

The Eastern Herald

Desolation's chaotic splendour

FILM

The Navigator
Directed by Vincent Ward
Academy Twin Cinema

With *Vigil*, his first feature film, Vincent Ward's fierce Celtic sense of connection with the natural environment resulted in a cinematic style which was vivid, idiosyncratic and intense.

In *The Navigator*, a weird time-warped synchronicity parallels the experience of an isolated community fearful of encroaching plague in 1348, with the spiritual desolation of our times.

Shot in the snowbound highlands of New Zealand, Ward's medieval Cumbria is an extreme, chaotic, landscape which contrasts with the imposed symmetry of our 20th century environment — a black-and-white world of faith and death, good and evil, captured with a pictorial purity which is peculiarly beautiful. Each frame has the fleshy velvet resonance of a pearl.

Desperate for some heavenly sign of hope or clemency, the villagers seize on the visions experienced by a small boy, Griffin, as a chance for salvation. He proposes that a tunnel be dug to the other side of the world, in an attempt to make a tribute to God which will save the village from the encroaching plague. The journey is an act of faith which transcends all obstacles, both real and imagined.

The physical extremity of medieval life provides a sort of primal alter ego to the 1980s — and the city of artificial light, stampeding traffic and flickering video screens which Griffin and his fellow travellers stumble upon in their search for the great cathedral which



haunts the boy's dreams.

Throughout every scene, Ward creates undercurrents of both ancient and modern mythology. It is difficult to imagine how he managed to shoot the sequence with the white horse in a boat, riding the swell of a submarine which emerges from the bottom of a black lake, but it is unforgettable. A sort of Moby Dick meets Spielberg, in the darkest corner of a painting by Bosch.

On many levels, not least structurally, *The Navigator* is a masterpiece. The performances have all the rich grim humour of the medieval world.

Hamish McFarlane, as the nine-year-old Griffin, explores a small boy's anguish in the face of death with remarkable understanding. He is surrounded by wonderful characterisations from Noel Appleby as Ulf, Marshall Napier as Searle, Paul Livingstone as Martin and Bruce Lyons as the revered older brother, Connor.

The Navigator was the winner of six AFI awards this year, including Best Film, Best Director, and Best Cinematography. It was also selected for competition at the Cannes Film Festival and won prizes in Munich, Rome and Spain.

□ RUTH HESSEY