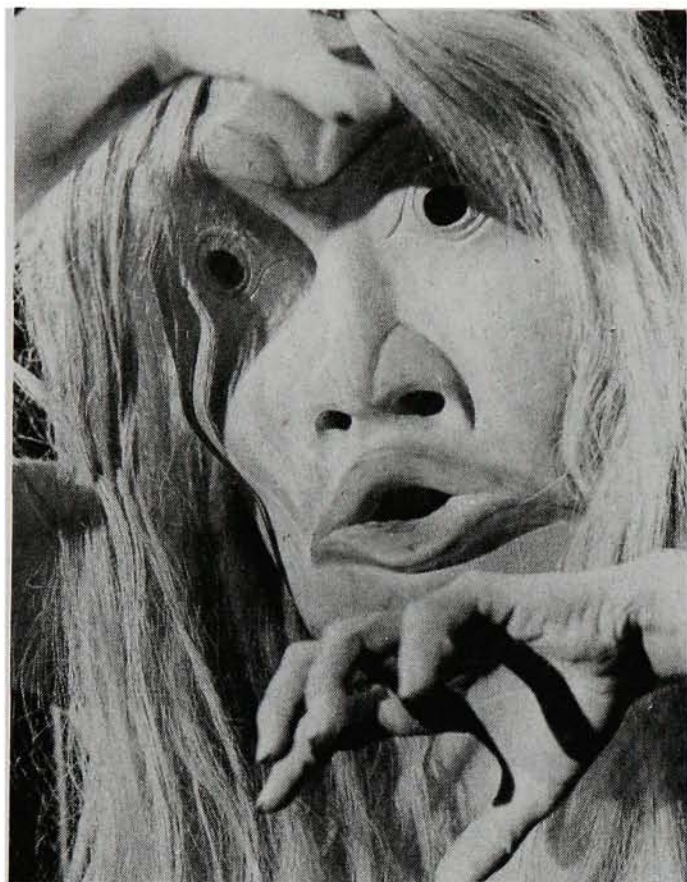
I thought of a poem by Douglas Le Pan, called “A Country Without a Mythology”, after seeing *Shadow of the Hawk*. Written well over a quarter-century ago, the central challenge it raises is still alive and waiting for an answer. The poem concerns a stranger to the country, representative of that perpetual stranger, the colonial, who searches desperately and unsuccessfully in his raw new environment for familiar, old-country assurances of meaning – Wordsworthian “sanctities”, humanistic “landmarks”. The countryside remains unremittingly alien to him, a savage incomprehensible place that seems to lack all pattern and human significance – “for”, as the poem ends, “who/Will stop where, clumsily constructed, daubed/With war-paint, teeters some lust-red manitou?” Not the embittered stranger, with his weary Christian eyes fixed on the heavens. But these last lines contain the suggestion that maybe it’s the man’s way of seeing, his inability to perceive anything in the manitou worth stopping for that empties the landscape of signs. Le Pan seems to be hinting that beyond the earthy Indian totem lies a whole universe of unfolded meanings, an alternative framework for connecting man to his terrain – a *mythology*, if the stranger could only recognize it as such – which derives as naturally and inevitably from this rugged country as a plant rooted in a particular soil.

It is an exhilarating suggestion – this idea that primitive modes of comprehension may hold the hidden key to our selfhood – and one that has held a long and powerful appeal for the minds of “civilized” men everywhere. Yet as Le Pan’s poem illustrates so clearly, primitivist sentiments take on particular force in New World environments. Surrounded by a strange, thoroughly unhumanized landscape, the inhabitant seems to be faced with an overwhelming freedom, a fundamental choice of identity – to reject the history-laden culture of his European past and to turn instead for an ordering of his experience to the aboriginal past of the land.

Twentieth-century psychological, anthropological and biological insights have tended generally to bolster the imaginative validity of this primitivist alternative. The criticism of civilized values implicit in the contrast presented by primitive ones, as well as the more difficult exploration of the primitive “state of mind” itself, with its enormous symbol-making capacity, its scrupulous attention to the concrete details of non-human life, its ecological sensitivity, and its integration of observation and interpretation, have in recent years become major artistic themes.

