

Weir(d) Australia: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*

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Australian New Wave cinema of the 1970s and early '80s is usually understood as a nationing rhetoric, a conscious effort at fashioning a unified national identity. Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* is a perfect instance of such patriotic myth-making, embodying within its three-part structure the legends of the bushman, the larrikin, and the Anzac (Rattigan 137). But Weir's other Australian films seem haunted by the forces excluded from this founding myth of social cohesion. Isn't it strange that one film frequently cited as a quintessential example of the Australian New Wave is entitled *The Last Wave* and has as its subject the imminent demise of white Australia as predicted by the Aborigines? And is there not also something peculiar in the fact that perhaps the first definitive film of the new Australian cinema is a mystery without a solution, based on a novel published without its last chapter? As John Taylor has suggested, "historians might well decide that [the] indirect result [of the decision to cut the ending from Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*] was the creation of the Australian film industry as we know it—because it is highly unlikely that there would have been a rush to buy the film rights in 1972 if Chapter Eighteen had not been deleted" (8). What is this national cinema founded on mystery and exemplified by apocalypse? I will argue that Weir's early Australian films are haunted by the uncanny in the homeland they are in the process of defining, that they are demystifications of the very myths that give white Australia its identity.

Among the first images in Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, set in the year before Australian independence, is that of Appleyard College, "already, in the year 1900, an architectural anachronism in the Australian bush—a hopeless misfit in time and place" (Lindsay 8): "The College, glimpsed through the dusty gold and grey-green gums. Foursquare and

incongruous. An island of hard stone and English garden, marooned in the bush, dreaming of Europe. Hopelessly" (Green 4). This hopeless dream might be described as the colonizer's nostalgic desire to convert the foreign into the familiar, to sublimate an unruly land into an ordered landscape, but there is something in the bush that resists revision, that confronts the cultural imperialist with an unseemly scene, an uncanny *déjà vu*: "Landscape [is] like the 'dreamwork' of imperialism, unfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both the utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and *fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance*" (Mitchell 19; italics added). If Mrs. Appleyard, the proper headmistress of this girls' boarding school who would indoctrinate her pupils in the ways of the homeland, is dreaming nostalgically of England, then Miranda, one of the rebellious girls, seems to be having Mrs. Appleyard's worst nightmare: an early shot of Miranda's sleeping face would indicate that it is she who imagines the very first scene in the film, where Hanging Rock emerges uncannily from a primordial mist. If the ideal dream-vista would be that of a Renaissance perspectivism in which the "I" is master of all it surveys, its self-possession validated by the country it owns, then the Rock appears as if from the unconscious to challenge self-presence and colonialist complacency: "The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression. There is, however, always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present" (Bhabha 295).

Hanging Rock or, more generally, the bush is experienced as a darkness at the heart of white civilization. As Weir has said, "We, forty million of us, live hard along the coasts. We're mostly in the cities on the edge of this vast continent. It's just there to be seen if you live there. It affects you even if you're not conscious of it—that great emptiness" (qtd. in Jameson 339). This unsettling emptiness becomes a blank screen for the projection of dread and desire concerning the inhospitable Other, culture's defining opposite: "The Australian landscape has not been incorporated into the European symbolic order, except as a motif of the 'extra-cultural,' as a sublime structuring void looming over all Australian culture. . . . [T]he landscape becomes a projective screen for a persistent national neurosis deriving from the fear and fascination of a preternatural continent" (Gibson 45, 50); "what is overwhelmingly projected is the otherness, contradictoriness or lurking

horror of nature in Australia, and the dwarfed and marginal part played by man" (Collier and Davis 29). The bush reminds white Australians of the vast extent to which they are not at home in their homeland, that their national identity is founded on repression of all that must be kept "outback." We might call this a *national* uncanny, building on the concept that Freud once defined in terms of the individual psyche: "the word 'heimlich' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight. . . . Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" ("Uncanny" 224–25, 226).

