HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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PETER WEIR (1944-)

LIFE

Peter Weir (1944-) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He was born and raised in Sydney, Australia. Though bright and curious, he struggled with the rigid expectations and lack of room for imagination in the formal education of the day. Weir spent about a year in based in England in the mid-1960s; after some exploration of Europe, he returned to Australia and worked in television for a few years. He made several prize-winning short films. In the late 1960s, the Australian government started to put more money behind a national film industry in the form of bodies including the Australian Film Development Corporation and, later, the South Australian Film Corporation. These funding sources were crucial to the ability of Weir and his fellow aspiring filmmakers to pursue the projects that would come to be known as the first fruits of the Australian New Wave. Weir made six feature films in Australia, all of which were well received at film festivals and in art house circles. In the mid-1980s, Weir began working in Hollywood, though he kept his main residence in Australia, where he lived with his wife and two children. Most of Weir's Hollywood films were welcomed by critics and fairly successfully straddled the divide between commercial and art-house fare. Weir began making films less frequently in the mid-1990s, and his final film as of this writing was released in 2010. In a 2022 interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Weir indicated that he is unlikely to direct any more films.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Peter Weir is a highly decorated filmmaker. He has won the Australian Film Institute's award for Best Direction twice. He has been nominated for the Best Director Oscar four times, and he was awarded the honorary lifetime achievement Oscar in 2023. *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* won two Oscars and was nominated for a total of ten; *The Truman Show* was nominated for three Oscars, and *Fearless*, *The Way Back*, and *Green Card* for one each; *Dead Poets Society* garnered four nominations and one win; *Witness* won two Oscars and was nominated for a total of eight; and *The Year of Living Dangerously* won one. Weir and his films have won many additional prizes from organizations all over the world. In a more general sense, Weir is regarded by many as one of the best filmmakers of his generation; his ability to make popular films with a unique and thoughtful sensibility is particularly praised.

FILMOGRAPHY

The Cars That Ate Paris (1974)
Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975)
The Last Wave (1977)
The Plumber (1979)
Gallipoli (1981)
The Year of Living Dangerously (1982)
Witness (1985)
The Mosquito Coast (1986)
Dead Poets Society (1989)
Green Card (1990)
Fearless (1993)
The Truman Show (1998)
Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World (2003)
The Way Back (2010)

THEMES

NATURE AND TRADITION VS. CIVILIZATION AND MODERNITY This is a frequent theme of Weir's. What does it mean, his films repeatedly ask, to live as an embodied human being in the modern world? What happens when the trappings of civilization fall away? Are human beings better off when closer to nature, or not? As is often the case with Weir, the films raise more questions about this topic than they answer.

Picnic at Hanging Rock This film asks, "How do modern humans react to something they cannot understand or explain in the natural world?" Most of the characters in the film are depicted as highly civilized, as indicated by the hats, gloves, corsets, and other restrictive articles of clothing that they must wear, as well as the good behavior and rote memorization demanded of them. Something about Hanging Rock disrupts such demands: all three girls who disappear first shed their shoes and stockings, and Miss McCraw apparently takes off her skirt on the way up the Rock. The girls dance, lie down, and have insects and other animals crawling on them; the film contains many images of human beings dwarfed by the Rock or the woods. The viewer often sees images, too, of individual animals observing human beings marching into the Rock. In addition, whatever happened to the girls and teacher out in the wilderness has effects that reach into the school as well: students and teachers leave, Mademoiselle puts on rouge (to Mrs. Appleyard's disapproval), and Mrs. Appleyard's usually perfect hair becomes increasingly messy as her control over the school fails. Natural urges and processes increasingly take precedence over restrictive human practices.

The Last Wave 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.

Witness Like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Witness* stages a conflict between tradition and modernity (which could perhaps also be expressed as nature vs. civilization). The Amish live in a more traditional society in which human beings are closer to nature, as evidenced by the Amish people seeming to rise up out of the fields in the opening shots and by frequent portrayals of farm work in the film. The Amish till the land and work with livestock. They also maintain traditional religious practices and a strict separation between male and female roles. They do not use modern technology. By contrast, John lives in Philadelphia, a gritty modern city. The film's shots of Philadelphia emphasize concrete, tall buildings, traffic, and violence – all traits that appear very foreign to Rachel and Samuel. John is a thoroughly modern, urban man who drives a car, uses a gun, has had sexual relationships with women without being married to them, and has never milked a cow before – although he does know some carpentry. The clash between tradition and modernity is most evident in the scene in which Rachel holds a lamp while John tries to fix his car, hidden the barn; when he succeeds, the radio comes on, and John and Rachel dance to a modern song in their Amish clothes, surrounded by bales of hay.

The Mosquito Coast *The Mosquito Coast* takes its modern American characters into a remote setting in which they must live face-to-face with nature, in the form of the Central American jungle with all its overgrown plants, rushing water, and heat. However, Allie does not seem to be interested in increasing his and his family's proximity to nature *per se*; rather, he simply wants to take them away from modern conveniences and modern society. Nature, for Allie, is essentially the absence of these things; he likes living in the wilderness because it offers the opportunity for invention and for feats of self-deprivation and valor, not because he sees any value in communing with nature for its own sake. This attitude is at odds

with many films and literary works (including *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*), in which characters from modern industrial society are brought into direct contact with nature and are transformed by the encounter. Those earlier films portray nature as a beautiful and dangerously sublime entity that can produce an existential crisis in the modern human being. *The Mosquito Coast* focuses only on the practical demands that life in the wilderness places on the characters (such as cutting down trees to make space for a house, making ice to combat the heat, and dragging the boat to evade a flood). Meanwhile, Allie frequently holds forth on the problems with American society. The problems he identifies are problems of modernity: too much luxury, laziness, excessive consumerism, out-of-control spending on social services, a broken criminal justice system. What triggers Mosquitia appeals to Allie because it seems to belong to an earlier phase of history. The film does not show any scenes of the Fox children in school in the U.S., but after they move to Mosquitia and are engaged in building their new village, Allie comments that *this* is the education all Americans should get: learning how to survive in the wilderness and build things, not learning how to fingerpaint and memorizing state capitals. By contrast, the other members of the Fox family miss the accoutrements of modernity: the children exclaim upon the modern toys they see at Reverend Spellgood's settlement, for example.

