50th anniversary of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: A landmark film of the Australian New Wave

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Fifty years after its release in 1975, Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* has received a 4K restoration with special anniversary screenings in Australia, the US and other countries. The film helped draw global attention to Australian cinema in the 1970s, at a time when the national film industry was being revived.

Following on from remarkable films such as Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* and Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright* (both 1971), Weir's adaptation of the acclaimed 1967 Gothic mystery novel by Joan Lindsay was an effort to give serious artistic form to an examination of a section of Australian society. At odds with the so-called "ocker comedy" films—the prevalent and commercially successful movies based on caricatured notions of Australia—*Picnic at Hanging Rock* sensitively explored something of the inner fabric of the country's life and history.

Weir's film tells the story of an elite private girls' school in rural Victoria at the opening of the 20th century. On Valentine's Day, 1900, the students go on a picnic to Hanging Rock, where three of the girls and their teacher mysteriously vanish. The volcanic rock formation is about 80 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. A search is conducted, while the schoolgirls and local townspeople deal with the consequences of the disappearance.

The school, Appleyard College, imposes the rigid morality of Victorian England on the girls. This was the prevailing set of cultural values in upper-middle class Australia at the time, when the country was not yet a separate nation and the state of Victoria was still a British colony.

The ladies' college is a rarefied world, where glimpses of lower-class people and Aboriginals are few and far between. Its austere headmistress, Mrs Appleyard (Rachel Roberts), presides over a select group of teachers including the French tutor Mlle de Poitiers (Helen Morse), a more kindly and natural presence.

Before the party heads off for Hanging Rock, Mrs Appleyard, standing like a dictator at the top of the front steps, delivers precise instructions on how the picnic will unfold. The girls, all dressed in white, can only remove their gloves once their carriage has passed through town—lest the men see their bare hands. Any wandering from the picnic ground, any curiosity to explore, or "tomboy foolishness" is strictly forbidden. "Try to behave yourselves in a manner to bring credit to the college," she says while bidding them farewell.

The picnic is in many ways an escape from the restrictive world of the school. The film's dream-like opening sequence, showing the girls as they prepare to leave, captures their sense of excitement: they wash themselves in flower-scented water, recite love poems in a state of rapture, and hold aloft a statue of Eros, the god of love.

Miranda (Anne-Louise Lambert), the most individualistic of the girls, embodies this sense of freedom. After the idyllic picnic scene in the bush, where the girls bask in the sun and read more poetry (Shakespeare and Paul Verlaine), Miranda leads three other girls up the slopes of Hanging Rock, against Mrs Appleyard's orders.

As they climb the rock, they seem to gradually enter a trance-like state, taking off their shoes and stockings. One of the girls stands on a precipice and sways, in a kind of pagan dance, while another looks blankly at the picnic below and appears not to recognise the others. "Everything begins and ends in exactly the right time and place," Miranda says cryptically.

The girls slowly ascend through a crevice. Parts of the rock look like human faces gazing out at them. A threatening humming sound, distorted animal noises, and synthesiser music are heard as they vanish. After this climax, the rest of the film documents the impact of this inexplicable event on the community, baffled by the mystery.

Picnic at Hanging Rock, from beginning to end, sharply indicts the straitlaced and prudish attitudes of the Australian middle class and its suppression of any trace of personal inner life or emotion. It sympathises with the girls' strivings for something more elemental, even paganistic (Hanging Rock's implicit suggestion of Aboriginal history), to fulfill their basic needs and desires. The filmmaker's instincts in this regard were healthy ones.

Weir's film was among the first works of a young generation of directors, collectively referred to as the Australian New Wave, who were interested in setting a new standard of artistic quality in the country's filmmaking. Under Weir's direction, the film brought together many talented individuals.

The story's sparse plot development allowed for introspective performances from the cast, above all Morse and Roberts, both trained theatrical actors. It also kickstarted the careers of Jacki Weaver and John Jarratt, in small but memorable roles as domestic servants.

The film is rightly revered today for its wonderful cinematography by Russell Boyd. Weir and Boyd worked consciously to model the film's bush exteriors on paintings by the Heidelberg School, the late 19th-century Australian art movement influenced by Impressionism. The picnic scene itself was shot over several days, at midday, to capture the diffused lighting and shimmering heat. Weir was also keen to replicate the early colour photography of Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894–1986).

Boyd would go on to collaborate with Weir on many other occasions, winning an Academy Award for his cinematography in *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), and work with other Australian New Wave directors including Bruce Beresford, Gillian Armstrong and Philip Noyce.

