

Beauty, Myth and Monolith: Picnic at Hanging Rock and the Vibration of Sacrality

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Any attempt to identify religious themes in art necessarily pre-assumes an ability to distinguish that which has religious significance from that which does not. Whether or not it is appropriate to evaluate religiosity along a qualitative or quantitative continuum, the issue at hand dictates that a definition must be drawn. The explanation reached must take care to include not only the aspects of religious traditions with which one is *unfamiliar*, but also those traditions so normalised by cultural absorption that they become invisible from the position of that milieu. It seems fitting, therefore, that one might turn to the rubric of Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy in search of a definition. In doing so, one returns fitted with the sensitivity to discern both institutionalised and mythical notions of the sacred, as well as the actions and imaginings that emerge in response to the experience of such sacrality.

Malingering somewhere between metaphysical horror and lush Victorian melodrama, Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) is an instantly unsettling cinematographic experience. Based faithfully upon Joan Lindsay's novel of the same name, the film has, for almost thirty years, coerced audiences beyond the parameters of comfort in its unmistakable allusion to some incorporeal 'other;' a domain which represents both the unknown and the unknowable. A massive volcanic outcropping at Mount Macedon and Saint Valentine's Day, 1900 compose the temporal and geographic backdrop for the disappearance of four Appleyard College members on their summer picnic. Before we leapfrog the scene-setting detail for a plunge into horror, however, we must pay due attention to the hermetic significance of time and place.

The day of St Valentine cannot be overlooked, because mindful audiences will infer from it much more than its Christian name evokes. The holiday itself originates from an ancient Roman festival of sexual license, Lupercalia, betiding on the *ides* of February and dedicated to Juno Februata, goddess of the fever of love. As with other pagan celebrations, Christianity attempted to suppress

Lupercalia by co-opting it, designating it the day of the martyred Saint Valentine. However, that the tragedy is made manifest on a dually religious holiday is not of pertinence to the question *per se*. Instead, one must recognise the resonances of erotica throughout the film, and the undertone of sexual reticence which flicks a knowing, jealous wink to the liberty of Lupercalia and what it inspires in the Victorian debutantes. The ligature between the sacred and the sexual will be discussed further into the paper.

At this point we must also refer to the religious significance of geography and indeed geology in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. If one can see beyond the austerity of Victorian England to the indigenous lore of pre-Christian Europe, then the importance of nature and natural phenomena cannot be slighted. A profound reverence for the earth and a regard for both benignant and noxious land spirits is a feature of a great many Celtic traditions, and Rayner connects such traditions to Australia through an observation that much nineteenth century Australian art conveys 'a deliberate attempt to equip a new nation with a mythology of spirits that come to belong uniquely to the Australian landscape.'¹ It is indeed characteristic of Weir to use paintings as a basis for artistic direction; seventeenth-century Flemish works influence the portraiture of *Witness* (1985) and the myth-infused canvases of the Heidelberg School compose the scene-cloth for *Picnic*. It has been noted that such works as Streeon's *Bush Idyll* (depicting fairies airborne amongst the gumtrees) were of primary interest to both Weir and novelist Joan Lindsay, suggesting the intentional investiture of the Australian bush with foreign mythological murmurations in both the film and the novel.

Similarly (and perhaps more pertinently) the spiritual traditions of indigenous Australians constitute a place-based analogue to *Picnic*'s inscrutable vanishings. Those attempting to solve the mystery have often deflected the charge of culpability onto Aboriginal 'land spirits' which guard sacred sites against unwelcome intrusion. Aboriginal Shaman Loraine Mafi Williams notes that 'there are places all over Australia to avoid'² and the Appleyard College members may well have unwittingly (or perhaps willfully) committed an act of religious trespass on the slopes of the Mount Macedon monolith. Whether or

¹ J Rayner: 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' in *The Films of Peter Weir*, New York, 1998, 61.

² As cited in H Schumann: 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' accessed April 2004, <http://www.talkingpix.co.uk/ReviewsPicnicHangingRock.html>

not it can be inferred that Hanging Rock exacts a brooding **revenge** on the College girls as a gesture of retribution for European invasion, it is nonetheless an interesting conjecture on their fate. Wrought with the confusion of irrational events, even the dispassionate Headmistress allows her guesswork to move beyond the misfortunes of rape and murder towards a speculation that the girls have not met a physically torturous fate but have instead been 'spirited away.'