The national uncanny is a figure for the return of what a country has repressed in order to establish its identity as master; it is the all-too-familiar threat of dispossession by strangers, of self-estrangement. If *Hanging Rock* seems to loom menacingly over Appleyard College, it is because the Rock is a projection of white Australia's fears which, since they have been repressed, now appear to come at society from the outside, as something disturbingly other. For Michael Fitzhubert, Australian colonist from England, the Rock represents his fear of the native Other as a threat to white women, but it also projects his unconscious desire, prohibited by his culture and thus repressed, to make sexual contact with these women himself. It has often been noted that, whereas "the characters and situations" in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* "emanate from nineteenth century melodrama" with its exaggerated conflict between good and evil (McFarlane and Mayer 57), the film does not provide the morally complacent resolution characteristic of melodramatic endings: "In its paucity of morality-directed cues and in its failure to adhere to a cathartic resolution to its central question, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* becomes an enigma rooted in ambiguity" (Novak and Breen 5). John Tulloch has shown how, in the genre of "bush melodrama" typical of 1920s Australian films, the white male hero would ensure cultural continuity—"the legitimate transfer of patriarchal right" and "the purity of the patriarch's daughter"—through the "rescue of the young woman taken by the Aborigines" (177–78). But in Weir's film, not only does Michael seem to fail in his attempt to rescue his beloved Miranda, there are clues suggesting that he may have raped her himself, then murdered and buried her to cover up his crime.

I submit that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an enigma rooted in *ambivalence*, that what happened to the girls remains a mystery because the

film screens the Australian colonists' unconscious fears and desires; the narrative is overdetermined in the sense of representing a variety of psychosocial fantasies. Weir has said that "[t]here are, after all, things within our own minds about which we know far less than about disappearances at Hanging Rock" (qtd. in Dawson 83). Quite so: when the girls disappear into that crevice, they fissure Michael's cultural identity, opening a gap between white savior and primitive rapist. The Rock splits Michael's consciousness as an uncanny reminder of his divided psyche. If the story that the colonists whisper to themselves about what happened to the girls on the Rock may be likened to the culturally authorized explanation in Forster's *A Passage to India* (rape by the native Other), then the even more unspeakable tale barely admitted to consciousness is similar to that in Kleist's "The Marquise of O" (the woman raped by her would-be savior—by one of her own).

The rift in the white male psyche is dramatized in the contrast between the superegoistic aristocrat Michael and the more openly libidinal working-class Albert. When Michael attempts to censor Albert's expression of desire for Miranda, Albert's retort is revealing: "I say the crude things. You just think 'em." Michael's persistent image of Miranda as an elusive swan is akin to Mlle. de Poitiers' vision of her as the angel of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*; both are artistic sublimations of the venereal, idealizations that evade sexual desire. Michael's recurrent dreams of Miranda and his obsessive return to the scene of her disappearance suggest a need to relive the trauma of her loss in an effort to master it, to rewrite the scene with himself as her savior: "the symptom appears as a repeated attempt to 'bind' and abreact the trauma," to anticipate and defend against the shock so that it will not again take the ego by surprise (Laplanche and Pontalis 470); "dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident. . . . These dreams are endeavouring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis" (Freud, "Beyond" 13, 32).

Michael does prove instrumental in saving one of the girls, Irma, who promptly falls romantically in love with her rescuer. That Michael finds the pleasant prospect of this socially approved match unsatisfactory (the sentimental resolution of a bush melodrama) shows that his drive to return to the Rock is motivated by other desires. As Rosemary Jackson explains, "The uncanny expresses drives which have to be repressed for the sake of cultural continuity. . . . Taboos are the strongest inhibitions which a culture imposes to guarantee its

survival. The major ones, according to Freud, are taboos on incest (a desire for the mother) and death (a desire to touch or make contact with corpses)" (70). Film critics often speak rather quickly and with some embarrassment of the phallic peaks and vaginal caves of the Rockscape in which Michael searches for Miranda, but it is perhaps time to give these Freudian concepts our unrepressed attention. Near the climax of Michael's search, just as he seems on the verge of reuniting with the lost Miranda, we see him crawling in an extraordinary attraction-repulsion near the entrance of a cave in the Rock: "*Michael crawls towards the monolith, towards what looks like hair growing weirdly out of the side of the rock,*" towards what is later revealed to be, in Albert's repetition of Michael's search, "*the entrance to the tiny cave beneath the monolith*" (Green 62, 64). According to Freud:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that "Love is homesickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is familiar to me, I've been here before," we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body. In this case too, then, the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix "*un*" ["un-"] is the token of repression. ("Uncanny" 245)

While Michael the would-be cultural hero dreams of recovering an idealized Miranda as a kind of return to his mother country (England, symbolized by the portraits of Queen Victoria), the libidinal Michael feels an uncanny desire to reunite with the originary mother, a tabooed, pre-civilized desire figured as an urge to crawl into the Aboriginal bush.

