

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974)**

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) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both also Oscar winners. Weir began making films less frequently in the 21st century but has maintained an international reputation.

Film *The Cars That Ate Paris* takes place in modern-day Paris, Australia, a tiny and depressed rural town whose inhabitants make a living by setting a trap for passing cars and taking the crash victims' belongings. Tonally, it is a sort of absurdist, deadpan horror film, as well as a black-comedy coming-of-age story for a young man who remains in the town after surviving a car accident that kills his brother. The film anticipates *Mad Max* and other late-1970s/1980s Australian films that transposed the American Western film to present or future Australian settings of scarcity and makeshift vehicles.

Background After working in Australian TV and making short films, Peter Weir made his first feature film, *The Cars That Ate Paris*. He got the idea when he was driving on a country road in France and found himself accepting without question the direction of two men standing at a barricade that he needed to divert to a side road, even though there was no visible construction or other impediment on the main road. The Australian government provided some funding. The producers took the film to Cannes, where it was well reviewed, but confusion about the film's genre (art film vs. horror) likely contributed to its struggles at the box office.

CHARACTERS

Arthur Waldo – young man in rural Australia

George Waldo – Arthur's older brother

Len Kelly – mayor of the rural town of Paris, Australia

Beth Kelly – mayor's wife

Doctor – the one doctor in Paris

Policeman – the one police officer in Paris

Darryl – young man in Paris who works at the hospital but also drives with the hoodlums

Charlie – young man in Paris

Reverend Mulray – minister in Paris

SYNOPSIS

Two adult brothers, Arthur and George Waldo, drive around rural Australia in the present day (1970s), looking for work. They go down a side road following a sign for a town called Paris. As they come around a curve on a hill above the town, they see blindingly bright lights, which causes George to lose control of the car. It careens down the hill, and George dies. Arthur wakes up the next morning in the town hospital, though he is not injured. The mayor of the town greets him when he leaves the hospital and says that the townspeople have arranged a funeral for George; all attend. Arthur reveals to the mayor that he is afraid of driving because he accidentally killed someone with his car a year earlier. The mayor encourages Arthur to stay in Paris indefinitely so that he and the local doctor can help him heal.

Meanwhile, the situation that brought Arthur to Paris is repeated, and it becomes clear that the townspeople deliberately set up a trap for motorists, causing fatal accidents and then taking all the victims' belongings. The cars are mostly repurposed by the town's young men, who fix them, spray-paint them in vibrant colors, and race around town, as there is no work for them to do. The doctor experiments on the brains of people who survive the accidents.

Though the whole town is in on the scheme, a rift between the adults and the young men widens when the mayor orders one young man's car burned as punishment for driving into the mayor's fence. The night of a fancy-dress ball, the young men decorate their cars with spikes and teeth and destroy the town by driving into many buildings, which easily collapse. Arthur recovers his ability to drive by getting into a car battle that ends in the other young man's death. In the end, almost everyone, Arthur included, leaves town.

SCENES

First wreck – A man steps out of a huge house and gets into a convertible. He drives to another large house, where a woman emerges and joins him, smiling. They drive into the countryside, where they encounter smiling country people. Suddenly a wheel comes off their car and the car goes tumbling down a hill, wrecked. A small town is visible at the bottom of the hill.



Rural poverty – Two men sit by a car with a trailer attached. They get into the car and drive along a country road. Eventually they stop at a building with a sign saying "Commonwealth Rural Employment Scheme." The older of the two men gets out and joins a line of five men waiting outside the building. A man comes out of the building and invites only the first two men in line inside. The original man gets back into the car and drives off with his companion.



Second wreck – The two men get gas at a decrepit-looking gas station, still in the countryside. They continue driving as it gets dark. At a road sign that says "Paris 5M" (surrounded by other hand-painted signs saying things like "work available" and "travellers rest"), they turn off the main road. A man wearing an orange vest holds up a lantern. The two men see a glare of very bright headlights, which startles the driver so that he loses control of the car. The car goes tumbling down the hill, wrecked.



