

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Last Wave* (1977)**

Peter Weir

OVERVIEW

Director Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985), *Dead Poets Society* (1989), and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003). The recipient of numerous awards, Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film The idea for *The Last Wave* came out of Weir's personal experience. He has said that while he was visiting Tunisia, he "was suddenly seized with this strange feeling that I was going to find something, I even saw what I was going to see. And there it was, on the ground, a carving of a child's head." Likewise, the central character of *The Last Wave* is a white man, a lawyer, who begins to have inexplicable premonitory experiences, specifically dreams. The film traces this character's attempts to grapple with these experiences while also defending five Aboriginal men accused of murder.

Background After the success of Weir's previous film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, this was a higher-budget film with financing from United Artists as well as Australian sources. The film features more expensive special effects than Weir's previous films, as well as some familiar Weir techniques, such as the use of barely perceptible slow motion in some shots to create a vague sense of unease. Because the film deals extensively with Aboriginal people and folklore, Weir and his colleagues consulted with the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation and with some of the Aboriginal actors in the film. Even though the tribal symbols and tokens in the film are invented, rather than being the authentic sacred objects of a real tribe in the Sydney area, some Aboriginal groups protested against the film.

CHARACTERS

David Burton – white Australian corporate tax attorney
Annie Burton – David's wife
Chris Lee – Aboriginal Australian man accused of murder
Charlie – Aboriginal Australian elder
Reverend Burton – David's stepfather
Billy Corman – Aboriginal Australian man who is killed
Michael Zeadler – attorney who works with David
Sophie Burton – David and Annie's daughter
Grace Burton – David and Annie's daughter

SYNOPSIS

In modern-day Sydney, Australia, unprecedented extreme weather events (chiefly heavy rain in the summer) begin to occur. One rainy night, an Aboriginal man named Billy Corman dies. Five other Aboriginal men are arrested on suspicion of murder, and a young white attorney named David Burton is hired to represent them, even though his background is corporate tax law. David, who has a wife, Annie, and two young daughters, begins to have strange experiences, especially premonitory dreams. In a dream, he sees Chris Lee, one of the Aboriginal men accused of the murder, before he actually meets him. The defendants are hesitant to say anything to David explaining what happened; he begins to

suspect that Billy Corman's death had something to do with traditional Aboriginal beliefs, practices, and taboos. David's fellow attorneys, though, insist that this is not possible because these Aboriginal men are city people, not "tribal Aborigines."

Yet as the film proceeds, it becomes clear that Billy was killed by tribal elder Charlie because he stole sacred objects before being initiated into the tribe. David continues to have premonitory dreams and to learn from his stepfather that he had also had them as a child—a fact he has forgotten as an adult. David speaks several times with Chris and Charlie about his experiences, leading them to suggest that he could be a vessel for a Mulkurul, an otherworldly spirit believed to act sometimes through humans. Eventually the accused men are convicted, as they will not admit to any "tribal" motivation that would move the case into the jurisdiction of tribal law. In the film's final sequence, Chris reluctantly agrees to take David to a hidden site in Sydney sacred to his tribe, where David sees cave paintings that align with recent events and a mask that looks like his own face. At the very end, David sees a vision of a massive wave; whether this is imaginary or truly premonitory cannot be determined.

SCENES

Original inhabitants – On a sunny day, an Aboriginal Australian man paints on the wall of a cave. Aboriginal Australian children run down a road and join a group of adults. Everyone hears a rumbling sound.

Deluge – Caucasian children play outside a school. They hear a thunderclap but remark that they cannot see any clouds. The wind picks up and a heavy rain begins to fall, causing the teacher to urge the children to come inside. Everyone returns to the classroom soaking wet and yelling. The storm intensifies. Eventually, huge hailstones begin to fall; a window is broken, and a child is injured. All run and scream as hail penetrates the building.

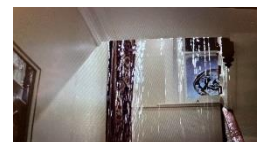


Into the storm – A man in professional clothing looks out his window at the storm; evening has come, and he prepares to leave the office. On his way to the car in the parking garage, a man with an Italian accent offers him a year's supply of yellow bell peppers, which he smilingly accepts. The professional man then drives out onto the street, where the rain continues to pour and traffic is jammed. It is almost impossible to see clearly through his windshield. The man turns on the radio and listens to a discussion of the unprecedentedly severe summer storm.



