A man with dark hair and a slight smile is looking towards the camera. He is holding a large, rolled-up map that is partially unrolled, showing various geographical regions and city names. The lighting is warm and orange, creating a soft glow around him. The map is the central focus, with the man's face partially visible behind it. The quote is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the image.

"I travel almost continuously," says Ward, "so I'm dislocated from where I come from and, frequently, from the person I'm involved with, which isn't a very constructive way to have a relationship, and it's that dislocation that I relate to in *Map Of The Heart*."

MAP OF

With characteristic modesty, Vincent Ward describes himself as a failed painter and actor. The rest of the world knows him as an electrifying film-maker. After the brooding intensity of *Vigil* and *The Navigator*, Ward's soon-to-be-released work is about love. He spoke to Jo Litson at his home in Sydney.

If Vincent Ward hadn't been hit on the head so often as a child, it's quite possible that he would never have become a film-maker. By the time he was 14, he had had concussion nine times, so, lying in his third hospital bed, he decided that, if he was to reach adulthood in one piece, the rugby, wrestling, boxing and fighting of which he was so fond would have to be replaced by something less aggressively physical.

From an early age, he had also been interested in art, so he began to rechannel his ferocious energies into painting and dreaming. As a boy growing up on his parents' isolated New Zealand farm, with brothers and sisters who were considerably older and often away at boarding school, Ward spent a lot of time roaming the indomitable New Zealand landscape and the inner landscape of his mind. As he says in his book, *Edge Of The Earth*, "I wasn't a lonely child, but an alone child ... I played in the shadows of other people's imaginations: Scott and his Ivanhoe, Grimms' fairy stories and the knights of the Round Table."

He went to Ilam School of Art in Christchurch, intending to become a painter and sculptor, but became a film-maker instead — a change of direction which he brushes off as a "total accident". "Really, all I am is a failed painter and actor," he says, with a self-deprecating shrug.

On another occasion, pushed as to why he chose film-making, he again dismisses it as accidental. "I started doing it and I still do it. I quite enjoy doing it. It's like something chooses you. And now I've got too used to working with other people to go back to something as solitary as painting."

His films do, however, bear the hallmark of a painter. You could freeze-frame almost any moment of his three features — *Vigil*, *The Navigator*, and his latest film, *Map Of The Human Heart*, which is due for release in May — and

VINCENT'S HEART

find an image as beautifully composed, moody and emotionally eloquent as a painting.

Ward describes his own paintings as being "somewhere between surrealist and expressionist-figurative, and often quite dark."

His films are equally sombre in hue. Primary colours are banished, unless used for special effect. It is a muted, surreal world and a strangely beautiful one. Ward has a rare imagination. His films are startlingly different. Awe-inspiring in their scope, engulfing in their eerie, elemental beauty and primal in their passion, they are like weird, wonderful dreams.

The strikingly original vision of Ward's "medieval Odyssey", *The Navigator*, put him on the international cinema map and won awards around the world. *Map Of The Human Heart*, which opened the Miami Film Festival in February, looks set to consolidate his reputation as a brave and inspired young film-maker, and is potentially his most commercial film to date.

Ward is an unlikely myth-maker. Short, dark and wiry, he can, on occasion, seem like a knot of tension made human. He fills the air with adrenalin as he rushes around, brow furrowed, eyes blazing with obsession.

When he stops and relaxes, however, the intensity and abruptness give way to a delightful sense of humour which mixes heavy-duty sarcasm with school-boy silliness.

He admits that he tends towards the obsessive. His natural work pattern is slow, methodical, detailed, Protestant-work-ethic. He is a perfectionist — uncompromisingly so. When he didn't like the sets that were being built for *Vigil*, he took a crowbar to them while the crew was away.

For some reason, he seems to be drawn to fiendishly difficult locations. *Vigil*, which focused on a solitary girl growing up on a remote farm (and which was more than a little autobiographical), was set in the austere, mountainous Ureweras.

The Navigator was filmed down dangerous, disused, medieval mine-shafts in Cumbria and in some of the harshest, coldest, most inaccessible locations New Zealand has to offer.

For *Map Of The Human Heart*, Ward took his cast and crew to the wastes of Alaska, where they worked in temperatures that dropped to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Sometimes, the only way to get to the frozen location was by helicopter. The location manager was nearly drowned, and Ward got frostbite on an eyeball and a cheek during the shoot.

During our interviews, he is reluctant to find any deep meaning in his choice of

challenging locations, and when pushed, he clams up: "Some things are best left unanalysed."

