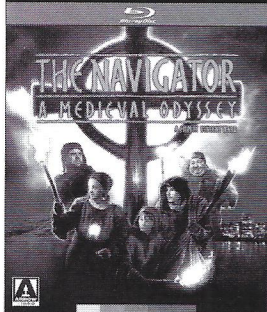


**THE NAVIGATOR:
A MEDIEVAL ODYSSEY**
Directed by Vincent Ward
(1988) Arrow Video Blu-ray



Set in Cumbria in the year 1348, Vincent Ward's *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey* tells the story of Griffin, a prescient lad who has visions of saving his village from the imminent Black Death. When his older brother Connor comes back from a trek to the outside world with tales of death and sorrow from the encroaching plague, Griffin becomes convinced that they can save their own village by tunneling through the Earth to take an offering of a copper spire to the largest cathedral in Christendom. Along with a few others, the duo set out to the deepest hole they can find and start digging. Eventually they

emerge on the outskirts of Auckland, New Zealand in the year 1988, and their journey takes a few expected (trying to cross a busy highway) and unexpected (menaced by a submarine while in a dinghy, rowing a horse across the harbor?!) turns.

The Black Death is used as a metaphor for the then current AIDS epidemic here, something Ward hammers home with a mention by a television announcer in the scenes set in present day. It's this sort of heavy handedness that marks the director's storytelling inexperience at this point in his career. His sense of narrative was not yet as highly developed as his visual artistry. That said, the film satisfies on more levels than it disappoints. "Dreamers will wear rags," says grandpa to Griffin. It's a sentiment which would carry more weight if everyone in the cast weren't wearing rags. In fact, most of the cast look like casual Friday refugees from *The Lord of the Rings*, at the time still just a gleam in fellow New Zealander Peter Jackson's eye.

Director Ward had made a splash a few years earlier with his debut feature, *Vigil*, and returns to some of his visual and storytelling touchstones with this film. Undoubtedly inspired by *The Wizard of Oz* from a format standpoint, *The Navigator* begins in stark and grainy black and white, switching to a rich color palette as the band makes their way through the ground and outside into the modern world. Ward's already polished visual sense is boosted by the work of cinematographer Geoffrey Simpson (*Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Shine*) who creates two very separate worlds, visually. The 1348 scenes are cold and sharp; 1988 is warm and diffused, with rich hues seeping into every shot. That Ward is a master of composition is apparent—the beginnings of an imagery toolbox that will serve him well in films like *Map of the Human Heart* and *What Dreams May Come* are present here.

Often called science fiction, it's truthfully fantasy—in more ways than one—and the film's concept somewhat overshadows the actors' performances, though Hamish McFarlane, Bruce Lyons, and Marshall Napier are standouts as Griffin, Connor, and Searle, respectively. *The Navigator* is very much a product of its time; the film was born into a cinema market that would bear such a small, personal movie, encourage its makers, and stand out in the home video aftermarket—a climate far different than today. What seemed like a natural exchange then seems now somewhat unnecessary and "tacked on" to remind the viewer that nothing good comes without a price, a case of Ward beating his message to death . . . literally.

The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey led Ward to the attention of 20th Century Fox, and a role in developing the third film in the *Alien* franchise. Set on a barren moon amidst a brotherhood of medieval monks, some of Ward's (and co-writer John Fasano's) *Alien 3* eventually made it onto the screen under director David Fincher, though the monks became prisoners in the final iteration. Widely held to be the weakest of the *Alien* films, one wonders how it might have fared in its original format. Ward's eventual Hollywood breakthrough came with *What Dreams May Come*, an iconoclastic film that stands apart from its "peers" even now. His output has been sparse since then, which is a shame.

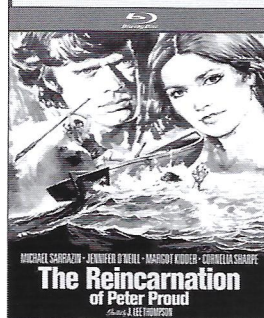
Arrow's presentation of *The Navigator* is texturally gorgeous and preserves the film's original widescreen format and mono soundtrack. Though billed as a "Special Edition", extras are a bit sparse, limited to an interview with film critic Nick Roddick, an episode of *Kaleidoscope* featuring a 1989 documentary on Vincent Ward made for New Zealand television, and, a special booklet, only available with the Blu-ray's first pressing. English subtitles are very welcome here, as the actor's accents are quite thick.

Roddick's interview is an appreciation of the film, and includes several interesting stories about it and the director, including the fact that Ward confided in him that he originally wanted to cast it all with little people, as in *Time Bandits*! The episode of *Kaleidoscope* is a look at Ward (and his family) just as the director began to emerge from the New Zealand film scene onto the world stage, and he seems a bit uncomfortable in front of the camera.