The entrance to the cave, however, is guarded by prickly plants, tumescent rocks, and a towering monolith, projections of Michael's fear of paternal castration for his culturally unauthorized desire for the mother: "*Prickly grey-green dogwood tears at his fine English skin. Huge rocks and boulders block his path, each a nightmare obstacle to be somehow got around, clambered over, crawled under. They grow larger and more fantastic. . . . The monolith, black against the sun*" (Green 62). The socially conditioned guilt Michael feels over desires improper in an English gentleman is repressed and projected onto the "alien" landscape, whose desired cave and dreaded monolith seem to beckon and block simultaneously, whose "foreign" influence seems to exert itself on the

colonist from outside. Freud, himself a pioneer in ethnocentric psychoanalytic anthropology as well as a diagnostician of such Western projections onto the racial Other, can help us understand how Aboriginal sacred sites and totems become invested in the white imaginary with both a longed-for maternal aura and a feared paternal threat. In Freud's theory of primitive races, sons killed the primal father who had been hording all the women and erected a totem in his place, which thereafter served as a reminder of both transgressive desire and paternal prohibition: "Totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to allay that feeling and to appease the father by deferred obedience to him" ("Totem" 145). Freud believed that animism—the idea of totemic figures as threatening, like that of sacred spaces as soothing—is really an effect of the uncanny, the result of repression and projection: "It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as 'uncanny' fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them into expression" ("Uncanny" 240–41). Hence the cave's sexual allure for Michael, countered by the monolith's castrative threat, both experienced by "civilized" man as "primitive" external forces rather than as his own projections onto Aboriginal sacred spaces and totems.

It should be noted that Michael's relationship with his aunt or mother-substitute is proper in the extreme: Weir presents the Fitzhubert family—figures of mother, father, and son—taking tea in the bush as a frozen tableau—a still life or *nature morte*. Small wonder, then, that Michael imagines a family romance to circumvent the incest barrier, a desire to unite with Miranda in the (Ab)original cave perceived as a more sexually vital environment. But his fear of interdiction gets the better of him, replacing the dream of fulfilled desire with disappearance and death: Michael blacks out on the verge of attaining his object, repressing desire from consciousness, and even Albert, who repeats Michael's search and expresses Michael's desire in a somewhat less censored form, can only imagine his own entrance into the cave as resulting in a girl's dead body:

Albert pauses, moves forward, hesitates, then drives himself towards it. A shred of fine paper [left by Michael] is lying at the entrance to the tiny cave beneath the monolith. The buzzing of flies is almost intolerably loud. A girl, lying face downwards. . . . To Albert, a dead thing; hated; corrupted. . . . A

big blow-fly crawls out of a nostril. Albert gags, is almost sick, he forces himself to touch and hold one severely scratched wrist. Suddenly, as Albert stares at the hated thing, there is a flick of life from Irma. . . . Albert's horror is overwhelming. (Green 64–65).

The son punishes himself for his unauthorized sexual desires by converting the longed-for maternal body into a corpse, as if he had corrupted it. Paternal threat is fused onto maternal allure, resulting in a condensed image of the *female fatale* or womb-tomb. It is as though the son, in his search for an alternative to the death-in-life of his actual family relations (that eminently civilized and static tableau), can only imagine wild (that is, unsanctioned) sexual contact as necrophilia—a corrupting fly in the nose, an animated corpse, the embrace of the living dead.

This dreaded death would seem to be the opposite of the desire for the mother, with one the punishment for the other, but it is worth recalling Freud's point that the uncanny may express both incestuous desire *and* an urge even more culturally proscribed: to touch or make contact with corpses. If Michael's repetitive dreams of Miranda and his continual return to the scene of her disappearance could indicate a need to master the trauma of her loss, either by preserving her virginity in his "civilized" role as savior-hero or by making sexual contact with her in his "Aboriginal" role as rebel son, then these dreamy returns might also be taken as a sign of repetition compulsion, of an unconscious death drive underlying the pleasure principle. Freud theorized that beneath the ego's will to mastery (its identification with the ego-ideal or superego) and beneath the id's desire to cathect to an object (its union with the beloved) there is an urge to discharge all energy and return to an inanimate state of zero-tension and primal unity. Freud's explorations into the uncanny led him ultimately to the theory of this death drive as the uncanny underside of the pleasure principle. Albert's horror at contact with what looks like an animated corpse may thus be reinterpreted as a repressed and projected desire to touch the dead, to become the living dead, to resolve the tension between desire and prohibition by returning to a unified state prior to their split. Similarly, Michael's repeated crossings of the line between superego and id, white man and "Aborigine," may be seen as ob-scene, an attempt to reject his culture's defining opposition between civilization and bush. Eschewing both repressive order and chaotic wildness in favor of something not yet defined (in Western terms), Michael moves toward the more truly other—not the Aboriginal as the white man's mirror opposite, but something prior to that division, both different and yet the same:

