Directed by Peter Weir
Written by Peter Weir, Tony Morphett & Petru Popescu
Produced by Hal McElroy and James McElroy
Original Music by Charles Wain
Cinematography by Russell Boyd
Film editing by Max Lemon
Costume Design by Annie Bleakley

Richard Chamberlain...David Burton
Olivia Hamnett...Annie Burton
David Gulpilil...Chris Lee (as Gulpilil)
Frederick Parslow...Rev. Burton
Vivean Gray...Dr. Whitburn
Nandjiwarra Amagula...Charlie
Walter Amagula...Gerry Lee
Roy Bara...Larry
Cedrick Lalara...Linds
Morris Lalara...Jacko
Peter Carroll...Michael Zeadler


Nandjiwara Amagula appeared in no films other than 1977 The Last Wave.


Australian director and scenarist, was born in Sydney, the son of a real estate agent. He studied arts and law at the University of Sydney, where he appeared in and wrote for undergraduate revues, but dropped out at nineteen to enter his father’s business. Bored by this, he took a trip to England in 1965, working as a clerk in a London theatrical booking agency/ he paid his way back on a liner by helping to organize passenger entertainment, and arrived home determined to work in some branch of show business.

Weir started in television in 1967, taking a menial job at ATN, one of Sydney’s three commercial stations. That Christmas he made a short film for the social club’s annual party. Count Vim's Last Exercise, a knockabout comedy showing the influence of Richard Lester, was a hit at the party, and Weir followed it next year with another Christmas short, The Life and Flight of the Reverence Buckshotte, a spoof on cult religions with himself in the title role.

On the strength of these two romps, Weir was hired as a director by the Commonwealth Film Institute (later Film Australia). At first there was nothing for him to direct, so he worked as assistant cameraman and production assistant. His first directorial assignment was “Michael,” one of three episodes in a feature about young people called Three to Go (1970). The hero (played by Matthew Burton) is an office worker from the bourgeois North shore area of Sydney who, in the course of this thirty-minute movie, drifts into the hippie movement and out again, disillusioned.

Three to Go, shown on television throughout Australia, attracted a good deal of attention and won the Grand Prix of the Australian Film Institute. “Michael,” which opens with a dream sequence about a guerilla attack on downtown Sydney, was generally recognized to be the most original and impressive of the three episodes, though in retrospect it seems a rather “simplistic examination of youthful rebellion and an equally simplistic repudiation of its values,” as well as “gratuitously flashy” in technique.

After a ten-minute short, Stirring the Pool (1970), came Weir’s first feature, Homesdale (1971, 50 minutes). Scripted by Weir with Keith Gow and Piers Davies, it was the first of his films to show clearly his penchant for dark comedy. Homesdale Hunting Lodge is a vacation resort on a remote island that offers “a new experiment in togetherness.” In a bizarre amateur revue (no doubt inspired by Weir’s shipboard experiences) and an increasingly dangerous treasure hunt, an assortment of guests are encouraged to work out their private fantasies while developing the “team spirit” imposed by their authoritarian host (James Delli). By the end, the most timid of the guests (Geoff Malone) has tried his hand at murder and been taken onto the Homesdale staff.

As Brian McFarlane says, the film’s “view of life is dark, apprehensive, often ironic and shot through with the grim wit” that characterizes Weir’s later films; “like them, too, it is concerned with observing people in potentially dangerous situations that grow partly out of their own personalities and partly out of unpredictably and indifiably threatening milieux.” It seemed to McFarlane that the narrative momentum slowed in the middle section of the movie, but it brought Weir the Australian Film Institute’s Grand Prix for the second year running and, though at first it achieved only limited distribution, it has been much revived.

After six months leave abroad, Weir made two documentary shorts for Film Australia, Incredible Floridas and Three Directions in Australian Pop Music, both released in 1972. Whatever Happened to Green Valley? (1973, 50 minutes) is a highly original experiment in do-it-yourself cinéma-vérité, in which five residents of Green Valley are each given a camera and told to film their own impressions of the town. Weir coordinated the project and also chaired the debate at the end of the picture.
Meanwhile, Weir (a nondriver) was working with Keith Gow and Piers Davies on an idea that reflects his dislike of the automobile, and which was filmed in 1974 as The Cars That Ate Paris. Weir’s Paris is a sleepy little township in New South Wales, off the main highway. Arthur Waldo (Terry Camilleri) finds himself in Paris after a car accident that has killed his brother. Although he is kindly treated by the upright mayor (John Meillon), he gradually realizes that something very strange is happening in the town.

In fact, the whole community—from mayor to village idiot—is involved in a contemporary form of an ancient industry. Cars are lured off the highway, wrecked, and plundered for their contents and spare parts. Those who survive the “accidents” are reduced to “veggies” by mad Dr. Midland at the local hospital. Arthur seems destined for the same fate when a gang of young “yobbos” in spiked monster cars make an all-out assault on Paris.

Produced by Hal and Jim McElroy on a tiny budget, with help from Australia’s Film Development Corporation, The Cars That Ate Paris seemed to David Stratton “the best and most commercial feature made entirely by Australians for very many years”; in fact, it was a disastrous failure at the box office, perhaps because audiences were unsettled by the touches of black humor that persistently undercut the mounting horror. It remains the most accomplished of Weir’s early movies—more perfectly realized, if less ambitious in conception, than most of its successors, and showing “a flair for narrative rhythm and tonal variety” that the director has not surpassed.

