



Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

The Cars That Ate Paris

The Cars That Ate Paris

Directed by: Peter Weir

©: Salt Pan Films Pty Ltd

Production Companies:

Australian Film Development Corporation,

Royce Smeal Productions

Produced by: Jim McElroy, Howard McElroy

Production Accountant: Pauline Ryan

Location Manager: Tom Hogan

Production Secretary: Pom Oliver

2nd Assistant Director: Ross Matthews

3rd Assistant Director: Chris Noonan

Continuity: Gilda Baracchi

Screenplay: Peter Weir

From a story by: Peter Weir, Keith Gow,

Piers Davies

Director of Photography: John McLean

Camera Operators: Richard Wallace,

Peter James, Andrew Fraser

Focus Puller: David Burr

Clapper Loader: Jimmy Allen

Gaffer: Tony Tegg

Key Grip: Grahame Mardell

Qasar Effects: Anthony G. Furse

Editor: Wayne LeClos

Assistant Editor: Tomash Pokorny

Art Director: David R. Copping

Propmaster: Neil Angwin

Standby Props: Monty Fieguth

Construction Manager: John Denton

Wardrobe: Ron Williams

Make-up: Liz Michie

Neg Cutting: Margaret Cardin

Filmed in: Panavision

Music Composed and Conducted by:

Bruce Smeaton

Sound Recordist: Ken Hammond

Boom Operator: Michael Midlam

Sound Mixer: Peter Fenton

Dubbing: United Sound

Sound Editor: Sara Bennett

Stunt Co-ordinator: Peter Armstrong

Action Vehicles: Alf Blight

Caterer: Harry Williams

Cast:

John Meillon (*mayor*)

Terry Camilleri (*Arthur Waldo*)

Kevin Miles (*Dr Midland*)

Max Gillies (*Metcalf*)

Danny Adcock (*policeman*)

Bruce Spence (*Charlie*)

Kevin Golsby (*insurance man*)

Chris Haywood (*Darryl*)

Peter Armstrong (*Gorman*)

Joe Burrow (*Ganger*)

Deryck Barnes (*Al Smedley*)

Edward Howell (*Tringham*)

Max Phipps (*Rev. Mulray*)

Melissa Jaffer (*Beth*)

Tim Robertson (*Les*)

Herbie Nelson (*man in house*)

Charlie Metcalfe (*Clive Smedley*) *

Frank Saba (*Con Lexux*) *

Rick Scully (*George Waldo*) *

Deryck Barnes (*Smedley*) *

Australia 1974

88 mins

Digital 4K (remaster)

Digitally remastered by the

National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

* Uncredited

Contemporary reviews

Paris, Australia, that is: a small collection of shabby houses with a ministering church and hospital, somewhere amongst the scrubwood and winding roads of the outback. Once it saw a gold rush; now it sees no one but its own dwindling inhabitants and the occasional motorist, lured there by the copious road signs. George and Arthur Waldo are among those lured: their car crashes; George is killed and Arthur recovers in hospital, alongside victims of similar accidents. After this, he doesn't feel much like driving a car and wanders about in a daze, forced to stay put in a community which gets more sinister day by day. Gradually it appears that the dying town is in the cliched position of living off the refuse of a materialistic society – symbolised in this instance by the automobile (the accidents are planned, the cars and victims then looted). But the obviousness of its theme has little adverse effect on the success of *The Cars That Ate Paris*, a grotesque and engaging horror-comedy and a fine feature debut by the Australian Peter Weir.

Weir's previous credits include a documentary about another isolated community – the Green Valley housing estate 25 miles west of Sydney (*Whatever Happened to Green Valley?*) – and while one can hardly say that *The Cars That Ate Paris* has a documentary 'feel', his directorial manner is cool and collected enough for the depicted events to seem startlingly matter-of-fact. The mayor is the most fully developed character in the bizarre drama; as played by John Meillon he recalls Robert Benchley without his befuddlement; he lives in a house of ghastly good Australian taste and vainly struggles to maintain respectability in the face of the hooligan car wreckers, who provide the town with its only action. Their leader is the cheery Dr Midland, who gives Arthur, our daft hero, a nightmare tour of the hospital's zombie inmates; a fringe member of the wrecking crew is the village idiot Charlie, so immensely elongated that he seems to have been in a drastic car crash himself. And none of the other townsfolk seem absolutely ordinary: they sit on their porches quietly polishing odd bits of dismantled cars (the hub of a wheel, a bumper) the way other people stroke cats or knit. Apart from Arthur, the only other character who seems free from the town's strange obsession is the eager new vicar, so run off his feet that he dashes to confront a waiting congregation still clutching his briefcase.