What will return [*reviendra*], in having already come, not in order to contradict the P[leasure] P[rinciple], nor to oppose itself to the PP, but to mine the PP as its proper stranger, to hollow it into an abyss from the vantage of an origin more original than it and independent of it, older than it within it, will not be, under the name of the death drive or the repetition compulsion, an *other master* or a *counter-master*, but something other than mastery, something completely other. (Derrida 545)

Picnic at Hanging Rock equivocates: the (Ab)original landscape is figured as an erotic alternative to repressed civilization, but feared as death to the social boundaries that have defined and secured the ego. However, the bush also represents for the white imaginary the utopian possibility of a unity beyond the very opposition between Eros and Thanatos, an alternative to alienation itself, an uncanny home before homelessness. Amid its ambivalent evocations of dread and desire, Weir's film hints at a primordial oneness underlying division—perhaps the ultimate wish-fulfillment fantasy. After Mrs. Appleyard warns the virginal girls to beware of the Rock's "Venomous snakes," Miss McCraw continues the sexual metaphor but turns it toward something less phobic in her description of the Rock's creation: "Silicious lava, forced up from deep down below; soda trachytes extruded in a highly viscous state, building the steep-sided mametons we see in Hanging Rock." In Miss McCraw's fantasy, the Rock is erected as the embodiment of the primal energy underlying civilization, the pre-history beneath history's forms and customs; it is the "mameton" or pagan god repressed and sublimated into Christianity. Following the girls' disappearance on the Rock, Rosamund, one of the survivors, cries in church when the congregation sings "Rock of Ages" ("cleft for me; / let me hide / myself in thee"). Ostensibly, she is a Christian mourning the loss of her friends to the pagan Rock, but, given the oppressive environment of Appleyard College, Rosamund may well wish that she too had found refuge in a primordial Rock less restrictive than Peter's.

During the picnic scene itself, Weir films the girls from a very low angle as they stand at the base of the Rock: towering above the row of girls' faces appears to be another row of male visages within the anthropomorphic Rockface—rapists, lovers, or something in-between. As the girls climb the Rock, we get high-angle views of them as if looking down from the Rockface's perspective, or we look out at the girls from the inside of caves as though the Rockscape were animistically invested with eyes. At a climactic moment, a shot of Miranda's turning face dissolves into a shot of what she sees as she's turning, the

whirling Rockface—seer and scene made one, self and other reconciled. Miranda and the girls then remove some of their clothes (the membrane separating colonizer from indigenous country); they fall into a deep sleep (accessing the repressed unconscious); and finally they rise in slow motion (prehistoric time) and enter the Rock.

The (Ab)original landscape is here imagined as a pagan masculinity that is the natural counterpart to civilization's repressed virginity, its fructifying agent. Juxtapositions which in a horror movie would be designed to provoke fright, such as that between girls and snakes or lizards, are here used to eroticize the exotic, to idealize an alien landscape as naturally vital, our original native land. As Weir put it, "For me, the grand theme was Nature, and even the girls' sexuality was as much a part of that as the lizard crawling across the top of the rock. They were part of the same whole" (qtd. in McFarlane and Ryan 326). Weir's depiction of the homey Rock probably gets its cue from Joan Lindsay's novel, which also invests the Rockscape with an aura of maternal plenitude: "Suddenly overcome by an overpowering lassitude, all four girls flung themselves down on the *gently sloping rock in the shelter* of the monolith, and there fell into a sleep so deep that a horned lizard emerged from a crack to lie *without fear in the hollow of Marion's outflung arm*" (41; italics added).