And they are themes ideally suited to treatment in the film medium, with its dazzling potentialities for depicting unfamiliar states of consciousness. Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout* was the first film to make me realize how compellingly film can suggest an entire change in one’s perceptual experience, a change so profound that it feels momentarily almost as if you have discarded your own neurological system for someone else’s. In it, Australia’s modern urban mentality is juxtaposed against the ancient imperatives of its most rugged terrain when two middle-class children, an adolescent girl and her much younger brother, are abandoned on the Outback by their crazed father. The story centres on their encounter with an adolescent aborigine, engaged in his initiatory “walkabout” into manhood, and the dialectic of primitive and civilized sensibilities that ensues.

continued . . .



For me, though, some of the most unforgettable sequences in the film occur before the young aborigine actually makes his appearance, the landscape itself asserting an active, relentless presence that gradually subverts the children's normal consciousness (particularly the teenage girl's). The babble of the transistor radio, a relic they carry along with them, grows increasingly irrelevant and insane, a metaphor in sound for the anxiety-ridden world of linear time they have left behind them; and no match for the force of the sun with its great resounding NOW burning through the inessential accretions of white culture. There is a startling night scene where several images of the children sleeping on the earth under a giant moon are accompanied by the yammering of multiple radio voices, as if all the news broadcasts and dawn-to-dusk programs in the world were being summarized – or summed up. For with one part of ourselves we feel the elegiac quality in this lunatic blend of voices, the lament for something passing quickly away. And yet at the same time we are somehow being forced into new skins, strange – perhaps aboriginal – eyes and ears, as the voices cancel each other out of meaning and become pure sound, a sort of tuneless lullaby by which we watch the desert and its creatures slowly claim the sleeping children.

The combination in this scene of fantastic and realistic elements, along with the distortion of our normal sense of duration create a complex and powerful articulation of the new state of being, a sort of mythological space, that is opening up as a possibility for the children. That their entry into this primitive Eden proves to be more problematic in the end than such heightened moments would suggest only intensifies their meaning. *Walkabout* shows us how the central questions posed by primitive thought and feeling can be handled in film with subtlety and intelligence, a careful skirting of simple-minded attitudes, and a depth of understanding we tend not to expect in films on this continent. Certainly, none of the major American or Canadian filmmakers have, in these terms, even begun to deal with the Indian psyche or the questions it raises.

K.G.

Technically, *Shadow of the Hawk* is very shoddy. Gaps in continuity abound. The old man suffers a snakebite which is supposed to leave him dead in twenty-four hours – but his condition seems to vary quite a lot. In some scenes, he looks as if he is about to pass out, so sick and weak is he, while in others he's his usual frisky old self. Eventually everyone appears to forget about this nasty detail altogether and the last we see of the chief, he's going fishing. The wound the hero suffers in his battle with the bear heals with miraculous rapidity (the less said about the bear the better – at the Coronet, it was one of the comic highlights). Jan-Michael walks out of a scene *minus* the magic staff he's been entrusted with, and enters the next scene holding it. There is also one remarkable scene where in three different shots of the hanging bridge, three different weather conditions obtain – one so clearly a downpour that it was gleefully noted by various members of the audience.

Why does the film *look* so tacky? Two million dollars is not a trifling sum. The photography is variously clean or grey, without any obvious relation to mood or theme. A general impression of "skimping" – on details, on cast, on footage – pervades the production. Most disturbing of all, there is no sense of location – an astonishing feat of non-achievement when you consider that the thing was shot in B.C. – and a crucial and inexcusable omission as far as the theme of Indian magic goes.

There are a couple of effective moments, mainly scenes intercut with the main action to show the beautiful sorceress ritualistically preparing her evil tricks among her followers. These glimmers of light remind us that the script, given professional handling, might have worked at some level – perhaps with a basic sensory impact, similar to that of the American film based on James Houston's book about an Eskimo community, *The White Dawn*.

Even the white mask-face, meant to function as the main focus of horror, is in itself a terrifying and strangely moving image, but its complete misuse illustrates the film's central defects. It is a perfectly valid opening idea, for instance, that the evil forces threatening the old man would also reach his grandson in the city. But instead of treating the mask-image suggestively, keeping it hovering between a palpable and spiritual existence, the film's writers and directors have made the spectre ludicrously concrete right from the beginning (with shoulders and arms, yet) by having it attempt to throttle the hero in the swimming pool. The crude and confused notions of the supernatural that lie behind this production ensure that wrong choices like this are constantly made. The male helpers of the sorceress look and act, at some points, like hired thugs from an episode of *Kojak*, and at others like the cast from *Night of the Living Dead*. Crass purple lights on the faces of the old Indian and his grandson are used to let us know they are undergoing a "mystical experience". The magical staff works exactly like a ray-gun.

