

# Uncanny Carnage in Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris*

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Arthur Waldo wakes up in hospital, learns that his car and caravan are wrecks, his brother is dead, and that he is trapped in a sinister community that is caught in a time warp. He is grief-stricken, disorientated and confused. It seems that cars are the key but he is not sure whether he is 'man enough' to unlock the dark secrets of the town and drive away. It is this setting that our protagonist Arthur must navigate in Australia's first car crash film: Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974). The film and Weir's next work, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), served as watershed films in the Australian film revival of the 1970s and both are typically described as seminal examples of Australian Gothic. As Gerry Turcotte notes, one of the comforting traits of genre fiction, in this case Gothic, is that the audience is in familiar territory (orientated).<sup>1</sup> If the familiar, however, seems slightly strange and unfamiliar (as is the case with Australian Gothic), then the uncanny is evoked in what can be a

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<sup>1</sup> Gerry Turcotte, 'Australian Gothic', in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed. (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 19.

disorientated and disorientating narrative. *The Cars That Ate Paris*<sup>2</sup> may be a Gothic horror film but its dark humour underscores the uncomfortable position of the viewer who is likely to be simultaneously horrified and amused by the onscreen carnage. This destabilising rhetorical strategy works to evoke uncanniness in the audience as it contemplates the strange but recognizable events on screen. Thus, automobiles operate as a remarkably flexible organising metaphor in a film where they act as both technological storks and agents of death. In this essay, I will interrogate the way that Weir aligns immobile crashed cars with Parisian/Australian culture and with liminal male bodies. I will argue that the characters and cars are manifested as uncanny hybrids with both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic qualities. Finally, I will argue that Weir dismantles many of the myths about Australia and Australians in *Cars* just before he goes on to define them in his next films.

Weir's early films paint Australia as a strange environment, populated by people who are insecure about identity and their place in both the national and international landscape. Weir's first success, *Michael* (1970), was conceived as the second part of a trilogy called *Three to Go* filmed for the Commonwealth Film Unit. *Michael* rehearses many of *Cars*' anxieties about subjectivity, claustrophobic family environments, intergenerational conflict and culture clashes. Weir confesses that in making *Michael* (and *Cars*) he hoped to generate discussion about Australia's xenophobia and involvement in the Vietnam War.<sup>3</sup> His next project, the darkly comic *Homesdale* (1971) is less self-consciously earnest than *Michael*, and Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka describe it as Australia's first Gothic film.<sup>4</sup> *Homesdale*'s black take on trauma and repression rehearses the pathological psychotherapeutic terrain explored in *Cars* and it shares its sense of mischief and fun. Both films simultaneously parody and interrogate issues such as trauma, repression, compulsion and sublimated violence. The title *Homesdale*, of course, alerts viewers that the notion of 'home' should be interrogated just as setting *Cars* in an Australian town called Paris suggests that 'foreign' and 'foreigners' are cultural constructions. Crucially, *Homesdale* introduces a plot device that is central to *Cars*, that car 'accidents' provide an excellent cover for murder. After

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Cars*.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Dempsey, and Peter Weir, 'Inexplicable feelings: An interview with Peter Weir,' *Film Quarterly* 33.4 (Summer, 1980): 2-11.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, eds., *The Imaginary Industry* (North Ryde, Sydney: AFTRS Publications, 1988), p. 50.

making *Cars*, Weir shot *Picnic at Hanging Rock*<sup>5</sup> the next year and it famously questions white notions of home, belonging and the strangeness of Australian landscape and the female body. Weir's next film, *The Last Wave* (1977), was less commercially and critically successful than *Picnic* but it continues Weir's experimentation with the Gothic genre. Weir encourages viewers to question white colonialism and respect Indigenous Australian culture while simultaneously stereotyping that culture as eerie and uncanny. The made-for-television and less well known *The Plumber* (1978) is less interesting than Weir's other early work but it is well regarded by some critics.<sup>6</sup> It centres on a psychological contest, this time between a white educated woman (an academic) and a working-class male (obviously, a plumber). Set in a claustrophobic domestic setting the two characters do battle over unnecessary repairs to an increasingly abject (leaking and unruly) bathroom. I will return to these films and their relationship to *Cars* throughout this essay.

In Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', he explains the relationship between the *heimlich* (homely or familiar) and the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar or uncanny) and just why the uncanny evokes dread, fear or anxiety.<sup>7</sup> One experiences the uncanny when what should be comforting and familiar appears alien and what should be foreign seems strangely familiar. Moreover, if what should be private and known only to a small community is made known or partially revealed to outsiders then the uncanny is evoked in the form of the interloper (a liminal figure). Apparent antonyms, *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in fact coincide (or conflate) to provoke a terrible sense of eerie familiarity or *déjà vu*. Traumatic repressed memories, often Oedipal in nature, resurface and destructive behaviour may reoccur as subjects battle to repress the memories again. Thus repetition, doubling, and a sense that one is trapped or going around in circles is a typical uncanny sensation. In their summary of the uncanny, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle helpfully list ten ways in which the uncanny is evoked, and in addition to the aforementioned tropes they add animism, anthropomorphism, automatism, coincidence, uncertainty about

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter referred to as *Picnic*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Marek Haltof, *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide* (New York: Twayne, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press, 1955. Vol 17.), pp. 218-252.

sexual identity, fear of being buried alive, telepathy, silence and death.<sup>8</sup> Royle expands on these unconventional conventions in his book-length study entitled *The Uncanny* and, as I will demonstrate, all of these identifying tropes surface in Weir's work and in *Cars* especially.<sup>9</sup> As both Royle and Hélène Cixous observe, however, attempts to 'list' aspects of the uncanny are doomed to failure as, by nature, the uncanny can never be defined or trapped in this fashion.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably, one is chasing ghosts and shadows and attempting to make them behave. To make matters worse, as Royle also notes, any meta-analysis of the uncanny is fated to be uncanny (circular and disorientating).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, as Royle's scholarship and Weir's films demonstrate, it is peculiar how much enjoyment can be experienced when one is waylaid grappling with uncanny shape-shifters.

Ken Gelder and Gerry Turcotte are Australia's best-known scholars of Australian Gothic and as Gelder notes, 'Gothic tropes seemed to lend themselves all too readily to the colonially perceived Australian interior'.<sup>12</sup> As Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs expound in *Uncanny Australia*, inevitably, any colonised space generates uneasiness and ambiguity about ownership and the right to call that territory 'home'.<sup>13</sup> Even after several centuries of colonisation and agricultural cultivation (making it more *heimlich*), the land will always be, to some extent at least, *unheimlich*: familiar but at the same time inevitably alien. Any postcolonial reading of Australian texts starts with the acknowledgement that white 'settlers' are by definition dislocated and disorientated (unsettled) in a hostile foreign environment and this renders Australia both terrible and sublime: an uncanny space. *Picnic* is perhaps still the most potent example of this and Douglas Keesey makes a convincing argument that *Picnic* and *The Last Wave* are texts haunted by the spectre of the uncanny while simultaneously trying to

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An introduction to literature, criticism and theory*, 2nd ed. (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall Europe, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.13 and Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The 'Uncanny'),' *New Literary History*, 7.3 (Spring, 1976), p. 525.

<sup>11</sup> Royle, op.cit., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Gelder, 'Australian Gothic,' in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, eds. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.116.

<sup>13</sup> Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998).

characterize Australia and its (white) defining myths.<sup>14</sup> Uncanny representations of the Australian landscape depict Australia as simultaneously familiar but also foreign; a space haunted by the absent presence of Aboriginal Australians who operate as liminal beings in these texts and this is implicit in *Picnic* and explicit in *The Last Wave*. The only indigenous presence in *Cars* is 'the mayor's Aborigine' (a garden ornament that is smashed part way through the film) and a white Parisian in blackface and fancy dress at the Pioneer Ball at the end of the film. Thus black Australians are reduced to tokens or totems—noble savages who are part of a distant past (history) but nonetheless haunt the present.<sup>15</sup>

Although Australian Gothic narratives also take place in the city (for example, the aforementioned *The Last Wave*) and the suburbs (for example, P.J. Hogan's 1994 *Muriel's Wedding*) they are typically set in the bush or outback where small isolated communities are coded as brutal: simultaneously agoraphobic and claustrophobic environments. This is the setting for behaviour that may initially appear to be larrikin-like but which quickly degenerates into violent gynophobia, homophobia and xenophobia (for example, Ted Kotcheff's 1971 *Wake in Fright*). Aggressive white hetero-normative masculinity is enforced to guard secrets like rape, incest, or lethal racism (for example, Steve Jodrell's 1988 *Shame*).<sup>16</sup> These insular communities do not welcome strangers who could learn their secrets or interfere with their way of life and so typically these interlopers are made to disappear. This is certainly the case in *Cars*. After a short prologue, viewers are introduced to two homeless 'battlers' (Arthur and George Waldo) who, like the archetypal 'wandering Jews' of so many Gothic texts, are on the road in search of work and sanctuary. They are unstable stateless bodies in search of a home while all the while radio reports and newspaper headlines emphasise high levels of unemployment, civil unrest, petrol

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Keeseey, 'Weir(d) Australia: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*,' *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 8, no.3 (1998): 331-346.