The narrative of the 'Lost Child' and the unforgiving, anti-creative landscape has for years resonated across the plane of Australian art, echoing the unvoiced concern that this vast inhospitable environment might somehow engulf and digest its subjects. In a curious cinematic parallel, Fred Schepisi's *Evil Angels* (1988) details the unaccountable disappearance of a child at another of Australia's sacred indigenous monolithic sites. While this film is more concerned with the meticulous depiction of actual events than with the artistic evocation of mystery, it is nonetheless suggestive of some native Australian esoteric other, alluded to by the search-party's reliance on Aboriginal trackers and the judicial finding of a 'method unknown' as the means by which Azaria Chamberlain's body is made to vanish. Also unknown, it seems, is the method by which *Picnic's* girls are made to vanish, eighty years prior on 14 February

However, while the magnetic carnality of St Valentine and the apparent spiritual charge of the rock itself may help to explain the girls' allurements, it does nothing to feasibly account for their evanescence. Additionally, that human foul play is barely suggested and never substantiated, instantly elevates and validates the vanishing of three senior schoolgirls and their mathematics teacher beyond the significance of time and place into a realm uncharted by the senses of rationality. This is the province of cinematic horror, an ambit which induces visceral anguish by inverting the sacred and confuting the viewer's understanding of terrestrial status quos.

Very gently, Weir petitions the viewer's awareness to the presence of an immaterial entity. This entity assumes no perceivable form, yet the guttural roaring of motionless air and the mid-noon stopping of fob-watches charge the unknown issue with a power not only to be, but to interact with, the physical world. As Weir confesses, much of the nightmarish semblance of *Picnic's* rock scenes is attributable to the oddness of the noises: 'With the soundtrack I used white noise, or

sounds that were inaudible to the human ear, but were constantly there on the track ... I've had comments from people...saying that there were odd moments during the film when they felt a strange disassociation from time and place.³ It is Weir's habit to augment natural noises in such a way that they come to convoke *supernatural* ambiances. *The Last Wave* (1977) is a perfect exponent of this tendency, refashioning recordings of torrential rains, flowing waters, and working windshield wipers to engender a constant, mesmeric and sinister rhythm.⁴ Indeed the eerie sense of primordial doom and natural ruination aroused in *Picnic* is validated by Weir's admission to using reversed recordings of earthquake vibrations as his basis for generating the thunder-like roar that percolates through crevices on the upper slopes of Hanging Rock.

Similarly, Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1975) uses disorienting sound to portray the fusion of ancient and modern as well as sacred and profane: Aboriginal music merges with radio static and school elocution lessons in a reference to the wider religio-cultural concern of stifled indigenous spirituality. In *Picnic*, such bizarre noises are an antithetical contrast to the Baroque piano preludes and Zamfirian pan-flute melodies which accompany the more rational and 'grounded' moments of the film, serving to distinguish through music a very different but definite 'otherness'. Coates discusses this preternatural presence in terms of the 'uncanny' which occurs, he purports, when the 'apparently familiar reveals its unfamiliarity.'⁵

The moments preceding the disappearance constitute one pictographic swell of expectancy: having ridden the colourful wave of momentum to a pregnant and breathtaking zenith, viewers are paralysed with the horror of imminent ills. As Irma, Miranda, and Marion rise from sleep with a perfect sameness of step, they drift barefoot up a steep and jagged incline in an unnervingly palpable display of reverence to whatever power has apprehended them. Already they have transcended the will or the ability to subsist on a sensory level, as none of the parting three can respond to Edith's cries of horror or are jolted back to the physical world by her blood-chilling scream for which the scene has become so renowned.

³ As cited in Rayner, op cit, 69.

⁴ M Haltof: 'Children in the bush: Picnic at Hanging Rock' in *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide*, New York, 1996, 36.

⁵ P Coates: *The Gorgon's Gaze*, Cambridge, 1991, 7.

Perhaps more significant, however is the moment before the disappearance where Miranda tenders a disturbingly final revelatory declaration that 'everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place.'

The ability to foresee the future is connected in some way to a great many religious traditions, and recurs several times throughout the course of Weir's film. Even before the portentous picnic, Miranda offers a prophetic warning to her beloved roommate Sara: 'You must learn to love someone else, apart from me. I shan't be here much longer.' It is not only Miranda who is endowed with the gift of prophecy. On the eve of Sara's suicide, her estranged brother, Albert, dreams of a farewell visit from his sister which is imbued with a pungent aroma of pansies. Seven days afterward, Appleyard's gardener discovers in the College's glasshouse something that had once been a girl in a night-dress; one-week rotten, green, bloodied, and broken among the velvety summer florets.

