

The 2010
David Lean
Lecture

delivered by
Peter Weir

6 December 2010



BRITISH ACADEMY
OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS



Picnic At Hanging Rock (1975)



PICNIC/BEE/AUST FILM COMMISSION/DAVID KYNOCH

Gallipoli (1981)



ASSOC R&R FILMS/PARAMOUNT

Cover: Weir on set of *The Mosquito Coast* (1986)

Introduction

by Jonathan Rayner

AN AWARD-WINNING director of distinction and finesse, Peter Weir has an admirable body of work that reflects his key role in the Australian New Wave of the mid-1970s, through to his remarkable standing within contemporary Hollywood.

After dropping out of university and travelling across Europe, Weir worked in television before joining the Commonwealth Film Unit. With his segment (*Michael*) in the CFU portmanteau film *Three To Go* (1971) and acclaimed independent short *Homesdale* (1971), Weir was at the forefront of the Australian revival even before his first feature, *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974).

Jean-Luc Godard's influence on *Michael* and the gothic allegory driving *Homesdale* became fully realised in *Cars*' unpredictable shifts in tone from horror to comedy to social satire. His debut feature now stands as a classic of Australian Gothic and a key New Wave film.

Enigmatic drama *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975) retained the gothic atmosphere of *Cars*, but integrated European style and Impressionist aesthetics to create an Australian art cinema. It was one of the first Australian features to reach an international audience. His status was then cemented by WWI drama *Gallipoli* (1981), a prestige project that united national cinema with national history.

Bigger productions followed, which led to the critically-acclaimed romantic drama *The Year Of Living Dangerously* (1982) and hit thriller *Witness* (1985), which showcased Weir's

deft handling of mainstream productions and garnered his first BAFTA and Oscar nominations.

International recognition followed for *Dead Poets Society* (1989), a moving drama set in an all-boys school which critiqued American post-war conservatism and echoed the depiction of Victorian repression in the all-girls school of *Picnic At Hanging Rock*. It earned Weir his first BAFTA win (Best Film). *The Truman Show* (1998) memorably satirised the American media and reality TV, and brought Weir a BAFTA win for Direction.

Though not as commercially successful, *The Mosquito Coast* (1986) and *Fearless* (1993) explored the same themes of alienation, identity, morality and mortality that inspired Weir's earlier supernatural thriller *The Last Wave* (1977). These themes are also embedded in the screwball comedy of *Green Card* (1991) and the Western in *Witness*.

Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World (2003) is a masterwork, an intellectual action film which scrutinises authority, loyalty and integrity, and is imbued with immersive detail alongside a distancing realism. It earned Weir his second BAFTA win for Direction, his third to date.

Weir's latest feature *The Way Back* (2010) is, in contrast to *Master And Commander*, a modest independent production. However, it embraces diverse international locations and Hollywood stars with the same level of visionary grandeur and dramatic gravitas that have come to typify his work.

Dr Jonathan Rayner is a Reader in Film Studies at the University of Sheffield, and author of *The Films Of Peter Weir* and *Contemporary Australian Cinema*.

Weir directs Mel Gibson in *The Year Of Living Dangerously* (1982)



MGM/UA

With Russell Crowe on *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World* (2003)



20TH CENTURY FOX/UNIVERSAL

In His Own Words

Much is made of David Lean's ability to combine the intimate with the epic, and rightly so: he was also a brilliant Editor. His feeling for structure and his sense of rhythm were valuable lessons in my own long apprenticeship. Therefore it is doubly gratifying to have twice received the BAFTA award bearing his great name.

Orange British Academy Film Awards Souvenir Brochure, 2007

On film production

An extraordinary feeling of the proximity of chaos hovers around a film set. That is dangerous to the director because it is all-pervasive and you can get very rattled. People are under great stress and are very excited and determined to do their best. In the early days of a shoot, people trip and knock things over until the unit is in rhythm, which sometimes doesn't happen until quite late. In those early weeks it can be very chaotic and you need to develop your own approach to combat that, to harness it, or your ideas can begin to disintegrate.

35mm Dreams: Conversations with Five Directors About The Australian Film Revival, 1984

On style

I've tried, to some extent, to disassemble my style, to fight against my own signature. Because I've observed that the great post-war directors from Europe, the great stylists – eventually, their horizons began to narrow. And I found myself tuning out their films because the subject became less and less important. So I decided I would try to be unpredictable and just look for good stories.

Premiere, 1989

On 'less is more'

When the Hays Code [which governed Hollywood movies between 1930–1966] operated, directors were far more inventive with the way they showed strong attraction between male and female, love and lust. With the Hays Code gone – and who would argue it should be there – I tried to use the lessons I learned from those directors, that less is more. You allow the viewers to join in making the film and apply their imagination. I like to make films in which, at least emotionally, you are joining in and completing the picture with me.

Pitch Weekly, 1998

Advice to first-time directors

Don't give your big ideas up because of budget; try and do the same idea another way. Second of all, write down anything you want to do, no matter how outrageous it might sound. You never have enough time or money, whether it's a big film, or a little film. Also, keep dialogue constantly going between yourself, your actors, and your crew. Keep the collaboration alive throughout.

