

DROWNING OR DANCING

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In the 1970s and early '80s, I was fortunate to be on hand for the emergence of a new filmmaking culture in New Zealand. The box-office success of films like *Sleeping Dogs* and *Goodbye Pork Pie* were crucial to the new industry, but I felt ambivalent about the choice of model - the American genre film translated into the idiom of kiwi male culture, with emphasis on chase sequences, explosions and wham-bam sex.

When the first films by a young art student named Vincent Ward turned up they were a very different story with their emotional subtlety, artistic visual style, and in-depth female characters. From *A State of Siege* (1978), *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1980) and his first feature, *Vigil* (1984), Ward opened up new directions for New Zealand film. Subsequently, in addition to the important films he has continued to make, other talented directors have followed the same path, and this work represents the most serious and artistic side of our film culture.

Ward's current work in the visual arts is again breaking new ground, as I shall discuss, but it remains true to the basic values that inform his filmmaking. First, it explores subjective experience at a deep level. One of the things that first struck me about his films was their very tactile and physical quality, but somehow, in contrast to the macho physicality of most New Zealand filmmaking, such images were a way to gain access to subtle states of mind. Clearly this unusual approach to physicality owed something to Ward's years as a dreamy kid growing up on a remote farm. He has said of his father: 'If [in painting] I can capture something of the earth and mud and water he experienced, the sheer visceral essence of it, I feel I have made that journey with him' (*The Past Awaits: People, Images, Film*, p.71).

The second continuing strength is Ward's extraordinary visual imagination, and the third aspect might be called philosophical, his desire to raise big questions. All three aspects relate to European traditions of art, seen in filmmakers such

as Ingmar Bergman, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Werner Herzog with their heightened images, psychological probing and brooding, melancholic tone. This approach contains a continuing awareness of Europe's dark historical experience, and it is not surprising to learn that Ward's mother is German and Jewish. His work has always been thoughtful in this way. His first student film, *The Cave* (1975), was based on a famous image from *Plato's Republic*, and the theme of *Void* (1976) was suicide. His subsequent films have continued to explore ideas, refusing to be limited by the Hollywood rubric of narrative and emotional single-mindedness. This gave his work affinities with the 'festival' or 'art film' tradition. For example, *Vigil* was the first New Zealand film to be selected in competition for the Cannes Film Festival, and Ward was quickly recognised internationally as an auteur, a filmmaker original in style and vision.

Today he is again surprising us by his turn (or return) to the visual arts. A survey of the art of his filmmaking would in itself have made a very interesting gallery exhibition, but instead Ward has taken risks and extended his aesthetic in new directions. The results are distinctly different from the current mainstream of the visual arts. He has radically reworked selected images from his films, created a new set of staged photographs, and explored ways of combining film, photography and painting. He says he finds the gallery context liberating in its freedom from the requirements of narrative film. At the same time, moving images remain an important element, and the fact that Ward has come to the gallery from filmmaking helps explain some of the features of his work that are unorthodox in this context.

Since the period of his earliest films, a digital revolution has occurred. Ward was already making innovative use of special effects in *The Navigator* (1988), and even more dramatically in *What Dreams May Come* (1998), which pioneered digital techniques to add motion to paint-like textures. His current work

continues to explore these possibilities. It is characteristic that he is using digital effects to develop new visual textures and to explore states of mind, in contrast to the mainstream of local filmmaking which uses them primarily to make action sequences more spectacular.

An overseas counterpart to Ward's work would be the high-definition images and multi-media installations of the American artist Bill Viola. Such work is not typical of the visual arts which have seen a shift in recent decades to so-called Postmodernism with its preference for an ironic, satirical or cynical tone, a deadpan manner, and a rejection of any form of subjectivity, lyricism or sublime affect that is seen (rightly or wrongly) as a hangover from Romanticism or religion.

These preferences can make it difficult for some viewers to respond to Ward's work, which may seem short on irony, with suspicious hints of an interest in spirituality. Certainly Ward's films - and the tradition in which he works - are drawn to situations of life and death and to the cultural attitudes associated with them - such as those of a Medieval village, an Inuit community, Maori spiritual concepts, and classical or Christian mythology. Yet Ward's work is not simply the expression of a belief but an opportunity for the viewer to enter a particular way of thinking and feeling, and each of his films has dramatised such a world-view coming into collision with other world-views. Ward's Romanticism is, then, of a complex, modern kind.

Bodies and metaphors

His current work shifts the focus from linear narrative to thematic affinities. Two quotes used by Ward provide a useful starting-point for discussing his thematic interests. The first quote embodies a metaphor so vivid to the senses that it has the shock

of realism, while the second is a true story with a metaphorical resonance.

Anglo-Saxon author the Venerable Bede wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (in Latin) early in the eighth century. Its famous description of a sparrow is spoken by a nobleman reflecting on earthly transience. As Ward summarises this passage in *The Past Awaits* (p.72):

*Like the swift flight of a sparrow
through a fire-lit mead hall,
from winter dark and back to dark,
Life is but a brief interval through fire's warmth.
As entering at one door,
and instantly leaving by another
the sparrow then vanishes from sight.*

This passage, part of a wall caption for Ward's Govett-Brewster exhibition, is not merely an intellectual conceit since (particularly in Bede's extended version) it conveys the visceral experience of the sparrow - the 'wintry tempest', the blazing fire, the bird's vulnerability.

