IT ALREADY seems fair to make the judgment that the great period of the cinema lasted two decades, roughly between 1940 and 1960, centred on Hollywood. Since the early 1960s there has been an odd work or two worth careful watching, and quite a bit of good solid competence, but the sense of being in the presence of something great, through which one might gain a deeper perception of the times, has long gone. The first new film that I myself have seen for many years worth a second viewing was Peter Weir's *Dead Poets' Society*, released in 1989. There is some reason for its box-office success.

Not that there is anything new in *Dead Poets' Society*. Weir recycles old themes, but does so in a way that is revealing about the present. I think his intuition is correct, that in historical terms Western societies are at present stuck in a logic already long set, and furthermore, at the most important level they are merely going round in circles. The film is ostensibly about a private school for the privileged in New England. Welton Academy is a hundred years old, with fine stone buildings, set in picturesque rolling countryside, and the small town nearby is a gem of upper middle-class taste, solidity and affluence. Welton prides itself on preparing its boys successfully for the Ivy League, principally Harvard Law and Medicine. In the opening scene we are shown the school assembled with parents, the ceremony led by a kilted piper and four boys carrying pennants on which are emblazoned Welton's four presiding virtues: Tradition, Honour, Discipline and Excellence. The Headmaster rules.

Through the film we learn that all is not well with the old order. While the Headmaster has genuine authority and loves his school, his ambition for his boys is narrow: that they become wealthy and successful professionals in New York. The gods are money and status. In this he is part victim of his clientele, whose patronage keeps his school going. But he neglects to counter this profane materialism with any higher values. Indeed when he himself conducts a literature class he labours through an academic dissection of poetry that flattens it, turning the lesson into a routine passing of the time. The two sets of parents we are shown are caricatures of bourgeois villainy. One is so indifferent to their son that they give him the same birthday present two years in a row, and their sole advice at a moment of great crisis for him is, "Don’t make trouble." It is little wonder that Todd is paralysed with shyness. The other family is ruled by an obsessional tyrant, whose main appearances take the form of ordering his son, Neil, with iron hatred, to do what he does not want to do.

A new poetry teacher arrives at Welton, a Mr Keating. We have already met the group of boys, senior classmates, who will be central to the story. They are in their classroom waiting for the new teacher. He saunters in whistling. Instead of mounting the podium he walks straight through the room and out the rear door. He reappears, impishly beckoning them to follow. He leads them into the school’s inner sanctum—this school, being a good one, has such things, knows about them. It is a heavily panelled room with walls hung with
photographs of past generations, and with the other holy relics, the trophies and honour boards. Keating utters his first words here, in the heart of Welton, where its tradition is alive: "O Captain! My Captain!" That is how the boys are to address him, if they are daring. The words are from Walt Whitman and refer to Abraham Lincoln. Keating then urges the boys forward to look at a photograph from 1902, and points out that the subjects look just like them, at the same stage in life, with the same hopes. The difference is that they are all dead; their bodies one and all now feed the worms. What is the moral? It is carpe diem, seize the day, for life is once and brief, so do not waste it. From this moment carpe diem rules the film, as the new god replacing tradition, honour, discipline and excellence. Keating's entrance has been dramatic, unconventional, mysterious: he has woken the boys up, and sown the seed of his gospel. It is a brilliant sequence as Weir introduces his charismatic hero, with his credo, suck the marrow out of life.

THE ANTINOMIES ARE SET. On the one side is a profane materialism with insensitive parents crippling their gifted sons with either indifference or fear, and a school subtly aiding those parents to produce boys who don't make trouble and who will occupy the lavish bourgeois homes of the exclusive New England towns. On the other side is seize the day, live your life to the full, dare the unexpected, break the bounds. Keating wins the boys, and for good reason. Their immediate concrete response, under the leadership of Neil, is to recreate the Dead Poets' Society, which Keating had founded when he was a pupil at Welton. The Society sneaks out in the middle of the night to meet in an old Indian cave to recite the works of the dead poets. The list is under the Keating thrill, all Romantics, principally Whitman, Thoreau, Byron and Tennyson—no "realists". Carpe diem is also enacted individually. Under its influence one of the boys gets up the courage to woo the blonde girlfriend of the local football star. By the end he has won her, with the help of a beating by the footballer and having made her blush purple by reading her a love poem in front of her own classmates. Another member of the Society takes on an Indian name, Nawanda, brings two girls to one of the meetings, and enchants them both by reciting poems to their beauty. The girls have been given an incandescent moment to remember through the prosaic years to come, by candlelight in the Indian cave.

