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.

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 sort 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 supposed 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 "citi-fied" 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
audience at the Coronet, a theater 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 lineup 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, 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 cooly 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 unemittingly 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 extricates himself; and returning to his companions cooly 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.

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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 programes 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 open-ended and forever changing. The magical staff of the Living Dead. Crass purple lights on the faces of the natives as they execute their rituals. The white mask-face, meant to function as the main focus of the story, is replaced by a series of images that suggestively, keeping it hovering between life and death, wage a quiet war of nerves. The male helpers of the 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**

Seenes from the Shadow of the Hawk

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.

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