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Map of the Human Heart (15, Lumière, 109 mins)

THE removal of New Zealand director Vincent Ward from the filming of *Alien³*, was one of the saddest missed opportunities of recent cinema. He had wanted the film to be set on a wooden planet, inhabited by warrior monks, and he certainly would have given us something more rare and strange than the final version.

His two previous films, *Vigil* and *The Navigator*, show a film-maker who is a true visionary, with an interest in the spiritual which has been largely absent from cinema since the death of the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky. His latest, *Map of the Human Heart*, contains images of beauty and radiance that might have come from the great icon-makers.

The opening shot of the film appears to be the Milky Way, but in fact it is an overhead shot of ice floes in the Arctic. An old, drunken, half-breed Inuit called Avik, but known by his nickname Holy Boy (Jason Scott Lee), has cornered a young American map-maker in his hut, and regales him with the story of his life. And some life it has been.

In 1931, another map-maker (Patrick Bergin) descended from the sky in the first aeroplane seen by the Inuit (or Eskimos as they then were). He flies the tubercular Avik to Montreal to be cured. In the sanatorium the boy falls for a half-Indian girl, Albertine (played in adulthood by Anne Parillaud). After their separation, enforced by a hell-fire preaching nun, he spends the rest of his life pursuing her.

Put like that, it sounds much like any number of fat bestsellers written for the airport trade. But Ward invests his film with an aching concern for the way that fate can distort the human heart and a startlingly original *mise-en-scène*.

Instead of a snapshot, the boy keeps a chest X-ray of his beloved with him at all times. When they are united in wartime London, they meet on top of the cupola of the Albert Hall, and remove their shoes to absorb the music rising from below.

And their first kiss is prompted by the fear that it may be their last, as a V-1 flying bomb cruises silently past their heads. Ward is possibly the only director who could get away with a bucolic interlude in which the couple climb on top of a semi-inflated barrage balloon. Their naked bodies, seen

like angels rising from the earth.

Vincent Ward's eye is far from commonplace, and the sentiment of his film is given a poetic quality by the way he makes the landscapes so eerie, and by the magical aura which hovers over the *Holy Boy*. There is a tone of awe about the film, for his boy's soul has been misshapen by the cold hand of fate—he is alienated from his people, his youth is sacrificed to war, his innocence turned first to nobility and then to drunken failure. A mounting horror at the world's cruelty reaches a climax when the *Holy Boy* trains as a bomb-aimer in Lancaster bombers and takes part in the raid on Dresden.

This is the most haunting section of the film. Parachuting from his stricken aircraft, the young Inuit lands in the



Star-crossed: Jason Scott Lee and Anne Parillaud

appalling fire-storm below. It is the hell with which the nun had threatened him; but it is here on earth. The X-ray of his beloved shrivels on mere contact with the hot air. He forsakes the ways of the white man, returns to the Inuit and drinks.

For a film as good as this, it seems a shame to carp. But there is a gulf between Ward's poetic compositions and what could have been a real searching of the human heart. The Arctic defies any mapping because it is strange and it changes. Humans, too, are irreducibly strange and there is no map which will explain the human heart.

Ward seems half aware of this, even while straining towards the opposite conclusion. His Inuit hero is presented to us through the eyes of a reverent adult in a series of superbly composed, poetic images. But he should now make a film about someone whose inner life is not as remote as those ice floes.