Keating's greatest achievement is with the insecure and inhibited Todd, who worries for days about the writing of a poem to be read aloud before the class. His escape from the imagined humiliation is to write nothing. Keating hauls him out in front of the boys and starts shouting at him, spins him around, and further intensifies the terror by breaking all courtesies by manhandling his face, covering his eyes with his own hands, demanding that he look at Whitman's portrait above the blackboard and shout out what first comes to his mind. The induced trauma works, and Todd utters a stream of images. Keating praises them. The dam has finally cracked. From then on Todd steadily gains in confidence. Keating's triumph has been because he takes his vocation as teacher with deep seriousness, which means he takes each boy as he is, directing himself at each one with a personal intensity. This is predicated on the teacher's respect for the student, the opposite of the parental Don't make trouble. Todd feels worth something, for the first time, and it is because someone has taken him seriously, respected him. Now he will be able to seize the day. Keating takes risks. His initial response to a boy whose name is Pitts is to tell him that that is unfortunate. This head-on breach of propriety could easily have turned the boy in hatred against him. In fact the insult has the opposite effect, and again because Keating is real, frank and open, not evasive, establishing a sort of intimacy that enables Pitts to accommodate his name rather than shy away from it. Any teacher can learn from him.

The climax to the film comes with Neil. He too has helped Todd, befriending him. He is the leading Keating disciple. His carpe diem has been firstly to form the Society, and secondly to discover that what he wants to be in life is an actor. He joins the local amateur dramatic society which is putting on A Midsummer Night's Dream. He will play Puck. His father finds out and confronts him, forbidding him to go ahead. Neil fails to stand up to his father; in fact he has already forged a letter giving parental permission to perform in the play. Now he visits Mr Keating who urges him to tell his father how important this is to him, and why; also the dramatic society is dependent on him. The next day Neil nervously tells Keating that he has talked to his father and won his approval. Keating knows that he is lying but decides to let the matter rest. Neil performs, is excellent, and receives an overwhelming response from the packed theatre, which includes all his classmates and Mr Keating. His father has watched from the back, standing, and after the curtain he orders Neil home with him.
where he tells him he is being taken out of Welton immediately, and will go to a military academy. The father again stresses how much his family has sacrificed for him. Later that night Neil shoots himself.

The Headmaster now works furiously to cover up the scandal. He focuses all the blame for the suicide on Keating and sacks him. He coerces the members of the Dead Poets’ Society to sign a statement blaming Mr Keating, and they all comply with the exception of Nawanda, who is expelled. The film ends with the Headmaster filling in, taking the poetry class. Keating returns to collect his things, catches the eye of Todd, who has been profoundly shaken, first by Neil’s death, and second by his own signing under pressure from his parents of the statement exonerating the school.

On the surface the film is a Romantic celebration of the poetic, the sensitive, the individual and the free against prosaic bourgeois conformity. Under the surface it is pervaded by imagery of death.

Now he seizes the day, and in defiance of the Headslowly climbs up onto his chair and then onto his desk, and addresses Keating, who is in the rear door, “O Captain! My Captain!” All the boys who have been influenced follow suit, one by one, in spite of the increasingly rattled shouts from the Head. Keating lingers in the door, and says “Thank you, boys” as he leaves. He has won.

DEAD POETS’ SOCIETY is distinct in separating the good from the bad. Mr Keating, Neil, Todd and the other boys are good, although some of them only potentially so—they are corruptible. Parents and Headmaster are bad. The appeal of the good is increased by binding them together as a cheerful and robust community. The boys are good-looking and vital, with that edge of insecurity and lurking permanent embarrassment endemic to adolescence tied to a stylishness that hides the normal clumsiness. Todd is the exception here, more normal in his withdrawn coldness, until he is saved by the charismatic teacher. The boys are bound by their camaraderie yet remain individuals, with their different characters. Moreover, they are nice to each other, supportive in times of trial. In short we have an engaging group of intelligent, buoyant teenagers undergoing the universal rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, male initiation in beautiful surroundings with the aid of carpe diem}

incarnate.

The film blames the bad for the death of Neil. There is, however, an undercurrent moving in a different direction. On the surface the film is a Romantic celebration of the poetic, the sensitive, the individual and the free against prosaic bourgeois conformity. Under the surface it is pervaded by imagery of death. Keating’s opening gambit in the film’s seminal scene is to shock the boys that one day they will be feeding the worms, like those before their eyes. It is because mortality rules that we are in such a hurry: seize the day is a way of cheating the inevitable, making a stand, so forget everything else. The school hall is like a crypt. The Indian cave is funereal, the boys initially afraid lest they hear whispers from the dead. When Neil plays Puck the striking part of his costume is a huge crown of dead twigs, and more dead twigs simulating his hands. It is in part a crown of thorns allusion, but the simpler and stronger thrust is towards a life that is dessicated. When you have sucked the marrow out of life what is left but the dried bones? The figure of Puck itself is outside life, the naughty sprite, the boy who cannot grow up, for whom time has stopped. Finally there are the dead poets themselves, whose portraits look down from above Keating’s blackboard, the film’s ultimate authorities. Why bother to stress that they are dead? Such is not a normal procedure. The title of the film thus points to its driving subterranean current.