The Way Back When Janusz first enters the gulag, one of the guards states that the real prison is Siberia itself; there is no point in trying to escape, he says, because it is too difficult to survive in the extreme Siberian conditions. This argument is ultimately compelling to Andrei Timofeyevich, but Janusz and the six other men decide to escape anyway. Indeed, though, the Siberian wilderness proves to be very harsh. One man freezes to death the first night after the escape. Before they make it to Lake Baikal, the escapees encounter frigid temperatures, snow, wind, and ice, not to mention difficulty finding food. Lake Baikal is a friendly environment, offering mild temperatures, water, and ample fish to eat. But before long the group encounters another harsh wilderness: the Gobi Desert, where water and food are fatally scarce and the sun beats down relentlessly, burning their skin. Finally, the surviving members of the group must cross the Himalayas – another cold and snowy environment. Throughout the film, the wilderness is presented as safe in that they do not encounter any people who might be hostile to them, but dangerous in that the conditions of the wilderness are often unsuitable for human life. This wilderness is fatal for some. The film's images of wilderness are often beautiful, though – suggesting a sublime landscape that dwarfs the human being and produces a sense of awe. This sublimity in nature represents a return to the way nature was presented in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*.

SOCIAL CONFORMITY VS. INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM Weir's films often present an individual at odds with a larger group – be it an entire town, a religious group, or a workplace. Ever complex, Weir does not simply champion the individual against society; rather, he simply dramatizes the conflicts that result when an individual transgresses social norms.

The Cars That Ate Paris The Parisians' criminal scheme only works because everyone works together and no one tells the national authorities. It seems at first that there is indeed a consensus among all the townspeople that continuing with the scheme is the right thing for them to do. But it becomes clear that the mayor has to work hard to ensure that this conformity continues. The young men of the town participate in the wrecking and theft, but they grumble about not getting enough. One young man, Charlie, kills the town's minister, which makes the mayor very angry. Similarly, another young man's car is burned as punishment for driving into the mayor's yard and damaging his fence. The youths want to commit crime against anyone; the mayor only wants crime committed against outsiders. The mayor also has to force Arthur to attend the town fancy-dress ball when Arthur is trying to leave town. More than once, the mayor informs a group of people of the official narrative of a criminal event (such as rendering Charlie's murder of the minister as a "shooting accident). Most of the townspeople are too brainwashed or jaded to protest, but Arthur and the local young men resist (in different ways and for different reasons), and the conformist town falls apart.

Witness A major theme of the film is each individual's negotiation of their relationship to the larger society. Overall, whereas Amish culture values the collective, mainstream American culture values the individual. But, as Paul Schaeffer articulates, the police force is like the Amish community in that it has rules that must be followed. John is pursued and his partner is killed for defying those rules. Meanwhile, Rachel is chastised and gossiped about because of her clear liking for John. Ultimately, John is rewarded

for flouting the rules of police comradery: he brings the corrupt cops to justice. Rachel, on the other hand, is not rewarded for her assertion of individuality. Although she does not transgress to the point of being officially “shunned” (which, as Eli points out, would mean that he could not sit with her or share food with her), Rachel is absorbed back into the collective, remaining in Amish society. The film does not take a clear stance on the conflict between society and the individual; while the soaring score that accompanies the Amish barn raising glorifies a collective effort, Rachel’s defiant speech to Eli and dramatic decision to remove her bonnet and kiss John are also presented as triumphant moments.

Dead Poets Society Of the “four pillars” of Welton Academy, two are “tradition” and “discipline.” Most of the classes at the school (including the Latin, trigonometry, and chemistry classes we briefly see) are very traditional in terms of the material taught and the teaching methods employed. The boys wear formal uniforms and address teachers as “sir.” The introduction to the senior boys’ poetry textbook provides a quasi-Cartesian formula for measuring a poem’s greatness. John Keating’s arrival at the school disrupts this conformity. Keating encourages the boys to think freely about everything—about poetry, about themselves, about life in general. He instructs them literally to tear the introduction out of their poetry textbooks—a directive that clearly shocks them but that they eventually follow eagerly. Neil and the other Dead Poets Society members seize on the encouragement to think for themselves: Neil acts in a play despite his father’s disapproval; Charlie writes an article advocating the admission of girls to Welton; and Knox declares his love to a girl despite her football-player boyfriend’s threats. Ultimately, though, Neil kills himself and Charlie is expelled; so, the film suggests that thinking freely in an environment that champions conformity can sometimes end in tragedy.

The Truman Show In the opinion of Sylvia, Truman is essentially Christof’s prisoner in the fake world of Seahaven. We learn that Truman was the product of an unwanted pregnancy and was adopted at birth by the entertainment corporation that then immediately launched *The Truman Show*. The two actors playing the roles of Truman’s parents had, of course, no real legal rights over Truman, as evidenced by the fact that Truman’s “father” was written off the show during Truman’s childhood. But because Truman is thirty years old at the time the film takes place, it is unclear how Christof can legally justify sending crew members to seize Truman the first several times he tries to escape. The film seems to support Sylvia’s contention that they are treating Truman like a prisoner. Christof insists that if Truman really persisted in trying to leave, he would let him; and indeed, this is exactly what happens at the end of the film. Regardless, the film does not provide any support for Christof’s contention that Truman is better off captive in picture-perfect Seahaven than free in the real world.

POWER The exercise of power on both interpersonal and societal levels is a recurrent interest of Weir’s. *The Year of Living Dangerously* and *The Way Back* explore the power oppressive regimes exert over their citizens, often with fatal consequences. Other films examine the power dynamics among individuals in a number of settings. Frequently, power shifts, and the films often demonstrate ways in which individuals who seem to have less power can turn the tables on their oppressors in isolated circumstances.