Anthony Taylor

THE REINCARNATION OF PETER PROUD

Directed by J. Lee Thompson
(1975) Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



The 1970s saw quite their share of hard-sell "based on the best-selling novel" movie ad campaigns, and *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* was one of the more successful beneficiaries of the era. Indeed, the book by Max Ehrlich, albeit a work of complete fiction, was happily embraced by the pop culture audience of the era in the heyday of *Chariots of the Gods?* and its accompanying host of superficial explorations of parapsychology, alien visitors and other phenomenon beyond our immediate ken. As such, the viability of a movie adaptation scarcely rated a second thought, and the result (scripted by Ehrlich himself for a Bing Crosby production ultimately released by AIP) certainly fit the bill at the time; although the frankly R-rated material involved limited the typical audience for such fare.

Now about that title. Peter Proud (Michael Sarrazin) doesn't actually get reincarnated in the course of the story . . . rather, a series of vivid nightmares suffered by the titular California professor (he's repeatedly bludgeoned to death with an oar wielded by a woman he calls "Marcia" in the middle of a lake) ultimately leads to the suggestion that he may actually be the reincarnation of a particularly unpleasant fellow who lived in Massachusetts in the 1940s. Sleep clinics and psychology offer no relief; and an obsessive jaunt across the country to visit a site he suddenly recognizes ultimately costs him the affections of his girlfriend (Cornelia Sharpe of *Open Season* as Nora); but that's quite all right. It's all too easy for Peter to strike up an affectionate friendship with a young lady named Ann Curtis (Jennifer O'Neill); much to the chagrin of her reclusive, hard-drinking mother Marcia (Margot Kidder). Who happens to be living under Ann's care . . . at her lakefront home.

Today, "absolute proof" of reincarnation can be found in the discount aisle and is routinely taken for granted in pop psychology and as fodder for talk shows and dime-a-dozen investigative "documentary" series. But the allure of the paranormal was sufficiently hot in the 1970s that *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* did a fair job of persuading viewers back then that Peter and his eager colleague Dr. Goodman (Paul Hecht) might actually stand a chance of turning the scientific community on its ear and amassing fame and fortune with the results of their meticulous research. Yet this was scarcely foremost on the mind of director J. Lee Thompson (somewhere between his *Planet of the Apes* contributions and his run of ultra-violent Charles Bronson thrillers) when he helmed Ehrlich's adaptation. Thompson understood completely why Peter wanted to deny his heritage and place in history in favor of a "normal" life with Ann: the story may have been "about" the phenomenon of reincarnation, but the premise serves as mere window dressing in what actually functions as an exploration of unhealthy sexual urges (something that not even the heavily-edited ABC network television version could keep completely under wraps).

From the opening moments of the film, Peter is unable to enjoy the charms of Nora (though Thompson makes sure we can in generous closeup) thanks to his nightmares (Peter's death scream in another man's voice was emphasized in the trailer and is the closest thing to traditional "horror" to be found here). Peter's research in Massachusetts (a look at "his" childhood home) is given an assist by caretaker Debralee Scott . . . who gratuitously poses on a bed in denim cutoffs in an apparent attempt at jailbait teasing that goes completely unnoticed by Peter (but again, not by the audience). Peter's attraction to Ann, of course, carries the suggestion of incest once removed (although their inevitable sex scene is the chastest such moment in the entire film); and most notoriously of all, Marcia's rekindled memories of marital rape, brutality and infidelity seem to be bringing her an erotic charge in a bathtub sequence completely excised from the ABC print. The late Margot Kidder (the troubled actress sadly took her own life in 2018) denied the implication of the sequence at the time and claimed that Thompson took the inadvertent motion of her hand out of context, but the scene speaks for itself . . . though significantly less so when seen in Spanish-speaking countries: the alternate clip is provided for comparison as a supplement on the Blu-ray.

The no-longer-novel concept and the undeniable perversity at the heart of the film make *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* a difficult sell today; indeed, the Kino Lorber Blu-ray marks its debut in any digital format. That said, this remains an efficient and daring 70s flashback worth another look by its original audience and at least one viewing for newcomers who missed out on all the fuss "back in the day." Plenty of additional context is provided by Lee Gambin in a feature audio commentary; while the usual amount of trailers, radio spots and stills round out the supplements. The film itself is attractively presented save for some mild but visible scratching early on, but it's a huge improvement over the Vestron VHS issued in the 80s (which marked the last appearance of this film pretty much anywhere until today).

Shane M. Dallmann