In the hallowed horror movie tradition, Arthur is about to tell the vicar his fears when his potential ally meets a nasty death offscreen – 'accidentally', the town decides. Now the movie's pace tightens and the eccentricities loom larger. The mayor chooses Arthur as the town's first Parking Officer, but the wreckers taunt him with threats. Finally they and their vehicles (specially reinforced with spikes, wire nets and other vicious impediments) move in to raze the town, which is having a dubiously festive time at the Pioneers' Ball, in honour of Paris' foundation. It's a marvellously funny sequence, and any participant in village fetes or church socials will recognise the seeds of truth: the lady pianist mechanically pounds out jolly tunes; the mayor half-heartedly leads the dancing; everyone's 'fancy dress' seems desperate. However, their costumes are nothing compared with those of the hospital patients, who make a triumphant entrance with cereal packets on their heads or cardboard boxes

Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

The Cars That Ate Paris

Mon 30 Mar 14:30; Tue 31 Mar 18:10;
Sat 11 Apr 20:40

Picnic at Hanging Rock (Director's Cut)

Mon 30 Mar 18:00 (+ extended intro by season
curator Elena Lazic); Thu 16 Apr 20:50

The Plumber

Tue 31 Mar 14:30; Wed 1 Apr 20:55; Thu 9 Apr
18:10 (+ discussion about Peter Weir as an
Australian director, with academic Dr Stephen
Morgan and film critic Tim Robey, hosted by season
curator Elena Lazic); Sat 25 Apr 20:45

Witness

Tue 31 Mar 20:40; Sun 5 Apr 12:00; Tue 14 Apr
20:40 (+ intro by season curator Elena Lazic)

The Last Wave

Wed 1 Apr 18:20; Sat 18 Apr 20:40 (+ intro by
producer Jeremy Thomas)

Gallipoli

Thu 2 Apr 18:20; Sat 25 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by
Dr Stephen Morgan, King's College London)

The Truman Show

Fri 3 Apr 18:10; Wed 8 Apr 20:45; Wed 22 Apr 20:40

The Year of Living Dangerously

Sat 4 Apr 14:40; Mon 20 Apr 20:30

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World

Sun 5 Apr 14:40; Sun 19 Apr 11:00 BFI IMAX
(+ Q&A)

The Mosquito Coast

Sun 5 Apr 18:20; Fri 24 Apr 20:35

Green Card

Mon 6 Apr 14:40; Tue 21 Apr 20:40

Fearless

Tue 7 Apr 18:15; Thu 23 Apr 20:30

Dead Poets Society

Sat 11 Apr 14:45; Fri 17 Apr 20:30

The Way Back

Sun 26 Apr 18:10; Thu 30 Apr 20:25

With thanks to

Peter and Ingrid Weir

The Cars That Ate Paris and *The Plumber* will be
released on BFI Blu-ray on 25 May

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**SIGHT
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round their waists. All scatter before the biffs and buffets of the cars; Paris' buildings collapse and the passive Arthur, in the driver's seat again, is whipped into fury, driving out of Paris with a new lust for life – or rather, death.

True, the movie has its faults: the pacing is often sluggish (particularly in the opening stages), the structuring of the story is haphazard, and most of the performances could be sharpened with benefit. But after the boorish and boring adventures of Alvin Purple and Barry McKenzie, it's refreshing and encouraging to find an Australian film which never wallows in its country's inglorious mores but uses them tactfully to further an intriguing and compelling narrative of its own.

Geoff Brown, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1975

Paris, in this case, is an outback Australian community not too distant from those little Western towns accustomed to remedial attention from such as Clint Eastwood. The law of the gun, however, has been replaced by the regime of the road, and the vehicles roaring joyously through the streets are close to severing all links with human control. Armoured mutants, so encrusted with chromium jaws and spikes that their drivers are lost to view, they charge across the society that fostered and exploited them until it at last collapses.

Like all the best fantasies, this one illuminates the truth with its headlights; the film's title in fact works as a metaphor, and Paris could as well be London, New York, or actually Paris. The erosion of humanity by malevolent technological influences is actually more cliché than truth, perhaps, and the peculiarly immediate effect of the car on the personality has been lovingly revealed by the cinema many times (*Point Blank*, *Weekend* and *Duel*, for example), but *The Cars That Ate Paris* is closer to *Dodes'ka-den* than to *The Wild One*, closer to Arrabal and Ballard than to Asimov. Which is not to say that the film is always certain of its destination; Australian domestic comedies, remorselessly twanging on the same threadbare lines of humour, have left their mark, and the Royal Portrait still hangs behind the mayoral desk.

The performances veer from competent to makeshift (with John Meillon not surprisingly stealing most of the glory in his haunted portrayal of the mayor), and the characterisations are as one-dimensional as relics from smoking concerts. But, as with that other masterpiece of anarchy, *Night of the Living Dead*, the suspension of conventional dramatic laws adds a curious potency to the thrust of the film, and we find ourselves in an uneasy and uncharted territory where logic has taken a blind turning and there is no escape route. 'Gosh, Lord,' says the vicar of Paris, presiding over yet another funeral, 'Sometimes Your ways are downright incomprehensible.' And by the time the town's adopted son is speeding off in search of fresh battles (as if the Starchild and the R.A.C. had joined in gleeful partnership), the cars have devoured everything and we know, with a hilarious terror, exactly what he means.

Philip Strick, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1975