

FILM AS TEXT.
***Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir 1975).**
By D. Bruno Starrs,
Queensland University of Technology. Copyright 2007.

Since the 1970s in Australia, when the separate states established film financing organizations and tax incentives via the 10B (a) legislation were enacted, thus encouraging the so-called 'Renaissance,' films that varied from the mainstream have been regularly produced, and these films have been frequently described as Australian art films. Kathleen McHugh, in her study of Australian film-maker Jane Campion (*Sweetie* (1989) and *The Piano* (1993)), describes the establishment of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), with its deliberately cultivated identity as an 'arty' institution, as commensurate with the goal of combining a uniquely Australian auteur style with mass marketability:

[. . .] the goal of national industries and national film schools was to produce filmmakers whose vision would be sufficiently distinct from the Hollywood model to be claimed for a national perspective, while also remaining sufficiently similar to that model to be commercially viable in the international film market.¹

Thus, a uniquely Australian national cinema was cultivated in the 1970s, one which sought to marry the artistic creativity of the film auteur with the industry requirements of box office performance. Although its director, Peter Weir, was not a product of the AFTRS, the most obvious and readily identifiable example of such commercially viable Australian Art Films is *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and this production exemplifies the pursuit of a national cinema so evident at the time. Indeed, Albert Moran and Errol Vieth (2006) call it the "quintessential Australian period Art Film, the marriage of a muted commercialism with a foregrounded aesthetic textual surface that was seen as a guarantee of 'quality'."² Weir's preternatural and perplexing masterpiece not only served him well at the box office, it opened the doors to a glittering career in Hollywood as he went on to make the more mainstream hits *Green Card* (1990) and *Fearless* (1993).

Picnic at Hanging Rock is instantly recognizable as an art film because, like Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979), it is also a period film, being set in the not so long ago days of Australia's colonial past. Films of this genre are characterized by authentic costuming and props with plots often based on acclaimed literary works. In the 1970s such subject matter contrasted significantly with Australian box office hits such as *Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford 1972) and *Alvin Purple* (Tim Burstall 1973) and Scott Hocking wrote:

The most influential work in this filmmaking 'renaissance' was *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Weir's deliberately oblique and haunting masterpiece which remains one of our country's finest cinematic achievements [... It was] a radical detour for Australian film following a succession of ocker comedies."³

Lest the reader think that merely setting a film in the days of one's forebears and basing the film on a classic novel is enough to qualify the work as an art film, I would like to draw attention to a definition offered by Norman Holland (1964), which states the art film is always a "puzzle film."⁴ Not unlike a detective film, the puzzle film offers a riddle or enigma that engages the characters, and the audience, in some significant struggle to comprehend. Unlike the detective film, however, the puzzling art film seeks to involve the viewer in an unresolved narrative without offering a sense of closure. Things rarely wrap up nicely with everybody 'living happily ever after' in an art film and characters often seem relatively directionless, not striving for the attainment of a certain goal, which when fulfilled typically signals the end of the mainstream film. As David Bordwell (2004) puts it, "Firstly, the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events."⁵ Instead of a standard story arc, there may be an acknowledgment of failure on the protagonist's behalf, or the character's perplexed status may continue unchanged, or only a partial or not entirely satisfactory explanation may be offered. The audience is encouraged to speculate about the solution to the puzzle beyond the end of the film, and,

indeed, about the meaning of the film generally. But as Bordwell notes, the riddle also concerns the intent of the author, not just the outcome of the story: “In the art cinema, the puzzle is one of plot: who is telling this story? How is this story being told? Why is this story being told this way?”⁶ Because of the art film’s interest in both realism—with its ‘real’ (not studio) locations, and ‘real’ problems—and in auteurial motivation, there is frequent and deliberate ambiguity, hence the reader of this type of film needs to undertake a particular strategy of ‘meaning seeking’:

The art cinema seeks to solve the problem [of merging the realist and expressionist aesthetics] in a sophisticated way: by the device of *ambiguity*. The art film is non-classical in that it foregrounds deviations from the classical norm—there are certain gaps and problems. But these very deviations are *placed*, resituated as realism (in life things happen this way) or authorial comment (the ambiguity is symbolic). Thus the art film solicits a particular reading procedure: Whenever confronted with a problem in causation, temporality, or spatiality, we first seek realistic motivation. (Is a character’s mental state causing the uncertainty? Is life just leaving loose ends?) If we’re thwarted, we next seek authorial motivation. (What is being ‘said’ here? What significance justifies the violation of the norm?).⁷