The Cars That Ate Paris Different forms of power are in play throughout the film. The brief opening scene features a wealthy couple leaving their huge houses and driving through the countryside—until they are caught in the Parisians’ fatal trap. The couple’s financial and social power is trumped by the Parisians’ power, which lies in in teamwork, local knowledge, and a willingness to commit crime. This is the power that the Parisians are using because they lack other forms of power, such as money, cultural capital, or the ability to affect policy changes on a national level. Within the town of Paris, the mayor has been wielding substantial power to control people’s actions and speech. Arthur clearly has some power to ruin the scheme, as evidenced by the fact that he insists that he saw lights in front of the car on the night of the accident, which the mayor and police officer insist is impossible because it is a one-way road; the mayor becomes very nervous when Arthur tries to talk to the minister about this. The young men of Paris have only the physical power of their cars, which they ultimately use to destroy the town. All of these characters also, implicitly, have a power that comes from being Caucasian; the mayor has a small statue of an Aboriginal person outside his house.

Picnic at Hanging Rock Mrs. Appleyard has power and authority at the school that bears her name. As the framed picture of Queen Victoria in her office is intended to demonstrate, she wants that authority to be viewed as an extension of the power of the Empress who is in charge of Australia along with the rest of the British Empire. Mrs. Appleyard speaks to the students in an authoritative tone; she never expresses sympathy with a student, asks how they feel, or offers clemency on anything. The first thing we see her do is give directions to the girls about how they should behave on the picnic. Sara Waybourne clashes with Mrs. Appleyard because she defies this power. She absolutely refuses to memorize the classic poem she has been instructed to learn; she even insults the poem as illogical. Sara derives authority from within: she has written a poem of her own, about love. She refuses to bend to Mrs. Appleyard's instructions, even when threatened with punishment. Mrs. Appleyard correspondingly exercises her power by telling Sara she must leave the school. Sara's subsequent death is a tragedy. Still, if the film is suggesting that Sara commits suicide, then Sara finally wins out in exercising her internal power.

The Plumber *The Plumber* illustrates many nuances and shifts in the power dynamics among its characters. Max possesses physical and social power over Jill as a man. Brian and the men who arrest Max, too, have masculine power that Jill does not: the power to actually remove Max. Brian also clearly has more power in the marriage with Jill due to his gender: his graduate study is already completed while her thesis languishes under the pressure to be a housewife, and it is for his jobs that they have moved to Adelaide and will soon move to Geneva. Meanwhile, Jill and Brian exercise social power over Max that derives from their higher social status. Brian has power over the indigenous people he studies: due to his race and his professional status as a scientist, he can promote research projects that he hopes will lead to changes in their healthcare and diets. The film's conclusion demonstrates that a feeling of powerlessness can drive a person to an extreme and unethical exertion of whatever power they do have.

Gallipoli Power shifts throughout the film. Archy and Frank are fairly evenly matched; Archy barely wins their first race, while Frank barely wins their second. For example, it is Archy who knows how to survive in the wilderness, but it is Frank who knows how to forge a birth certificate that will gain Archy entry into the military. Ultimately, Archy holds the power of being the more famous runner, which gains him Major Barton's offer to be a sprinter instead of a fighter at the battle. But Archy uses that power by giving it to Frank, which leads to Frank's survival and Archy's death. Throughout the film, Archy and Frank use their power to help each other. By contrast, the military officers in the film use their power to issue orders that defy logic and to ignore the protests of people who are below them in the military hierarchy. The men of the infantry and Light Horse ultimately have no power to save themselves. Major Barton tries to use his limited power to save them; though unsuccessful, he, like Archy, does choose to die with them even though his status does grant him the power to avoid going onto the battlefield.

The Year of Living Dangerously *The Year of Living Dangerously* portrays power from various perspectives. One central aspect is political power. President Sukarno holds power in Indonesia at the time during which the film takes place, but his time in power is almost over. To hold on to power when the people are no longer sure they want to give it, Sukarno is employing strongman tactics like stifling speech, controlling citizens' movements with roadblocks and curfews, and killing dissidents (including Billy and the PKI members who are shot). Meanwhile, the PKI is trying to gain power via a violent coup; they succeed, but only very briefly. They seem, however, to have the power of public support. More important, though, is the film's portrayal of how ordinary people are affected both by a regime's attempts to cling to power too long and by the violence of another group's attempt to gain power. Lives are risked and lost. Meanwhile, the film also portrays power dynamics on a more personal level. Billy gains power from the information in his dossiers, Guy from his handsomeness and bravery, and Jill from her position as a spy. All three have the power as non-Indonesians to leave the country, though Billy does not use it. All three also have emotional power over each other.

The Way Back Janusz begins the film being forced to cede his individual power to the greater power of the Soviet regime. Although Janusz initially tries to resist, he can do nothing to prevent the regime using their political power to seize and torture his wife, thus forcing a corroborating witness statement out of her. Once Janusz is sent to prison, the power of the regime is in the hands of the guards, who use it to control the prisoners' movements and activities. The guards choose to let prisoners like Valka who are there for committing ordinary crimes exercise power over the political prisoners. Valka uses this power for childish

purposes such as seizing another man’s sweater to use as currency when he runs out of money while gambling. Ultimately, though, Janusz’s wilderness skills and bravery give him the power to escape the prison and survive the journey out of Siberia. The whole setup of the gulag in Siberia indicates that the Soviet regime is banking on their prisoners lacking such power. Even though some of the people who escape with Janusz die, a total of four prisoners ultimately escape thanks by exercising what power they do still possess to take a risk and survive.

