

# LAWEEKLY

FREE

## Film

by john powers



A woman falls to earth in *Vigil*.

## Seers Catalog

Vincent Ward has the visionary gleam — he makes the world fit the pictures in his head. *Vigil* (1984) is his first full-length feature, and it unfolds with the mysterious precision of J.G. Ballard's fiction or an hallucination fraught with Symbolist intent. Awash in mood, mistrustful of mere talk, and laying on images in dazzling scads, *Vigil* finds this 29-year-old New Zealander trying to elevate a coming-of-age story into something bolder and more mythic, to create an outer world worthy of his heroine's inner feelings.

Set in a bleak, drizzly, isolated valley in the New Zealand hinterland, *Vigil* opens with intimations of doom, an old man telling his granddaughter Toss that their farm will soon be swallowed by the South Pole. Almost immediately, a cataclysm does in fact visit itself upon Toss' world. Her father falls from a cliff, and his death coincides with the arrival of a mysterious stranger — a poacher — who threatens to take her father's place.

In the aftermath of this tragedy, the film traces the shifting alliances and conflicts between four radically different characters: 11-year-old Toss (Fiona Kay), who moves from girlishness to womanhood; her grandfather, Birdie (Bill Kerr), who preaches pantheism, toots a flutulent tuba and invents harebrained contraptions; her incommunicative mother, Liz (Penelope Stewart), a repressed, ravaged beauty who dreams of being a ballerina; and Ethan, the bearded newcomer who does farm work alongside Birdie and angles his way toward Liz' bed.

Though this premise may sound familiar, it is not the heart of the matter.

*VIGIL*. Directed by Vincent Ward. Written by Ward and Graeme Tettey. Produced by John Maynard. Starring Fiona Kay, Bill Kerr, Frank Whitten and Penelope Stewart. At the Samuel Goldwyn Pavilion.

*MANHUNTER*. Directed and written by Michael Mann. Based on the novel *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris. Produced by Richard Roth. Starring William Baltus, Kim Greist, Brian Cox, Dennis Farina and Tom Noonan. Distributed by DEG. Citywide.

For like most visionary filmmakers (Dreyer, Nick Roeg, ascetic Andrei Tarkovsky), Ward cares less for plot than for imagery and is fascinated by vision as a creature act — he's enthralled by the act of looking, by dreams and nightmares, by the way our psyches create the landscapes around us. *Vigil* brims with images of vision — people staring through windows, peering through telescopes, eyeballing themselves in the mirror — and shifts its perspective to allow each character his or her independent view. "What you see depends on who you are," says Birdie, and *Vigil* bears out the truth of this claim for Toss.

Most of what we see expresses her visions and moods, and its hallucinatory intensity suits an isolated adolescent girl who must grapple with the meaning of death, survive her body's disorienting rush into womanhood and read the baffling actions of the adults. Toss wanders through the farm like a little criminal of perception. Linking up dreams, fragments of talk and behavioral "clues" (grampa's petulance, Ethan making love to her mother), she

enters a child's private world whose magic the adults can't fathom. In Toss' fervid inner life, prosaic facts breed fantastic thoughts: She thinks that tractors are alive, buries a plate of meat in the mud to feed her dead father, and sees Ethan as "Hawker-man," an agent of the devil. In her dreams, the interloper jousts with her dead father and intimidates her with vaguely sexual threats. She longs to banish him from the valley.

Toss' vivid imaginings find echoes in the physical world, for, like the Tavian brothers or Werner Herzog, Ward uses his elemental setting to push his story toward myth. With its voracious rain, witchy gnarled trees, elaborate gorges and acres of mud, *Vigil*'s landscape has the insidious beauty of a grim fairy tale. If no orcs come skulking over the hills, that's only because Ward doesn't need them. He knows how to make ordinary things strange, to make a tutu seem like outer-space gear, to give a common green apple talismanic force, to turn a metallic hawk into a demon from the sky, and to weave elemental correspondences between fire and rain, mud and blood.

In creating this enchanted reality, Ward has received stunning assistance from Jack Body's haunting score, which insinuates itself into the sounds of wind and rain, and especially from Alun Bollinger's astonishing, hyper-clear photography. Bollinger's camera captures every blade of grass, every drop of water on a wool cap, investing the most mundane objects with a surreal intensity.

Ward's obvious devotion to each shot reflects his faith in the power of the image and, paradoxically, serves to show us the limits of the visible. Ward's no materialist, and what unites him with Bresson or Dreyer (one of his acknowledged masters) is the desire to express psychological and spiritual states that can only be evoked, that can't really be shown and certainly cannot be spoken. In its 90 minutes, *Vigil* has about five minutes of talk, most of it allusive, cryptic or regrettably heavy-handed. The rest is silence, or more precisely, the sounds of natural life: wind, pelting rain, human breathing, the bassing of next Easter's dinner.

This predilection for silence is tied to his fascination with isolated figures, usually women. His first film, *A State of Siege* (made when he was 21), adapts a Janet Frame novel and paints an impressive portrait of an older woman alone-unto-madness. As its heroine cuts herself adrift from the outside world, she talks only to herself

the poignant mander of the fatally lonely. The isolation is equally intense (and silencing) in his second film, *In Spring One Plant Alone*. Filmed over 18 months, this award-winning documentary examines the life of an 82-year-old Maori woman forced to take care of her paranoid-schizophrenic son. Once again, there's almost no talk.

Ward's mistrust of chatter bespeaks an admirable respect for his characters' inner integrity, and for solitude in general, yet it ultimately demands too much of his images. *Vigil* drags. Although Ward's a stunning shotmaker — dozens of images linger in the memory — there's something claustrophobic about the film's lack of spontaneity. As the striking images dance across the screen and the story leaps forward in logical arcs, Ward's film takes on some of the forbidding reticence of his characters. About halfway through I began to long for some idle palaver, a little fresh air. Visionary or not, Ward needs to cool down just a bit.

As these remarks make clear, my reservations about *Vigil* are largely a matter of temperament and taste. After seeing it twice, I admire the film more than I actually like it. And *Vigil* deserves this admiration — for its visual brilliance, its uncompromising strangeness, its desire to find the mysteries hiding within, behind and between its images. Although it won't please everyone, *Vigil* is an extraordinary feature debut — a connoisseur's film, really — and it establishes Vincent Ward as a director of enormous gifts.

Although it won't please everyone, *Vigil* is an extraordinary feature debut — a connoisseur's film, really — and it establishes Vincent Ward as a director of enormous gifts. Not the least of these is his sophisticated sense of cinema's primitive power.