<sup>15</sup> There is a clear case that this could be read as an example of Freud's 'Totem and Taboo.' 1913, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 17, pp. 217-56.

<sup>16</sup> Meaghan Morris's 1989 and 1998 essays remain essential reading about what she calls 'phobic narratives' such as *Cars* and the ones listed in this section of my paper. See Meaghan Morris, 'Fate and the Family Sedan,' *East-West Film Journal* 4.1. (1989): 113-134, and 'White Panic or Mad Max and the Sublime,' in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 239-262. John Scott and Dean Biron, 'Wolf Creek, rurality and the Australian gothic,' *Continuum* 24.2 (2010): 307-322, provide a valuable addition to more recent representations of xenophobic tropes in Australian Gothic cinema.

rationing, and car carnage out of control.<sup>17</sup> After a series of disappointments on the road, the brothers follow a series of road signs and detours that direct them to a town called Paris. Parisians, who mimic Cornish smugglers or pirates by using lights to lure travellers off course, ambush the brothers and pillage their car and caravan. George (Rick Scully) is killed and the town's mayor (John Meillon) 'adopts' Arthur (Terry Camilleri). Arthur is initially employed as a hospital orderly (where he meets another worker, Darryl, played by Chris Haywood) and then as a parking inspector. Both roles evoke horror and dread because, as I will go on to discuss, in the first role he must interact with the dead (and the undead), while in the second role he is forced to confront his driving phobia. The narrative ends with a battle (where cars become hybrid characters), Paris is destroyed, Arthur gets back behind the wheel, kills Darryl, and escapes.

For Australian audiences, Paris at first appears to be an idyllic little country town in a familiar countryside with rolling hills and narrow winding roads. Its quaintness evokes nostalgia and perhaps homesickness. It is a place we expect to feel safe, secure, cosy and at home; and that is why, according to horror conventions, it is particularly unsettling when that expectation is overturned. As Brian McFarlane notes in his essay about filmic representations of Australian small towns, Weir undercuts our expectations at every turn and exposes the 'hypocrisies and assorted malevolences at work in the apparently peaceful setting'.<sup>18</sup> Although a film about country towns, *Cars* is not a narrative about the Australian countryside (landscape) even though, like so many Australian narratives, it interrogates notions of home, homelessness and belonging. Just as in *Homesdale*, the characters do battle with each other, not with the land, and there is never any suggestion that the Parisians could farm or mine the surrounding countryside. One assumes this has been tried before in the days of the 'pioneers' (now history) but that 'the future' is technology, not agriculture. Accordingly, Parisians are preoccupied with the roads and the travellers that traverse the landscape, not the landscape itself. For whatever reason—we never find out—Arthur is spared by the Parisians and not killed or made into a lobotomised 'veggie' (a type of monstrous body manifested as a zombie). Hence, Arthur is stuck in a liminal insider/outsider position between the known and the unknown. He is now

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<sup>17</sup> These preoccupations went on to dominate car crash films for at least the next decade. For example, the *Mad Max* trilogy and *Dead End Drive In*.

<sup>18</sup> Brian McFarlane, 'Country Towns in Australian Films: Trap or Comfort Zone?' *Metro Magazine* 146/7 (2005): 50.

the bearer of the town's secrets and he survives to escape with that knowledge and this is not always the case in Weir's early films. In *The Last Wave* the protagonist's mystical insights into Indigenous Australian culture disrupt his stable notion of what it means to be Australian and in a position of white hetero-normative hegemonic power. He learns hidden truths about himself but in doing so, according to Gothic conventions, his subjectivity is shattered and the narrative ends with his impending death. Thus in *Homesdale*, *Cars*, *Picnic* and *The Last Wave*, Weir suggests that self-awareness, agency, and 'wholeness' comes at the expense of possible self-destruction. Of course, it is not just the characters that are placed in this uncomfortable position as the audience is implicated in this colonising process. Subsequently, as viewers we are forced to contemplate our own innocence, guilt or complicity where previously we may have been, as Julia Kristeva argues in relation to the uncanny, 'strangers to ourselves'.<sup>19</sup> After all, Freud's essay centres on a tale about eyes and what is and is not seen—it forces us to reconsider our ability to see (and know) ourselves. As Nicholas Royle and Barbara Creed argue, film is the ideal medium for this type of uncanny visual investigation.<sup>20</sup>