LOVE/FRIENDSHIP/FAMILY Loving interpersonal relationships (or the failures of these relationships) are central to almost all of Weir’s films. Although Weir depicts sexuality somewhat less than many other filmmakers of his generation, he nonetheless explores the strong motivating power of romantic love in several films. Weir’s films often present difficulties within families or situations in which characters are separated from their families (boarding school, ships, etc.). Friendship is a frequent theme and more often a source of love and strength for Weir’s characters than family is.

The Cars That Ate Paris The mayor says to Arthur at one point that he is a great family man and always has been. But his definition of “family” is somewhat idiosyncratic. His relationship with his wife seems ordinary enough. But it turns out that the couple were unable to have biological children of their own, and that the two children who live with them are orphans from one of the car accidents that the townspeople, under the mayor’s direction, caused. Similarly, the mayor says to various people early on in the film that they are “keeping” Arthur instead of killing him or abandoning him to the doctor’s brain experiments, like most of the surviving accident victims. He offers Arthur a place in his family as a son. Arthur is touched by this, saying that he never had a real family before; he was raised by his brother, George, who took care of him despite not liking him. The mayor’s inviting Arthur into his family, though, is strategic: he has just seen Arthur ask the minister for a talk, and he immediately follows the invitation with a declaration that the one thing close families do not do is talk to outsiders. In other words, the mayor weaponizes the idea of family in order to control Arthur.

Picnic at Hanging Rock Many characters clearly love each other, and both expected and unexpected friendships are apparent throughout the film; meanwhile, all the characters are separated from their families. Unsurprisingly, many of the girls at Appleyard College appear to be close friends, as evidenced by their physical closeness, the sharing of confidences, and the general comfort they seem to take in each other’s presence. But unexpected friendships occur, too, including the one between the very popular, glamorous Miranda and the plainer, younger Sara. Sara loves Miranda, as expressed by writing a poem for her, looking at her lovingly, and mourning her loss. Conspicuously, Sara does not love anyone else. Many of the girls at the school seem quite affectionate and caring toward each other; this is true of Marion, Irma, and Miranda, who also loves Sara. Another friendship that crosses class boundaries is the friendship of Albert and Michael, which the viewer sees from its beginning. Unlike the girls at the college, Michael does not have companions of his own age, gender, and class in Australia. He seems happy to sacrifice social class in order to be friends with Albert—and Albert shows himself to be a true friend by his willingness to accompany Michael on the risky venture to the Rock and to lie to his employer, Michael’s uncle, about Michael’s whereabouts. No adult friendships are seen in the film. Rather, friendship in this film is the province of the young, and while it only seems to exist within genders, it has the ability to transcend other barriers. One might say that Miranda represents love in the film, and that her disappearance causes desperate attempts to recover that love or to find a way to live without it.

Gallipoli Friendship (or what Australians might refer to as “mateship”) is arguably the most prominent theme throughout *Gallipoli*. Early scenes show the two main characters, separately, interacting with friends: Frank talks with Barney, Billy, and Snowy, while Archy defends his friendship with an Aboriginal man against the taunts of a neighbor. The Aboriginal man only appears early in the film as he does not join the military. But Frank’s three friends are present at various points, and they obviously all care a great deal about each other. They work together, train together, explore Cairo together, and are hurt when they feel one has betrayed another—and all of this happens before the ultimate bonding activity of being in a war zone together. But the greatest friendship is between Frank and Archy, who are adversaries in a race and disagree about the war but nevertheless bond almost instantly. They frequently help each other; Archy helps Frank get across the outback, Frank helps Archy pretend to be old enough to join the war, Archy helps Frank get into the Light Horse, and finally, Archy gives Frank his position as

sprinter/messenger at Gallipoli so that he will not have to fight. Frank screams when he realizes Archy will die.

The Year of Living Dangerously *The Year of Living Dangerously* portrays various forms of love, and it ultimately endorses Billy's stated belief that loving relationships are the most important thing in life. No political entity seems to be able to alleviate the poverty in Indonesia; Billy, however, regularly gives some of his own money to a poor woman and her son. Of course, Billy's loving act does not solve every problem: the little boy still dies of disease. But there is no suggestion that therefore his generosity has not been worth it. Meanwhile, love motivates Jill to share a state secret with Billy and Guy in hopes that they will use the information to save their lives. Billy dies anyway (for a different reason than the one she was hoping to forestall), and Guy is ultimately able to remain in the country safely because the coup does not last more than a day. Again, though, the film suggests through Billy's words that all we can do in the face of systemic conflict is try to help and love people right in front of us. And it does make a difference for Guy: he leaves the country with Jill. Meanwhile, friendship is a specific form of relationship that is explored at length in the film. Billy is friends with both Guy and Jill, and he clearly values friendship a great deal. Billy is able to maintain a strong friendship with Jill even though he also has an unreciprocated romantic interest in her. Billy and Jill's friendship involves spending time together (we see them going out for tea, for example), as well as having each other's best interests at heart. For example, Billy encourages Guy to pursue Jill romantically because he respects him; and Jill shares the classified information with Billy because she wants him to be able to leave the country before civil war breaks out. Billy and Guy's friendship evolves concurrently with their professional partnership. Billy seems to want to educate Guy in various ways; he plays his favorite opera music for Guy in addition to helping him understand the Indonesian context of his work. More casually, all of the western journalist characters behave like friends in that they often drink together. However, we never see any acts of generosity or assistance among those men; they are friends only on the surface.

Witness Familial and romantic love are prominent themes in *Witness*. Though we learn nothing about the recently deceased Jacob (Samuel's father and Rachel's husband), the whole film portrays strong family love among Rachel, Samuel, and Eli. These three people frequently embrace, help each other, and encourage each other to behave in the way they believe to be right. Despite Eli's criticism of Rachel in one scene, he seems to love and respect her overall. Meanwhile, all three come to love John Book in their separate ways, and to be loved by him. John puts his life on the line to protect them from the corrupt cops. He puts down his gun when Schaeffer points a gun at Rachel. The romantic love between John and Rachel is also a driving force in the film. It begins to develop early on and is sustained throughout the film via the exchange of glances and one scene in which they embrace and kiss. John articulates the barrier to their love when he says, "If we'd made love last night, I'd have to stay, or you'd have to leave." One or the other would have to give up their life for them to be together, and ultimately neither is prepared to do that.