The Hollywood Interview, 2005

INSIGHTS: CAST & CREW



Ed Harris

The Truman Show (1998), *The Way Back* (2010)

Back in 1998, I was asked to meet Peter Weir about a role in *The Truman Show*. My heart skipped a beat, knowing I'd soon be meeting one of the greatest film directors of all time. I had been a huge admirer of Peter's films since *Picnic At Hanging Rock*.

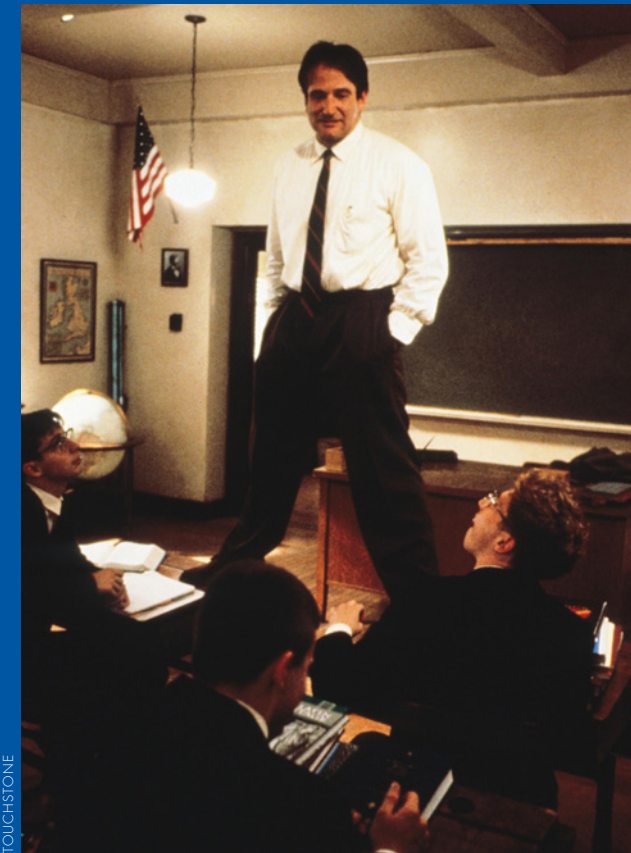
Cast as Christof, the God-like creator and manipulator of Truman's world, I literally had two days before I was to begin filming. Thankfully, I was working on a Peter Weir film: his 'book' for the film was filled with sensory images of what he was after, his description and ideas about Christof were inspiring and provocative and his meticulous

attention to detail made me quickly realise I was in strong, highly intelligent, passionate hands.

Peter's single-mindedness when he is directing is astonishing. You know his laser-like focus is paying attention to your every move, every inflection, every emotional detail. For an actor who loves to work with artists who pursue the truth relentlessly – Peter is like manna from heaven.

When he asked me if I would play Mister Smith in *The Way Back*, it was the fulfilment of a wish. It had been 12 years since we worked together... and I was ready to go wherever Mr Weir was leading me.

Harris was BAFTA-nominated for his performance as Christof in The Truman Show.



Robin Williams

Dead Poets Society (1989)

Peter Weir is an extraordinary director but he is also a teacher. I would have to say more like a cinematic sensei. He would play classical music before scenes and inspire both the boys and myself to push the creative envelope. He also gave me an invaluable piece of advice. He told me that silence and stillness have great power and for someone who thought they had

to fill every pause, this was a revelation. Doing a movie with Peter definitely changes you and I would have to say not just as a performer, but as a human being.

Thank you, My Captain.

Robin Williams
Dead Poets Society, Class of 1989

Williams was BAFTA-nominated for his performance as John Keating in Dead Poets Society.

Russell Boyd

Director of Photography

I have had the great fortune to work on six of Peter's films as his cinematographer.

Story, story and story are what Peter thinks most about when he is preparing or shooting a film. His ideas flow at a rate that takes one's breath away and his attention to detail and his research often provide him with clues for scenes.

Peter then proceeds to tell the story with great subtlety and emotion. He always sets up a wonderful ambience on the set that makes his actors feel comfortable with the characters they are playing.

He often plays music on set, even through takes at times if he feels the mood is required and can usually be seen playing a CD through a boom box as he wanders through the set. The music can be anything from Bach's cello concerto to Pink Floyd.

Two pearls of wisdom I will never forget from Peter were along the lines of: "Part of the art of directing is knowing how to turn a compromise into a bonus." Also: "When you come onto a film with me, you'll be going on an adventure."

Peter always provides incredible inspiration to the people around him and makes the making of the film a great, memorable experience.

Boyd won a BAFTA for Picnic At Hanging Rock and was nominated for Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World. He's also collaborated with Weir on Gallipoli, The Year Of Living Dangerously and The Way Back.

William Anderson

Editor

Signing on to do a movie with Peter Weir was always a bit like joining Hannibal's march. Many hours, men and materials would be required but Peter was a consummate leader taking his crew into the heart of the story.

