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Visions of a plague

THE NAVIGATOR

Written and directed by Vincent Ward
Rated PG
Academy Twin (from tomorrow) and Pitt Centre

VINCENT Ward started out in his native New Zealand wanting to be a painter and sculptor, and you can see that in the way he makes movies.

Every shot in *The Navigator*, his "medieval odyssey", has been painstakingly constructed, and they're almost all striking, with an elemental beauty and harshness.

The movie begins in Cumbria in the 14th century, as the Plague is sweeping Europe. A small, isolated community of miners is aware of what's happening outside their world, but they're protected by a lake. They're frightened nevertheless, because safe harbours attract refugees from the disease, who have to be repulsed.

Ward shoots these scenes in a grainy, high-contrast black and white, as if to reinforce the idea that the dark ages were really very dark. The village is all great black stone outcrops and collars of snow. The people, swaddled in layers of rough cloth, seem dwarfed by this despotic landscape.

In the midst of this woe, a young boy, Griffin (played by a NZ schoolboy, Hamish McFarlane), has a vision of redemption. There must be a pilgrimage to a great church on the other side of the world, an act of faith to save their mortal souls. The way through, he divines, is subterranean. They must tunnel.

It's hard to tell how much reality Ward intends these scenes to have. The film's point of view is intentionally cryptic — at least partly. We're taken inside Griffin's mind, a party to his vision, but the vision is fragmented.

When we see a skeleton fly across the face of the moon, we are unsure whether to take it literally. Ward doesn't distinguish the fantastic from the real, so that we can recognise it as such, and that presents a problem when the tunnelling miners, led by Griffin and his darkly handsome adult brother, Connor (Bruce Lyons), suddenly come up in the Antipodes in the 20th century.

One is left craving a mechanism for the suspension of disbelief. It may be that the fragments of Griffin's vision are meant to achieve this, but we're never wholly within his psychological state to begin with.

The film breaks into colour in the tunnelling sequence, and explodes with colour when the pilgrims emerge in our century, and this seems to solve the problem, to some extent. The incongruity of these 14th-century Britons in the present has its own seductive power. It is a conceit that we can readily accept in return for a magical story.

And the latter half of *The Navigator* is quite magical and involving. Ward gives us a way of seeing our own times through the filter of these medieval travellers. A freeway becomes a terrifying obstacle to these men, one of whom, the roly-poly Ulf (Noel Appleby), can't bring himself to cross it.

The miners have some frightening bouts with technology, but Ward's vision of the 20th century is concerned with the similarities between times, as well as the differences.

When the miners have to cast an iron cross to raise atop the church steeple, they're helped by some foundry workers (who think their visitors must be from the country), and the technology is entirely familiar.

When Griffin is confronted by a battery of television sets in a shop window, he is confused, but he recognises the grim reaper, from the AIDS commercial.

Obviously, *The Navigator* is about a symbolic journey, with its story of isolated people taking responsibility for their own lives. When a nuclear submarine appears in one scene, it's not surprising. Nuclear destruction, rather than disease, is the plague of which Ward speaks.

The raising of a cross is less an endorsement of religion, than a metaphor for belief and the need for hope.

Made as an Australia-New Zealand co-production, *The Navigator* won six Australian Film Institute awards this year, including best film and best director for Vincent Ward. It has since won first prize at three European festivals of fantasy film. It was in competition at Cannes earlier this year.

It was clear from *Vigil*, shown here a few years back, that Vincent Ward has a rare and individual talent as a film-maker. His stark, painterly imagery, his preoccupation with people struggling with isolation and superstition, and his feeling for the power and mood of landscape, mean his films always stick in your mind long afterwards.

I liked *Vigil* more, because it seemed more unified, but *The Navigator* has a lot of graphic power, nonetheless.