The Mosquito Coast The Foxes are a close-knit family. During the part of the movie that takes place in the U.S., we see the Foxes spending a great deal of time with each other, and no time with friends outside the family. Charlie and Jerry sometimes accompany Allie when he works. After they move to Mosquitia, the whole family works on setting up the new village. Even the very young twin girls are put to work; while one of them is pedaling to operate the washing machine that Allie made with parts from a bicycle, he passes by and says to her, "Don't just sit there, honey – pedal!" Despite his narcissism, Allie obviously sees the family as a unit: it means as much to him that his children live simply and inventively as that he does himself. Family loyalty is clearly important to all of them; Allie expects that everyone will be loyal to him as head of the family, and they all agree, until finally Charlie and Jerry are driven past the point of endurance and defy Allie. Although Allie sometimes speaks very insultingly to his sons, most of the time all members of the Fox family behave affectionately toward one another.

Dead Poets Society Welton is an all-boys school, and the film does not present any homosexual characters. But one of the students, Knox Overstreet, does fall in love (at first sight) with a girl he meets on a foray into town. Knox initially experiences this love as both overwhelming and hopeless, since the girl, Chris, is "practically engaged" to another teenage boy. While at a Dead Poets Society meeting, though, Knox is inspired to "seize the day" and to call Chris. He later kisses her forehead and reads her

an original poem, despite her boyfriend's threats that he will kill him. Mr. Keating encourages Knox's writing of poetry about love, noting that love is one of the "great themes." Even though Chris tells Knox to leave her alone, the film suggests that she is in fact drawn to him as well; Knox is rewarded for his persistence when she agrees to attend Neil's play with him, even as she insists that he is "so infuriating." Romantic love also comes up in the form of a photograph of a woman that Neil sees on Keating's desk; Keating explains that she is in London and that he prefers to be at Welton teaching. Family, meanwhile, is presented in *Dead Poets Society* as chiefly a source of pressure rather than comfort for the students of Welton Academy. The film's first few scenes take place on the first day of the new school year, when the parents join the boys for a start-of-year assembly and then say goodbye to them. We see Todd's parents expressing the hope that Todd will be as good a student as his older brother was during his time at the school. Similarly, Neil's father tells Neil that he has high hopes for his academic performance. Neil's father also tells Neil on that first day of the year that he must drop one of his extracurricular activities: namely, the school annual. Mr. Perry is deaf to Neil's protests. Neil's friends chide him for caving to his father's demands, but they acknowledge the truth of his reply that they, too, obey their parents even when they do not want to. Ultimately, Neil's conflict with his father is so strong that it costs him his life: he commits suicide when his father says that instead of acting, ever again, he must go straight to military school, then to Harvard, then to medical school. The nurturing support that family should provide comes instead from the boys' relationships with each other, and from Mr. Keating.

Green Card   *Green Card* sits squarely in the romantic comedy genre. Its tagline was "the story of two people who got married, met and then fell in love," and its main focus is the relationship between its two leads. As with many romantic comedies, the two characters are quite different and spend the better part of the film negotiating those differences. They do not fall in love at first sight. Instead, they learn to appreciate each other as they get to know each other better. The film does not construct much of a romantic history for Georges, but we are told that Brontë has had two serious relationships with men in the past, in addition to her current relationship with Phil. As portrayed in this film, love inheres in supporting someone in spite of difference. For example, Georges helps Brontë obtain for her Garden Guerrillas group the trees that Lauren's parents are giving away, even though Georges expresses doubts that the Garden Guerrillas' work is really helping inner-city residents. The point is that he is supporting her project because it matters to her. *Green Card*'s ending offers a twist on the genre's usual ending: the two leads have fallen in love, but they are separated by Georges's deportation.

Fearless   Family is presented in *Fearless* as a source of many things, including love, fear, support, pressure, joy, and grief. Carla is driven by love for her son, whether in the form of trying to protect him from harm or grieving for him after he has died. She is married but ultimately ends her marriage because Manny's response to the death of their son is so unacceptable to her. Max, meanwhile, is uninterested in his family in the immediate aftermath of the crash. Instead of calling Laura to tell her he is alive, he spends a day driving to Los Angeles to visit an old girlfriend. When he does return home, he speaks callously to Laura and Jonah and chafes against Laura's statements about his obligation to them. Laura sees Max's risky behaviors as unacceptably cruel to his family; he does not agree. Max and Laura discuss divorce. Max seems to be replacing Laura and Jonah each with a similar person from the crash, namely Carla and Byron—both of whom he sees frequently. Ultimately, Carla distances herself from Max in order to encourage him to go back to his family. And he does, asking Laura to "save" him and smiling and embracing her when she does in fact save him from the near-fatal strawberry.

The Truman Show   Truman never meets anyone to whom he is biologically related. It is clear that the actor playing Truman's father is very attached to Truman; brief flashbacks show his affection for young Truman and his frequent attempts to save the boy from harm. Truman's relationship with his mother is less clearly drawn. The only substantial scene with her is one in which she tries to convince the adult Truman that he could not have seen his father. This suggests that this actress is more interested in upholding the show's status quo than in helping Truman. Meanwhile, Truman believes himself to be married to a woman who, he later discovers while looking at their wedding photos, crossed her fingers when she married him. She, presumably at the behest of Christof, tries to convince Truman that they should have a baby. Whether the pregnancy would be real or faked is unclear, as it does not take place. In any case, neither Truman's supposed mother nor his supposed wife gives him true, selfless support.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World In a setting in which everyone is separated from his family, friendship is crucial. The friendship between Aubrey and Stephen is established early on when Aubrey tells Stephen about the *Acheron*'s disastrous sneak attack. Throughout the film, the two men—whom we are told have been friends for many years—enact their friendship through leisure activities (playing violin and cello together) and through discussing difficult practical problems together. Their friendship is tested when Aubrey breaks his promise to stop the ship at the Galápagos Islands for several days so that Stephen can examine flora and fauna there. Stephen is furious, and his anger is connected to a deeper conflict: Stephen prefers discovery to warfare. Ultimately, though, the friendship survives, and Aubrey manages to get Stephen to the Galápagos later. The film also portrays a close friendship between crewmen Nagle and Warley; they are always together, and when Warley dies, Nagle is disconsolate. Midshipmen Blakeney and Calamy, too, are friends. Calamy supports Blakeney when he is wounded early in the film, and when Calamy is killed in the final battle, Blakeney grieves deeply. Other friendships develop over the course of the film, such as the one between Blakeney and Stephen based on an interest in naturalism. Blakeney and Stephen provide consolation for each other's disappointments.