It is, as I said, a terrible film – and an insult to all things Indian. Someone, sometime, has got to get it right. □

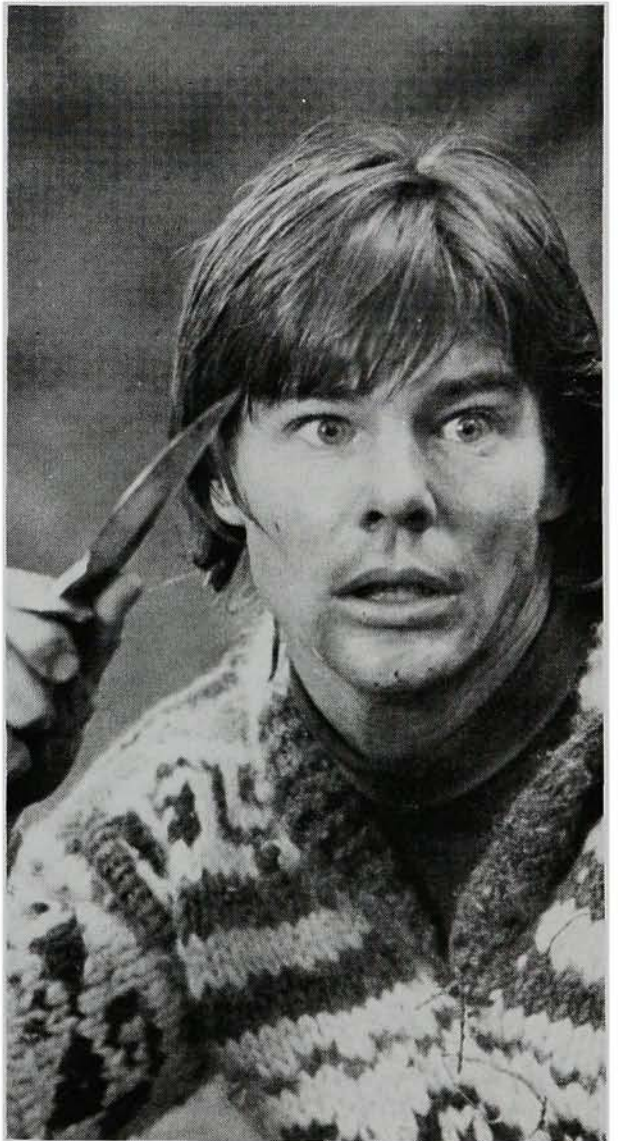
Shadow of the Hawk

d. George McCowan, asst. d. Ronald L. Schwary, Jim Scott, sc. Norman Thaddeus Vane, Herbert J. Wright, ph. John Holbrook, Reginald Morris, C.S.C., sp. effects Dick Albain, John Thomas, ed. O. Nicholas Brown, sd. ed. Ralph Brunjes, Patrick Drummond, sd. rec. George Mulholland, a.d. Keith Pepper, set dec. Peter Young, m. Robert McMullin, cost. Ilse Richter, Bobby Watts, l.p. Jan-Michael Vincent (Mike), Marilyn Hassett (Maureen), Chief Dan George (Old Man Hawk), Pia Shandel (Faye), Marianne Jones (Dso-noqua), exec. p. Henry Gellis, p. John Kemeny, assoc. p. Ronald L. Schwary, p. manager. Bob Gray, p.c. International Cinemedia Center/Rising Road Production, 1975, col. 35 mm., running time 92 minutes, dist. Columbia.

Scenes from the Shadow of the Hawk



Marriane Jones as Dsonoqua, possessed by a sorceress, invoking her evil forces; and Jan-Michael Vincent as Mike, defending himself from these same forces



A car which explodes in fire, the attack of the bear, the unsteady hanging bridge... just a few of the trials which await the hero of **Shadow of the Hawk**