In the press kit for this latest film, though, he admits that he likes "hard locations" and "pushing people to the limit". His films don't happen in gentler climes, he says, because "it's the environment that pushes people".

He was drawn to the Arctic, he says, because he has an "outsider's sensibility. I'm originally from New Zealand, which is even more a perimeter than Australia. To me, it's a small step to go to the Arctic. They're both perimeters, so it wasn't hard to get into [the Inuits'] head space."

Map Of The Human Heart is a haunting love story spanning 30 years and several continents. It begins in an Inuit settlement, where a visiting European map-maker, Walter, meets a young Eskimo boy, Avik. Suspecting that Avik has TB, Walter takes him to a Canadian sanatorium, where Avik meets and falls in love with a Metis Indian girl, Albertine.

He begins a love affair that is played out against the hopes and fears of World War II, moving inexorably to its aching

denouement. In the process, their love forces the couple to make crucial choices as to who and what they are.

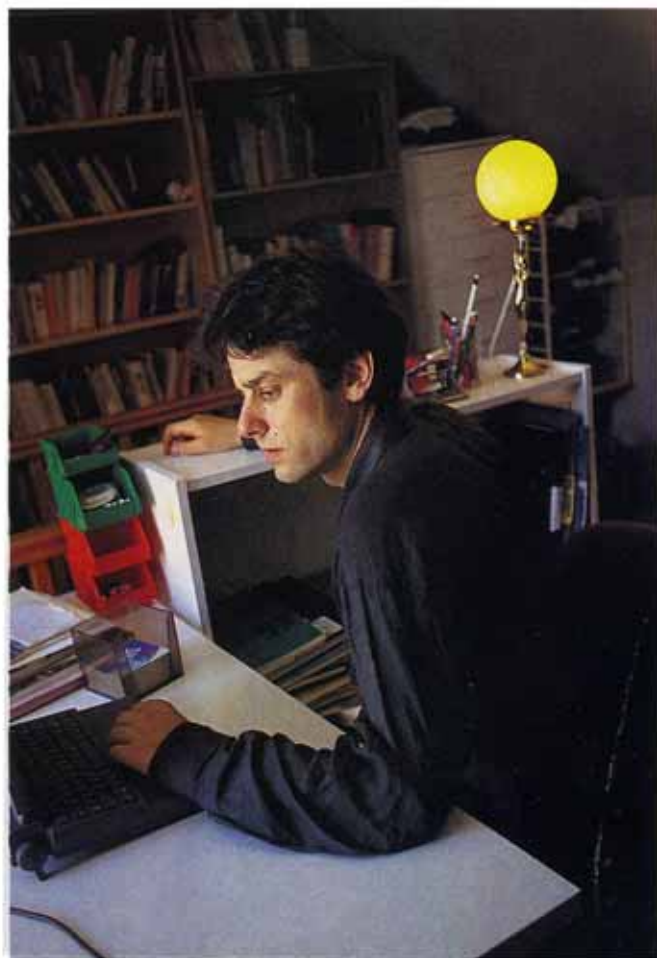
Walter is the third party: he brings Avik and Albertine together and then comes between them. He is, says Ward, "the ultimate cartographer, who is obsessed with mapping the unmappable. Physically and metaphorically, he charts courses and he charts people's lives.