It is important to stress the extent to which the original landscape being fantasized here is an Aboriginal one. Hanging Rock has the attributes it does because of its association in the white imaginary with Aboriginal totems and sacred sites. As Nancy D. Munn notes, "Aboriginal law is said to be in the ground, especially the rocks. . . . The Law's *visible signs* are topographic 'markings'—rocks, rock crevices . . . —remnants of the multiple, so-called totemic ancestors who made the land into distinguishable shapes" (453). What the girls experience on the Rock is a national uncanny, the return of their felt connection to the Aboriginal landscape, a belonging that had been repressed by the English cultural imperialism of Appleyard College. In Yvonne Rousseau's words, "Although each girl owes her spirit to an Australian Ancestor, her traditions (and, perhaps, some adulteration of her spirit) are derived from another land, and she is ignorant even of the entities around her which spring from the same Ancestor's life-atoms as herself— . . . her totemic kin" (103). Lying peacefully with the lizard, Marion is reunited with her totem spirit; she and the other girls enter the Rock and are returned to their primordial Mother Country in the Aboriginal Dreamtime: "Transformed into some portion of the landscape we know, she enters the consciousness of that

landscape, on behalf of all members of her race who share her totem; the landscape then 'knows' them, as part of the 'Dreaming' reality" (Rousseau 119). The epigraph to Weir's film—"What we see and what we seem are but a dream, a dream within a dream"—may be a quote from Edgar Allan Poe, but this notion of a deeper reality underlying mere civilization is given a specifically Aboriginal inflection in the film; it is figured in terms of totemic ancestors, the Rock as sacred site, and the Eternal Dreamtime.

Whereas the bush melodramas of the 1920s demonized the Aborigines as white women's captors and rapists, Weir's (and Lindsay's) liberal sensibility projects onto Aboriginal myth an idealized notion of sexual freedom and natural belonging in a womblike native land. Commentators have gone so far as to claim that the girls' experience on the Rock "suggests an ecofeminist ethic," "an emergent caring relationship" between the self and its environment (Aitken and Zonn 208). Weir's film may be usefully compared to the work of surrealists such as Andre Breton and Alberto Giacometti, with their idealized primitivism and their dream-interpretations stressing love and liberation over any potentially nightmarish aspects of the uncanny. However, as Hal Foster has explained, the uncanny is not so easily disambiguated: "Bretonian surrealists often sought to overcome this ambivalence through feminized images of happiness, but the auratic redemptive-maternal aspect of this feminine imaginary is never quite free from its anxious deathly-erotic aspect" (198). The same could be said for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: as we have seen, its fantasy of the Aboriginal cave as the fulfillment of our longing for home, as a true belonging apart from the alienation of white civilization, is continually disturbed by xenophobic nightmares of the Other as threat to national identity and self-possession, by fears of kidnapping, rape, and the ultimate dispossession, death.

The Aboriginal subtext of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* surfaces as a main theme in Weir's next film, *The Last Wave*. David Burton, a well-to-do corporate tax attorney in 1970s Sydney, has his complacency disturbed by dreams of revenant Aborigines and diluvian apocalypse. Having helped corporate polluters evade their civic responsibility, David now has guilty visions of black rain, hail-bombs, and a giant tidal wave to come as Nature's revenge on white Australia. David receives these visions through Aboriginal messengers who surface like the return of the repressed—tribal Aborigines who were driven underground along with the sewage that Sydney would just as soon forget. In the sewer tunnels are wall paintings that predict the great flood:

David's dream thus condenses two fears, that of Nature's punishment for polluting the earth and that of the Aborigines' revenge for near-genocide, the connection between the two being the close relationship that is supposed to exist between the Aboriginal people and the land. As Neil Rattigan has argued, "It is to be borne in mind that white Australian culture never, at the bottom line, truly *believes* it actually belongs in Australia. . . . Australian culture is never truly at peace with being the inheritor of a nation gained by one group of dispossessed dispossessing the members of a prior culture" (21–22).

David is haunted by the uncanny presence of tribal Aborigines within the white city, inside his bourgeois home, infiltrating his rational mind. The hierarchical relation of center to periphery is destabilized if tribal people inhabit the city; "that boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality" (Bhabha 300). When an Aboriginal man standing outside a window in the rain suddenly appears inside David's house and when, near the end of the film, the rain intrudes through doors, windows, and roof into the home, the haunted-house motif figures the permeability of middle-class material comfort to mortal fear. As Anthony Vidler has written of ghosts and haunted houses, "At the heart of the anxiety provoked by such alien presences was a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home. The uncanny, in this sense, might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear" (3–4).

