



## *The Matter of His 'Heart'*

Why Filmmaker Vincent Ward Goes to Such Extremes

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With his eyes half closed and the imprint of sleep still mangling his thick black hair, Vincent Ward is struggling to greet the morning. Jet lag, plus his customary shyness, is playing havoc with the soft-spoken New Zealand-born filmmaker's usually excellent powers of speech.

"I wanted 'Map' to be about a certain kind of longing," he says, speaking about his latest film, "A Map of the Human Heart," which opened strongly here the week before. "A kind of all-pervading romantic longing."

He pauses briefly as his thoughts coalesce. While other directors might start with an explanation of the movie's thematic content or some essential aspect of the narrative, Ward focuses on the emotional and the ineffable.

"'Map' is a love story about people who are separated by great distances and still remain connected. Or for their whole lives have a longing for their absent other half. I wanted to see if I could express what that feels like."

The love affair in "Map of the Human Heart"—Ward's third feature and his best chance to emerge from his pigeonhole as a cult genius—is between a dark-eyed, half-breed beauty named Albertine and an Inuit Eskimo named Avik. These two star-crossed soul mates meet as children and spend the rest of their lives chasing each other, either consciously or unconsciously, all over the world. Ward says the idea for the film came to him quite by accident, really, when he found himself in a similar predicament a few years back.

"You know, where the two people chase each other from continent to continent, leaving messages at each other's hotels, constantly missing each other—all that," Ward sheepishly explains. "It became sort of an obsession, where you feel desperate to be with the other person, as if you would die if you were separated. And I became fascinated by that sense of longing for another person."

Ward's other inspiration for "Map"—his interest in Eskimo culture—grew out of a two-year period in the '70s when he lived with a community of Maori Indians; it was a mission that bore fruit in the form of a superlative 1980 documentary about the Maoris called "In Spring, One Plants Alone."

"The Maoris and the Inuit couldn't be more different," Ward says. "The Maoris are very demonstrative emotionally

The Eskimos, on the other hand, are more—turned inward. Maybe it has something to do with being stuck inside and in close quarters so much of the time, but they never show what they're feeling. That's why it's so hard to find Eskimo actors. They bury their emotions."

Ward's movies don't give in easily to quick categorization. They're ambitious, personal, wildly (and often perversely) idiosyncratic, even visionary and, at times, ecstatically beautiful. His affinity for vast landscapes and epic stories has reminded some critics of David Lean. Others notice his haunting lyricism and his ability to create powerful visual metaphors and see traces of Werner Herzog (whose work he admires) and the late Russian master Andrei Tarkovsky.

Though he has been in the business since age 21, the 37-year-old filmmaker has only managed to produce the documentary on the Maoris, the short feature "State of Siege" (1978) and, apart from "Map," two other full-length features—"Vigil" (1984) and his best-known work, "The Navigator" (1988), which won six awards, including best film and best director



from the Australian Film Institute. But with "A Map of the Human Heart," Ward emerges as one of the most important members in a group of budding talents—Jane Campion ("The Piano," a winner at Cannes this year, and "Sweetie"), Gillian Armstrong ("The Last Days of Chez Nous"), John Duigan ("Wide Sargasso Sea")—to emerge from Down Under in recent years.

Though geography has linked him to this talented crowd, Ward continues to blaze his own eccentric, intensely personal path as an outsider. "I suppose it comes from growing up so isolated out on a farm," Ward quietly explains. "We didn't see many people out there. And then coming from New Zealand too: It's like coming from the edge of the world."

Perhaps this partly explains why Ward's films are so dominated by outsiders and visionary children, like the dreaming child in "The Navigator" and culture-shocked "Holy Boy" Avik in "Map." In that film, one of the most compelling moments comes when Avik, who has been airlifted from his Arctic home and taken to a Montreal hospital, bursts out of his room in a panic that subsides only when he is distracted by a startling patch of green—a scene that Ward added after he discovered that his young Eskimo star, Robert Joamie, had never seen a tree.

"It all has to do with point of view," Ward says. "It's a way of looking at things. And if you put yourself in the perspective of an outsider, then everything is seen fresh, as if for the first time. That's the perspective I try to take, the way I try to see."

In the interval between "The Navigator" and "Map," Ward made a brief detour to Hollywood, where he

worked for five months on preparations for "Alien<sup>3</sup>." And though the project only earned him a story credit (he left the production because of "creative differences" with the producers), he doesn't rule out the possibility of working again in America.

"The basic story points are all mine," he says of "Alien<sup>3</sup>," "but the rest is totally different. My idea was to spend \$40 million on re-creating Bosch in outer space. I wanted to use every penny of the \$40 million just to scare the hell out of everybody. Apparently, they had something else in mind."

As for his relatively small output, Ward is both resigned and unapologetic: "I'm reconciled to the fact that I won't make many films," he says. "I'm very picky about what I do. I can't just do anything. It has to be right for me. And I feel that something has to be at risk when you make a film. It has to challenge you in some way. I wouldn't want to tell a story that had been told before, either by me or someone else. What would be the point?"

For Ward, the making of every film appears to be a sort of quest, a personal ordeal, both physically and aesthetically, from which the final product emerges. As a result, he is constantly drawn to stories that force him into the most remote and most extreme climates, ranging from the desolate, blasted rocks of a New Zealand sheep farm in "Vigil" to the pristine white Arctic ice floes in "Map."

"I had to do the location scouting for 'Map' in weather that was 45 degrees below freezing. That's where I got this," he says, pointing to a reddish spot just under his eye. "From frostbite. It just turned black. We would see these hunters—these are guys who still live the old way—and their faces were black all over. Incredible looking."

But why is he drawn to such extremes?

"Well, I'm not Catholic," he jokes, "so it's not self-flagellation." (Though, later, he does admit that he was almost killed during "Map" when a support broke and left him dangling high above the seats inside London's Albert Hall.)

"I think it has something to do with my father," he continues. "He'd been in the war, and his hands had gotten very badly burned. Really badly burned. And seeing him work out there against that harsh backdrop on this land which everyone said could never support a farm, working against incredible odds. That had a profound effect on me."