His casual Australian demeanour only somewhat disguised his exacting methods in filmmaking. When I first began working with Peter, he arrived in the cutting room sporting khaki shorts and I was surprised to see that he had tattoos about his knees. When I worked up the courage to ask him what they meant, he said that he had been taking notes on his thighs as he watched the cuts so he wouldn't forget anything.

Peter enjoyed the collaboration and camaraderie that come with filmmaking and was always open to ideas and suggestions. But he also never lost his vision for his films and his focus on getting the end result.

On Dead Poets Society, my assistant and I were doing our best with the hours of ad lib footage that naturally comes when one puts a camera before Robin Williams. Peter arrived at the cutting room to ask if we have any plans for our evening. What plans could we have at this late hour? Thinking Peter was going to take us out for a midnight supper we told him we had no plans. "In that case," said Peter, "Let's cut another scene."

Anderson was BAFTA-nominated for Dead Poets Society. He's also collaborated with Weir on Gallipoli, The Year Of Living Dangerously, Green Card, Fearless and The Truman Show.



TOUCHSTONE

Andie MacDowell

Green Card (1990)

Peter Weir was a great leader. He was kind, gentle, but definitely the one everyone listened to. He had the most respect for his crew that I have ever witnessed and in return he was loved with devotion that he earned.

There was always a feeling of peace and creativity on the set and everyone worked together as a team. Peter loved to gather the cast and crew together in the mornings for some kind of motivation, celebration, a game or something that made us all laugh.

There were no feelings of above and below the line... there was no line and this made for a set that felt even and humble.

I never heard him raise his voice; I never saw him get angry. He always thanked people. He is a master filmmaker; he has all the technical skills and brilliance to match any of our best directors, but he has something that I have not often seen that makes him the man that he is. He knows how to treat people.

I was young and inexperienced and I had no idea how lucky I was to be there. Not that I wasn't pleased and thankful because I was. However, I am older, wiser and more experienced now. He is a beautiful man and to me, that is much more than being a great filmmaker.

Witness (1985)



ASSOC R&R FILMS/PARAMOUNT

The Truman Show (1998)



PARAMOUNT/MELINDA SUE GORDON

Filmography

- 2010 *The Way Back*¹
- 2003 *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*¹
- 1998 *The Truman Show*
- 1993 *Fearless*
- 1990 *Green Card*¹
- 1989 *Dead Poets Society*
- 1986 *The Mosquito Coast*
- 1985 *Witness*
- 1982 *The Year Of Living Dangerously*²
- 1981 *Gallipoli*²
- 1979 *The Plumber* (TV)²
- 1977 *The Last Wave*²
- 1976 *Luke's Kingdom* (TV)
- 1975 *Picnic At Hanging Rock*
- 1974 *The Cars That Ate Paris*²
- 1973 *The Auntie Jack Show* (TV)³
- 1971 *Three To Go* (segment: 'Michael')²
- 1969 *Man On A Green Bike* (TV)

Short Films

- 1979 *Heart, Head And Hand*
- 1975 *Three Workshop Films*
- 1974 *Fugue*³
- 1973 *Whatever Happened To Green Valley*
- 1973 *The Fifth Façade*³
- 1972 *Incredible Floridas*
- 1972 *The Billiard Room*
- 1972 *The Computer Centre*
- 1972 *Boat Builders*
- 1972 *The Country Couldn't Do Without You*
- 1972 *Field Day*
- 1972 *Australia Colour Diary No. 43: Two Directions In Australian Pop Music*
- 1971 *Homesdale*²
- 1971 *Tempo: Australia in the '70s*³
- 1970 *Stirring the Pool*
- 1968 *The Life And Flight Of The Reverend Buck Shotte*
- 1967 *Count Vim's Last Exercise*

¹ Also wrote and produced ² Also wrote ³ Writer only

SELECT AWARDS

BAFTA Wins

- Director *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*
- Director *The Truman Show*
- Best Film *Dead Poets Society*

BAFTA Nominations

- Best Film *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*
- Original Screenplay *Green Card*
- Director *Dead Poets Society*
- Best Film *Witness*

Oscar Nominations

- Director *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*
- Best Picture *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*
- Director *The Truman Show*
- Original Screenplay *Green Card*
- Director *Dead Poets Society*
- Director *Witness*

THE DAVID LEAN LECTURE

The Academy's annual David Lean Lecture is generously funded by The David Lean Foundation. The lecture series serves to continue the legacy of the great director David Lean, one of the founders of the British Film Academy (as it was then known) in 1947 and a continuing inspiration to many through his exceptional body of work.

Previous David Lean Lectures have been given by:

- 2009 Atom Egoyan
- 2008 Lean Centenary Celebration
- 2007 David Lynch
- 2006 Oliver Stone
- 2005 Woody Allen
- 2004 John Boorman
- 2003 Ken Loach
- 2002 Robert Altman
- 2001 Sydney Pollack

A webcast from tonight's lecture will be made available online at www.bafta.org.

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THANKS

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Robin Williams

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