Safely home? – The man arrives at a house and is greeted by a little girl. He sits down to dinner with her and with a woman and another little girl. They discuss the school day of the older girl, Sophie. Meanwhile, water begins to pour down the carpeted staircase. Although the man cannot see the staircase, he begins to look concerned and asks the girl sitting next to him, Grace, to move so that he can pass by.

Water inside – The man sees the water pouring from the ceiling down the stairs and calls for the woman, Annie, to come. The girls follow and laugh. The man follows the water to the bathroom, where the bathtub faucets are on and the tub is overflowing. The girls insist that they did not turn on the water.



Nighttime – Wearing pajamas, the man walks around the house alone, looking at the pouring rain outside. He looks into his sleeping daughters' bedroom and moves Grace from the floor to the bed. He goes to a larger bedroom and lies down next to Annie. He gets up and goes to the window, where he sees what appears to be a naked Aboriginal man standing in the rain; he then sits bolt upright in bed, sweating, while Annie says, "It's just a dream."



Weekend – The sun shines; Annie, Grace, Sophie, and an older man are all outside in a yard. The older man is cooking on a grill. David is on the phone inside; he listens, then says that this is a taxation problem and he will look into it on Monday. "You lawyers are worse than doctors," the older man says when David hangs up the phone.

Dreams – The two men discuss David’s recent problems sleeping due to bad dreams. The older man says that this had frequently happened to David as a child, which had worried his mother very much. David indicates that he has no memory of these dreams, so the older man, his stepfather, gives examples of the dreams and fears that David said he had when he was a little boy. Annie, Grace, and Sophie play in a sprinkler.

Theft – Thunder rumbles and rain pours again; it is dark. A man is walking, running, and climbing in a dark industrial space with multiple levels and rooms; it is not immediately clear what this space is. He reaches the exit, where another man, standing still, says, “You stole our things. You die!” Both appear to be Aboriginal Australians. The first man runs away, having dropped a sack full of stones and other small objects.



Death – The man who ran away goes to a bar and sits with his head down on a table. Caucasian men and women play folk music. Five Aboriginal Australian men, one of whom is the man who made the accusation of theft earlier, enter the bar; a fight ensues between them and the other man. All run out of the bar into the rain. An older Aboriginal man looks on from a parked car. The pursued man stands still and clutches his chest; he collapses. The man in the car is holding a pointy object.



Official response – The five men from the previous scene are arrested. Two white men (a police officer and a doctor) converse over the body of the dead Aboriginal man; they discuss the cause of death. The doctor expresses uncertainty.

Leisure interrupted – David plays tennis in the sunshine; David is called to the phone, and Annie takes his place on a doubles team. On the phone, David expresses hesitation about what the person on the other end of the line is saying. He says that he has not worked with Aboriginal Australians before, but acknowledges that he has worked with Legal Aid.

Legal aid – Four of the five Aboriginal men charged with Billy Corman’s death drive to a building labeled “Australian Legal Assistance.” They enter a room, where David and an older white man are waiting. The older man asks where Chris is; he receives no response. “My field is corporate taxation,” David admits to the men. He invites them to sit down and asks them what happened on the night of Billy Corman’s death. “Billy died. That’s all,” one man replies.



Tribal possibility – David and Annie are at home. “They’re keeping something from me,” David says; Annie is looking at a pair of books about Aboriginal Australians. Annie suggests, “Perhaps they’re tribal Aborigines.” David replies that he has been told that there are no tribal people in the city. “Maybe he’s wrong,” Annie says. She says she is going to go to bed; David says he will stay up later to work, but Annie says the real reason is his fear of being unable to sleep. They smile at each other as she goes upstairs.



A dream – David looks at the books about Aboriginal Australians. Rain and wind rage outside, accompanied by another strange sound. David looks out the window; tiny frogs hop around in the rain. David looks up from his desk and sees a man (the same man who accused Billy Corman of theft) standing in his living room, holding a stone with carving and blood on it. David’s head is on the desk; he looks up and sees no one in the living room. David goes upstairs.