CURIOSITY, VISION, AND SPIRITUALITY

A distinctive feature of Weir's oeuvre is its exploration of the ineffable: Weir's characters frequently strive for something they struggle to reach and even to define. Examples include the unsolved mystery at the Hanging Rock, a white Australian lawyer's feeling that he might be possessed by an Aboriginal spirit, a misguided visionary's move to Central America, a plane crash survivor's search for the meaning of life, and the scientific curiosity of a pre-Darwin natural historian.

Picnic at Hanging Rock Miranda, Marion, Irma, Michael, and (to a lesser extent) Edith all show themselves eager to explore. Not coincidentally, all of these young people are living in an extremely restrictive society. Their clothing, knowledge, and behavior are dictated for them by adults with a very narrow view of what is appropriate. The Appleyard College girls are literally instructed to keep their gloves on until they have passed through the town that lies between the college and Hanging Rock. Clearly, the Hanging Rock brings out these young people's desire to escape such confines. Michael, standing in the wilderness and seeing Miranda, experiences a sexual awakening and a desire to "stretch his legs a bit" and walk into the unknown. Michael is especially restricted because he normally lives in upper-class England, which generally had a more restrictive society than Australia at this time. Then again, the girls are especially restricted, because they are girls. Their clothing focalizes this restriction: the first thing they do when they are quite alone at the Rock is remove their shoes and stockings, and we learn later that Irma and Miss McCraw both removed additional articles of clothing while on the Rock. We don't know what exactly they all do at the Rock, but the fact that they are unobserved by authority and free to choose for themselves is crucial. Ultimately, that restrictive attitude completely breaks down: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a mystery with no solution. The viewer never learns what happened to Miranda, Marion, Irma, and Miss McCraw, or why they seem to have an inkling about it in advance. In the absence of a solution, the viewer can only focus on other matters, including the fact that all the other characters also want an explanation and are not getting one. On a fundamental level, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* asks, "How do human beings react to something they cannot understand or explain?" Picnic is about human encounters with something bigger and almost inarticulable. Something outside the normal human experience. And that force swallows up some of the people who encounter it, but not all of them. For example, while Michael is clearly very affected by the Rock, acting strangely and appearing to see visions and lie down suddenly like the girls before him, Albert seems not to experience any of this. Perhaps significantly, Albert was born in Australia, while Michael was not. Meanwhile, Mrs. Appleyard literally cannot survive the confrontation with the unknowable.

The Last Wave 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.

The Mosquito Coast Allie sees himself as a visionary. “You have no vision” is his ultimate insult. Indeed, Allie considers things that almost no one else would, like packing up his American family and striking out for a remote land. Allie is an inventor, and as far as we see in the film, all of his inventions work. Whenever there is a setback, Allie refuses to acknowledge it as such, immediately reframing the situation as one of freedom or opportunity for change. However, Allie’s vision is limited by his hubris and his refusal to listen to the opinions or ideas of other people. It seems never to occur to him, for instance, to ask the natives of Geronimo what their ways of living in that place have been. When “Mother” asks him if they might take Mr. Haddy up on his offer to go live in his village, Allie replies, “What? And live like savages?” He wants to live in the jungle with minimal comforts and conveniences, but he is completely uninterested in learning about other people’s ways of doing exactly that. He is also unable to see problems right in front of him, such as Jerry’s increasing anguish over Allie’s treatment of him.

Fearless Max and Carla, in the wake of surviving the airplane crash, both grapple with questions about the meaning of life. The things Max says suggest that he has decided life has no particular meaning, and that therefore one should do whatever one wants. His actions, though, do not entirely bear out this idea. For example, having survived the crash and finding himself in Bakersfield, Max drives not north to his home in San Francisco but rather south to Los Angeles, to visit an ex-girlfriend whom he has not seen in twenty years. There is no indication that he is trying to renew a romantic relationship. Rather, it seems that he simply wants to see her because he almost died and she is an important part of his life. Despite Max’s risky behavior and the interest he expresses in “disappearing” throughout the film, he ultimately returns emotionally to his wife and is very glad to be revived from his near-death experience with a strawberry at the end of the film. Life is ultimately not meaningless for him. Carla, meanwhile, argues that the meaning of life inheres in the existence of God and the love we bear other people in spite of the fact that they can be taken from us at any moment.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World In the early nineteenth century, scientists had to be knowledgeable in multiple fields. The film is set in 1805, which is prior to the birth of Charles Darwin. The character of Stephen Maturin is thus imagined as belonging to a very early wave of naturalists. In 1805, the Galápagos Islands had only recently been identified by Europeans as a source of scientifically significant flora and fauna. Scientists like Stephen were of necessity also explorers. In addition, many scientific books were available only in their original languages of French or German; in *Master and Commander*, Stephen is seen to be reading a book in French on natural history. It is typical of the period that Stephen is both a physician and a naturalist; scientists tended to be less specialized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they are today. Stephen is officially employed only as a physician; it is his curiosity that drives his explorations in natural history. Like a modern scientist, though, Stephen bases his work on meticulous, systematic observation and recording of information about the species he discovers. His scientific spirit is clearly contagious: Blakeney catches Stephen’s enthusiasm for natural history and becomes as passionate about it as Stephen is.