The opening sequence of *Picnic* features the recurrent use of mirrors in its shot composition, establishing from the outset a leitmotif of otherworldly travel. While the 'mirror, mirror' incantation may evoke nuances of fairy-tale fantasy, it must be remembered that the mirror is an important medium in a number of pagan traditions, constituting an aperture between the binaries of life/death, this world/other world, past/future, and falsity/truth.⁶ While there is no direct allusion to trans-temporal voyage in *Picnic*, common theory supposes that the girls come to 'slip' through a tear in the fabric of time, a conjecture supported by the disruption of the picnickers' watches, Miranda's musing on beginnings and endings and the reason-defying health of Irma's person after a seven-day spell in the rugged February bush. Analogously, Donald Crombie's film of Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (1985) is predicated on time-travel and the gift of prophecy as bestowed unto the Bow family during an encounter with the painted Elfin folk of the Orkney Isles some hundred years previously. While *Beattie Bow*'s Abigail is permitted to return to her contemporary world, however, the fate of *Picnic*'s Miranda is an amaranthine sentenced to abide in whatever world has immured her.

⁶ Vivianne Crowley: *Wicca: The Old Religion in the New Millennium*, London, 1996, Chapter 6 'The First Initiation: Opening the Door.'

Just as there is something otherworldly about Hanging Rock, there is something otherworldly about Miranda herself. It appears as if she too is the incarnation of some unsaid elemental force; emanating a composite wisdom beyond the dominion of mortal being. As the gentle, fair-haired girl waves a fateful farewell to Mademoiselle de Poitiers, the young French mistress looks up from an illustration of *The Birth of Venus* to exclaim, 'Now I know!' 'What do you know?' inquires Miss McCraw; 'I know that Miranda is a Botticelli angel,' she responds. Indeed, Rayner observes that Miranda's dual position as school figurehead and otherworldly damsel awaiting escape is 'comparable to Venus's standing in Botticelli's work,'⁷ absorbing dichotomies of free will and duty, love and obedience, nature and nurture. In an interesting aside, Rayner recalls the story of Belphoebe and Amoret in Book III, Canto 6 of Spenser's *Faerie Queen*.⁸ The narrative of twins, separated at birth and ignorant of each other even in close proximity is a striking pendant to the story of Albert and Sara who through disparate upbringings each remain fantastically unaware of the other's closeness. That Amoret is raised as the adoptive child of Venus is dually significant, for it serves to foreshadow Sara as an acolyte of the College's Venus, Miranda.

That Sara is desperately in love with Miranda is made patent by both Lindsay and Weir. That their relationship is sexual, however, is only implied. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* contains many ambiguous homoerotic relationships; not only between Sara and Miranda, but between Miranda and Mlle de Poitiers, among others. Valentine cards, love poetry, and missing corsetry are as close as the film comes to supplying brute evidence, but Weir's hypnotic and eroticised slow-motion cinematics leave little doubt as to the nature of exchanges between characters. Hunter points out the Victoriana in Weir's film and notices that its suggested lesbianism serves as 'an emblem of the girls' otherworldliness', a quality drawn from such Victorian art as Coleridge's *Christabel*, or Rossetti's *The Bower Meadow*.⁹

Sexual motifs are carefully placed in the narrative and constitute an important analogical undercurrent to the themes of maturation and

⁷ Rayner, op cit, 62.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ M Haltof: 'Children in the bush: Picnic at Hanging Rock' in *Peter Weir: When Cultures Collide*, New York, 1996, 31.

transcendence. Perhaps the greatest exemplar of sexual transformation can be seen in Irma's visit to Appleyard after her experience on the rock: entering the College's 'Temple of Callisthenics,' her ripe-red velvet dress stands in stark sensual contrast to the virginal white gymnasium attire of her uninitiated classmates. This is not to suggest that Irma has endured the fate of rape or molestation during her week in the bush; on the contrary her physician declares that she (and her virginity) are 'quite intact.' Rather, it can be seen that Weir's film stresses a strong thematic concern with the repressed sexuality of the pubescent girls, presenting Appleyard College and Hanging Rock as the monolithic antipodes of restriction and liberty.