Once viewers are orientated and more 'at home' in Paris, Weir then hints that automobiles may also operate in an uncanny fashion in the narrative. The power of the car as an uncanny object stems firstly from its ubiquity in the Australian landscape. It is a potent signifier of freedom, independence, wealth, power (often associated with virility or masculinity), and, in Australia especially, it is coded as a means to conquer the landscape.<sup>21</sup> It is familiar and part of nearly every household and thus *heimlich*. *Cars* presents the automobile as uncanny because it highlights the *unheimlich*; the elements that we know but try to forget or ignore—driving is a dangerous activity and many people die or incur horrific injuries on Australian roads every year. Crashes and vehicular violence is normalised as an apparently 'everyday' occurrence—tragic but not exceptional. It is a bloody cycle that is repeated year-after-year and, to extend the Freudian

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<sup>19</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Royle, op. cit and Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent overview of Australian road movies see Rama Venkatasawmy, Catherine Simpson and Tanja Visosevic, 'From Sand to Bitumen, from Bushrangers to 'Bogans': Mapping the Australian Road Movie,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 70 (2001): 75-84.

analysis, this compulsion could be described as part of the death drive.<sup>22</sup> Weir rehearses many of these themes in *Homesdale* where violence and humiliation is employed for 'therapeutic' purposes. So in these very broad terms it is clear how Weir establishes the uncanny underpinning of the narrative before extending his interrogation of Australia's relationship with car culture.

The film asks us to consider the place of the car in Australia's future and suggests that our fascination with car culture is indicative of a broader cultural malaise. This anxiety about science, technology and modernity is typical of the Gothic genre and as Gelder and Jacobs suggest:

Freud's primary concern is certainly with the psyche, but the essay is also about one's sense of place in a modern, changing environment, and it attends to anxieties which are symptomatic of an ongoing process of realignment in the post-war modern world.<sup>23</sup>

Like many small Australian towns at the time Weir shot *Cars*, Paris is in decline, and in a creative attempt to profit from passing motorists it has created a cottage industry from stripping and recycling motorcars and motorists. Given that it is the only 'industry' in town, it is hardly surprising that cars have become fetishised commodities and that their value as transportation has become secondary. Even those Parisians with cars, never leave town, but merely drive around in circles. Indeed, as Michael Bliss notes, the vehicles in *Cars* represent inertia and stasis rather than freedom and movement.<sup>24</sup> Catherine Simpson has written insightfully about what she calls 'auto-immobility' in Australian car crash films more generally.<sup>25</sup> That is, despite the fact that automobiles and roads are usually coded to signify escape, on Australian screens they are more likely to leave characters dead, maimed, or spinning their wheels in frustration. According to that schema, a cargo cult economy has burgeoned around ill-fated

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<sup>22</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an extended analysis of Freud's *The Pleasure Principle* here but clearly the death drive is relevant in terms of my argument about cars and the uncanny.

<sup>23</sup> Gelder and Jacobs, op.cit. p 23.

<sup>24</sup> Bliss, op cit. p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Simpson, 'Antipodean Automobility and Crash: Treachery, Trespass and Transformation of the Open Road,' *Australian Humanities Review*. 39-40, (September 2006). <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2006/home.html>.



automobiles and motorists, and cars and automotive parts are used as currency and part of a barter economy in Paris. One of the film's taglines warns 'They run on blood' and indeed cars and petrol are the lifeblood of Paris as they are in so many car crash films. Thus the film is an allegory about consumption and the narrative is punctuated with references to food, hunger, and cannibalism. Once again, this aligns the text with the uncanny given the centrality of cannibalism in the literature of the uncanny.<sup>26</sup> At the top of the food chain is the mayor, who commands the first cut of the merchandise (radios, fur-coats, children). Assimilation is a dominant leitmotif in *Cars*, and all of the other films in the car crash genre, and there is an endless cycle of salvaging and recycling in these texts.<sup>27</sup> The young Parisians cannot afford to buy cars in one piece and so, as schooled by their elders, they scavenge to construct their own monstrous bodies (hybrid killer cars).<sup>28</sup> What I want to suggest is that this recycling (as a conflation of self and other) contributes to the uncanny sensation that the cars induce. In a sense, the crashed cars are regurgitated or reincarnated and as I will discuss later, so are the drivers. Every car has a history and if each car is dismantled and reassembled many times over until many different histories are conflated, this triggers a sensation of *déjà vu*. Every generation learns from the one before but even more so the new generation feeds off the bodies of their ancestors as a form of degeneration.<sup>29</sup> Each car has a traumatic history and is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*: new but second-hand.

The young men of Paris are so closely identified with cars that they *become* cars. I want to extend this argument by examining how this recycling or shape shifting operates as a form of Gothic metamorphosis or uncanny animism. A blurring of boundaries and confusion about identities is apparent in the three-way hybridity between the town's young men,

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<sup>26</sup> Royle, op. cit. pp: 205-212.