SOCIAL CLASS Differences in social class frequently create misunderstanding and conflict between Weir’s characters. This is true of almost all of his Australian films, as well as in the Hollywood film *Green Card*. Weir’s films do not present any facile solutions to the problem of social class divides in the modern world.

The Cars That Ate Paris Almost everyone we see in *The Cars That Ate Paris* is poor. At the beginning of the film, Arthur and George are living out of their car and trailer, driving around New South Wales looking for work. At one point, George stops the car and gets out at small building with a sign in front that says “Commonwealth Rural Employment Scheme.” Five men line up outside the building; only two are invited in. Clearly, the national “scheme” is inadequate. Every location visible in the film is rural and poor, marked by dirty, dilapidated buildings and loitering people of all ages with nothing to do. The townspeople of Paris have resorted to crime in order to make a living. None of them expresses any compunction about

this decision, which may suggest that it has been going on for such a long time that they have become desensitized. The mayor makes a vague reference at one point to their "glorious past" as a nation, but no evidence suggests that Paris itself was ever any more prosperous than it is at the time of the film.

Picnic at Hanging Rock Most of the students at Appleyard College are wealthy, as is Michael. But two prominent characters are poor: long-lost siblings Sara Waybourne and Albert Crundall. They were raised in an orphanage and have now been separated for years. Albert works as a servant (a job he does not carry out with alacrity), while the younger Sara has been allowed to receive an upper-class education because of the munificence of her guardian. But Sara's position is extremely tenuous. She cannot force Mrs. Appleyard to let her continue to live and study at the school. Her guardian's lapse in payment and communication with Mrs. Appleyard – another thing Sara cannot control – costs Sara her place at the school and ultimately her life. Albert plays a happier role in the story as a whole, since he is the person who ultimately rescues Irma. Michael's determination (and sense of wealthy, English entitlement, perhaps) drives him to search longer for the girls, but it is Albert who can actually tolerate enough of the climb up the Rock to get to Irma safely. There is clearly a toughness to both Albert and Sara that could perhaps be attributed to the adversity they have faced.

The Plumber In addition to gender, the most important lens through which to view the conflict between Max and Jill is that of social class. Jill has an advantage over Max because of her higher social status. Although most of the film's scenes dramatize the distress Max causes Jill through his masculinity, it is ultimately Jill's social power that determines the winner of the battle of wills between them. As soon as Jill tells Brian that her expensive watch is missing, he becomes agitated and starts to search the apartment for it. Max is an obvious target of suspicion. The very next morning, we see four men in suits converge on Max when he arrives at the apartment building to search his truck for the watch. It is clear throughout the film that class struggle preoccupies Max; he writes and sings songs about working-class people and frequently comments on the monetary value of objects in Jill and Max's apartment. Although Jill and Max do not live an ostentatiously wealthy lifestyle, Jill's friend, Meg, certainly does: she buys a new Mercedes sedan and shows off an outfit that "cost a fortune." Max remarks to Jill that he wishes he could speak in a more polished way but appears distressed when she responds by correcting one of his sentences.

Gallipoli Archy's family owns a cattle station, which grants him a higher class status than that of Frank, who lives in a smaller house and works on the railroad. The class difference does not interfere with Frank and Archy's affection for each other. It does interfere with their ability to stick together, though; Frank has never learned to ride a horse, so he is unable to join the Light Horse with Archy (despite Archy's attempt to teach Frank to ride). Once the characters leave Australia, several scenes depict conversations among officers who are clearly of a higher social status than both Frank and Archy. Most of the officers clearly see themselves as inherently superior to the men serving under them. Only officers are allowed at the farewell ball, and most of the officers do not actually fight despite their willingness to sacrifice their men's lives. One exception is Major Barton, who strongly protests the continuation of the pointless assault and, when unsuccessful in his attempts to stop it, joins the last wave of fighters himself on the grounds that he cannot ask his men to do what he would not do himself. He dies as a result.

The Year of Living Dangerously When Billy and Guy first meet, they walk through the streets of Jakarta and discuss the poverty that is so visible there. Billy repeats the question: "What then must we do?", originally from the Gospel of Luke and repeated by Leo Tolstoy. By frequently showing Guy walking through slums, the film presents poverty as a ubiquitous problem in Indonesia. The character Kumar, Guy's Indonesian assistant at A.B.S., has insufficient funds to pay off corrupt military officials, and he explains to Guy late in the film that he has joined the Communist Party because they are trying to do something about the country's pervasive poverty. The implication is that the sitting president, Sukarno, is not doing enough – a view which Billy also comes to hold by the end of the film. The acute example of poverty that we see in the film, through Billy's eyes, is that of Ibu, who lives in a shack by an unhealthy river and struggles to support herself and her son. Her son dies because of a disease caught in this river (and because of the lack of medical care). Billy cares deeply about this, and he chastises the Western journalists other than Guy for failing to report on ordinary people's struggles with poverty.

Green Card One of the characteristics differentiating Georges and Brontë is social class. Georges describes himself as coming from the “gutter.” He tells Brontë that he left school at age ten to be a “bad boy in the street” and spent some time in jail for theft; he shows her the amateur tattoos on his arms. Georges’s working-class background complicates his identity for the American characters (and for American audiences), who typically associate France with cultural refinement (as Lauren expresses by referring to a French movie and a French restaurant when she first meets Georges). Brontë’s class status is not totally specified, but there are various characteristics of Brontë that, taken together, suggest that her class position is higher than Georges’s. These include her college education, her friendship with the wealthy Lauren, her first name (chosen, she says, by her writer father), her ability to afford rent on a nice apartment, and her work for charitable causes. *Green Card* spends little time with the inner-city residents for whom Brontë is planting plants. The film mildly satirizes wealthy people, both through Lauren’s parents’ dinner party (at which women fawn over the Frenchman Georges and show off their knowledge of composer Gabriel Fauré) and through the snobbish opinions of the other residents in Brontë’s apartment building.