Aftermath – The next morning, two men in suits discuss the accident, concluding that the road and perhaps alcohol were to blame. One of them leaves. Meanwhile, the younger man from the accident is in a hospital bed. He tells a doctor and a policeman that his brother lost control of the car because of the bright lights. The policeman smiles and says that this is wrong, because it is a one-way road with no oncoming traffic. "You know your brother is dead?" the doctor says. The man nods.



Doctor – Now dressed, the man, Arthur Waldo, goes to the doctor's office, where the doctor tells him that the really exciting experimental work in medicine and psychiatry is happening in the countryside. The doctor shows Arthur a series of photographs of ordinary objects, each of which Arthur is supposed to identify. Then there is a photograph of Arthur's own car accident, which he identifies as "smash." The doctor corrects him by saying, "accident."

Funeral – Arthur leaves the hospital, where he is met by about a dozen townspeople who stand still and stare at him unsmilingly. One of them steps forward and identifies himself as Len Kelly, mayor of Paris. He says that the whole town is very upset about what happened to Arthur's brother and have arranged a funeral for him. Arthur joins the townspeople in walking behind a



hearse as it proceeds down the main road of the town, which looks like an Old West town in the United States. Arthur's brother is buried in the town cemetery.

City council meeting – The mayor leads a meeting of seven men in the town hall. Outside, several loud cars go roaring past. “As to our youth,” the mayor says, “they are idle, they are lazy. They need to work.” The others agree. One of them says that he wants to raise the question of their “visitor.” “Yes,” the mayor says, “we’re keeping him.”



Mayor's wife – Arthur sits at a table with a late-middle-aged woman, who presses him to eat some cake. She shows him a fur coat, saying that she got it secondhand from Len and is not allowed to wear it outside because it might look too posh. But, she says, she thought it might cheer him up to see it.



Lodging – Arthur joins the mayor, his wife, and two young girls at dinner. One of the girls tucks her hair behind her ear, revealing a scar. After dinner, the mayor and Arthur talk alone. The mayor says that he could not have seen lights on the night of his accident and must have been imagining things because of the shock. Arthur tells the mayor that about a year ago, he killed an old man with his car and has been unable to drive ever since, even though he was acquitted of manslaughter. The mayor takes this news casually, saying that elderly pedestrians are a problem.



Another wreck – Several men stand at a bar. In the hospital, several people with bandages on their heads make noise. An orderly tells them to go back to bed. Someone is driving a car along the country road in the dark. A man in an orange vest raises a lantern. A bell rings, and the men in the bar all get up and leave. The car goes tumbling off the hill, wrecked.



Spoils – A bleeding man is brought screaming to the doctor's operating table, where the doctor smiles and beckons him forward. Several townspeople push the smashed car along the main road and then strip its parts in a garage as the mayor looks on and nods. When they are finished, a man sets fire to the car outside. The doctor and his assistants smilingly strap the injured man to the operating table. They take his clothes, his watch, and his wallet. The doctor drills into the man's head.



Attempt to leave – Arthur comes downstairs in the mayor's house with all his luggage. He says goodbye to the mayor's wife and says he left the mayor a note. He leaves the house and walks along the main road out of town. However, he is stopped by two colorfully spray-painted cars blocking the road; the drivers rev the engines menacingly. He turns around and goes back to town, where he sits at a bus stop. One of the men from the city council approaches and asks Arthur to come back to the city hall for a meeting with the mayor.



Stuck – In the mayor's office, the mayor tells Arthur that Arthur's fear of driving and guilt over two men's deaths need to be dealt with. Arthur hangs his head. The mayor says that Arthur can stay with him and work for the doctor as a medical orderly in order to earn some money. Or he can proceed with his plan to leave. Arthur decides to leave and goes to the garage where his beat-up car has been waiting. He turns it on but is unable to drive, breathing heavily and crying. He takes his luggage out of the car and walks back to the mayor's house. Several young men stand by two spray-painted cars and watch him.