Morning – Daytime and sunshine. David drinks coffee; Annie and Sophie discuss the rain. Annie looks concerned as David walks out of the kitchen.

Interviewing a witness – David talks to the bartender at the bar where the fight began. The bartender says that Billy Corman had announced that he knew things and had things. But he does not provide any

more specific information, stating that he has work to do. David walks over to a table where another Caucasian man, wearing a suit, is sitting.

Legal precedent – David tells the other man about a case he read about elsewhere in Australia in which Aboriginal men were acquitted because a murder had been deemed tribal. They were turned over to tribal elders for the enforcement of tribal law. The other man, though, counters that the current case is not about tribal people but rather city people, so tribal law does not apply.

Introductions – The two men look up as the Aboriginal men (the group of accused men minus Chris) enter the bar. David introduces them to the other white man, Michael Zeadler, who will be the barrister in the case. Another Aboriginal man enters and introduces himself as Chris. David looks at him intently; he is the man from David's dream.



Invitations – David enters his house and tells Annie that he has invited one of his clients to dinner in hopes of getting him to talk more away from the others. She expresses surprise but does not protest. David says that he told Chris he had seen him in a dream, and that Chris seemed to find this a normal thing to say. The doorbell rings; Chris is there, along with the older Aboriginal man who was present at Billy's death. Chris introduces him as Charlie but does not explain why he brought him along.

Initial questions – David offers the men a drink. Chris says that Charlie does not speak English. While David gets drinks, Chris, Charlie, and Annie converse. Annie asks them directly whether they are tribal people; Chris responds, "No tribal people in the city."



Origins – David brings photo albums to the table, explaining to Annie that Charlie had asked to see them. He points out his stepfather, his mother, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather; the latter seems especially to interest Charlie. Through Chris, Charlie asks where David's family comes from; the answer is South America.



No answers – David gets up from the table and asks, "Why did Billy die?" Chris responds that he saw and took things he should not have. But he will not be more specific, and he says that David cannot see or know these things himself, or else he also would die. The men discuss David's dream of Chris, then dreams in general. Chris says that his relatives can communicate with him through dreams.



Another dream – Inside another building, while it is pouring rain and dark outside, Charlie and several other Aboriginal men converse inaudibly. Next, someone or something seems to approach and then enter the Burtons' house, eventually going up the stairs to the bedrooms, while a didgeridoo plays. An Aboriginal man in a tribal outfit and face paint is standing there. David sits bolt upright in bed.

Warring impulses – David drives down a street, approaches a building and knocks on the door. Chris answers and the men walk off together. David insists that he cannot defend him adequately unless Chris is more forthcoming with him about what Billy saw and did. But Chris counters that "[s]omething more strong is holding me back" from revealing his people's secrets. David says he is in terrible trouble, but Chris replies that David is the one in trouble because "[y]ou don't know what dreams are anymore."



Mulkurul – David tells Chris he had another dream. Chris urges David to go away because he will die if he stays and continues to interfere. Chris says that Charlie is an owl and has magic power. Finally, he reveals that he suspects David to be a *mulkurul*, a being from another world, both because of his strange dreams and because his family comes from South America.

Parting ways – David goes to see Michael Zeadler. He says that their case is tribal, but Michael continues to insist that there are no tribal people in the city. David replies that Michael should drop the

case; Michael agrees, while insisting that he knows Aboriginal people better because he has worked with them for a decade and David barely has no experience at all. He accuses David of having a “middle-class, patronizing attitude” toward them.

Research – David goes to the police station to look at Billy’s personal effects. He picks up a stone with carving on it. He then goes to a museum to confer with an anthropologist who specializes in Aboriginal culture. She explains to David that although “daily objective activity” is the only reality Caucasians know, Aboriginal people also know about the Dreamtime, an “infinite spiritual cycle...more real than reality itself.” Sometimes, she says, people can access this realm, through dreams or through ceremonies involving sacred objects like the stones. She also explains that the figure carved on one of the stones is an image of the *mulkurul*; she notes that *mulkuruls* tend to have premonitory dreams, especially at times of natural cataclysm.



Visitation – At the Burtons’ house after darkness has fallen, Grace looks out the window and announces that she sees a black man who she thinks is a witch. Annie looks and sees Charlie; with a frightened face, Annie tells Grace to get Sophie and go to their bedroom. There is a knock on the front door. Annie, obviously afraid, keeps the door closed until she hears a female voice; she then opens the door and Charlie is nowhere to be seen.

