

Rolling Stone®

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The Navigator

THINGS DO NOT BEGIN PROMISINGLY: The time is the fourteenth century. The scene is a remote, snow-bound English mining village. The black plague is advancing, and the medieval villagers are gripped with fear and dread. Me, too. The black-and-white cinematography, the ominous clang of Celtic music in the background and all those hooded actors huddled around, analyzing dreams, hinted at the worst: a pseudo-art film that wears its pretensions like a badge of honor.

Boy, was I surprised. *The Navigator*, directed and co-written by Vincent Ward, a thirty-three-year-old New Zealander, gradually draws you in and then holds you in thrall. It's a spellbinder. Griffin, a nine-year-old boy beautifully played by Hamish McFarlane, is haunted by strange dreams. He sees a magical city with a great cathedral. A figure is climbing the steeple; he is holding a cross to mount on the spire. Then, suddenly, the figure is falling. . . .

Griffin's brother, Connor (Bruce Lyons), has just returned from another village, where the plague has already struck. He interprets Griffin's dream as a chance for salvation. Griffin will guide Connor and four other villagers to this cathedral. Reaching a mine shaft, the group tunnels through the earth only to emerge in present-day New Zealand. The wonders of the twentieth century dazzle and frighten them. But the cathedral of Griffin's dreams looms in the distance. They must pay their tribute to God and be saved.

Ward, suffusing the screen with color, lets us see the modern world through the eyes of these primitives. The effect is electrifying. Ward doesn't overdo the gimmicks. A car whizzes by, a submarine crosses paths with a rowboat, a TV newscast blares the latest headlines. Perhaps Ward does push too hard in his parallels between the plague and AIDS, but it's a minor flaw in a visionary film of rare courage and imperishable heart. (NR)