Sorrows – At the hospital, a young male orderly, Darryl, shows Arthur around. He tells him that most of the people in the hospital are accident victims, and many of them are “veggies” with varying degrees of brain damage. Back at the mayor’s house, Arthur stands sadly in his room. When the mayor’s wife comes in, he tells her that he is not going to work at the hospital anymore. He also tells her about how his brother George had always been the one who took care of him. She reveals to Arthur that her two daughters are actually adopted; their parents died in a car accident.



Friction – In the evening, Arthur and the mayor sit in the living room. The mayor says to Arthur that he cannot stay with them anymore. Arthur says nothing at first, then reiterates that he saw lights on the night of his accident.

Church – Many of the townspeople attend church. The minister refers to the Paris Pioneer Ball to be held in a few days. He also refers to himself as a “newcomer.” Meanwhile, half a dozen young men recklessly drive spray-painted cars around town. Arthur does some independent investigating along the road into town, where he sees a car with huge mirrors placed around a corner.



Invitation – As people come out of the church, Arthur runs up to the minister and asks to talk to him, which the minister says he can after the ball. The mayor sees this conversation and frowns. Arthur walks off into the hills, and the mayor follows him. The mayor tells Arthur that he has realized something is missing in his family; he would like Arthur to settle in Paris and become part of his family. Arthur agrees. The mayor says that the one thing close families don’t do is talk to outsiders like the minister; they keep themselves to themselves.



Parking Superintendent – The mayor presides over a city council meeting. He says that he is creating a position of Parking Superintendent – someone who can clean up the town and “make it a decent place for people to park.” He announces that Arthur – who turns out to be sitting off to the side – will be appointed to this position. Arthur is presented with an armband indicating his new title, and the city council applauds.



Attack – That night, a dog growls outside. The mayor steps outside his house, followed by Arthur, just as two young men in spray-painted cars crash into his front fence and break a statue of an Aboriginal person. They drive off shouting.



Enforcement – The next day, Arthur walks around on the main street in his new uniform. He walks uncertainly toward a spray-painted car parked crookedly outside a café. He is about to write down the license plate number when Darryl walks out of the café and says that the car is his. “Anything to oblige, mate” Darryl says cheerfully when Arthur asks him to move the car. Arthur continues to pace around town.



Resistance – Two men raise a banner for the Paris Ball over the main road. Eight young men, dressed in cowboy hats and long coats, stand on the road in front of their spray-painted cars. Arthur walks up to them, focusing on Darryl, who is one of them. He says that the mayor gave him a new job for which he is supposed to tell people where to park. Darryl and the other men challenge Arthur’s authority and make fun of his brother’s accident. The policeman approaches and asks Darryl and one other man, Les, to come with him to the station.



Punishment – The minister drives his car down the country road coming into Paris. Charlie, another young man, points a rifle in his direction. At the police station, the policeman accuses Darryl and Les of crashing into the mayor’s yard the previous night. Darryl and Les are then led outside, where, at the mayor’s instigation, Les’s car is set on fire. Les screams as he is held back.



Cover-up – Charlie approaches the crowd gathered to watch the car burn. He is wearing a clerical collar and covered in blood. A tow truck brings the wrecked car into a garage in town. Many other people come to the garage, including Arthur, the mayor, the members of the city council, the policeman, and Charlie, whom the mayor chastises as an “irreligious bastard.” The mayor then informs everyone that “a shooting accident” has occurred, that the ball will proceed, and that no one should enter or leave the town until the “mess” is sorted out. Arthur sits sadly in the corner.



Detained – The mayor comes upon Arthur in his bedroom, packing a suitcase. Arthur says that he is not going to the ball. The mayor grabs Arthur by the shirt and tells him that no one leaves Paris, and that Arthur is going to the ball.



Ball – People, in costume, begin to enter the “Paris Victory Hall” where the ball is taking place. The mayor, his wife, and Arthur enter. The music stops and everyone stops dancing when the doctor and about a dozen patients from the hospital enter, on foot or in wheelchairs, several of them wearing boxes or newspaper over their bandaged heads. The mayor takes the microphone and announces the accidental death of the Reverend Mulray. He gives a speech about Australia’s pioneer history and leads the group in a song.