Weather disturbances – The girls come downstairs and greet the other woman, who is a babysitter. The babysitter mentions having heard about cyclones currently occurring in the South Pacific, at the wrong season.

A subdued party – Annie and David attend a party at someone else’s house. Annie calls the babysitter to check on the girls. Partygoers discuss the strange weather. A man chides David for working so hard on his current case that he never sees him.



Wearing thin – When Annie and David return home, Grace sits up in bed and tells them she had a dream about angels. Annie goes downstairs, crying, and closes a door that has blown open in the wind. She then tells David about Charlie’s appearance outside their house. David is obviously distressed, but Annie insists that she feels she cannot talk to him anymore. A little later, David looks out the window from bed and sees an owl perched on a tree.

Following – Chris walks down a street; it is sunny. David follows him in a car as far as Charlie’s apartment, which Chris enters. As the sun reflects off the windows of high-rise buildings, thunder rumbles and clouds gather. Black rain begins to fall onto David’s windshield as he waits for Chris to reappear. When Chris exits the building and walks away, David gets out of the car and rings Charlie’s doorbell. A woman admits him.

Charlie’s answers – Charlie reveals that he actually does speak English and gestures for David to sit on the floor with him. David states that Charlie was outside his house yesterday and frightened his wife. David asks, “What do you want? Who are you?”, but Charlie replies by asking “Who are you?” several times. David stares and begins to sweat as Charlie begins to chant. Charlie asks David several questions to which the answer is obviously “no,” such as “are you a snake?” But he then asks, “Are you a man?” and David again replies, “No.” To the question “Are you *mulkurul*?”, David replies, “Yes.” Charlie lifts a cloth and reveals a sort of ax underneath it. He says to David, “Don’t speak in that court,” and then walks away.



Watery premonitions – David sits in his car as regular rain pours and a person on the radio discusses the previous fall of black rain. David sees water pouring through his car radio and then sees a bus underwater full of people.

Sent away to safety – At home, Annie reads from a book about the cave paintings of Aboriginal people. David enters. Annie says that she has sent the children to her mother’s house until the trial is over. She

asks whether she should go, too, and he says yes. They hug. David urges Annie to take the children and go away from the city. She asks for more explanation, but David says he does not know what he is dealing with but is very frightened.

Cause of death – The trial begins as the prosecutor summarizes the facts of the case. He exhorts the all-white jury to remember that modern Australian law must prevail even though the defendants are Aboriginal people. Next, the medical examiner from earlier in the film is on the witness stand, discussing his opinion that Billy Corman's death was caused by drowning. In cross-examination, David asks whether he had difficulty determining the cause of death in this case; the medical examiner replies in the affirmative but reasserts his original opinion.

Death bone – David brings an object he identifies as an Aboriginal death bone to the stand. This is the bone Charlie held at the beginning of the film. The medical examiner states that the bone is believed to cause death when it is merely pointed at an intended victim. But he insists that this could not have happened in this case because the victim was not a tribal man.

Chris's testimony – David and Chris stand outside and discuss the rain and David's dreams. David continues to urge Chris to reveal more information. Chris continues to insist that he will die if he does. When Chris goes to the witness stand, though, he does answer David's questions. He admits to being a tribal Aboriginal person with tribal land right there in the city. He reveals that Billy Corman wanted to join the tribe but broke tribal law. David then asks several leading questions with increasing vehemence. Chris seems to change his mind, refuting David's statements and saying that Billy died in a bar fight. The judge reprimands David for his conduct.

Stepfather's visit – David's stepfather comes to visit him at home as rain pours outside. The stepfather attempts to console David for losing the case. They then discuss spiritual mysteries and the prophetic dreams David has; specifically, the stepfather says that before David's mother died during David's childhood, young David had dreams for a month that exactly predicted the manner of her death.



Things fall apart – David bangs on Charlie's door without receiving an answer. He then drives through the rainy night to his house; at first, his daughter appears but then he seems to be alone for the rest of the scene. Water pours in the house, and a tree breaks through a window. David sees an owl perched on a tree outside. The ceiling partially collapses.