The 'Breath' section of the present book contains a description of certain tragic events nearly 13 centuries later. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze 'suffered from emphysema and had great difficulty breathing.' In the end: 'His lungs were so full of fluid he felt as though he was drowning. In order to feel the air filling his chest and mouth he threw himself from his Paris apartment, preferring this last brief and intense rush of air, to life itself.'

This story has a number of themes that link with the surrounding images, such as breathing, drowning and falling. Deleuze was a famous film theorist who wrote books on

'movement' and 'time,' but the book of his I want to mention is *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* because it seems highly relevant to Ward's current work. I am not suggesting that Ward was influenced by this book or by Bacon, but Deleuze's attempt to define the painter's aesthetic provides a useful framework for discussing Ward's art, highlighting the serious interests they share.

Obviously there are individual differences. Bacon belongs to an earlier generation, his images are consistently more sinister, and his primary medium is paint, not photography or film. But both artists have a strong philosophical tendency enriched by European traditions. Deleuze, drawn to artists who share a sense of melancholy, likes to link Bacon with Samuel Beckett whose situations raise existential questions yet never lapse into obvious symbolism.

Both Bacon and Ward use the figure as their starting point, and thus have frequent use for vertical formats. Of course an emphasis on figures is basic to narrative films but is no longer the norm in art. The figures in Bacon are frequently confined within cages or other frameworks, while Ward sets his underwater figures within a transparent membrane, evoking both birth and death. Deleuze says of Bacon: 'Thus isolated, the Figure becomes an Image, an Icon.' This de-contextualisation is particularly striking in Ward's case as many of his images have been lifted out of feature films. His narrative style has always been based on the primacy of the image, but now he leaves the meaning of the image more radically open.

Bacon is a painter of heads rather than faces, and often his bodies lack a clear face. Deleuze says: 'We see everywhere the reign of the blurry and the indeterminate, the action of a depth that pulls at the form.' Many of Ward's figures also have faces obscured, which is certainly unusual for a filmmaker. When

he does focus on faces it is in a very dramatic fashion, such as the pilot in *Flying*, or the dissolving image of a woman's face in *Waystation*. In general the photos are full of vivid, precise textures and parts of bodies but often these details float in chaos.

Though the encounter between man and horse (*Kin*) is the most naturalistic image, and it has an accompanying text, its effect is still enigmatic. Ward's images often hint at archetypes, such as the white horse, the sea-wyf or mermaid, and death and the maiden. These allusions add to the richness, though they are often subliminal and merely speculative. At times, for example, the extraordinary images of swimmers remind me of the falling angels of William Blake or Henry Fuseli, naked figures on whom light pours down from above.

A number of possible narratives are lightly suggested. As Deleuze remarked in a later book (*The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*), Bacon's painting 'is the possibility of all of these hypotheses or narrations at the same time.' The ambiguity seems equally rich in Ward's art. A woman is drowning, or is she simply enjoying the ecstatic sensation of floating and dancing in water? There is more than one woman - sometimes two are present. Who are they? The image is a nexus or crossroads for many possible readings, though we are steered towards some key themes. Many titles carry metaphorical suggestions, such as *Wings through Water*, *Rorschach Tree* and *Blood-dimmed tide*, though they are evocative rather than definitive.

In a 1984 interview with Tony Mitchell in *Art New Zealand*, Ward spoke of a stylistic balancing act: 'I came across a quote from John Mortimer the other day, 'your symbolism is showing,' which I think is very apt. It's an unresolvable dilemma [since] if you believe in visual narrative it's hard to get away from symbolism . . .' He added: 'I often reject images because they

look too beautiful.' The challenge, then, is to load an image with meaning and visual interest yet avoid conventional beauty or symbolism.

Bacon was fascinated by photographs, especially the motion series of Eadweard Muybridge, and his liking for the triptych was a way of playing with movement in his juxtaposition of images. 'The Figures are lifted up, thrown in the air, placed upon aerial riggings from which they suddenly fall.' They 'look like trapeze artists whose milieu is no longer anything but light and color.' Drawing on his background in film, Ward carries such juxtapositions further, exploring the whole spectrum of movement from freeze frames to combined still images to multiple moving images.

Figures in Bacon's paintings are thrown into extreme situations ('weighed down by stress, pain or anguish'). In this 'violence of sensation,' says Deleuze, the figures exist in a 'tactile-optical' or 'haptic' space, which the viewer is encouraged to relate to his or her own body. This 'is not a taste for horror, it is pity, an intense pity: pity for flesh' (as Deleuze's translator Daniel W Smith puts it). There are obvious affinities here with Ward, though that artist's work often seems more sensuous and celebratory with its graceful bodies, its liquid textures, its glimmers and bursts of light, its explosions of colour.

As noted earlier, this extended comparison between Ward and Bacon aims not to suggest an influence or a similar look to their work but to draw attention to an underlying aesthetic, a rich cluster of interests, a tradition which has not always been well understood in this country. While Ward has links with this tradition, he also brings to it an approach that is contemporary and local and a unique visual sensibility which makes use of a range of new technical resources.

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