
FILMMAKER

VINCENT WARD

Vincent Ward achieved recognition as a film director with his short films *A State of Siege* and *In Spring One Plants Alone*. He has recently completed shooting his first feature, as yet untitled. He speaks to Philip Tremewan about his attitude to film and filmmaking.



WHAT is your feature about?

Several people have commented that the strongest single thing that comes through the present film is the sense of an experience that has been lived, shaped into something that is the character's experience which hopefully other people can get into and experience vicariously.

It's the experience of an imaginative kid growing up in an isolated environment. A small kid with a large imagination. The story really is what this kid makes of the major events in her life — the death of her father, the arrival of an intruder into the valley. It's not just what happens but what this kid sees as happening, which is not quite the same thing. It's to do with a perception, an imaginative world that this kid creates from the events that are going on.

This film is less austere, richer than the earlier ones and finally more uplifting. You take someone through an experience and they come out the other side. This applies mainly to the kid — but the kid is who the film is about. She spins off other characters and they spin off her but the story is about the kid.

I've heard you using the word "story" a lot.

My first interest, where I get my greatest pleasure, is from images and imagery. Imagery that is centered around people, and often

Alun Bollinger, director of photography and Vincent
photo Miles Hargest

centered around the way people see. But more and more I find I admire the art of story-telling and the art of just being able to tell a tale through images on film — trying to use cinema to tell someone's story in a effective a way and as economically as I can.

What kinds of stories interest you?

Probably the folk-tale more than anything else, a sort of imaginative folk-tale.

What's the purpose of these stories — what comes out of them?

There's lots of theories. One of them is if you lead a fairly mundane sort of existence, it comes out of boredom, out of trying to make quite ordinary acts into something that's larger and more exciting. Also to capture something that's sort of hidden. A tale tries to articulate something that's not necessarily on the surface of things. So it makes things larger like a dream or a nightmare or whatever.

How do you relate plot and character?

The story of these characters is more important than plot consid-

erations. You want to keep the story going, to keep it turning and twisting, but the experience is more important than any plot you can dream up. The common thing you find in a large number of American films is that the plot takes over from the characters so the characters cannot exist on their own — they must always bend to an inflexible plot line going through the film, rather than the sense of an experience lived or a story coming out of a character. I make films to move people and to convey human experience — it's the most obvious thing but you don't see it very much.

Are you more interested in character than social or political patterns?

Yes — human qualities much more than a looser, more distant, more objective perspective on people. I'd rather be inside their heads than viewing them up on a blackboard as figures or formulae for some sort of social or political theory. I'm wary of generalising people into larger patterns. I'd prefer they govern what they do rather than be subordinate to plot or some political or social theory. Again, I'd rather the story arises from their needs and problems, in other words it's a human centre rather than an ideology or theory they fit into.

What sort of people do you explore?

I'm more interested in people on the perimeter, the circumference, than the people in the middle. I prefer to try to expand the way we view ourselves rather than go for the accepted stereotypes and reinforce them. I prefer to broaden rather than limit rather than say this is what a New Zealander is, I prefer to throw that out and say New Zealanders may be this or this or maybe something else. I suppose I'm interested in people with some sort of vision, some view of the world that is not so necessarily an objective view.

You had this script, this film in mind for quite a long time?

It's a long germinating process — three or four years. I kept notebooks for a while and gradually clusters of scenes came together but at first they didn't all relate. It didn't come together like a story you sit down and write from A to Z. It began with some visual ideas, some fairly disparate ideas. Somewhere along the way, other things clustered together and connections started to happen. Other things like growing up on a fairly isolated farm. Also I'd come out of making another film in the Ureweras. But it's not important what sources you have — except to yourself personally. What is important is that what you finish up with on the screen is a coherent whole, it has a completeness and a life of its own. If it has that completeness then sources are irrelevant. And the sources are normally so diverse, from things maybe you saw when you were five years old, to something a friend commented about, to a line from a book. To select out sources denies the cumulative effect of everything else.

People are going to read in reference points whether they're actual reference points or not and probably 80 percent of the time they're not. They're their reference points — that's their prerogative — their points affect the way they see it. I give the reference points I want to give — in the actual film. Finally the film stands or falls on its own.