Bordwell et al suggest that the art film depends on a unique narrative strategy that hovers between the classical narrative of mainstream Hollywood and an alternative modernist or avant garde type of filmic disposition.⁸ Narrative is not disregarded as much as it is in the avant garde or modernist film, however, and the art film retains many characteristics with the classical Hollywood product. Verisimilitude and naturalism may still be guiding characteristics and attention to the film-making apparatus is still usually avoided. Star actors are frequently sought, although the lower budgets of art films may preclude A-list thespians. Some actors, however, are prepared to forgo their usual fees for the opportunity to work for a director of high repute or on a script they consider particularly worthwhile and artistic. Frequently there is the expectation by investors that such low budget art films are not commercially viable, especially when competing at the box office with big-budget Hollywood productions, but occasionally marketing and promotion equals that afforded by mainstream films and occasionally art films capture the public’s imagination to the extent that significant profits are made.

Certainly, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* presents a puzzle to the viewer. The film evokes a sense of unease with its unresolved mystery and director Weir confirmed this as his intention, stating “I did everything in my power to hypnotize the audience away from the possibility of solutions.”⁹ Quite simply, the puzzle concerns the fate of some schoolgirls and their teacher who go missing on an outing to the picnic site of the film’s title, an outgrowth of granite rocks in the Victorian countryside. Hermeneutically, the audience is left with a challenge: how to explain the unresolved, open ending of the film regarding their mysterious disappearance. Numerous ‘red herrings’ abound, that is, co-incidental clues suggest a solution that does not exist. With its famously eerie soundtrack incorporating the pan-flutes of Georghe Zamfir, and its seminal treatment of the Australian landscape as a character, both beautiful and threatening, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* instills a foreboding sense of the supernatural. As if the schoolgirls were spirited away by unseen fairies, this movie hovers between lush turn-of-the-century melodrama and metaphysical horror. The plot is a fairly faithful adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s 1967 novel of the same name: it is Valentine’s Day in 1900, and a class of teenaged school girls from the oppressive Appleyard boarding school have set off for a special outing to Hanging Rock in the countryside of Victoria in Southeast Australia. The strictly regimented environment they leave behind is a seething hothouse of barely restrained sensuality: the adolescent women are shown tightening each other’s corsets in the near-fetishised *mise-en-scene*, exchanging valentines or quoting love sonnets with lesbian overtones, gazing narcissistically into looking glasses and dozing languidly in virginal white petticoats. In their auteur analysis of Weir’s films, Bruce Johnson and Gaye Poole identify a thematic polarity in *Picnic* between abandonment and restraint:

... the organic timeless sounds of birds, wind and insects set against the ‘little fidget

wheels' of clocks and chimes in muted Edwardian interiors invoke the nature/culture polarity. The use of rhythm-based as opposed to tonally-based music helps to activate oppositions between abandonment and restraint: drums versus harmony, rock versus Mozart.¹⁰

On arrival at their holiday destination, several of the girls attempt to climb the volcanic outcrop but stop partway through their ascent to uniformly fall into a mysterious sleep. The watches of their friends left behind enigmatically cease working as the tragedy above unfolds. The victims then simultaneously awake and are shown in slow-motion, passing into a crevice in the rock like time travelers into a teleporter, as one reluctant girl screams and apparently escapes the uncanny lure of whatever it is that has captivated her companions. Following a succession of desperate searches, the lone survivor is found but remembers nothing. The Headmistress (Rachel Roberts) loses herself in alcoholic oblivion as the school suffers financially due to some of its students being withdrawn by concerned and anxious parents. An aristocratic young English fop (Dominic Guard), having briefly observed the girls at the rock on the day of their disappearance, searches obsessively, obliquely suggesting an ulterior motive. Miranda's infatuated room-mate suicides, her body lying undiscovered for some days amongst the crushed flowers of a greenhouse. The missing schoolgirls are eventually declared deceased, and a church memorial is held. Frequent flashbacks subsequent to their inexplicable evanescence, rendered in soft-focus and reminiscent of a dreamlike trance, show the girls with their leader Miranda (Anne Lambert) seemingly figured as a white swan.