Left penniless by this failure, Weir marked time with some television work until an acquaintance brought him a copy of Joan Lindsay’s novel Picnic at Hanging Rock. He knew at once that he had to film it, and a remark he subsequently made to an interviewer helps explain why: “The Protestant church of my childhood was stripped of all mystery,” leaving him with an urge “to bring back some spirituality, in the very widest sense of that word.”

Picnic at Hanging Rock, as adapted by Cliff Green, is an account of an event that is supposed to have occurred near Melbourne in 1900, on Saint Valentine’s Day. Already stirred by the occasion, the well-drilled inmates of a stuffy girls’ boarding school are taken on an outing to Hanging Rock, a great primeval cliff sacred to the Aboriginals. After spending a languidly romantic morning in the lushly wooded foothills, four of the girls elect to climb the Rock itself. As Peter Cowie wrote, “George Zampfhir’s pan-pipe music echoes the plangent opening text: ‘What we see and what we seem, Are but a dream, a dream within a dream.’ The glaring sun, the tantalizing dissolves and ripples of slow-motion as the girls pick their way among the rocks, are used disquietingly to suggest the no-man’s land that lies between fantasy and reality.”

Three of the girls seem to become possessed by the spirit of the Rock—so liberated from gentility that they take off their shoes and stockings; the fat, earthbound Edith grows frightened and runs away, back to the rest of the party; her companions disappear. A young visiting Englishman and his groom join the search and one of the girls is eventually found, strangely transformed and matured; the other two are never seen again. The atmosphere of the college, already oppressive, grows stranger as pupils are taken away and the repressive headmistress (Rachel Roberts) tautens toward madness.

Weir resists straightforward Freudian interpretations of the film, but as Brian McFarlane writes, “the Rock, with its sense of ageless knowledge, and adolescent sexual yearning are there from the start, and the film makes the audience keep them in mind together,” while Peter Cowie thought that the girls on the Rock were “like infidels in the Holy City; their climb is an attempt to penetrate a secret that should lie beyond the ken of neat young ladies.”

Russell Boyd’s “stunning” camerawork reminded one reviewer of “Lartigue’s early color photographs.” Characterization, however, was found one-dimensional, and it seemed to McFarlane that “the film’s grasp of narrative, as distinct from intimations of dread among the summer lushness and stillness, is very uncertain.” All the same, McFarlane concluded, “whatever its lapses, Picnic is not parochial; it is the work of a man with a vision of life, a vision in which dangerous forces are always menacing life’s orderly surfaces, surfaces that can be made to reflect frightening depths.” Released in 1975, the film had a rather mixed reception at home but went on to become the first great international success of the Australian New Wave.

While traveling in Tunisia in 1971, Weir had come upon the remains of an ancient city. He had a premonition that he would find something, and did—a carving of a child’s head. The chain of thought this initiated became associated some years later with a new notion—what would happen if “a highly respected citizen...suddenly came in contact with things beyond his experience?” From these beginnings grew the script of The Last Wave (1977), originally conceived as a black comedy, but much darkened and sharpened during rewriting with the collaboration of Tony Morphett and Petru Popescu. Like Picnic at Hanging Rock, it was produced by Hal and Jim McElroy. With additional financial backing from the Australian Film Commission. The South Australia Film Corporation and other (including in this case United Artists).

Behind the credits of The Last Wave, we see an Aboriginal painting a symbol on the roof of a cave—three concentric circles with four dots in the center. We cut to a parched township in Central Australia where. Out of a cloudless sky, a deluge of rain suddenly falls, followed by a window-shattering hail. Then we encounter David Burton (Richard Chamberlain), a lawyer in Sydney who is vaguely troubled by the freakish weather and by a recurrent dream in which an Aboriginal (David Gulpilil) shows him a strangely painted stone—three concentric circles with four dots in the center.

Burton meets Chris Lee, the man in his dream, when he is called upon to defend a group of Aboriginals accused of the tribal murder of a man who has been stealing sacred stones from the caves beneath the city’s sewers. Burton feels a growing
alienation from his middle-class life and a growing affinity with the Aboriginals. Taken by Chris Lee to the tribal caves under the city, he sees his own likeness in a stone face and finds himself able to interpret an enigmatic wall painting that embodies a prophecy of imminent apocalypse. Outside again on the beach, he sees a great wave moving toward the shore.

Davis Stratton called The Last Wave “a beautifully crafted film, brimming with ideas and allusions, with water in many different forms (as the continual rain, in an overflowing bath, in a goldfish tank, from a dripping tap) a palpable character in the drama. A modest budget brought about an alteration in the original ending, but nevertheless the film’s ending is remarkably effective given what has come before.” Joan Juliet Buck thought it “a fascinating film because it cuts deep beneath the Australian continent for symbols and terrors that are unknown to Europeans...Weir wanted to plumb the archeology of Australia, those artifacts, rituals and taboos that go back so far their roots reach beyond mythology into a fundamentally primitive consciousness.”