The production, on a relatively low budget, involved much

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experimentation by Boyd and other film technicians. This included slipping nylon stockings over the camera lens to give a hazy look, as well as slow-motion footage. The surreal atmosphere was also created through superimposed images, such as the looming rock or flying rainbow lorikeets dissolving over Miranda's face. Weir enlisted the help of artist Martin Sharp, also an expert on Lindsay's novel, as the film's Artistic Advisor.

One of the film's defining features is its soundtrack of pan flute music, played by Gheorghe Zamfir. Weir later said this was meant to suggest a "pre-Christian feeling" and the "old gods" personified by Hanging Rock itself. In contrast, the classical music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven is featured to suggest civilisation and refinement.

The film's portrayal of young people and their natural instincts, repressed by social conventions, spoke more to what was taking place in the early 1970s than in the 1900s. Youth and workers were being radicalised by the Vietnam War and in opposition to the generally narrow-minded state of culture, enforced through Australia's draconian censorship laws. In many ways, the morally oppressive conditions at Appleyard College persisted at private schools and some other areas of Australian cultural life up to when the film was made.

The strict observance of hide-bound "moral values" by the college and wealthy layers in its orbit comes in for harsh treatment. Michael (Dominic Guard), a shy, repressed young man from an affluent English family, falls deeply in love with Miranda. After her disappearance, he is slowly driven into despair.

Meanwhile, Sara (Margaret Nelson), a student at the college, is an orphan whose friendship with Miranda is a reprieve from her tortured existence at the hands of malicious school authorities. She is punished for not learning the required poems on the syllabus and is strapped to a wall to "cure her terrible stooping." With Miranda gone, she decides to take drastic actions.

While extending his sympathies to the "lower classes" and the Aboriginal population and its culture, as he envisions it, Weir perhaps goes too far in promoting a type of pantheistic mysticism, rooted partly in author Joan Lindsay's own beliefs.

Picnic at Hanging Rock opens with a voiceover by Miranda: "What we see and what we seem are but a dream, a dream within a dream." In another scene, in the college's greenhouse, a gardener cites a plant that folds its leaves inward when touched as an example of supernatural phenomena, things that are beyond human knowledge.

Nevertheless, the idea of an unexplained mystery is used to examine social manners and class attitudes. This approach was not entirely new but had been seen in Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), about a wealthy young woman's disappearance during a boat trip to a remote volcanic Sicilian island and its effect on her bohemian circle of friends.

Picnic at Hanging Rock also provided an indelible portrait of Australia's colonial history, with British imperialism trying to import its quaint world of tea parties and picnics to the rugged Australian landscape of "venomous snakes and poisonous ants."

In an interview on his career, Weir commented that the Vietnam War, and the global mass protest movement it sparked, was a major factor in the Australian New Wave: "It was anti-establishment, and you saw one's own establishment as connected directly to the American establishment … The war unleashed energy and conflict, passion. You always have to look at movements in society, to look at any sudden movement in the arts."

Weir began making films in the late 1960s. During his time at Sydney University, he became involved in the experimental filmmaking collective Ubu Films, founded by student radical Albie Thoms and known for its anarchistic productions. Starting with theatrical sketches and anti-establishment short films, he then moved to feature films in the 1970s.

After *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, he made the anti-war *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), to this date the only major film to depict the 1965 Indonesian military coup which overthrew President Sukarno and the mass killing of up to one million members and supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party.

As with his fellow Australian filmmakers—Bruce Beresford, Fred Schepisi and Philip Noyce—Weir embarked on a career in Hollywood in the 1980s and beyond. This was an especially bad time to arrive at the American studios: a period of political and cultural reaction under Ronald Reagan and then George H.W. Bush.

On the whole, with the very notable exception of *The Truman Show* (1998), Weir's American films pale in comparison to his earlier work. This is largely true of the other Australian directors too.

Having made no new films in the past 15 years, Weir recently announced his retirement. In 2022, he told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "For film directors, like volcanoes, there are three major stages: active, dormant and extinct. I think I've reached the latter!"

This is not simply a question of Weir or the Australian New Wave directors as individuals. Their own trajectory reflects a broader historical process, in which artists came face-to-face with exceedingly difficult conditions.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted last year, the radicalism and social convulsions of the years 1968–75 found expression in a trend of realistic and critical films internationally. The subsidence of the class struggle and the rightward political shift that set in from the late 1970s, however, had profoundly damaging consequences for the arts.

We wrote: "Overwhelmed and confused by the reactionary turn of events … the film writers and directors, and leading performers, became demoralized or cynical in many cases, grew silent, made their peace with the status quo or disappeared into various forms of dissipation."

The severe cultural decline of the past five decades has meant that certain films from the early 1970s stand out. In the bleak landscape of contemporary Australian film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* remains a landmark achievement and will continue to fascinate audiences.

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