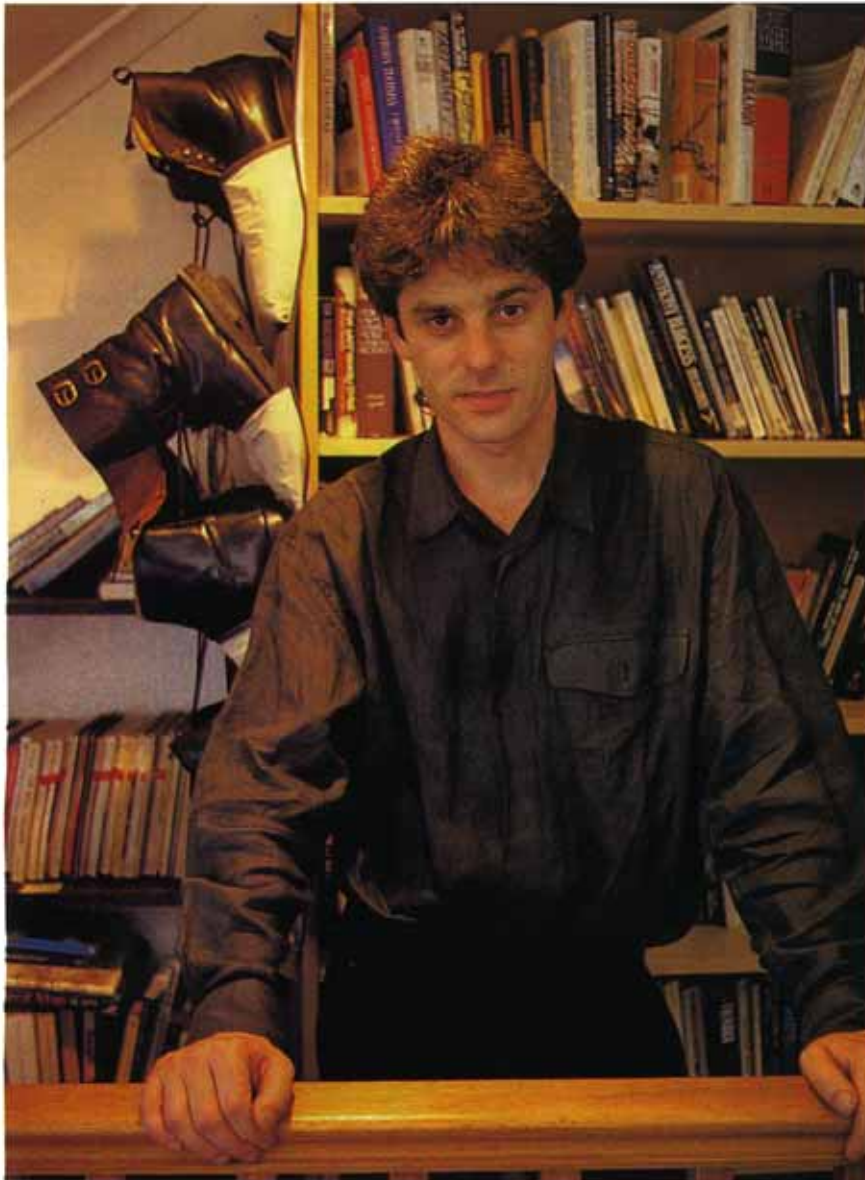
"The film is about making a map — and I mean that literally."

Like Peter Greenaway? "Yes, sure," he says, "but Greenaway does it as an intellectual exercise. This is more of an emotional story, so it's less self-conscious."

The idea began to germinate when Ward met a film-maker and anthropologist, Hugh Brody, at the London Film Festival about seven years ago. Brody had been involved with Indian land claims and was mapping their traditional trails. He had lived in both Indian and Inuit communities, and told Ward a number of stories which fired his imagination: about some Indians during World War II who believed they could will enemy planes to crash to the ground; and about

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“A lot of film-making, for me, is fulfilling relationships that you have never successfully fulfilled in your life.”

a tribe who believed that if they lived a good life and set their traps in the right places, they could map their way to heaven.

While researching the film, Ward spent several weeks living in Inuit communities, while co-writer Louis Nowra spent time with the Metis. Ward and Nowra then spent time talking about their own love affairs — “our disastrous pasts”, as Ward puts it. “We felt that if the film was going to work, we had to work out something about our own lives.”

As it turned out, they had different emotional connections with the film — Ward identified more with the dependable, faithful Avik (played by Jason Lee

Scott), while Nowra felt more in tune with the emotional pragmatism of Albertine (Anne Parillaud) and Walter (Patrick Bergin).

Pondering what it is that he brings to film-making, Ward shrugs. “God knows ... but what is important to me is simply relationships. I don’t think I’m very good at them, but that’s finally what interests me.”

“A lot of film-making, for me, is fulfilling relationships that you have never successfully fulfilled in your life. The girl in *Vigil* is like the sister my own age that I never had.”

Relationships were also central to his short film, *In Spring One Plants Alone*. It’s about an old Maori woman, Puhi, and her paranoid-schizophrenic son, Niki, with whom Ward lived for two-and-a-half

years. “It’s the film I feel closest to,” he says. “For me, Puhi was like a grandmother (my grandmother died when I was very young). The experience with that woman and her son has been the experience that has affected me most, ever. Period. And moved me most.”

Is *Map Of The Human Heart* fulfilling the perfect love affair for Ward? “As a filmmaker, I travel almost continuously,” he says, “and, because of that, my relationships are very episodic, so I’m dislocated from where I come from and, frequently, from the person I’m involved with, which isn’t a very constructive way to have a relationship, and it’s that dislocation that I relate to in the film.”

And did he discover anything more about love? “Sure — but I’m not telling you!” ■