The Last Wave was received in Australia with even less enthusiasm than its predecessor, according to David Stratton, but was a success overseas, especially in the United States, where in 1979, it appeared in Variety’s “Top 50” box-office chart along with Weir’s next movie, The Plumber (1979), originally made for Australian television. Scripted by Weir, it was made on a minuscule budget in six weeks. Judy Morris plays Jill, the cool wife of an ambitious academic, herself working at home on her master’s thesis about the primitive highlanders of New Guinea. One day a plumber arrives for a routine check—a disturbingly familiar and sexy man (Ivor Kants). He turns the perfectly efficient bathroom into a jungle of scaffolding and disemboweled piping, and he stays for days.

The plumber’s hammering disturbs Jill’s thinking, and his extremely physical presence disturbs her at a deeper level. As the plaster cracks in the bathroom, so does Jill’s cool intellectual façade. Obsessed, she is driven to shocking lengths to rid herself of the man and the dark forces he threatens to set free. Weir, as surely as he looses cascades of water, is the destroyer of the broken pipes. David Robinson found the denouement finally “predictable and melodramatic; but the building of the tension and the use of strange crosscurrents, coming from the woman’s academic concern with aboriginal tribal magic, are recognizably the work of the director of the Last Wave.” The film is often very funny; Marc Green was reminded of Harold Pinter’s “comedies of menace,” adding that “in its sly, unpretentious way, this provocative little movie has much to say about the life of the intellect, the vulnerabilities of civilization, the ambiguities of guilt and innocence.”

“Brought up on the idea of the birth of our nation through a defeat,” Weir had long contemplated a film about the hopeless, heroic ordeal of the Anzacs (Australian and New Zealand forces) at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles during World War I. The Anzacs landing at Gallipoli were supposed to provide a diversion to cover the misconceived British attack on Suvla Bay. The Turks were in impregnable positions, but the untried Anzacs held on from April 1915 to the end of the year, losing 10,000 men. Weir wrote his “intimate epic” in collaboration with the Australian dramatist David Williamson. The first product of Robert Stigwood and Rupert Murdoch’s R and R Productions, it was filmed with great speed and economy for less than three million dollars.

Gallipoli (1980) centers on two young amateur athletes, a farmer’s son (Mark Lee) and a settler (Mel Gibson) who cross fifty miles of desert to reach the recruiting station at Perth, do their training in an Egypt of pyramids and dirty postcards, and go on to play their part in the birth of a national identity at Gallipoli. David Robinson praised the film almost unreservedly—its “uncluttered” vernacular dialogue and ironic humor, its “striking and original” images and “rare sense of atmosphere,” and “the vividness with which Weir makes us understand what it was like to be Australians in 1915, with all the innocence and hope of a nation that was younger than the boys themselves.”

Salman Rushdie was more equivocal in his praise, admiring the “marvelous detail” of the film’s first seventy minutes but finding the Gallipoli sequences themselves relatively dull and overwritten—“cardboard soldiers go nobly over the top and die patriotically cardboard deaths, in stunning Panavision cinematography [by Russell Boyd].” “What remains in the mind...” Rushdie thought, “is a whole series of microcosmic images and moments. Anzac Bay at night, lit up like a macabre fairground. Grenades being constructed out of tin cans. Naked men diving under the surface of the sea as bits of shrapnel float downwards through the water. A game of Rugby football, watched over by the Sphinx.”

It seemed to Robinson that Gallipoli was significant in the continuing debate about whether Australian film should concentrate on indigenous themes or pursue Hollywood-style “international” productions, because it demonstrated “the universal appeal of a national subject uncompromisingly treated.” Not everyone agreed, and John Pym called Gallipoli Weir’s “first and at times anonymous ‘international’ picture.”

Because the worldwide box-office success of Gallipoli made Peter Weir a bankable international director, it was comparatively easy for him to persuade executives of MGM/UA Entertainment Co. to put up the money for his next venture, The Year of Living Dangerously (1983). It was the first time an Australian feature film had been fully financed by a major American motion picture studio. The movie, which was written by Weir together with David Williamson and J.C. Koch from a novel by Koch. Deals with the unrest and turmoil in Indonesia in 1965, as Communist demonstrators marched in the streets of Djakarta and the Sukarno government balanced precariously at the edge of a coup. Into this volatile world, a newly arrived
The principal actors all won the praise of reviewers, and it was widely acclaimed as a film that excites the mind as well as the eye. In Witness (1985), Peter Weir’s most acclaimed film to date, the Australian journalist (Mel Gibson) searches at the edge of mysteries, is drawn into a romance with a woman in the employ of the British embassy (Sigourney Weaver), and into association with a dwarf (Billy Kwan). The film is an American eccentric and inventor, Allie Fox (Harrison Ford), who works as a photographer and is the movie’s prophetic narrative voice.

Critical reception of the movie was mixed, with praise for the performance of the principals (the tiny 4’9” Linda Hunt won an Academy Award as Best supporting Actress for her role), but with marked reservations about the script. “The torrential quality of life in Djakarta,” Stanley Kauffmann remarked, “the teeming streets, the engulfing poverty, the waves of beggars and peddlers and prostitutes, all these are well conveyed by Weir and his cinematographer Russell Boyd. But…having created an authentic environment [Weir] uses it for an inauthentic, stale story.” A number of critics thought the romance between Gibson and Weaver in a Graham Greene-like setting trivialized the tragic events in Indonesia, and David Ansen complained that the film “fritters away…many rich possibilities,” offering finally “just an atmosphere and attitudes.”

