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Stopping up the Works: Weir's *The Plumber* and Social Class Conflict

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Good plumbing seems to be essential for a happy life or at least as the film, *The Plumber* (1979), suggests with ironic wit. This film may be seen as part of the Australian New Wave, which has produced many talented filmmakers such as the maker of this film, Peter Weir. Weir is an innovative and stylised director who was, especially in earlier works, concerned with Australian mythologies and history such as in *Gallipoli* (1981), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977). *The Plumber* was a departure in theme from other films and came in between *The Last Wave* and *Gallipoli*. It was a made for television drama with an off-beat sense of humor, and makes use of, what was then, contemporary Australia and is comparable to the earlier made-for-television American films such as Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971). Both films navigate within the confines of genre films, transcend limitations of the television medium, and show promise of more great work from the directors in the future. Later, the film was released as a feature film in U.S. theaters. *The Plumber* is diabolically charming, yet if one examines the underlying elements, an incisive social commentary is revealed. The subtext of a monomaniacal plumber demonstrates a seething resentment from the working class towards the well-heeled and well-educated sectors in Australian society, as Max (Ivar Kants), the plumber seeks to systematically destroy the lives of husband and wife academics by destroying their plumbing.

Janet Maslin describes this film as an instance where Weir "turns his attention, with much success, to a droll, claustrophobic work of absurdist humor."¹ This comedy works in synergy with mounting

suspense to create a visceral visual experience. The comedy appears as satire and is far from slapstick, but rather an unnerving battle of wits and wills. Maslin also described the episodically arranged piece as “Pinteresque.” Indeed, the viscously thick and rich subtext is prominent as in Harold Pinter’s work as *The Birthday Party*. *The Plumber* absurdly recalls Pinter’s often pregnant, awkward silences and subtle inferences with larger connotations.

The Plumber was made in 1979 during Malcolm Fraser’s term as Prime Minister of Australia. During the 1970s, there were several political and social changes such as a greater interest and movement towards protection of Aboriginal rights with the enactment of Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act.² It was also a prosperous time for Australia. Jill Cowper, the protagonist in *The Plumber*, has been studying indigenous populations in Papua New Guinea. The film begins with her description of a close encounter with an indigenous Papuan man. Although her studies dealt with New Guinea, her rigorous academic interests in indigenous populations aligns with the contemporary investigation into cultural diversity in Australia, and a renewal of interest in indigenous rights. While Jill’s disaffected expressions and repressed reactions in the beginning of the film to the plumber’s antics reflect someone who is naïve and shy, she is very much in tune with cultural diversity and is what one would call “worldly”. The plumber in contrast is a blue-collar caricature, but not stereotypical. He is hellbent on calling to mind cultural differences between himself and the rest of the world. The restrictions of Max are contrasted sharply with the educated, culturally aware lifestyle of the Cowper’s. But while Jill and her husband, Brian, are deeply intellectual and erudite, they seem to willfully neglect the practical. Their lack of pragmatism makes them an easy target for Max.

Jill recounts to her husband about an incident where a holy man came to her tent during her field research in a village. The man chanted and yelled for hours until Jill flung a bowl of goat’s milk, which frightened him off. The conflict of crossing over this fine invisible line of what is considered appropriate behavior is another key motif personified by the restrained disorder of Max until he dips over to the other, irrational, primal side which he has flirted with throughout. Jill too begins a descent into the primal need for self-preservation. She reaches a breaking point when she turns on the water tap in the kitchen and it does not work. She responds to this by bellowing, “Bloody plumber!” It is here that the term “plumber” gains derogatory and sinister overtones.



The film indicates that, ironically in a living space that is supposed to be mundane, there are forces at work in the bathroom of the main protagonists. What more of a great leveler of social classes than the bathroom? The bathroom reminds us that all of humanity is still attached to the basic

physiological functions that make us human. What the plumber does is to seek to deprive the couple of even the most basic and private places to conduct these functions. He seeks to control in any and only way he knows, through pipes and tiles.

Jill Cowper (Judy Morris) is a higher degree student at the University and is systematically bullied and tormented by Max who compromises even her most basic need for privacy. There is a scene wherein Jill is unaware of the plumber's activities in her bathroom and thinks he has left for the day. She begins to strip her clothes off for a hot shower. She becomes startlingly aware that he is still occupying the bathroom space and may be spying on her. It is here that the film begins to take an eerie and bizarre turn. She calls her husband at work to make him aware of the situation, but he is disaffected and preoccupied with the local visit of the World Health Organization, leaving Jill to fend for herself.

Before Max's descent into complete obsessive malice, he pronounces to Jill that he is somewhat dissatisfied with his place in life. In one awkward scene, he reveals his aspirations as a Dylanesque folk singer. He then proceeds to sing one of his songs in Jill's shower. His song is laughably a pastiche of Dylan imitations. It seems that Max is trying in his demented way to demonstrate his social consciousness. Of course, his appeal to the intellectual side of Jill is disturbingly distorted and absurd. Jill just wants Max to leave, and cares little of his aspirations to be a socially aware troubadour.