<sup>27</sup> This has also been recognised by critics such as Delia Falconer, 'Vanishing Points: Mapping the Road in Postwar American Culture' (Ph.D. diss. Melbourne University, 1995) and Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction*. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Although with less sinister intentions, young men in other car crash films are portrayed as ingenious scavengers and canny adapters in an endless cycle of pulling cars apart and putting them back together again in films such as *Dead End Drive-In*, *Return Home*, *FJ Holden*, *Midnite Spares*, *Running on Empty*, and *Metal Skin*.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, op.cit. p.234.

animals, and cars.<sup>30</sup> We hear the roar of a wild animal and what appears to be a monstrous gaping mouth as George and Arthur panic and career off the road at the beginning of the film. (Of course, later in the film Arthur discovers that the wild beast is merely a car wreck artfully arranged to resemble a metallic animal.) As Dermody and Jacka note, the mayor's car with its fins and sinister presence resembles a predatory shark—a mythic 'monster' for Australian audiences.<sup>31</sup> The Jaguar is the other animal most often associated with the cars: Charlie (Bruce Spence) collects Jaguar crests as trophies. The Reverend Mulray (Max Phipps) becomes his next trophy as he is picked off *en route* to Paris in another popular British export (a Mini). When Charlie returns with his prey, he poses next to it in the manner of a big game hunter and states, 'I got this one. This one's mine'.



The mayor is quick to mount a cover-up operation and explains 'An accident has occurred ... A shooting accident has occurred.' The sense that one is witnessing a type of antipodean safari is underlined by Weir's use of the sounds of roaring animals and screaming engines when the cars' presence is implied. These non-diegetic sound effects are used to reinforce the zoomorphism of the machines, and the wildness and ferociousness of the young men. By aligning themselves with sharks, jaguars and dinosaurs, men align themselves with wild beasts (*unheimlich*) in contrast to characters like the mayor's wife who resembles a domestic cat (*heimlich*) in her sad fur coat. Freud contemplates the division of tame and wild animals as part of a discussion about domestic space and it is significant

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<sup>30</sup> See Cyndy Hendershot's *The Animal Within: Masculinity and the Gothic* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998) for an extended analysis of this link between animism, Darwinism, and the uncanny. She argues that animality and sexuality are often linked in Gothic texts. Also, see Creed, op.cit.

<sup>31</sup> Dermody and Jacka, op.cit. p. 95.

that this animism is gendered in *Cars*.<sup>32</sup> Creed's work is an extended examination of this type of gendered uncanny animism which she argues is at the centre of what she labels the 'primal uncanny'.<sup>33</sup> Many of the arguments that Creed makes about women, animals and death as profoundly other (thus prompting phallic panic) are borne out in *Cars*.<sup>34</sup>

The suggestion that cars and humans are interchangeable is reinforced throughout the film. This is implicit when the torching of one of the vehicles provokes rebellion, and as the mayor's henchman observes, 'It's the cars—they're upset over the burning.' This form of animism incorporates both anthropomorphism and automatism and a fascination with the dead. When Arthur shuffles out of hospital to attend George's funeral, he is met at the entrance to the hospital by a group of Parisians who appear to be catatonic androids or zombies. This strange procession walks behind the hearse, which seems to glide along silently almost of its own accord.



The sense of the car being alive is augmented by the point of view of the camera coming from the back of the hearse itself. Viewers share the gaze of the dead man witnessing his own funeral and this highlights the strangeness of the uncanny viewing position. We are compelled to look and see images that should remain hidden (Creed makes an extended analysis of this type of uncanny subjectivity).<sup>35</sup> Of course, it also suggests that George is being buried alive and amplifies the anxiety about the status of

<sup>32</sup> Freud, op.cit. p. 222.

<sup>33</sup> Creed, op.cit. p.24.

<sup>34</sup> Creed, op.cit. p.15.

<sup>35</sup> Creed, op.cit. pp.27-40.

dead bodies in Paris. Arthur is haunted by the spectre of brother, his double, who may or may not be dead and the presence of so many Parisian zombies augments his anxiety (possibly a premonition) that he too may be buried alive.