In psychoanalytic terms, the ghostly Aboriginal appears to David as his dark double, which Freud called "the uncanny harbinger of death" ("Uncanny" 235). A man like David yet other than him, mysterious yet disturbingly familiar, the Aboriginal seems to confirm David's own suspicions of a world beyond that of white middle-class Sydney, a world overwhelming in its implications for Sydney's materialist complacency. In Hélène Cixous' reading of Freud, "The direct figure of the uncanny is the Ghost" or double:

What is an absolute secret, something absolutely new and which should remain hidden, because it has shown itself to me, is the fact that I am dead; only the dead know the secret of death. Death will recognize us, but we shall not recognize it. . . . What is intolerable is that the Ghost erases the limit which exists between the two states, neither alive nor dead; passing through, the dead man returns in the manner of the Repressed. (542–43)

In a series of shot/reverse-shot exchanges emphasizing their mirroring aspect, the Aboriginal appears to David to reveal to him the secret

of his own mortality, the dispossessed reminding the colonizers of the limits of their expansionism. Rising from the underground in which white consciousness had sought to bury him, the Aboriginal hails David as himself one of the dead, equally subject to dispossession. As a child, David was afraid to sleep for fear that taxi drivers on night shift would steal his body and take it on a long ride to another world. Now, white Australia's fear of not being inalienably at home seems confirmed in the person of this Aboriginal double, who leads David to the underground paintings foreshadowing the deluge and to his own death mask which David watches float away in the sewers, bringing him face to face with mortality.

The scene where David discovers his own death mask was inspired by an uncanny event that happened to Weir as he was walking through the ruins of a Roman city in Tunisia: "I was suddenly seized with this strange feeling I was going to find something, I even saw what I was going to see. And there it was, on the ground, a carving of a child's head" (qtd. in Stratton 75). What seems like a premonition is in actuality the return of a repressed intimation of mortality, a knowledge that Weir has always had but which now seems to come to him from the outside and from the future. Rome's triumph in conquering many lands did not save it from being dispossessed in the end; *The Last Wave* carries the same warning for the whites occupying Aboriginal Australia. "We've lost our dreams and they come back and we don't know what they mean," David tells his stepfather, who then reminds him of dreams that David had as a child: "When your mother died, for a whole month before, you dreamt it, and what you dreamt, happened." Again, the personal uncanny has national implications, as we can see if we compare David's maternal loss to the loss of the mother country often remarked by Weir: "It's really a trauma that the country's still going through, this dislocation from Europe, with a complete severing of roots. There's no real consciousness of where you came from" (qtd. in "Dialogue" 13). Weir has spoken of having gotten out "the family Bible" and "looking at some old photos" in search of his roots: "I was astonished that our family hadn't kept any records of where we had come from and who we were on either side of the family. I've asked other Australians what records they have, and have found the same story" (qtd. in Mathews 78).

Deracinated from the motherland and insecurely grounded in a country not their own, white Australians suffer from separation anxiety and guilt over the dispossession of the Aborigines. However, *The Last Wave* does more than envision a cultural nightmare; its dream-

work revises history in order to minimize psychic trauma. Thus, in the scene where David gets out *his* family Bible, he discovers photos of his maternal grandfather standing in a doorway under a snake motif similar to that adorning the entrance to the Aboriginal tunnels. In Weir's wish-fulfillment fantasy, David is not only reconnected with his maternal past, he also turns out to be Mulkrul, the descendant of a white race from South America which came to Australia before the Europeans and which shared the Aborigines' close connection with Nature. When Charlie, the Aboriginal tribal leader, asks David who he is, David does not have to answer that he is a dispossessed dispossessor, uprooted from Europe and forcibly grafted onto Australia. Instead, David can remember that he is Mulkrul, a kindred spirit to the Aborigines who shares their understanding of the ecosystem but who, being white like the rest of white Australia, is the one chosen to save Sydney from the deluge if he can warn his people in time to cease their pollution.