Pauline Kael, however, enjoyed Weir’s oblique directorial style, particularly in the first half, and his creation of mood. “Scene by scene,” she wrote, “I was held by it and had a very good time, though I didn’t believe any of it.”

The Year of Living Dangerously was followed by Witness (1985), Weir’s most acclaimed film to date [this entry is written in 1987]. In Witness, Kelly McGillis plays a young Amish woman who travels with her small son (Lukas Haas) to visit her sister in Baltimore. In the terminal where they are to change trains, the boy goes to the men’s room where, unseen, he witnesses a murder. Harrison Ford, a Philadelphia detective in charge of the case, takes the mother and her boy into protective custody; but when he learns that the men who have committed the murder are members of his own department and that his own life is now in danger, he flees with the pair to their Amish farm. The principal actors all won the praise of reviewers, and it was felt that Harrison Ford had given a particularly strong performance. Jack Kroll remarked that Ford “is tough, sweet, romantic, brooding, masculine—more like the easy-flowing old movie stars than almost anybody in his generation.”

Most striking about the reviews were the superlatives used to characterize the film. David Denby, for example, observed that its “action sequences have all the jolting speed one would want, and in the rest of the picture, Weir achieves the meditative strength—the tension in quiet—of a master director.” Richard Schickel was impressed by Weir’s skillful and “edgy” juxtaposing of the “representatives of two subcultures that are ordinarily mutually exclusive,” and called Witness “one of the most originally conceived and gracefully made suspense dramas of recent years.” Stanley Kauffmann, too, was struck by Weir’s direction, remarking that he “has made the film evenly and exquisitely. Weir decided to shoot the whole film as close up as was feasible and sensible. Faces fill the screen much of the time, seen in gentle lights of day and night. The result is that their story of imminent terror, not in itself especially original, is placed in an original, intimate, beautiful texture.”

The Mosquito Coast (1986), adapted for the screen by Paul Schrader from Paul Theroux's bestselling novel, concerns an American eccentric and inventor, Allie Fox (Harrison Ford), who uproots his family to live in the wild of Honduras. Obsessed and egomaniacal, he rejects compromise and in doing so visits a grisly fate upon himself and those around him. Most reviews of the Mosquito Coast were harsh. “How does a director of Peter Weir’s caliber, “Richard Schickel asked, “make a miscalculation of this magnitude?...With all his art and effort, Weir is unable to enlist cogent concern for Allie.” “This curiously ungripping movie, “ David Ansen observed, “manages to be faithful to the letter of the book while utterly missing its spirit….as [Allie] gets more paranoid and unhinged, Ford’s performance fails to deepen...Allie should scare the pants off us by the end, but the movie seems reluctant to take the descent into horror.” Julie Salamon found The Mosquito Coast lacking in “dramatic tension,” an Vincent Canby noted that “Mr. Weir and Mr. Schrader haven’t adapted the novel so much as they have inventoried it. Most of its contents are still there, but they have no particular cumulative impact.”

Marc Green writes that “Weir has defined a distinctive imaginative realm in which elemental forces ominously impinge upon the standard assumptions of a civilized society. Illuminating the clash between primitivism and civilization, he fills the screen with image that are startling, sensual, disturbing. In contrast to most young American directors, Weir makes movies that excite the mind as well as the eye.” Alexander Walker has called him “an Antipodean Antonioni who can see fateful omens in the facts of everyday life.”

Peter Weir was interviewed by Judith M. Kass in New York City on January 8, 1979, in connection with the U.S. opening of his new film The Last Wave. The Last Wave concerns a lawyer, played by Richard Chamberlain, who defends five aborigines accused of killing a sixth in Sydney, Australia. Through them Chamberlain comes in contact with what the aborigines call “dream time” and his own involvement with their myths.

Richard Chamberlain is principally known in this country as the star of the TV series Dr. Kildare. What is not so widely known is that after becoming a star he left the U.S. to learn how to act. Why did you choose him for The Last Wave?

I thought he’d always been poorly photographed in white light. When I think back to Kildare I think of those hot lights and I thought he’d never been photographed at night. I don’t mean that literally, but there was something in his face, there was some alien quality, and in my story my character had that quality. I had one actor in Australia I thought of using, but he was unavailable. Also, we couldn’t raise all the money in Australia...
and Chamberlain's name occurred to somebody and I remembered that face, those eyes in particular.

Gulpilil, the young aboriginal star, is familiar to American audiences as the star of Nicolas Roeg's Walkabout. How did you come to use him?

It's very difficult to tell you about Gulpilil. I know very little about the man. He's enigmatic; he's an actor, a dancer, a musician. He's a tribal man, initiated in the tribal ways, found by Roeg at a very early age and put into an international movie. Roeg took him on publicity trips to Europe and the States. He has a foot in both cultures. It's an enormous strain on the man. In movies sometimes you can draw on that. And my film is very much about... In his instance in the story, as one of the men accused of manslaughter, he is torn between two cultures. I didn't get the performance out of him, the situation did. The man is torn, and he has broken his tribal law by moving to the city, by marrying a black girl who is not tribal. He goes home, they still accept him in his tribal area, but he's under enormous tension. It's impossible to know what tension he's under. He speaks English well and I talked with him. You can have a conversation about anything, music, and then suddenly, he'll have a moment, as I experienced. It was one of the things that got me on to the movie. He'll say something in English that makes no sense. This is one of the things that drew me to write a part for him. I'd never written a part for a person. It's dangerous: you might not be able to get the person. I'd used him in a TV episode in a very straightforward part. He played a person. It's dangerous: you might not be able to get the person. We discussed the tension he's under.