Soon after the funeral, another car, a white Jaguar, has an 'accident' during the night. The audience hears the scream of an animal in pain, and then sees the body of the vehicle being stripped. Weir accentuates the parity between cars and humans during this segment when the automobile is being dismantled and the women hand the most prized vehicular pieces to the town's patriarchs. As Bliss notes, the camera cuts back and forth from the street scene to a parallel scenario in the hospital, and this editing underlines the ruthlessness of the townspeople, the status of the human body, and the nature of their economy.<sup>36</sup> Weir uses a similar technique in an episode set the next day where the camera cuts rapidly between the hospital, which is full of human wrecks, a hillside covered in car wrecks, and the town graveyard. The overlap between consumerism and cannibalism, and the subsequent Parisian hybrids, is underlined by the construction of the shots and the editing process. In the first of these 'inter-cut' scenes, the unfortunate driver of the Jaguar is being 'stripped' (of his shoes, watch and wallet) and, like the car, is about to be used as spare parts. The luckless fellow is last seen strapped to the operating table with Doctor Midland (Kevin Miles) unnecessarily but enthusiastically drilling into his head. The use of a mechanical power-tool reinforces the impression that the patient is just another piece of salvage. The patients are used as both transplant fodder and as guinea pigs for the Doctor Midland's 'experimental' work.<sup>37</sup> Hapless motorists who have been salvaged from car wrecks constitute a whole community of patients (described by Darryl as 'veggies') who inhabit the Bellevue Ward of Paris hospital. They all appear to be male but it is difficult to know whether they are dead or alive let alone their gender. As Cyndy Hendershot argues, 'The Gothic exposes the others within and without that give lie to the notion of such a category as stable masculinity.'<sup>38</sup> As is so often the case in the Gothic genre, the

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<sup>36</sup> Bliss, op. cit. p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> Weir is clearly poking fun at Gothic favourites like *Frankenstein* or *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, but it is likely that this is also a reference to John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* (1966), an American thriller in which bodies are re-cycled: the final image is a POV of a drill coming towards the camera, positioned as a patient strapped to an operating table.

<sup>38</sup> Hendershot, op.cit.

constructedness of gender, sexuality and subjectivity is thus exposed and disrupted.

Before Arthur is permitted to leave hospital, he undergoes a psychological test where he is obliged to identify a number of flash cards. The exercise starts benignly enough, with Arthur tentatively identifying items such as a tree, chair, dog, house, and television. The mood changes dramatically when a gruesome photograph of a car crash is offered. After recoiling in horror, Arthur says 'crash', only to be corrected firmly by the doctor who says 'accident'. The test then continues with further photographs of car crashes and their bloodied victims intercut with commonplace images of a pen, horse, ball, scissors and so on. Meanwhile, Doctor Midland muses admiringly about his talents as a photographer as he contemplates an extremely abject image of a bleeding body emerging from the metal carapace of a crashed vehicle. In shots such as this one, Weir highlights the anxiety generated by the unstableness of the subject/object binary and the horror that corpses evoke. After all, Freud suggests that dismembered limbs and mutilated corpses are horrifying and 'peculiarly uncanny'.<sup>39</sup> Given that the car is usually coded as a phallic symbol, this mutilated car/human assemblage triggers the castration complex and an overwhelming anxiety about corporality and wholeness. Creed describes this type of cinematic horror as 'phallic panic' in her study of the male monster and this example is particularly apt.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, Dr Midland is a monstrous 'magician' who can carve up and photograph these bodies and put them together again—we see evidence of his work in the wards of the hospital and he even arrives dressed as a magician to the Pioneer's Ball.<sup>41</sup> He insists that we look at his work. His vegetable-like zombies embody both life and death and their bandages seep blood and secretions highlighting the inside/outside horror of the abject and uncanny. Macabre or perverse pleasure is generated when characters are faced with images of abjection: so familiar but yet so alien and confronting. Suitably traumatised, Arthur absorbs the message that when car crashes occur they should be identified as 'accidents'—regardless of the circumstances or the regularity of such incidents. Road accident victims and veggies are abject and thus taboo (and coded as 'other') whereas unified metallic carapaces are clean and whole (but there is an implicit threat that if punctured they will leak). Hence, Arthur as male hysteric is encouraged to reject or repress

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<sup>39</sup> Freud, op. cit. p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> Creed, op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Once again, the magician features in Freud's discussion of the uncanny. Freud, op. cit. p. 244.

his memories (and guilt) and the possibility (or indeed reality) of abjection and death. It is hardly surprising that he finds working in the hospital intolerable.