Access at last – Chris appears at David's door holding a stone with carving on it. "I take you!" he says. The two men go together to the location from the beginning of the film where we first saw Billy and Chris; a sign identifies it as a sewage treatment center. They run through the building and eventually crawl through a sort of tunnel to arrive at a cave.



Cave paintings – Chris states that they are in a sacred place which so far has never been found by white men; he has now broken the law of his people by bringing David there. At Chris's urging, David proceeds without him. His flashlight eventually reveals paintings on the cave walls. The paintings include images of the *mulkurul* stone, black rain, hail, and a large wave. David then sees, on the ground, a skeleton and a mask that resembles his own face.



Discovered – An owl appears, then a man in a tribal outfit and face paint. David puts the mask in a sack, along with some other objects, as the other man yells. David hits him with the stone, yelling, "Charlie!" He lets the stone fall from his hands, and an owl watches him.

Escape – David leaves the cave, running through various passageways and tunnels. He loses the sack of objects while going through a pool of water. He has a hard time finding a way out of the sewage center but eventually does.



The next wave? – David emerges onto a beach, as the sun rises. He is filthy, breathes heavily and walks slowly toward the ocean. He kneels down at the edge of the water as small waves roll in around him. The sky darkens, and David sees a huge wave. David himself does not seem to be close to the wave at the present time, however, and the light on his face brightens slightly.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

David Burton David is a white Australian man who works as a corporate tax attorney. He is married to Annie Burton and has two young daughters with her. David has little experience working or otherwise interacting with Aboriginal Australians, but he is quickly drawn to their culture.

Dedicated It is clear from the film's early scenes that David has worked hard as a corporate tax lawyer. Once he begins to confront new questions and challenges, he approaches them with dedication as well. We see him working hard at home late into the night, as well as going to multiple locations (such as a museum) in pursuit of more knowledge.

Open David does not seem to consider himself spiritual when the film begins. But he immediately takes seriously the suggestion that he could be a *mulkurul* or spirit. The other Caucasian characters involved in the case are much more closed: for example, they all simply accept the dogma that no Aboriginal people in the city have tribal affiliation.

Curious David's dedication and openness work in concert with his curiosity. He listens as his wife reads from books about Aboriginal Australians and continues reading on his own when she goes to bed. He consults a white expert at a museum as well as pursuing Charlie for more information about *mulkuruls*.

Chris Lee Chris is a young Aboriginal Australian man accused of involvement in the murder of Billy Corman, another Aboriginal Australian man. Chris is torn between wanting to avoid jail and feeling that he cannot share with David the traditional cultural information he would need to share in order to explain Billy's death.

Modern Like David, Chris is a man living in modern-day Sydney. He wears jeans and T-shirts. He navigates the urban setting with ease. Of all the Aboriginal men accused of killing Billy, Chris is the one who speaks most readily with David. Chris is also the only one who cooperates—albeit temporarily—with the modern justice system; he does this by admitting the existence of the Sydney tribe.

Traditional Nevertheless, Chris is also deeply attached to his cultural traditions. On the witness stand, he changes his mind and tries to take back what he said about the tribe's continued existence in the present day. He does reveal the location of the sacred site to David, but he does not accompany him there. In the end, he expresses an intention to go back to his people.

Social Chris frequently acts in concert with others. He brings Charlie to David's house even though only he, Chris, was invited. He follows Charlie's lead for most of the film. But he also is clearly drawn to David and helps him understand, to some extent, the possibility that he is a *mulkurul*.

Charlie Charlie is an elder of the underground Aboriginal tribe in Sydney. He is an enigmatic figure in the film; the viewer learns little of his background. He rarely speaks. Yet he clearly holds the respect of others in his tribe, who consistently listen and defer to him.

Spiritual Chris actually says of Charlie that he is an owl and that he has magic powers. At several points in the film, David sees an owl watching him. It is Charlie who first suggests that David could be a *mulkurul*. The film also implies that Charlie really did kill Billy with an Aboriginal death bone.

Formidable Charlie is not at all intimidated by David's status as an attorney. When he does speak to David, he does so in an authoritative tone. Meanwhile, if Charlie did kill Billy for violating tribal law, this is another indication of his formidable nature. Other Aboriginal men simply look on while this death takes place.