How did you find Nanjiwarra Amagula, who plays Charlie, and who is actually the leader of the aboriginal tribe?

He's actually a clan leader. He'd never made a film, nor will he make one again. Not because of my experience, but because he saw this as a one-time thing. He would do it for certain reasons. To get him I had to go to, in Sydney, the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation director, a man called Lance Bennett, who subsequently became a friend. He was highly suspicious of a feature filmmaker delving into tribal cultural matters. It's all very well to photograph a tribal man with spears against Ayres Rock, but another to delve into the system of perception, which I wanted to. So he screened me, he read my draft screenplay, and finally he passed me and he said, "OK. I'll help you." He said, "There's only one man who can play your Charlie, one man who has enough wisdom, enough breadth, enough understanding, not just to come into the city but to make a feature film. It's obviously a sophisticated Western process." He said, "I'll tell him about this on the radio-telephone on his island in the Gulf of Carpentaria - Groote Island. He may or may not see you." He did see me and we sat all day at Fanny Bay in Darwin, where he was rehearsing some dancers.

As a tribal elder he's a magistrate; he sits with a visiting European magistrate to try petty crime, which is what they cope with there - theft, drunkenness, etc. He speaks the language with the accused and he advises the European magistrate on sentencing. He officiates at tribal ceremonies, which are considerable. For instance, during filming he had to hurry home at one point to bury a child who couldn't be buried until he was present. He's a member of the Northern Lands Council, which is coping with the uranium question. He's a very important, busy man. So a film is something that could have appeared frivolous.

Our meeting, then. You know, they had no concept of acting. They don't have acting. It's the real thing. I sat with him on the beach and my first instinct was to tell him all about it. And I started to, and stopped because I could sense that it was the wrong thing to do and that he only wanted to do it his way. So we sat all day without saying a word. At the end of the day he said, "Can I bring my wife with me to make this film?" So he'd made this decision throughout that day in his own way, but it certainly wasn't this idiotic language that we use. He sensed that it was right to do and that I was right to do it, I think. We then met that evening with Lance Bennett, who remained the go-between and who could speak his language. We discussed the
concepts of the film and he asked me to place certain points within the film.

Did you have to treat the aboriginal actors differently in any way from the non-aboriginal actors? What did it involve?

Absolutely. It varied. With Gulpilil I had to be very careful of his ability to mimic a direction. He had considerable experience, far more than the others, and I could say to him... For example, the scene where he came to dinner with the old man, Charlie, and he walks up to the door and says, "Hi. This is Charlie." Something simple. We rehearsed it and it was flat. I said, "David, what's the matter, you're not firing. What's wrong?" he said, "What do you mean? What do you want me to do? I'm saying 'Hi. This is Charlie.'" We had to act it out in pantomime and destroy the language. I said, "This is a king you're bringing, a man of great power. You're bringing Nanjiwarra to the door. And when you say 'Hi, this is Charlie', you don't just mean that." And I walked through it and we acted it out and we touched each other. A great amount of touching, pushing, prodding, through other means of communication like that. And he suddenly said, "Oh! I see, I see!" "Hi. This is Charlie.' Let's do the take." Straightaway. And he just said the same line, the same movements, full of life. Language is secondary as communication.

Did they influence the script and did you want them to?

I don't know if I wanted them to. I guess you could say yes. I didn't say to them "Please I've only got an outline. Help me." I wanted to approach them as equals, which is difficult to do with the white man's burden and given the sad history of contact with these people. But I had to approach them and I used many ways. That was just one of them.

How did you decide on the subject matter?

It just arose. A series of connecting things, moments, that conversation with Gulpilil that I couldn't understand. Something that happened before that. I'd had a premonition. I'd never had anything like that in my life. I don't consider myself psychic. I was on holiday in Tunisia; I'd come down from London. I'd always loved Roman or Greek ruins - not the way they used to be, I just liked the way they'd fallen down; but I kind of liked classical structure. We were driving to Duga, this inland city in Tunisia, Roman city, looks like Pompeii, and we stopped the car to exercise a little and everyone was picking up bits of marble by the roadside in the fields. The driver hit the horn and we were heading back to the car and I had this feeling which lasted some seconds, that I was going to find something. I was picking up bits of stone and I saw on a stone these three parallel lines and I picked that stone up. In fact it was a hand, a fist, and the lines were between fingers. It resisted a little bit, then burst up through the ploughed field and there was this head, the head of a child, broken off at the neck and at the wrist. It had been holding something on its head, or a sword or something. The nose was gone, the lips and so on, but I can't tell you what that was like. I smuggled it out and took it home and had it dated and put it on my desk. I wondered about the head; why did I know I was going to find it? Subsequently I told people about it, and they'd say, "Oh, that happens to you - it's you." And I thought, What if a lawyer had found it - that's more interesting. And at some stage from that I thought, What if a lawyer dreamt of some evidence, what if he found some evidence through a premonition? Someone trained to think precisely on one hand; on the other, the facts, dreaming, dream some evidence. I told Gulpilil about this and we discussed things and gradually the forces began to come together. I did a lot of reading during that period - Casteneda and the Old Testament, strangely different influences. Thor Heyerdahl's theories, Velikovsky - and somehow these clues began to form a pattern. There was a new way to look at tribal people.