It transpires that even the timid Arthur has killed before (but he tries to bury that memory) and by the end of the film he kills again. After dinner one night, Arthur confesses to the mayor that he feels guilty about the crash because he feels that he should have relieved George and taken his turn at the wheel. He admits that he has a phobia about cars and driving, stemming from an earlier accident in which he knocked over and killed an old man. Hence, Arthur is immobilised and too traumatised to drive. He returns again and again to the memories of the road fatalities in a self-destructive loop. The assiduous reminders about Arthur's inability to drive are, of course, a means to make him appear impotent, passive, and 'feminine' but they are also remarkably uncanny. The mayor makes light of Arthur's problems but is quick to exploit them (he makes him a parking inspector). Instead of the consolatory platitude expected of him, the mayor responds to Arthur's confession, with: 'Yes. These old pedestrians are a *real* problem, aren't they?'<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Arthur's road to 'recovery' starts when he is made Paris' parking superintendent, charged with 'Cleaning up this town and making it a decent place for people to park'. In the climatic battle scene, the cars engage in 'hand-to-hand' combat with the townspeople and the town's elders guard their territory on foot, chiefly armed with makeshift weapons such as pitchforks. In one scene the faceless driver of one of the cars is prodded and poked to death with a pitchfork and dies at the wheel.



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<sup>42</sup> This shocking response prompts guilty laughter and thus as viewers we are reminded of our own dual natures (we are horrified at our response and do not recognise ourselves).

A metal carapace shields body parts and contains bodily fluids that could suggest the abject or grotesque. Thus, the car's metal armour (as a denial or refusal of abjection) is ultimately insufficient protection and what should remain inside is penetrated and seeps out. Arthur's status as outsider places him in a quandary when the battle commences and he has to choose sides and align himself with the young people or the elders. He sides with the mayor who manipulates him to crush Darryl in a deadly version of a demolition derby. Arthur complies, at first reluctantly, but then with ghoulish satisfaction when he joyously rediscovers his mechanical potency. When he emerges, alive and victorious, from his cathartic duel with Darryl he ecstatically exclaims 'I can drive'. Significantly, Arthur is deemed 'cured' after he has smashed Darryl into a bloody pulp and is able to drive away. A car and a fatality take away Arthur's agency and conquering a car and another driver are the means for him to regain it. Thus, in this instance, repetition proves restorative.

If cars and humans are so uncannily interchangeable perhaps it should not be a surprise that the cars become responsible not only for deaths but also for rejuvenation and even reproduction in Paris. Dr Midland 'gives birth' to abject zombies (the result of car crashes) and in producing these monsters he also becomes a monster.<sup>43</sup> Cars also convey additional and equally unnatural offspring and unnatural families are artificially constructed. Such progeny can only ever be monstrous as they are divorced from the maternal body and this is one of Creed's key points.<sup>44</sup> In 'The Uncanny' Freud suggests that the female genitals and womb are the uncanniest places of all given that, more than any other place, the womb conflates self with other.<sup>45</sup> The maternal body as first home, but one that we are inevitably excluded from, is a source of anxiety in this film which circles around issues of childbirth, reproduction and immigration (borders). Australia cinema abounds with what Meaghan Morris has termed 'phobic narratives' about immigration and border protection and this topic remains an hysterical one in Australian debates about population and immigration.<sup>46</sup> Hence, when Arthur motors into town he is playing a role in engineering a

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<sup>43</sup> Creed, op.cit. p.xvi.

<sup>44</sup> Creed, op. cit.p.17.

<sup>45</sup> Freud, op. cit. p. 245.

<sup>46</sup> See Morris op.cit. I have also written about xenophobia and immigration a little-known phobic narrative entitled *Dead End Drive-In* in an essay that will soon appear in *Studies of Australasian Cinema*.

change in the genetic makeup of the region.<sup>47</sup> Given that Paris is constructed as such an isolated xenophobic place, the sequence where Beth (the mayor's wife) and Arthur sit at the kitchen table and have tea is especially memorable given that Arthur has manipulated the mayor so that he can remain part of the family. In a sense, he is 'reborn' as their son. Thus, Beth and Arthur are 'at home' in a domestic space but that space is *unheimlich* because it is the site where all that is terribly wrong about the Parisian way of life is revealed and manifested. As Arthur is coded as Beth's adopted son, the scene has decidedly Oedipal overtones, and as Morris argues, the transgression of such taboos as incest and cannibalism underscore the town's parochial insularity that is, gradually and inevitably, causing it to implode. As Morris also notes:

Parisian women do not bear enough children for the town to survive: so, like the mutant cars that terrorize the streets, Parisian patriarchy reproduces by making over the remnants of the car-crashes caused by the men.<sup>48</sup>

This becomes evident when Beth (Melissa Jaffer) informs Arthur that she is barren, and that Hilary and Jeanette are 'orphans' whom she and the mayor have 'adopted'. The fact that she has been complicit in murder in order to obtain a 'family' is repressed (as is her attraction to Arthur). Although it is never made explicit, the 'accidents' are perhaps similarly beneficial for other childless families in the town. As already noted above, it is not even necessary for 'adoptees' to be whole (complete bodies) as Dr Midland utilises body parts to construct the veggies. This automotive benevolence marginalises women from the reproductive process and renders them superfluous in the town's economy.<sup>49</sup> Paris is a town almost devoid of women: apart from the 'orphans' Hilary and Jeanette, and two

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<sup>47</sup> The automobile revolutionised courtship rituals and sexual practices, and resulted in a widening of the gene pool. See Graeme Davison, *Car Wars* (Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), B.L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), and Julian Smith, 'A Runaway Match: The Automobile in the American Film, 1900-1920,' in DL Lewis and L. Goldstein, eds. *The Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1983), pp. 179-192.