But why death? For very good reasons, ones which it is unlikely that the director himself picked up. Like Hamlet, the greatest of Romantic heroes, who also was keen on worms, also highly gifted in intelligence, sensitivity and eloquence, Keating is an emissary of death. In spite of Peter Weir’s rhetoric it is Keating who is responsible for Neil’s suicide, and he knows it. In the middle of the film he has the boys kicking footballs to the thumping strains of the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the Ode to Joy. The music is well-chosen, the hymn to passion and freedom, within whose utopia “all men will become brothers,” the anthem of Germanic Romanticism. The darkest period of the twentieth century should have taught us to beware of this particular tune, for it was favourite accompaniment to that orgy of destruction that was Nazism, and fittingly so. The Ode to Joy is fine only as long as there are internal constraints, something to check the highly-pitched charge of lyric exaltation. What starts with the pure egoism of Whitman: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself” ends either in perpetual childhood—
Dead Poets' Society is a seductive film, technologically of very high quality. It is, as a result, powerfully subversive. It uses a good cause as a cloak to advance a bad one. The lines are drawn exactly as they were in the 1960s, as they have been many times since the Romantic movement got going two centuries ago. I would go further: this film is the best, the most persuasive presentation of 1960s ideology that there has been, and for some reason it has appeared twenty years on. There are other historical associations. Every time the middle-class order, stipulated on family, vocation, duty and civil society, swings into its own decadence ruled by snobbery and greed, an alternative decadence springs up to counter it, the Romantic one which over-emphasises feeling and artistic originality, at the expense of most of what really happens in life. The Dead Poets' Society and its success is evidence that a new bout of profane materialism has indeed emerged in the 1980s. In the West the humanist epoch has completely run down. There is no ability to do anything new and, above all, no ability to break this senseless logic, which has us going in circles from one moribund illusion to the other, then back.

Dead Poets' Society raises other issues. One is what makes a good school. This film has stimulated me to think back on my own experience at a Melbourne private school thirty years ago. Two things stand out as having been of singular value. One was the school Dancing Class conducted with girls from the Ladies College across the road. The other was the Cadet Corps. Both were run in an authoritarian manner, their inflexible rules and insensitive authority making possible in gawky self-conscious boys the development of some physical discipline that had as part of it a mental one too.

The man who made Picnic at Hanging Rock has not advanced in his vision of life, merely exchanging boys for girls, sharpening the focus, and worsening his caricatures of adults. He has, at least, brought a self-caricature on stage—Puck. Since Henry James it has been almost all downhill with our High Culture.

Their contribution to a self-confidence that enabled some carpe diem was far more profound than any poetry classes, which by the way I enjoyed, and especially learning lines from A Midsummer Night's Dream. The Dancing mistress and the Army captain worked according to Plato's axiom that limit is the beginning of pleasure, the opposite of Keating's that freedom is all. My own Captain would never have had the outrageous vanity of identifying himself with a national hero like Abraham Lincoln, never mind wooing his boys into deifying him with "O Captain! My Captain!" While his students were his life, and he peppered his classes with a spritely wit, he was a matter-of-fact man in whom a cheerful vitality combined with a serious orderliness. I remember him well, as I do.
my Dancing mistress, who had all the charm and manner of the buxom and bossy female sergeant-major that she was.

*Dead Poets' Society* is a very interesting and watchable film. The masterpiece in whose shadow it works its themes is Henry James’ novel, *The Ambassadors*. James too tests *carpe diem*, sending his hero, the New England Puritan, Lambert Strether, to Paris to “live all he can,” for as he learns, “if you haven’t had that, what have you had.” Strether slowly comes to understand the full logic of the “live all you can” as it is consummated in Paris, elegantly, courteously, intelligently, the most refined pursuit of pleasure and its subtle indulgences. He is seduced, but in the end he sees this world as empty, and flees in order to salvage his honour. By contrast, the man who made *Picnic at Hanging Rock* has not advanced in his vision of life, merely exchanging boys for girls, sharpening the focus, and worsening his caricatures of adults. He has, at least, brought a self-caricature on stage—Puck. Since Henry James it has been almost all downhill with our High Culture.

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**Fifty Thousand**

The epitaph will be composed for them
By one of their compatriots at last.
These lines are offered for the interim.
But can it be that fifteen years have passed?
Now Time already starts to strip away
The brief disfigurements of mortal harm,
And they are settling deeper by the day
Into a massive and majestic calm.

The trigger-happy, acid-headed crew
Might not have been a propaganda lie;
But now we cannot doubt they also knew
What Roman gravity it took to die.

And thus let only sober claims be made:
Their dying held no magic to repair
The wreck of their equivocal crusade,
The bitter treacheries it had to bear.

And yet perhaps we need not wholly grieve,
For many times in history we meet
Those later generations who perceive
The moral triumph in some sad defeat...

Consult the sober histories and find
How Spartans perished in the narrow pass;
How many others, too, have left behind
Their legend as perennial as grass.

We may assume that honour’s ancient laws
Will serve these dead Americans as well,
The underlying virtue of whose cause
Became apparent even as they fell.

*Peter Kocan*