In this more satisfying scenario, the Aborigines return not as dark doubles or uncanny harbingers of death, but as guarantors of immortality, reminders to whites of a spiritual realm beyond the merely material, a world that whites can share if they forgo materialism. Here again, as in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Weir's Aborigines become screens on which to project white Australia's fantasies as well as fears, both desired and dreaded aspects of the national uncanny. In his essay on "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud notes Otto Rank's description of the double as "originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death' . . . ; and probably the 'immortal' soul was the first 'double' of the body" (235). So the Aboriginal who first appeared to David in the rain proves to be more friend than foe (his name is Chris) as he guides David to the tunnels and reveals to him tribal secrets that could enable David to become the savior of the white race. As Chris says to David, "Now, because of your dream and my dream too, I've brought you here"; Weir's film is an oneiric fantasy of reconciliation between the races and of salvific forgiveness on the part of the Aborigines toward the whites who sinned against them and Nature. The Aborigines' mysterious symbols that seemed so threatening in their uncertain portent—the snake over the entrance, the wave in the wall paintings—are suddenly legible as totems and signs of a natural-supernatural world that whites, once cleansed of pollution, can inhabit too. Thus *The Last Wave* can be said to continue *Picnic at Hanging Rock's* attempt to disambiguate the uncanny so that the Other reads as a message potentially positive for whites. Such interpretive impositions are typical of ethnocentric encounters with

Aboriginal culture, as Eric Michaels has shown: "These only reduce the mystery and terror of the ambiguous so that the European observer is able to construct a readable text—indeed, may take pride and pleasure in doing this. The confrontation with the image is reduced to an exercise in cryptography" (50).

But what may be ultimately most interesting about *The Last Wave* is the resistance it registers to its own cultural imperialism, for despite its attempts to reduce the Other to the self-same, the film is haunted by doubts of white worthiness to receive mercy and salvation from the Aborigines it has idealized as naturally spiritual. What if the underground wall paintings are not so easily and optimistically decrypted? What if the sewer tunnels are the mortal crypt in which white society is condemned to be buried for its violations of Nature? Near the beginning of the film, the tribal leader Charlie points a death bone at Billy, a man who had wanted to become a member of the tribe but who had violated the sacred space of the tunnels and stolen tribal artifacts, planning to get rich by selling them to whites. At the end of the film, David also enters the tunnels, and Charlie attempts to slay him with a hatchet, but David kills the tribal leader with a stone. David's desire to learn tribal secrets would seem to be spiritual rather than materially motivated, his goal that of bridging the gap between cultures, but it is significant that his actions repeat those of Billy, as though David too feared that his efforts at understanding the tribe are inevitably compromised by his bourgeois status and would thus rightly meet with rejection.

The hatchet-wielding tribal elder Charlie marks the uncanny return of David's doubts about white motivation and his fears of Aboriginal reprisal for white attempts at dispossession; Charlie is the figure of the dark "double, its link with narcissism and death as the punishment for having sought immortality, for having wanted to 'kill' the father" (Kofman 128). If Chris the spiritual guide was a fantasy of being welcomed as a member of the tribe (the promise of immortality), then Charlie is the antipodean nightmare of an Aboriginal uprising against white imperialism, a last wave bringing God's Judgment. As Mladen Dolar explains, "The trouble with the double is that . . . he constitutes the essential part of the ego; he carries out the repressed desires springing from the Id; and he also, with a malevolence typical of the super-ego, prevents the subject from carrying out his desires—all at one and the same time" (12). David's dream of the Aboriginal Chris as helper, modeling the courage it takes to overcome xenophobia and communicate between cultures, is increasingly troubled by the Aboriginal

Charlie as blocking agent, paternal punisher of white transgression into sacred spaces.

As David attempts to carry the tribal secret about the coming deluge up from the sewer tunnels in order to warn white society, he finds his way blocked by an impassable door marked "GAS, WATER & MANPROOF—TO BE KEPT CLOSED AT ALL TIMES." The bar of repression put up by white consciousness will not admit any threat to its material well-being; bourgeois Sydney is unworthy of salvation. Unable to break through his people's or his own racism and materialism—the willful ignorance that drove the Aborigines, like sewage, underground—David stops pounding at the door to the surface and instead follows the sewage down through tunnels until it empties out into the sea. A final attempt to wash his face of pollution is met only by a terrifying vision of a great flood as the ultimate purifier. *The Last Wave* haunts as the nation's uncanny, white Australia's fear of retribution for the Aboriginal land and culture it dispossessed. As a founding film in the Australian New Wave, *The Last Wave* establishes a weirdly insecure national identity. It is one of those films that make the new Australian cinema so *unheimlich*.

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