

Study Guide for Vigil (1984)

Facts

1984, New Zealand, 90 mins
Director Vincent Ward
Producer John Maynard
Director of Cinematography Alun Bollinger

Themes

Adolescence, reality vs. fantasy, family relationships.

Summary

On an isolated, hilly, New Zealand sheep farm live 12 year old Toss, her parents (the taciturn Justin and the emotionally and physically worn Elizabeth) and her grandfather "Birdie" (the eccentric originator of various crackpot schemes to save the crumbling farm). The stark scenery and the unrelentingly bad weather which envelope the characters seem to be portents for the film's oncoming turmoil, which we see entirely through Toss's eyes. The child witnesses her father fall to his death in an attempt to rescue a stranded sheep. Justin's body is carried home by Ethan, an itinerant hunter and farm hand whom Birdie subsequently employs, to the obvious anger of Elizabeth. Toss is alternately fascinated and terrified by Ethan, emotions which are heightened when the tensions between him and her mother erupt into a passionately physical relationship. All of this coincides with Toss' emergence into puberty, and the film movingly and poetically shows us the strange, moving rituals of a childhood tragically disrupted and the nameless, unspoken terrors of Toss' dawning sexuality. Intense, strange and darkly atmospheric, the film is filled with striking (almost primeval) imagery and ominous sound. With its mingling of Toss' reality, fantasies and dreams, and a dark magic that only childhood knows, it is a deeply haunting and hypnotic experience.

Cultural Context

The Place of Vincent Ward and Vigil in New Zealand Film History

At the time he made Vigil, Vincent Ward was only 27 years old, but was already an accomplished and highly individual film maker. Although he had made only two short films prior to this (State of Siege in 1978, based on a Janet Frame novel, and the documentary In Spring One Plants Alone in 1980), both films had won awards and demonstrated a very distinctive, intense and haunting style. Four years in the planning stages, Vigil was originally called First Blood, Last Rites, but was unable to be finally titled as such, due to the release in 1982 of the Sylvester Stallone vehicle, First Blood (two films farther apart in content, pace and style would be difficult to find). As the first New Zealand film to be shown in competition at Cannes - a significant achievement for the small, albeit highly creative, film industry in that country - Vigil holds a special place in New Zealand's film history, and Ward has gone on to

international acclaim with films like *The Navigator*, *Map of the Human Heart*, and *What Dreams May Come*.

The Landscape of Vigil

The "star" of this film, in some respects, is the landscape of Mt Messenger in the north-eastern Taranaki region of New Zealand's North Island, on which Toss's parents' sheep farm is precariously situated. Literally so, as the very hills are caving in around them and the valley in which their run-down farmhouse is located seems in imminent danger of submerging into the swamp. Sheep farming in such an isolated region, and with such unforgiving geography and weather, is far from a pastoral idyll for this family, as their austere existence shows.

The film has an almost medieval "feel" to it at times: the clothing (like ragged peasant garb); the curious wooden staff Toss carries; the mysterious rituals she performs; the strange magic; the dim light; the eerie portentousness. As such, it almost serves as a dry run for Ward's next film, *The Navigator: a Mediaeval Odyssey* (1988), which mixes the medieval and the modern, again as seen through the eyes of a child.

Or perhaps the "feel" of the film is primeval, rather than medieval? The blasted landscape, the omnipresent gloom of fog and rain, the blurring of reality, magic, fantasy and dream all contribute to this sense of timelessness. Small wonder, then, given this evocative landscape, that New Zealand is providing the perfect setting (in the eyes of many Tolkien fans), for the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy of films, currently being made by Peter Jackson, another New Zealand director.

The "Cinema of Unease" and "Kiwi Gothic"

Several commentators have noted the New Zealand film industry's apparent penchant for dark themes, such as dysfunctional families, domestic violence and matricide; think here not only of *Vigil*, but also of *Once Were Warriors*, and *Heavenly Creatures*, for example. While this is, of course, not the full story of New Zealand film, it is true that the country has become known internationally for such disturbing films as those listed above. (Contrast these, too, with the films that neighboring Australia is known for in the international arena: quirky, often offbeat comedies such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Muriel's Wedding*).

Vigil certainly fits within what actor Sam Neill has identified as his country's "Cinema of Unease" (see Resources). The film takes the New Zealand fascination with dark themes to extremes, with its isolated, almost wordless characters, embattled by psychological forces they barely understand and by an indifferent Nature. It is indeed a film of portentous "unease".