Secretive Charlie speaks little, and when he does speak, he often does so in a way that is mysterious to David. Charlie never speaks in court or in any other official environment; he speaks privately to David in the setting of his home. While he does lead David to the suspicion that he is a *mulkurul*, he offers no additional information about the significance or implications of this.

THEMES

Law/Crime *The Last Wave* contains elements of the murder mystery and courtroom procedural genres. The death of Billy Corman occurs near the beginning of the film, and the film concludes shortly after the end of the trial. The case and the story hinge on the question of national Australian law versus tribal law: did Billy die simply because of a barfight with Chris and the other Aboriginal men? Or was he killed by a traditional method for a reason connected to tribal practices? As David discovers when he takes on the case, sometimes crimes committed by Aboriginal Australians were turned over to the tribe to be dealt with under tribal law rather than nationwide law. He clearly wants to have the same thing happen in this case, and the film provides many indications that he is right. Billy, evidently, was killed by Charlie because of his own violation of tribal law: seeing and taking sacred things before being initiated into the tribe. Because Charlie's method of killing kept him at some physical distance from Billy, it is the other Aboriginal men (who herded Billy to a spot within sight of Charlie) who are on trial. The men are ultimately convicted under Australian law for their role in the enforcement of tribal law.

Imperialism Like Weir's previous film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Last Wave* deals with the aftermath of British imperialism. The white characters in the film, like David and Annie, are in Australia in the first place because of Britain's imperial expansion into Australia. Several times, someone in the film refers to the devastating consequences of this expansion for Aboriginal people. All the white characters we meet are upper-middle-class: lawyers, clergymen, stay-at-home mothers. The film depicts no Aboriginal Australians in positions of power or authority. Although they have the social power, the white characters are not equipped to deal with the apocalyptic weather events that take place during the film. David is completely overcome and loses all sense of his life as he used to know it. Annie is terrified at the sight of Charlie outside their house on a stormy night. The newspaper headlines we see and brief radio broadcasts we hear can offer no real explanation of the weather; in discussing the black rainfall, the radio news only provides the generic explanation of "pollution." The white characters' ancestors may have wrested social power from the Aboriginal Australians, but that power has limits.

Spirituality Aboriginal Australian spiritual beliefs are central to the film. Chris tells David that Charlie has substantial spiritual power, and the film implies that we should believe this. He does sometimes seem to take the form of an owl. He does seem to kill Billy with the pointed death bone. And his suggestion that David could be a *mulkurul* does seem to be consistent with David's present and past experiences of premonitory dreams. The film often features images of objects of spiritual significance, especially stones with carvings on them, and the film's climax is David's entry into the hidden cave sacred to the Sydney Aboriginal tribe. David spends the film grappling with the possibility that he could be an otherworldly being. On the whole, though, spirituality is more associated with Aboriginal than white characters. The expert whom David talks to at the museum says that she doubts any white person has the spiritual power to be a *mulkurul*. Late in the film, David chides his stepfather, a Christian clergyman, for having "explained away" anything truly mysterious in the Christian story. For David, considering the possibility that he is channeling a *mulkurul* is the first truly spiritual experience he has had.

Indigeneity Indigenous characters—specifically Aboriginal Australians—are integral to *The Last Wave*, and the film is specifically about the interaction between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures and laws. The film is not a documentary, and the tribal symbols seen in the film are invented rather than being authentic to any real tribe. Nevertheless, Weir clearly does intend his viewer to be a white person interested in learning something about indigenous culture. Although Chris insists to David at one point, “I don’t know everything,” Aboriginal Australians are presented in the film as wiser than Caucasians, as well as closer to nature. David’s premonitory dreams are shocking to David and Annie but are not shocking to Chris, who tells them that he can receive messages from his family in dreams and in bodily sensations. Indigenous people are also portrayed as victimized by Caucasians; all the indigenous characters in the film are poorer than all the Caucasian characters, and the men on trial for killing Billy Corman do not seem to stand much of a chance. There is no indication that the Aboriginal Australian characters know exactly why the apocalyptic weather events are occurring, but they nevertheless seem less surprised by them than the white characters—and the old cave paintings made by Aboriginal ancestors predict them all. A stark distinction is believed to exist between “tribal Aborigines” and “city people,” leading to the inference that no Aboriginal person living in the city has any connection to traditional beliefs; however, this distinction is undermined by the film’s events.

