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Vincent Ward:
The Emergence of an Aesthetic

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film, Television and Media Studies
Auckland University 2004
Abstract

This thesis examines the work and career of New Zealand director, Vincent Ward, focusing on the emergence of his distinctive aesthetic. It places this aesthetic in the context of local and European artistic and filmic traditions (in particular, certain forms of Romanticism and Expressionism) that have influenced Ward’s work. It also explores how his childhood and education may have shaped his approach, and examines what his aesthetic has meant in practice, in the process of making each of his major films, as well as in the formal characteristics of the completed films. The study focuses to a greater extent on his early (New Zealand) films as case studies that help us to understand the development of his practice and theory. The career of Ward as a filmmaker who has had a significant influence on the development of the New Zealand film industry is also explored in the light of what may differentiate his approach from that of other local filmmakers and the extent to which it is useful to think of him as a “New Zealand filmmaker”.

This thesis draws from extensive primary research in the form of interviews with the director, his family, associates and collaborators (cameramen, editors, co-writers, producers and so on). Textual study has involved the viewing New Zealand and Expressionist films and art-works, and the examination of archival and unpublished material. Secondary research has included coverage of European and local artistic and filmic traditions and. the relatively limited body of criticism of Ward’s films.

While this thesis takes an essentially auteurist approach – identifying characteristic themes, visual motifs and stylistic tendencies – it also seeks to expand and reposition such an approach by taking into account intellectual and cultural history, the contributions of Ward’s collaborators, and the complex industrial conditions in which his films were produced. To do so has necessitated a close examination of the filmmaking process. By examining the aesthetic of such a director – known for his heightened individualism, perfectionism, and unusual methods - this study has sought to reveal the strengths and limitations of classic auteur theory, suggesting ways in which this approach can be modified and re-invigorated.

The thesis also provides a case study in the difficulties faced by a director of this kind in finding a satisfactory base within the contemporary film industry. The alignment of local and global interests and investments is still a highly complex business.
Acknowledgments

There have been a number of individuals whose assistance and support has been important to this project. I owe a great deal to my supervisor, Roger Horrocks, for his unfailing encouragement and support. Roger’s dedication to his students and enormous knowledge of the New Zealand film industry is inspirational, and his input has been fundamental to the formation of this work.

I am very grateful to my fiancé, Brian Coleman, who has been a constant support and encouragement through the necessary ups and downs of such an extended project. I would also like to thank my daughter, Celine, and my son, Matthew, for their belief in my ability to carry through such a project, and Celine for proofreading my thesis. A number of friends and colleagues, in particular Susan Pointon and Duncan Petrie, have read or discussed the work at various stages, and I acknowledge their contributions.

I would like to thank Vincent Ward for his helpful suggestions for the thesis, and for his willingness to be interviewed and to answer my various queries with patience and good humour. I am particularly grateful for his giving me permission to use his DipFA thesis as source material for the chapter on *A State of Siege*.

I thank all those who so willingly gave up their time to be interviewed and whose contributions have been invaluable to the research for this thesis. Jennifer Pointon did a wonderful job of transcribing many of these interviews. I am grateful to Barry Barclay for his encouragement and for introducing me to members of the Tuhoe community, and to Jillian White and Eruera Morgan for accompanying me to the Ureweras. I thank David Scott and Andrew Lavery for their patience and help in the presentation of this thesis. Roger Horrocks, Geoffrey Simpson, Sam Gaoa, Susan Pointon, Ian Conrich and Stan Jones allowed me access to unpublished resource material, for which I am most appreciative.

Several organizations have assisted me by providing funding for research costs. I thank the New Zealand Film Archive for providing me with travel funding to conduct interviews around New Zealand and in Australia and for support in accessing research material. I am grateful to the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women for offering
me a Harriet Jenkins Award to assist with transcription costs, and Auckland University for financial assistance for travel costs to interview Vincent Ward in the USA, and to present my research at the Crossroads Cultural Studies conference at the University of Illinois. I am also grateful to UNITEC for assisting me with course fees. Other institutions have allowed me access to archival and other research material. These include the College of Santa Fe, The British Film Institute (London), die Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen, die Staatliche Graphische Sammlungen, das Lehnbachhaus and the Film Museum at the Münchner Stadtmuseum (Munich).
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