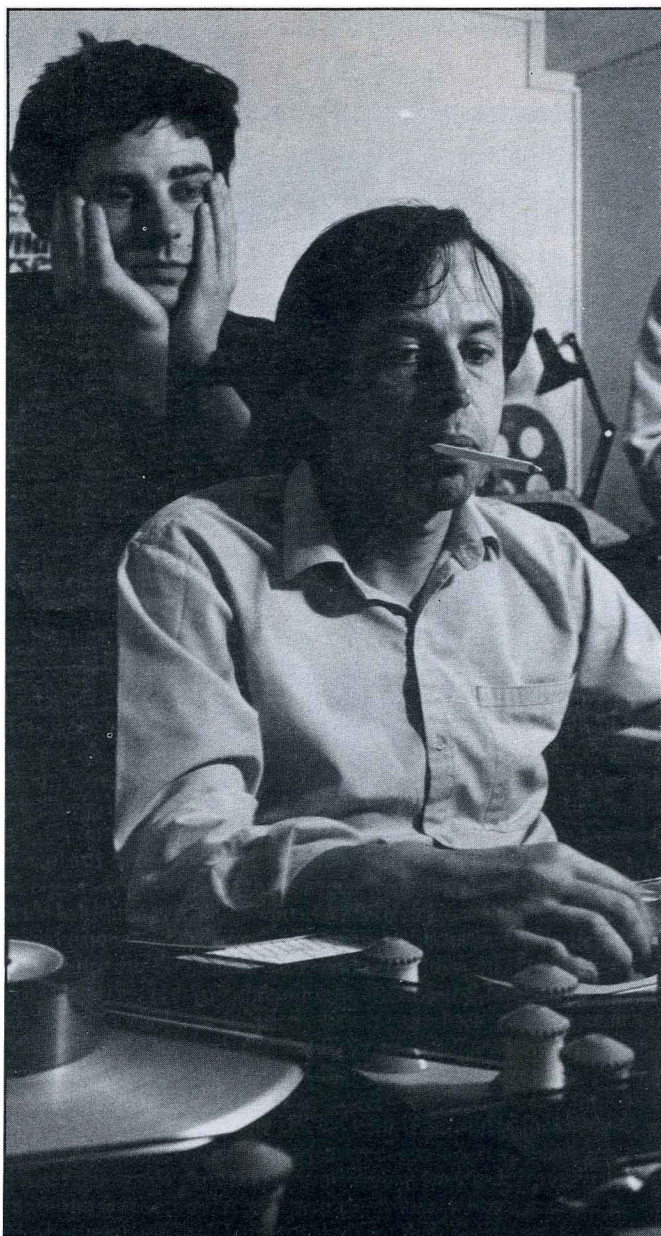
Coming back to scripting — you've talked of how the scripting process doesn't stop until you've finished sound mixing.

When you're working on a script, you're working with an idea and a piece of paper and a typewriter but when you actually come to film it, you've got people (film crew, actors), location - with those come a whole new range of possibilities. Some things are going to be better than what you envisaged because of their contributions and some things look as though they might not be so you try to make them better. The paper gives you structures; the actual locations, the actual way you're filming them, the actual way you use your actors, direct your crew, editing (the way you use your sound and cut your picture) those give you your film.

I would never be literal to my own script because it's only words on paper, it's only a structure. What makes a film a film are cinematic qualities.

Your earlier films were not easily accessible — how does your feature compare?

The earlier films were more intended as character studies without any strong view to the market-place. The feature, although it's predominantly about a single character, tells more of a story. Although the story is still very much of one person's experiences, it's



Vincent and Simon Reece, editor
photo Guy Robinson

much broader than the other films, far less austere and I think it's much more accessible.

The central characters of the earlier films tended to be quite introspective — one a middle-aged woman, the other an elderly woman. Given the costs of the films, I thought the story of those characters were more important than marketing considerations. You can afford to spend a certain amount of money on something that is less accessible and a different amount of money on something that is more accessible. You make the other sort of film but you just have less money to do it and you spend a lot longer doing it. You've got to make what is important to you but there are certain financial parameters.

You reject the commercial/non-commercial label — why?

I reject it as a way of looking at things because I feel that tends to stereotype what you are allowed to make. The common attitude is — if it's an action film or it's a B-grade then it's going to be commercial. That's not true. In terms of figures, what films are made and what films make money, it's just not true. In fact everyone else has that same attitude so you're competing in a very limited sort of genre which doesn't give you much creative room to move - and the chances of you succeeding are quite minimal in purely financial terms.

But you're still interested in people seeing your film?

Obviously I'm interested in a film that makes its money back

and I'm interested in people seeing the film. To make a feature film the costs are so large you just can't afford not to be interested in these. The whole pleasure of trying to tell a story is to have an audience.

You've talked about film as a plastic medium — what do you mean?

It's a medium that lives and breathes. It has living and breathing people at the centre who it recreates on the screen. It's also plastic in the way clay is plastic — it can be put together in many different ways, it's fluid, it can be shaped. I suppose I'm talking about editing here, where you can gain a fluidity and a rhythm. It's rhythm, it's sound, it's a whole movement thing, you can feel it. You can almost touch it with your fingers. It's like quicksilver.

You're very committed in your approach to film . . .

Most people take professionalism to mean a certain wage bracket and certain technical standards — no matter how they feel about what they're doing. But professionalism to me means something else over and above those things, before those things, and that is commitment. Without that commitment, while you may do work that is of a high technical standard, it is unlikely to have anything else.

Why do you work in film?

It's quite personal — it's because I believe in it, I have a passion for it, it's something I have a real need for, it gives everything else meaning. I have to do it.

Where to from here? The New Zealand film finance future looks gloomy . . .

I don't know. The practicality of trying to do anything is enormous but I worry more about what I'm going to do rather than how I'm going to do it — the creative side rather than the practical side of raising money. Really it comes down to the somewhat naive belief that if you know what you want to do and believe in it, then somehow it will happen. So long as you keep working at it and trying to achieve it, it may be difficult but somehow it will happen. What you want to do leads, and money follows. ■