Is there really an ancient aboriginal cave under the city? Is that a real location in Sydney?

No, my location was up the coast about 15 miles. But there are rivers under Sydney; there are things buried under Sydney.

Are the aboriginal legends in the film authentic?

Everything passed through the hands of the tribal aborigines we used. The Sydney people are dead - white contact destroyed them. Around the city they've left signs and symbols, some paintings, carvings in national parks; they're now protected. Nobody knows what they mean unless there's obvious hunting in the picture. We took the Groote Island people to look at them. And Nanji just said "Poor fellows." So therefore, we created a fictional situation. The only thing was, Nanji insisted that there are still the Sydney people there, but they're spirits and their spirits exist at sacred sites and protect sacred sites, so if there's a sacred site under Sydney he said, "This is true, your script is true. The spirits will be there, therefore I cannot be human." That was one change because in my story Charlie was human, initially. He pointed out that that was impossible. But he could be a spirit that took on human form; this is quite possible.

In The Last Wave a white man seeks spiritual assistance from a black. Was it your intention to show that whites can learn from blacks if they take the trouble?

I don't think so. You can't come in contact with them. I paid a million dollars to spend six weeks with them, when it gets down to it. Who could do that? They're in the North, a long way away. There are a few books, but I haven't been lucky enough to find anything interesting. They're either academic on the one hand or quasi-poetic on the other, and I didn't set out to preach in the film. But something to think about, something I think about a lot, is the fact that I, with a basically Scottish-Irish-English
background, have lost my past. I have no past. I'm nobody. I ask my parents who these people are in the photograph album and they can't remember. Nobody knows. I have no culture. I'm a European who lives in Australia. I'm an Australian in a sense, but I've lost something. And that's what I made a film about.

**Part of the film seems to be about the white man's guilt over the destruction of the aboriginal culture.**

It's part of the story but by no means the most significant. The loss of dream time on our side is much more interesting.

**What do the aborigines mean by dream time?**

It's a system of perception. I first learned about it as if it were some kind of mythology. Like Grimm's fairy tales: a collection of aboriginal dream time legends: how the rivers were formed, where the sun came from. In fact, I didn't like anything I read. They always seemed cute in English, or coy. "The great great bull was in the sky and he hit the wombat on the head and that's how the sun came." I just didn't like it. It was only when I talked to tribal people, not only about that but about other things, that an idea of dream time, as a way of perceiving, as another perception, started to come to me. The dream time wasn't something in the past, but was a continuing thing. It is, in fact, another time, and people of great power can step into it and step back into our time. Now, how or what that means, I only touched on.

**The film is also about natural phenomena gone awry. A rain of frogs or rain coming through a car radio. Why did you do that?**

I suppose I've been shaving some mornings and I've watched water coming out of the tap and I've thought. It seems to be under control. What if I couldn't turn it off, and no plumber could? We think we have nature under control. Disasters always happen in Third World countries; in my part of the world we're OK because we've organized things. We wouldn't permit a cyclone to hit the city. It seems to me we've lost touch with the fear of nature. More than the respect for it, because there are too many poems written about the respect for nature. To be absolutely dead scared. Tonight, when we leave this building and there's a special kind of wind blowing. If that wind is howling with a voice like the voice of a person, a four-year-old child might say to us, "The wind's talking to us," and we'll say, "No it isn't, don't be silly. It's just howling around those wires." Organize his imagination, everything's under control. It's just part of something we've lost touch with, another way of seeing the world. It was part of a balance of things, a balance within us, and we've eliminated it since the Industrial Revolution and it's forcing its way back. People makes movies about it, write books about it. Often they're junk. Children are born with it, with this balance. We teach it out, but it'll find its way back with some of us.

**What is the significance of the wave itself?**

It's a common dream amongst peoples throughout all time. The water rising up, the last high tide. It's mentioned in the Bible, which is a type of journalism. It's happened before; people have chosen to forget it. It's the Velikovsky collective amnesia, which is used to forget certain catastrophes.

It seems that in your film primeval forces are gaining control over a part of the world that was previously considered civilized.

We, 40,000,000 of us, live hard along the coasts. We're mostly in the cities on the edge of this vast continent. It's just there to be seen if you live there. It affects you even if you're not conscious of it - that great emptiness. You can travel and see nature as it was before the history of man, and you can be days driving from a hamburger joint or something. It doesn't take any imagination at all to feel awed.

You've been quoted as saying, "It takes the littlest thing to reveal the chaos underneath." What is there under Richard Chamberlain's suburban life? It seems happy and tranquil.

Things not thought through, things suppressed. The natural forces that have been cemented over and the bloodstains of the corpse are seeping through for some people. It's there and we just don't choose to see it.