Haltof observes that Hanging Rock is a symbol of ancient knowledge and is in this context comparable with the Aboriginal Dreaming of *Last Wave* and the Egyptian pyramids of *Gallipoli* (1981).¹⁰ But Hanging Rock embodies a far more *carnal* spirituality, beckoning kindred souls to transcend the oppression of sexless Victorian propriety and surrender to a more powerful and untamed meta-reality. Both Rock and College symbolise states of mind and body (freedom versus restraint, endangerment versus security), and both possess dark and labyrinthine interiors, intimating their sexual, spiritual, and psychological significance.¹¹ Weir builds his film around the contrast of the two monoliths: an awe-inspiring shot of Hanging Rock which opens the film slowly dissolves into a shot of the imposing Appleyard College, where both appear as Gothic castles of old-time vampire mythology. The College enforces the strictures of Victorian Christendom, suppressing vitality and budding sexuality through regimented schedules and constrictive dress; a sequence of harsh metaphors in the opening scenes, for instance, depicts a blooming rosebud being flattened in a flowerpress. Conversely, Hanging Rock is a highly sexual symbol, sporting phallic peaks, vaginal caves and the seductive aura of unknown energy. As in the Gothic novels, both Rock and College dominate their regions and await their newest victims for ultimate and absolute devourment. It might be construed, however, that Hanging Rock is not so much a siren-like site of destruction but a deliberate and welcoming destination for transcendence, as Irma remarks of the Rock on their way to Mount Macedon: 'Waiting a million years, just for us.'

¹⁰ Ibid, 29.

¹¹ Rayner, op cit, 61.

That Hanging Rock delivers to the girls some metamorphic experience is echoed in a series of superimposed shots which paragon the image of Miranda with that of a white swan on the glossy College lake. The symbol of the swan is a multivalent image, evoking a nodding recall of Leda and the swan in Greek mythology, the beautiful fairy Caer who lived as a swan in Irish folklore, and the warrior maidens of Norse legend who donned magical swan-feather capes to transform themselves for flight.¹² The swan associated with Miranda reappears several times after the initial image; as a tiny china ornament in the bedroom she shared with her enamoured Sara and also as the motif on a drinking class used by her arch-antithesis, Mrs Appleyard. The swan's enlightened freedom clashes artfully with the regimented and callow flock of white peahens on the College lawn, furthering the metaphorical foils of transcendence and confinement. Also, the concept that Miranda has become a swan has strong implications for a reincarnatory reading of her disappearance and probable death.

By functioning both as threat and catharsis, Stone notes, horror 'reveals to us just how thin is the line that separates beauty and terror'.¹³ Indeed, it is at times difficult to distinguish in *Picnic* our appreciation of aesthetic resplendence from our revulsion at unfathomable occurrences. The Hanging Rock experience is as gloriously depicted as it is utterly disquieting, and this, according to Stone, is 'precisely its openness to the religious'.¹⁴ Films such as *Picnic* and *Last Wave* dismantle the Judaeo-Christian confidence in the benignity of nature and disturb the balance of sacred and profane by enforcing such 'inappropriate' associations as the marriage of divinity and erotica. True horror, remarks Cronenberg, is the 'genre of confrontation'.¹⁵ Being at the same time attractive and repellent, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* casts an unsettling shadow on the conditions of the cosmos, enduing elements of the profane world with an unmistakable sacrality and likewise ushering the sacred into the worldly and secular province.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ B Stone: 'The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films,' *Journal of Religion and Film*, 2001, 5 (2), 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rayner, op cit, 61.

Unfortunately, the themes and techniques examined here are merely illustrative; an exhaustive analysis demands more space than this paper allows. Nonetheless, it can be confidently concluded that the most regnant theme of Weir's piece is intrusion into an unfamiliar environment which manifests its nuances across physical, spiritual and symbolic gradients. The artistry of Weir's film communicates a much grander threat than Lindsay's novel ever insinuates, subpoenaing to centre-screen 'something true and profoundly felt'¹⁶. His cinematography is deservedly eulogised for the innovative and idiosyncratic means by which he commands attention and creates ambiances more allusive and menacing than the religious motifs themselves. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* asserts the presence of the unknown, and in doing so it unabashedly reveals the limitations of the protagonists and, simultaneously, our knowledge, which fails on all counts to find answers to matters of both worldly and otherworldly disturbance.

¹⁶ A Lambert: 'A Dream Within A Dream' directed by Mark Hartley, *Umbrella Entertainment*, 2004.