"Kiwi Gothic" is a term used by one New Zealand academic for films such as *Vigil* and *The Scarecrow* (1982), which draw, directly or otherwise, on the traditions of Gothic literature. Dr Jenny Lawn notes that "[New Zealand] monsters tend to be interior: they are experiences of intense psychological states, often with sexual undertones within isolated nuclear families", a particularly apt observation in the case of *Vigil*. She also notes that typical Gothic works include "a vertical dimension, whether that be a basement or attic in a house, steep hills or cliffs

in landscape" [emphasis added] and that Kiwi Gothic films "depict an intruder who disrupts a family or community, often exposing underlying stresses" (see Links). With Ethan as the intruder, we can read *Vigil* as an exemplar of Kiwi Gothic: the itinerant hunter/farm-hand exposes several underlying fissures in the already fractured family he enters. Indeed, just like the steep landscape which is falling in around the farm, Ethan causes the fragile family structure to disintegrate. There is, for example, the possibility that he may have inadvertently caused Justin to fall to his death, by firing his gun at a couple of goats, making Justin lose his precarious hold on the cliff face. His presence undoubtedly causes inner turmoil (for different reasons, and manifesting itself in different ways) in both Toss and Elizabeth. Even Birdie is not immune to Ethan's disruptive force: it is Ethan with whom Elizabeth celebrates the sale of the farm, to Birdie's evident chagrin and disgust.

Music

Original music by well-known and highly eclectic New Zealand composer Jack Body contributes greatly to the film's dark, mysterious and poetic style.

Viewer's Guide

The film was to have been titled *First Blood*, *Last Rites*. In what ways does this title help the viewer better comprehend the film? Or is *Vigil* a more apt title?

The film is often described as a "coming-of age" movie. How does Toss' imminent puberty contribute to the film's intensity?

The relationship between Toss and Ethan is as contradictory as the dissonant image of Toss wearing a tutu and gumboots. Why is this? Similarly, the relationship between Ethan and Elizabeth turns on contradictory tensions. What are these tensions? In both cases, how are these contradictions/tensions rendered cinematographically in specific scenes?

The docking scene (cutting the tails off the lambs) is a pivotal one, both for the relationship between Toss and Ethan, and for that between Ethan and Elizabeth. Why is this so? What is going on in this scene, both emotionally and cinematographically?

What does the characterization of Birdie contribute to the film?

Particular items of clothing carry much resonance or signify deeply in this film. What are these items and what do they "mean"?

The film's colors are uniformly drab, and the weather is uniformly bleak - with a (very) few notable exceptions. What are these exceptions and what do they signify or suggest?

Images and sounds of hawks occur frequently in this film. Why?

Sound effects and music play an important role in this film. At which points are these most significant, and why?

The film contains a number of long shots with deep focus (similar to shots famously employed by Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*). There are also numerous shots of one of the characters appearing over the brim of something (a hill, a door stoop, ...) and of one of the characters watching something or someone (through a window, binoculars, a rifle sight) . What purpose do these shots serve?

In addition to the subtle reminders of (homage to ?) Welles referred to in the previous question, what other director is brought to mind by this film?

Is the viewer always able to clearly separate fantasy, reality, magic and dream in *Vigil*? Does this matter?

Twelve year-old Fiona Kay gives a remarkable performance as Toss. Reviewer Hal Hinson (see *Reviews*) compares her "compacted intensity" to the silent screen actress Lillian Gish. "In her face", he says, "a soul is laid bare". Which scenes in particular support Hinson's view of Kay's abilities?

Related to the previous question, the film, with its minimal dialogue, is almost a silent movie. How does the camerawork of Alun Bollinger (one of New Zealand's finest cinematographers) do a considerable amount of the "speaking" to the viewer?

How is "the feminine" or "femininity" represented in this film?

Could this film be read in Freudian terms?

What, if anything, makes this an identifiably New Zealand film?

Resources

Cinema of Unease. Dir. Sam Neill and Judy Rymer. Videocassette. 1995.
(Variant title: Personal Journey by Sam Neill. A personal journey and an excellent history of New Zealand film. Part of the Century of Cinemaseries of films)

Insdorf, Annette. "Vigil: a New Film Poetry Form New Zealand." Los Angeles Times. Part 6 Calendar Section (Sept 10, 1986): 4.

McCloone, Martin. "Cinema Irish Style." Studies: an Irish Quarterly Review. 74. 294 (Summer 1985) : 220-224.

Martin, Helen and Sam Edwards. New Zealand Film 1912-1996. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1997.

"Perimeters: an Interview with Vincent Ward. " Film in Aotearoa New Zealand. Eds. Jonathan Dennis and Jan Bieringa. 2nd ed. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1996. 89-91.

Ward, Vincent with Alison Carter, Geoff Chapple and Louis Nowra. Edge of the Earth: Stories and Images From the Antipodes. Auckland, N.Z., Heinemann Reed, 1990.
("Traces the development of a highly individual film-maker through three widely acclaimed films - In Spring One Plants Alone, Vigil, and The Navigator". Variant title: The Navigator).

Contributor

Jo Seton, who has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is Australian, but also lived many years in New Zealand. She has long had an interest in the film industry in both countries. She worked for the New Zealand Film Archive in its early years, along with various other national cultural institutions in New Zealand. Currently she lives in a small town in the United States. She gets nostalgic about the Antipodes on the rare occasions on which she gets to see a movie from that part of the world.