**Richard Chamberlain learns of a previous civilization that was destroyed by a great wave. He was part of that civilization. Are we meant to believe that he was an aborigine in a previous life, or that he is psychically in tune with the aborigines and that's why he's chosen to be their lawyer?**

Here we have two men: one white, one black; one tribal aboriginal, one highly sophisticated Western civilized man. Both fine men. One of them has material wealth; one has spiritual wealth. I wanted my lawyer, with his material wealth, with his humanitarian principles, to, firstly, glimpse with his mind that there was another lost dream, or spiritual life, and then to touch it. I thought, How can he touch it? I'll have him go back down, go back down - that's what I kept saying in my mind. How can he go back down? I thought, Go back down underneath the city, down through the sewers, through the filth, down to the dirt, down to his own lost spiritual life - treated with some logic, some realistic elements. It's not a fantasy. I wanted to represent it that way. So he goes back down, and there, within the ground below - we've mentioned in the film that his background is South
American, he came from South America as a child - and there he touches his own lost spiritual life, his own dreaming. In a sense he's given a gift by the aborigines. There are symbols and signs from some other life, or South American history - who knows what? He can't cope with it. He can't handle that kind of knowledge. I don't think he could.

Picnic at Hanging Rock, your previous film, is about the mysterious - and historically real - disappearance of three girls and a teacher during a school picnic in 1900. While not overly occult, it is mysterious: two of the girls and the teacher are never found, all the watches stop at noon, and so forth. What is the significance of the red cloud that Edith says she saw?

Something that was always a pattern of geological disturbances. A lot of things were written about, or collected by Charles Ford, who wrote a book about phenomena around the world from the last century and early in this century. Red clouds were consistently represented in reports from Peru and elsewhere, coinciding with other mysterious happenings, showers of stones, etc. For me, this unsolved mystery... Nor is the story necessarily true. This is one of the most intriguing things. The author of the book [Joan Lindsay] from which the film is taken says it may be true. Strange thing to say. She wrote the book in her sixties. She's no publicist; she's a very shy, aristocratic, interesting woman. When I met her the agent warned me not to ask the truth of the matter - which I did immediately. She said, "Never ask me again." When the film was released and there was massive press contact with her, she asked, "Should I tell them?" I said, "Keep your secret. It's not the point." People disappear all the time. There are no newspaper records, but that doesn't mean it isn't true. For me, it was partly to do with natural phenomena.

In The Last Wave and Picnic at Hanging Rock you're concerned with the occult and the mysterious. Is your first feature, The Cars That Ate Paris, similarly concerned with the occult and the mysterious?

I don't think those things are occult and mysterious - I think they're natural. When people ask me why I always make films about the occult, I say... I don't mean to be clever about it but - maybe it makes me eccentric - I think these things were natural. Maybe they're not now, but we've only chosen to see the world in a certain way; it's by common agreement these things are so. It's why we laugh at foreign tribes who paint their noses red or something. They laugh at us because we wear sunglasses. It's what we all agree upon. It seems a reasonable thing to say we've agreed on the world, but it also therefore seems reasonable to say that it's not necessarily that way.

As for The Cars That Ate Paris, it was retitled The Cars That Ate People in the States, and for anyone in the Carolinas who was unfortunate enough to see this recut version of the film, well, it was a grotesque monster of a film. It was an allegory using the B picture form - hence the title, which was like The Monster That Ate New York, or whatever. It was about a bunch of kids who had cars. They were living in a town [in Australia, not France] that lived off motorcar accidents: they trapped cars by night. Eventually the young Frankensteins rose up and decorated their cars one night with mouths and sharks' teeth, and they attacked the town. But the allegorical element was eliminated the way the U.S. distributor cut it, and the picture came out as senseless violence. It was a horrible film.

What would you like your audiences to know about your films?

I remember a quote of Bruce Springsteen's in Rolling Stone. He said, "I like to give my audiences something money can't buy." So I'd like them to walk out with much more than the $4.00 or whatever it cost.

Romy Sutherland: “Peter Weir” (Senses of Cinema 60)

Commanding Waves: The Films of Peter Weir
Peter Weir helped to define the rebirth of Australian cinema, while addressing some of the most pressing concerns of the nation in the 1970s and 1980s. His intriguing images of Australia, evocative and transcendent, made an impact in the international art house scene, eager for compelling visions of geo-political areas and cultures overlooked by mainstream cinema. After achieving international recognition as an emblematic Australian filmmaker, Weir made his transition to Hollywood while maintaining a sense of experimentation and artistic exploration. His films, including his Hollywood ones, can not be pigeonholed in terms of themes, genres or geographical locals; but they do display an approach to filmmaking, a sensibility, a drive, that amount to one of the most searching trajectories in contemporary cinema.