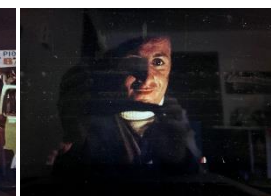
Battle – Seven cars pull into town – not only spray-painted but also covered with spikes and protrusions that look like teeth. One by one, the cars, all driven by young men, crash into various town buildings, which easily fall. The people at the ball begin to realize what is happening and go outside, only to run back into the hall. Two men are impaled and killed on cars’ spikes. Meanwhile, one of the youths driving a car is speared to death by a middle-aged man.



Strange therapy – Darryl drives one of the decorated cars into the garage, pursuing Arthur. Arthur gets into another car already in there. The mayor comes in and directs Arthur to back that car into Darryl’s car. As Darryl tries to get out, Arthur backs into him again, harder. He does this about ten times, all under the mayor’s direction, leaving Darryl bloody and eventually killing him. Arthur gets out of the car and sadly looks at Darryl’s body. The mayor pats him on the shoulder as he begins to smile and says, “I can drive!”



Goodbye to Paris – Townspeople walk along the main road carrying their belongings. The mayor comes out and says that no one can leave, and that Paris will rebuild. Everyone ignores him as they walk away. Arthur gets in his car and drives off, smiling as he passes the other people walking along the road out of town.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Arthur Waldo Arthur is a young man in rural Australia who is dependent on his older brother, George, until George dies in a car accident on the way to the small town of Paris. Arthur has no family apart from George and no other connections, skills, or ambitions.

Timid Throughout the film, Arthur barely speaks above a whisper. He often looks down, hangs back, and lingers in corners. His timidity may be what causes the mayor to decree that they will “keep” him instead of handing him over to the doctor for brain experiments; he seems easy to manipulate.

Damaged Arthur’s young adulthood has been marked by failure, dependence on George, and, most crucially, a sense of guilt for a car accident in which he was responsible for an old man’s death. The accident has made George afraid to drive, and the new accident only compounds Arthur’s psychic damage.

Open Although he originally wants to leave, Arthur is willing to make a go of it in Paris. He tries the hospital job the mayor gets for him. Even though he is unable to continue in this job, he accepts the mayor’s second offer of the position of Parking Superintendent. He is damaged but still open to growth.

Len Kelly Len Kelly is the mayor of Paris—and usually referred to by his position rather than by his name. In late middle age, he has a wife, Beth, and two adopted daughters. He governs Paris authoritatively, setting up an illegal scheme for the townspeople to make a living and brooking no opposition.

Proud The mayor is obviously proud of his town despite its poverty. He organizes events like the fancy-dress ball and runs city council meetings very formally. He dresses neatly and keeps everything in his life running predictably.

Unethical The mayor helms and presumably came up with the scheme to generate income and possessions for the townspeople by booby-trapping the road and causing car accidents that kill or maim the people involved. He has clearly lost his ethical bearings and tries to keep the criminal scheme going even when it means continuing to perpetrate and cover up murders.

Authoritarian In his personal and professional capacities, the mayor expects obedience. His wife and children never oppose him, and his wife refers to something she never does because “Len” does not like it. The men on the city council sometimes frown but never raise objections to anything he says.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Poverty 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.

Conformity 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 consensus 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.

POLITICS

Power 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 teamwork, local knowledge, and a willingness to commit crime. This is the power that the Parisians are using because they lack of other forms of power, such as money, cultural capital, or the political clout 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.

Conflict Although everyone in the town of Paris is on board with the criminal activity, a conflict nonetheless exists between the young men and everyone else. In an early scene between one young man, Darryl, and his boss, the doctor (Darryl is the one young man has a job and thus straddles both worlds), the older man is very patronizing to the younger. Another young man, Charlie, grumbles to the mayor at one point, “You always took all the best bits.” Charlie murders the minister because he wants his car, and he does so on his own because he believes it is the best way to ensure that he gets what he wants. The older people in the town seem to be merely annoyed the young men when they loiter and drive their cars loudly. But matters escalate when Darryl and another young man, Les, drive into the mayor’s fence and the mayor orders Les’s car to be burned as punishment. It is the following night that the young men “enhance” their cars with spikes and drive into town to destroy the buildings and kill any people who resist them. The mayor underestimates the young men’s frustration and their power.