Part of the film's unease is due to its theme of restrained sexuality, with Weir creating an atmospheric analogy with pagan ritual sacrifices of vestal virgins to the dark, unfathomable forces of Mother Nature. Indeed, the director's attitude to female sexuality is hardly enlightened: the young women's burgeoning sexual appetites are summarily annihilated by the rock, which itself is figured as a devouring feminine presence through the film's use of inter-uterine imagery. Julia Kristeva's concept of an abject, threatening womb springs to mind, as the rock's labyrinthine passages and hidden hollows echo with the sub-text of her "neutralizing cave, a fantasy arising precisely as the negative imprint of the maternal phallus."¹¹ Thus, the rock is a place where the male audience's deepest fears of feminine sexuality are symbolically enacted and effectively countered. The rock engulfs the young women, removing the threat of their unbridled sensuality. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the rock as a giant male member is frequently volunteered, if incorrectly, with Benita Parry making the banal elucidation "the girls are mesmerized into offering themselves up to the phallic rock."¹² Rather than a celebration of sexual union, however, Weir's misogynistic project is further evidenced by numerous examples of objectification of the girl's adolescent bodies as erotic and deserving of punishment. Russell Boyd's romanticized slow-motion camera and soft-focus lens lingers over titillating sights such as the girls tightening each other's stays in a thinly veiled depiction of a sado-masochistic male fantasy or engages in voyeuristic close-ups of the girl's uncovered legs as they partially disrobe on the rock. Patriarchal control of the libidinous female continues when the medical examination by an elderly male doctor declares the surviving girl, Edith, and the rescued but amnesic Irma, as "quite intact", although Irma's bright red costume subsequent to her ordeal, juxtaposed so vividly with the achromatic uniforms of the other schoolgirls, suggests she has been 'blooded'. She has survived the rock but emerged nonetheless scarred.

Of course, there is much more to Peter Weir's seminal Australian period art film than its condescension to female sexuality. Jonathan Rayner notes:

... *Picnic* earned praise for its period recreation, and it helped to establish some of the elements of Weir's style and vision: the amalgamation of the normal and the abnormal; collisions between society and individuals, and between societies and external forces; visual hallmarks of bleached, pale lighting, soft-focused nostalgic haze, and meticulous art direction; reinforcing or undermining the image with conspicuous or incongruous sound.¹³

But with an apperception of Weir's misogynistic cinematic contrivance, one might question how

great a departure from the ocker comedies of the 1970s, with their gratuitous female nudity and blatantly demeaning objectification of women, the early Australian Art films as exemplified by *Picnic at Hanging Rock* really achieved. Both genres, it might seem, recognized the salient truth of the movie industry: sex sells. This belief that the Australian period art film is a disdainful depiction of Young Womanhood is quickly jettisoned, however, on examination of that other significant Australian period art film of the 1970s: *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong 1979). Here, the narrative concerns the journey of emotional self-discovery of novelist Sybilla (Judy Davis) as she realizes her socially discouraged dream of writing professionally in misogynistic Australia. The puzzle posed by the film at its ending is whether or not Sybilla was right to reject the security and safety of marriage for the uncertainty of a literary career and whether or not her book will be published. With its female authorship, primary cast and crew (Miles Franklin wrote the source novel, Eleanor Whitcomb the screenplay, Gillian Armstrong directed, Margaret Fink produced and Judy Davis starred), *My Brilliant Career* ties its feminist project self-reflexively with the story of the film: the audience is subtly lead to believe the manuscript featured in the last shots is the autobiographical novel. Such a positive endorsement of female independence contrasts deeply with the frail, vanquished sylphs of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. While Weir may have been a film-maker nurtured by a climate that encouraged what Moran and Vieth call films with a “foregrounded aesthetic textual surface that was seen as a guarantee of ‘quality’”¹⁴, and as such was a forerunner in the nascent Australian national cinema, he also geared his work to the unconscious desires of the lowest common denominator. His *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was a text of no less interest to the sex-obsessed, patriarchal, ticket-buying Australian public than the sex-romps of *Barry McKenzie* or *Alvin Purple*.

Notes.

1. McHugh, Kathleen. *Jane Campion*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2007: 14.
2. Moran, Albert, and Errol Vieth. *Film in Australia: An Introduction*. Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 2006: 36.
3. Hocking, Scott (ed.), "Picnic at Hanging Rock", in *100 Greatest Films of Australian Cinema*, Richmond, Victoria: Scribal, 2006: 166.
4. Holland, Norman. "The Puzzling Movies: An Analysis and a Guess at Their Appeal." *Journal of Social Science* 1 January 1964: 71-96.
5. Bordwell, David. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Practice." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 2004: 775.
6. Bordwell 779.
7. Bordwell 779.
8. Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
9. Dawson, Jan. "Picnic under Capricorn," *Sight and Sound*. 1976: 83.
10. Johnson, Bruce and Gaye Poole. "Sound and Author/auteurship: Music in the films of Peter Weir", *Screen Scores: Studies in Contemporary Australian Film Music*. Rebecca Coyle (ed), North Ryde, NSW, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1998: 129.
11. Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, NY: Columbia UP, 1982: 135.
12. Parry, Benita. "Materiality and mystification in *A Passage to India*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Spring 1998: 177.
13. Rayner, Jonathan. *The Films of Peter Weir*, NY: Continuum, 2003: 59.
14. Moran and Vieth 36.