Weir’s work has received a considerable amount of journalistic and critical attention, including four scholarly books, each of which offers a sense of the Australian director as an auteur with identifiable characteristics. Don Shiach shows that Weir’s films repeatedly offer intimations of alternative realities; Mark Haltof argues that the tense encounter between distinct cultures is Weir’s dominant concern; Jonathan Rayner underscores Weir’s consistent amalgamation of European art-house characteristics with genre conventions; and Michael Bliss highlights Weir’s ability to evoke hallucinatory, dreamlike states. These illuminating views complement each other: Weir’s cinematic exploration is often realised in films in which generic conventions border on the iconoclastic, alternative realities and cultural incompatibilities abound, and numinous yearnings challenge staid conventionalities. One could add that Weir’s films are invariably concerned with the struggle for authenticity, and that his most memorable characters – often confronted with danger, uncertainty, or betrayal – become uneasy with the world as they have found it, or as it has found them. They are often exposed to unsettling aspects of their own realities – sometimes traumatic ones – that lead to their loss of innocence or naïveté. Weir’s camera draws their worlds of grief, confusion, or spiritual awakenings with adroit cinematic techniques that convey
subjective states: oniric compositions sometimes(bordering on the surreal, distorted sounds, slow motion, and un-naturalistic light exposure. Weir is more of an observer, a dreamer, even a debunker, than a mythmaker, and his sensibility—sometimes bordering on, but never fully reaching, a comic pitch—is ironic rather than tragic. A glance at the careers of actors who have worked with him suggests that Weir has been a catalyst of their growth. He elicits natural performances from children and first-time actors, while extending the range of established talent from Mel Gibson to Robin Williams and Jim Carrey. Always shunning the comfortable resolution, Weir’s signature films move audiences beyond the commonplace while keeping them in an unsettled state to the end. His own career has been one which parallels this aspect of his filmmaking: from the start he has preferred to take risks and to wait for a meaningful challenge, rather than follow a winning formula or style.…

The Last Wave

Weir more explicitly addresses the role of non-indigenous Australians in the new world in The Last Wave (“Wave”), focusing specifically on white Australia’s relationship to ancient Aboriginal culture and law. The story can be read as either a spiritual awakening or a psychological break down of the protagonist, David Burton (Richard Chamberlain), a white corporate lawyer, married with two daughters, who is called upon by a friend at legal aid, Michael Zeadler (Peter Caroll) to defend four Aboriginal men charged with murder. While working on the case, David comes to believe he may be a spirit from the Aboriginal Dreamtime and he finds it increasingly difficult to function as a family man and professional in white society.

The film incorporates many of the same filmic techniques as Picnic – slow motion, timelapse photography and eerie sound effects – to create an intense and uncanny atmosphere, and as intriguing a mysterious undercurrent. However, where Picnic is a study in restraint, Wave approaches the excessive in its surrealistic elements (rain pouring in through car radio), expository dialogue (“You’re in trouble, you don’t know what dreams are anymore”) and the introduction of more complex elements than the film can fully integrate, including the suggestion that Aboriginal culture may have had ancient contacts with the pre-Columbian world of the Americas. In an interview, Weir explains that Wave evolved out of a period of reading and talking about Aboriginal culture and that he remains frustrated that in the film he captured so little of what he learnt.

Despite his own frustrations with the finished product, we do see in this film Weir’s effective use of creative cinematic techniques to convey ineffable qualities. In a series of scenes in which David is conversing with other characters, for example, the background of his shots, unlike that of his companions, is infused with over-exposed lighting, subtly suggesting the prophetic, supernatural gift the script suggests David possesses. When, later in the film, David’s eldest daughter talks of dreams in which “there was a beautiful light”, we wonder whether she too may share his gift.

An early sequence of David and his family (including his stepfather, an Anglican minister) at a backyard barbeque, overshadowed by a prominent church, recalls a similar scene in Michael, of the protagonist and his family exiting a church service. The scene in the earlier film served to illustrate the extent to which Michael felt alienated from his environment; here too, the church will come to symbolise that with which David cannot reconcile himself, namely the Western tradition of rationalising mysteries. The explicit references to Western religion both foretell what will become the protagonist’s spiritual awakening and serve as a counterpoint to Aboriginal mysticism, which Weir implies embraces mysteries and, in so doing, is privy to powerful insight.

Weir was aware that any film of this kind is vulnerable to charges of romanticising (or “orientalising”, in postcolonial discourse) an indigenous culture. With this in mind, it makes sense that he would insert a dialogue within the film to address the propensity to represent non-Western cultures in a patronising way. When David suggests to his legal aid colleague that there may be more going on with the Aborigines on trial than is superficially apparent, the pragmatic solicitor retorts: “That middle-class patronising attitude towards the blacks revolts me … you come in here with this idiotic, romantic crap about tribal people”.

Funded and, crucially, distributed in part by American finance and starring the American actor Richard Chamberlain, Wave was Weir’s first film to reach and impress American audiences. It was in the wake of its success that Weir more explicitly addressed the role of non-indigenous Australians in the new world in The Last Wave (“Wave”), focusing specifically on white Australia’s relationship to ancient Aboriginal culture and law.

**COMING up in the Fall 2011 Buffalo Film Seminars XXIII:**

November 1 True Confessions, Ulu Grosbard (1981)
November 8 Chunking Express/Chung Hing sam lam, Wong Kar-Wei (1994)
November 22 Frida, Julie Taymor (2002)
November 29 Revanche, Götz Spielmann (2008)
December 6 My Fair Lady, George Cukor (1964)

**CONTACTS:**

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...for the series schedule, annotations, links, handouts (in color) and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com

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(Chapel Hill)
Folklorist and filmmaker, author of ten
books, chair of National Endowment for
the Humanities under President Clinton.

Tom Rankin
Director of the Center for
Documentary Studies & faculty member
Duke University
Photographer, filmmaker and folklorist.

MODERATOR

Tim Dean
Professor of English at UB &
former director of the Humanities Institute
Remarks followed by open audience
discussion after a brief response by Bruce
Jackson, who will also comment on his
current exhibit at the Gallery, “Full Color
Depression: First Kodachromes from
America’s Heartland.”