CULTURE CLASH Particularly earlier in his career, Weir frequently took culture clash as a starting point for his films’ conflicts. Characters must learn to understand cultures different from their own, or risk falling into outright violence.

The Last Wave 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.

The Plumber The norms of various cultures are on display in *The Plumber*, as is the clash between cultures. Culture is also an object of study for Brian and Jill as anthropologists. The viewer learns a little bit about the culture of the indigenous people of the New Guinea highlands through dialogue about Jill’s research and through audio recordings and objects (chiefly masks and spears) on display in the couple’s home. Indigenous culture is not opposed to a monolithic Caucasian culture as in Weir’s earlier film, *The Last Wave*. Instead, white characters themselves belong to different subcultures. Jill’s friend, Meg, comfortably occupies the upper-middle-class culture of fancy cars, midday classes vaguely related to Eastern spirituality, and expensive clothing. Brian clearly aspires to Meg’s culture, but he and Jill live on its fringes; they firmly belong, though, to the academic culture of hard work, conservative clothing, and orienting life choices around professional opportunities. Finally, Max, wearing jeans and listening to popular music, proudly identifies himself as a working man—specifically, a principled one who will not compromise his values by adapting his folk songs to suit the trends of the music industry. Max attributes his ethical stance to his upbringing in Melbourne, a city he holds up as a model against the capitalistic Adelaide.

Witness Like *The Last Wave* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Witness* centers on a character’s exploration of a culture not his own. Amish culture and mainstream American culture are represented by Rachel and John, respectively. Rachel introduces John to Amish culture’s insistence on non-violence and on “plainness,” manifested in the simple clothing they wear. We see also the Amish people’s religious practices and reliance on simple machinery and technology, as well as their rigid social expectations. Weir’s films tend not to be preachy, but there is a slightly positive connotation to the film’s presentation of Amish non-violence and a slightly negative connotation to its presentation of Amish social expectations. On the other side, John’s mainstream American culture involves more social freedom but also a great

deal of violence and sometimes loneliness. In one scene between John's superior, Paul Schaeffer, and John's partner, Elton Carter, Schaeffer states that the police force is like the Amish community in that it too is a "cult" or "club" with rules that must be followed – and that Carter is currently flouting them by refusing to reveal John's whereabouts. This statement is reinforced by Weir's placement of this scene right after a scene in which Rachel is chastised by Eli for flouting Amish mores by dancing with John.

CHANGE Weir's films often explore situations in which a character is encouraged or forced to change and grow in order to get through a challenging experience. Here's one example: while John Book in *Witness* begins the film on the consistent/cautious end of the "openness to experience" personality trait spectrum, circumstances force him to become more open to experience. He hides out in the Amish community because his corrupt fellow police officers are pursuing him. Throughout much of the film, he expresses a great deal of curiosity and inventiveness and even considers remaining in the Amish community because of his love for Rachel and his interest in their way of life. In the end, he decides to return to mainstream American society, so perhaps that indicates that his consistent/cautious personality trait is intact. We might also say that the events in the middle of the film reveal complexities to Book's character that were not previously apparent. Essentially the same could be said about Michael in *Picnic at Hanging Rock.* But *The Last Wave*, *Green Card*, and *The Truman Show* all seem to depict actual changes in characters' positions on some of the personality trait spectra: David Burton becomes more open; Brontë becomes more extraverted while Georges becomes more conscientious; Truman Burbank becomes more judgmental and also more confident.

In discussing Weir's films, it is often difficult to pinpoint characters' personality traits because these traits are often in flux during the film, at least for major characters (usually much less so for minor characters). *Fearless*, for example, focuses on an extreme but temporary period in the lives of Max and Carla: what they exhibit during the majority of the film and who they *are* may not be the same. Is it appropriate to designate "grieving" a character trait for Carla because it is her most prominent emotional state in the film? Ultimately, I identified "loving" as the consistent character trait from which the grief sprung, particularly because by the end of the film, Carla is beginning to move on from her grief. Max, meanwhile, was designated both "fearless" and "fearful" because he exhibits both throughout the film and ultimately settles into a sustainable combination of the two.

CHARACTERS

Outsiders Many of Peter Weir's films center on a single man who goes alone into a country, workplace, or other type of setting in which he feels culturally alienated. This is true of Arthur Waldo going to the strange small town of Paris in *The Cars That Ate Paris*, David Burton immersing himself in Aboriginal culture in *The Last Wave*, Guy Hamilton going to Indonesia in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, John Book hiding out in Amish country in *Witness*, and John Keating in the hidebound mid-twentieth-century boarding school in *Dead Poets Society*. It is arguably also true of Michael in Australia in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Max working for upper-middle-class clients in *The Plumber*, Archy and Frank in the military in *Gallipoli*, Allie Fox going to Central America in *The Mosquito Coast*, Georges as an immigrant in New York City in *Green Card*, Max Klein in a new imagined world free of risk in *Fearless*, and Truman Burbank in the newly doubt-ridden world of Seahaven in *The Truman Show*. Weir's last two films, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* and *The Way Back*, depict men leading groups out into an unknown environment, but both men (Aubrey and Janusz) are quite comfortable in this role. Weir's earlier films frequently train their focus on a man who needs to adapt to or escape from the new milieu in which he finds himself. *Witness* most dramatizes the potential allure of such a milieu, embodied both in the Amish woman Rachel and in the culture of collaboration and support. More often, however, the man feels himself fundamentally at odds with those who surround him. The fate of David Burton is unclear; John Book and Guy Hamilton are privileged enough to simply return home, while John Keating is ignominiously dismissed from Welton Academy. This basic structure underlying so many of Weir's films can be seen as a crystallization of the theme of culture clash discussed above.