<sup>48</sup> Morris, 'White Panic,' p. 246.

<sup>49</sup> The 'mad' scientist who gives birth to monstrous 'children' is the subject of many studies. See, for example, Hendershot op.cit., Creed op.cit., and Gayatri Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,' in Henry Gates Jr. (ed.), *Race: Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985).



nurses, there do not appear to be any women under the age of forty. Just as the feminine is cast as out of place and uncanny in *Picnic*, once again the female body is unknowable and unpredictable in Paris. Paradoxically, the maternal body is divorced from sex and childbirth and thus is not abject whereas the male body *is* monstrously abject. Paris is certainly not the centre of romance, sex, and glamour that viewers may have expected, and the absence of sexual desire on the screen is striking.<sup>50</sup> (In fact, the only desire on screen is directed at the rewards and thrills associated with *cars*, and not *carnal* pleasures.) Arthur is coded as impotent (because he does not drive), George is a bachelor, and the other men on the road appear to be without female companionship. The mayor and Beth are unable to have children, Doctor Midland brings his patients rather than a partner to the Pioneer Ball<sup>51</sup>, and Darryl and his mates roam in bachelor packs. Sexuality is repressed and sexual identity is somewhat ambiguous but as Royle states, this is to be expected in uncanny narratives.<sup>52</sup> Despite the town's rhetorical emphasis on 'the future', there can be no future for Paris without the contribution of motorcars and motorists.

This anxiety about sexuality speaks of a typically Gothic 'crisis' of masculinity given that the men appear to mimic male heroes from the past or from the screen, from Hollywood Westerns, American politics, Australian bush ballads, and adventurous tales from radio serials or black and white movies. Thus *Cars* parodies mythic Australian tropes (or dominant national myths) like mateship and white hegemonic masculinity, and figures like the battler, bushman, larrikin, Anzac, heroic driver, noble savage, and 'pioneers'. It sets them up, one-after-the-other, and then pulls them down. The costume party scene at the end of the film highlights that the Parisians are awkward players who do not seem to know how to read the script, or how to act out male and female roles.

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<sup>50</sup> Many other commentators have noted an absence of heterosexual desire and romance in Australian films. See, for example, Meaghan Morris, 'Personal Relationships and Sexuality,' *The New Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (West Melbourne, VIC: Nelson, 1980), pp. 133-151.

<sup>51</sup> Such asexual behaviour is the norm for the Gothic 'mad' scientist. See Hendershot, op. cit p.72.

<sup>52</sup> Royle, op.cit. p. 1.



This underscores the performative nature of their constructions—their salvaged and hybrid bricolage of what it is to be ‘Australian’. The heroes that they have chosen to emulate from the screen are conservative, dated, and decidedly unromantic; they are figures that personify power and authority rather than passion. *Cars* parodies Australia’s post-war rhetoric about ‘progress’ and the ‘future’ when even role models and speeches are recycled from the past (as we witness at the Pioneer Ball when the mayor ‘borrows’ a speech heard earlier in the film and is dressed as Abraham Lincoln). Ironically, Weir, more than any other Australian director would go on to define national myths in two of his next films: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Gallipoli*—although very different films, they both look back at Australia’s past to define us as a nation.

The uncanny is strange and savage; it shifts, slides, and changes shape. Uncanny films force audiences to look and question whether we recognise what we see on the screen (strangeness) and in the mirror (strangers). *Cars*, as one of a suite of Gothic uncanny films made by Weir in the 1970s, employs the automobile as a means to interrogate post-war Australian society and its trajectory. Is what we see monstrous? *Cars* suggests that it is and that the everyday horrors of the ‘pioneers’ haunt those trying to embrace ‘the future’. As viewers, we are forced to reflect on Australian culture and the uncanny status of women, Aboriginal Australians, and immigrants. Strangely, these supposedly liminal presences refuse to go away and our gaze returns to them again and again in Weir’s films. *The Cars that Ate Paris* allows us to laugh (nervously) at what we see and even after all of these years, it is strangely *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. It is difficult to turn away.

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