Psychic powers The film raises the question of the existence of psychic powers. At the beginning, the film establishes itself as taking place in the “real world” as that phrase would be understood by the average Western viewer. For example, laws of physics are respected, time proceeds in a linear fashion, and extreme weather events out of season are treated as surprising. But then the film introduces the possibility that David might have psychic powers, and it takes this possibility very seriously. Evidence mounts that David really has had premonitory dreams, and that therefore the other strange images he has seen might also have validity. The fact that such psychic powers are treated as ordinary by indigenous characters (Chris and Charlie) further bolsters this body of evidence, leading to the inference that such powers are indeed ordinary but simply not usually accessible to Caucasians like David. Chris and Charlie themselves seem able to access powers akin, though not identical, to David’s.

Dreams This is a film full of dreams. David and Chris experience dreams over the course of the film; also, David and his stepfather discuss the dreams that David had as a child. Dreams are of course part of the Aboriginal Australian concept of the “dreamtime” or “dreaming” as opposed to linear time (a concept explained by the anthropologist character whom David meets in the museum). The term “dreamtime” is somewhat misleading because, although it is conceived as something that can be accessed through the dreams people have while sleeping, it is something much bigger than, say, the Western conception of “dreamland.” Rather, the “dreamtime” refers to a realm outside of linear time, which stretches back to the creation of the world but also continues to exist side by side with linear time. It is, in a sense, more real than what Westerners would refer to as reality. Thus, the dreams David has that seem to predict a future event are really something else: moments of access to the dreamtime in which “before” and “after” do not carry the same meaning they do in the waking world of human beings. David almost always seems to experience his premonitory dreams as frightening, both because they usually depict negative events and because the idea of the dreamtime is not a familiar one to him.

Cultures The values and practices of two cultures—white Australian and Aboriginal Australian—are central to *The Last Wave*, as is the conflict between these cultures. The story is structured around a suspicious death and the legal process with which it is dealt—a process of immense importance to white Australian civilization as inherited from the English justice system. The film shows many white characters whose careers make them part of this system. But the case depicted in the film involves Aboriginal Australians who live only partially within the national culture inherited from England. They also have their own traditional culture, and the film shows that the dominant culture’s practices for dealing with crime and punishment can miss the mark when it comes to Aboriginal Australian people. Chris voices the difficulty of living within both cultures at once. Other aspects of the dominant culture, such as the realms of scholarly study and news reporting, are also portrayed in the film, as is their failure to account for the apocalyptic weather events that occur. By contrast, the Aboriginal culture did equip people in the past to predict these events through the cave paintings. Another obvious difference between the two cultures is that while David insists that people are more important than laws, Chris asserts the opposite.

Nature vs. civilization Again like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Last Wave* explores how people (especially white people) react to the encroachment of nature into their civilized spaces. The severe storms that occur during the film bring wind, rain, and hail into people's homes and schools. The film shows a great deal of imagery of the penetration of the elements into man-made spaces; however, it is sometimes unclear whether what we are seeing is a real occurrence, a premonitory dream of David's, or simply the product of David's imagination. David is an upper-middle-class white attorney living in a modern-day city; the film offers no indication that David had any previous connection to or interest in nature (going camping, for example). Instead, nature seems only to be a negative encroaching (even apocalyptic) force for him. The same is not true of the Aboriginal characters. For example, the film's very first scene depicts an Aboriginal Australian man, possibly Charlie, painting a rock wall in the sunshine. In the final scene featuring Chris, after he announces his intention to return to his people and David has walked on, Chris removes his clothes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think David is a *mulkurul*? Why or why not?
2. Some Aboriginal Australians protested against this film while it was in production and after it was released. Why do you think that is? Do you share their reservations about the film?
3. Do you think that what David sees or "sees" at the very end is a real occurrence, a prophetic vision, or the product of an overactive imagination? Why?
4. *The Last Wave* is now several decades old. Do the cultural and societal issues it presents still resonate for you as a 21st-century viewer?
5. The film's producers were worried that this film might not have sufficient international appeal. If you are not Australian, did you find this film interesting? If you are Australian, did you find yourself responding most to culturally specific aspects or to more universal themes?