

A STATE OF SIEGE.

The following comments are reprinted from an interview with Vincent Ward in *Art New Zealand*, Autumn 1984, No. 30.

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His first film, *A State of Siege*, based on the novel by Janet Frame, and with Geoff Murphy as assistant director, was made when he was twenty-one and still at Art School. In its detailed exploration of textures and its brooding definition of objects against a background of darkness, it conveyed a distinctively European, metaphysical tone, with its rigorously crafted camera-work prowling about Frame's disintegrating heroine in a way which, in its concentration on extremities, recalls both Beckett and Bresson. 'Ward evokes more horror with his play of light and shadow in this low budget movie than Stanley Kubrick was able to create in the whole of *The Shining*', claimed the *San Francisco Chronicle*, somewhat exaggeratedly, but indicating the subtle, suggestive and highly subjective power with which Ward was able to evoke a chilling situation without resorting to special effects.

T.M.: The scene in *A State of Siege* where the woman is painting at her easel by the coast reminded me of Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf*. Also what she says about the colour blue denoting distance seems almost a key to the film.

V.W.: I haven't seen the *Hour of the Wolf*. But what I like about that scene is its visual irony—the waves explode against the rocks with a ferocious and totally wild energy yet she's trying to capture the scene with refined little brushstrokes using a delicate watercolour brush. In painting you're always distanced from your subject-matter. The more beautiful the surface of the picture the more it operates like a window pane and separates you from the content. Coming from a painting tradition you know you can create 'beautiful' images, but in fact you have to be a part-time iconoclast so the characters will live and breathe. You have to break the lovely surface of things; smash your fist through the panel of glass and pull the people out from behind it. Particularly with documentary I often reject images because they look too beautiful—they look too much like a Caravaggio or a Vermeer, say. You often get this with European films—they draw very heavily on a painting tradition and because of this you find you are more interested in their beautiful surfaces. The characters don't live, and swear and sweat. American film has more immediacy, less poetry. It draws more from a tradition of newsreel and photo-journalism. In New Zealand we're neither in one tradition nor the other. You have to try and forge a different tradition which inevitably has elements of the two. It's a blank canvas. The rawness of the country, its lack of tradition or conversely its mish-mash of inherited, diluted traditions, are your material.

Anne Flannery in A State of Siege. 13