JUSTICE

Crime *The Cars That Ate Paris* portrays a bizarre system of repeated, semi-organized crime. Because of the widespread rural poverty in Australia and dearth of regular employment opportunities, the townspeople of Paris have developed a scheme whereby one man keeps watch on the road into town, someone else then startles the driver with blinding lights as he or she comes around a curve, and the car goes toppling down the hill. With the human being(s) inside either killed or quickly neutralized by the cruel brain experiments of the local doctor, the townspeople are free to take whatever they can: clothes, watches, money, shoes, other objects in the cars, and, of course, the smashed-up cars themselves, which are either fixed or stripped for parts. The insurance man who comes to town after Arthur’s car crash is easily convinced by the city councilman’s explanation that darkness, a treacherous curve, and perhaps some alcohol were to blame. Clearly, no authorities care enough about Paris, Australia to investigate the murder, assault, medical malpractice, and theft taking place. Even the town’s ultimate downfall is brought about not by authorities but rather by the local young men who are fed up with getting less of the spoils than the men in charge.

RELATIONSHIPS

Family 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.

PSYCHOLOGY

Alienation Every single character in the film is alienated. All of them are alienated from Australian society in that they live in poor, rural areas and are being let down by the national government's failure to introduce programs that will ensure that such areas are not left behind economically and culturally. For most of the characters, the manifestation of this alienation is a willingness to resort to crime to make ends meet. They no longer see themselves as participating in a national social contract. This is even true of Arthur, who is uncomfortable with the criminal activities as soon as he learns about them (understandably, given that they caused his brother's death) but eventually participates in the car battle at the end of the film and kills Darryl in so doing. Meanwhile, the young men of Paris are doubly alienated in that they feel ignored by the local authorities and adults as well as the national authorities. This local alienation leads Charlie to murder the minister and spurs all the young men to destroy the town with their cars. They have no pride in a town that they believe to have let them down.

LIFE STAGES

Coming of age Arthur Waldo, the film's protagonist, is in his twenties. He tells the mayor's wife that his older brother, George, always took care of him. Since George dies at the beginning of the film, this is Arthur's first attempt to make it on his own. He is struggling to do so. After one day at his new job at the Paris hospital, Arthur tells the mayor's wife that he does not think he can go back because he found it too upsetting. In addition to holding down a job, Arthur also struggles with another hallmark of modern adult life: driving a car. Arthur's past experience of accidentally killing a man while driving has made him unwilling to get behind the wheel again. Near the end of the film, when one of the local young men drives his car into the garage where Arthur is hiding and tries to kill him, Arthur gets into another car for safety; the mayor appears and encourages Arthur to drive his car into the other man's car, repeatedly, until the other man is dead. Although Arthur is at first sad to see that the man is dead, he then smiles and says, "I can drive!" He drives out of town on his own at the end of the film.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Cars That Ate Paris* obviously presents an extreme example of resistance to social authority and norms. But did you ever find yourself relating to the characters' frustrations? Can you think of examples in your own experience of misbehaving as a form of resistance to inadequate or damaging social systems?
2. When the doctor and his "experiments" arrive at the fancy-dress ball, the townspeople stop dancing and stare uncomfortably at the newcomers. Do you interpret this as guilt over the consequences of their actions, or mere squeamishness at the sight of people who are now medically abnormal?
3. Arthur is talked into staying in Paris, joining the mayor's family, and becoming Parking Superintendent. What do you think motivates him to stay? Would you have stayed if you were in his situation? Why or why not?
4. Arthur regains his ability to drive by using his car to back into Darryl multiple times and kill him. He drives away from Paris at the end of the film. Is this a bizarre form of healing for Arthur? Or do you think he is more damaged than ever given that he has now killed another man with his car?
5. Compare and contrast *The Cars That Ate Paris* with either *Mad Max* (1979) or *Straw Dogs* (1971)—or, if you've seen neither of those films, with another film about youthful alienation or rural poverty.