The Plumber is full of awkward unpleasanties such as the climactic scene where the Cowper's have a dinner party for some highly established academics from the World Health Organization, Max has made sure that the bathroom is now unusable. An important guest finds himself in an absolute mess as he falls into the toilet and pipes bust overhead. This scene reminds us that Max is wielding power and influence over the couple's lives wherein previously he was powerless. It is essentially a kind of class revolt. The working class is taken for granted by those that are representative of the middle class according to Max's deranged logic. At the time this film was made, there was a push to make public universities in Australia more accessible to working and middle-class families. Max is an individual who has no upward social mobility. He lacks both intelligence and the talent to transcend his position. While the film never outlines the exact motive for Max's malicious and obsessive behavior, this frustrated classism may offer some insight into the position.

Social conflict is the crux of the film and while it is not overtly concerned with socio-economic politics, the subtext demands to be read, no matter how abstract. The somewhat bold statement being made is done within the framework of a standard TV thriller. Obviously, to tailor the film for television audiences, there needed to be a degree of intrigue and sensationalism absent in what may be considered Weir's more ambitious, if not heavy-handed approach. *The Plumber* is playfully irreverent and refreshing.



At the beginning of every vignette wherein Max draws the Cowper's deeper into his world of madness, he arrives in a dilapidated car wagon with a canned rock and roll track that has no discernible recording artists stamp. It is obviously chosen arbitrarily by Weir to suggest music of the period. Yet, the repetitive nature of the song becomes a leitmotif of eccentricity. The repetitive episodes punctuated by Max's car and radio-play, reinforce the obsessive-compulsive nature of the plumber's actions and his unrelenting grinding of his "gears" to disturb the couple.

Max disguises the epitome of the working-class Australia with his madness. If it weren't for his bizarre fixations, he might well be a representative of a hard-working white male. Weir makes no overt moves to demonstrate the class struggles that become evident in spite of his direction. In fact, one may be lost in the trappings of a blackly humorous psychological thriller. Perhaps, it is that Weir succeeds by being socially conscious despite his limitations. Max is a grotesque, or an exaggerated figure and the film becomes a caricature of class relations.

Weir's work on *The Plumber* is restrained and unobtrusive as is the cinematography. It demonstrates none of the stylisation of his other films. Yet, Weir makes use of limited locales and the apartment, particularly the bathroom, is shot with stifling claustrophobia. When the master shot of the housing development is established, the edifice comes to represent civilised society or somewhat as a bourgeois prison complex. As Max pulls into the parking area each time, the viewer is challenged with anticipation to see if a metaphoric crack shall appear in the façade of this structure. Weir is suggesting that the whole edifice may come crashing down with the blow from the counterculture. In this case, the bourgeois bubble of the Cowper's becomes punctured by the hammer of Max and his peculiar blend of offense. Make no mistake- Max is no working-class hero, a phrase that was made even more famous by John Lennon whose musical influence he emulates. He is more of a mental sadist that likes to mock and torment his prey. This case it includes the Cowper's in his little games. Weir suggests that Max is so relentless that he has no intentions of ever repairing the Cowper bathroom, but would continually destroy it drawing the couple deeper into his madness. It is suggested to the viewer that Max needs to be stopped by any means available to Jill Cowper.

Marxism may be the last thing on the minds of viewers coming to see a "psycho-plumber" movie. Nevertheless, Max is the working class in revolt. Yet, the Cowper's may not be the most representative of an upper class. Their extensive education, though, becomes an example to Max of the luxury of the bourgeoisie. Max refers to Jill as going to "posh" schools and insinuates that she has a condescending attitude. In one scene, Max indicates the demeaning aspects of buildings having a "tradesman" entrance. His response to this prompts him to arrive at Jill's one day through a hole in the ceiling which he mockingly cites as his "tradesman" entrance. Weir is not endorsing nor

opposing class warfare or revolution. If so, he is really mocking the absurdity, the labels, and classifications social groups identify with. The primary instigator of this absurd class warfare is obviously the status obsessed Max.

The Plumber seems to be escapist entertainment on the surface. Yet at the heart of this off-beat genre piece is a revelation of social conventions and classism. Max represents an absurd challenge to the erudite lives of the Cowper's. He attacks in a primal way. Ultimately, Jill resorts to desperate measures by placing some of her belongings in Max's jalopy and calls police. The film ends with the police dragging Max away screaming and claiming he had been framed. It is ironic that because Max is from a lower class and Jill, the scholar in the apartment, the police assume that Max is guilty, or so the conclusions infer. The viewer is left to meditate on societal roles and classes once again. After all, maybe Max did have something when he proclaimed the tradesman entrance was demeaning. How does contemporary society view the less educated and lower class? What roles do we to assume in life and why?

The Plumber is not a message film, but it is an exploration of different characters from diverse backgrounds thrown together in an awkward and challenging situation. Yet, it also manages to play on audience's biases about the working class and invokes a sense of dread about the less educated. What Weir succeeds in is giving us is a Hitchcockian exploration of clashing socio-educational-economical forces and experiments with it. As a result, Weir straddles the line between value judgement and simple interpersonal experiment, with the achieved effect of challenging audience's comfort zone. It is evident, as Frost said "good fences make good neighbors", that good pipes make good neighbors.

Endnotes:

1. Maslin, J. (1981, December 1). Peter Weir's 'The Plumber'. The New York Times. Retrieved July 19, 2017, from <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/01/movies/peter-weir-s-the-plumber.html?mcubz=0>
2. "Aboriginal Land Rights Act." The National Museum of Australia. Accessed July 26, 2017. http://www.nma.gov.au/online_features/defining_moments/featured/aboriginal_land_rights_a

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