

Picnic at Hanging Rock



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Film Guide **Brendan Maher**

Picnic at Hanging Rock

Director Peter Weir/
Australia/1975/107 mins

Cast

Rachel Roberts Mrs. Appleyard
Dominic Guard Michael Fitzhubert
Vivean Gray Miss McCraw
Helen Morse Mlle. de Poitiers
Kirsty Child Miss Lumley
Tony Llewellyn-Jones Tom
Jacki Weaver Minnie
Frank Gunnell Mr. Whitehead
Anne Lambert Miranda
Karen Robson Irma
Jane Vallis Marion
Christine Schuler Edith
Margaret Nelson Sara
Wynn Roberts Sgt. Bumpher
John Jarrett Albert
Peter Collingwood Colonel Fitzhubert

Crew

Director Peter Weir
Executive Producers John Graves,
Patricia Lovell
Producers Hal McElroy, Jim McElroy
Original Music Bruce Smeaton
Cinematography Russell Boyd
Editor Max Lemon
Art Director David Copping
Costume Design Judy Dorsmand



Introduction

'Picnic At Hanging Rock', Peter Weir's second feature film, released in 1975 is an exciting mixture of horror (without the bloodshed) and fantasy within a Victorian period drama. The film adapted from Joan Lindsay's 1967 book has an open-ended story with no specific resolution. The audience is left with the task of piecing the mystery together.

The film is strong on atmosphere and invokes the carefree days of youth as well as having an overwhelming sense of calamity about to take place. The calamity that befalls the picnic group visiting the Rock, also spreads out into the wider community causing tension and despair for those affected.

Director Peter Weir

Weir's films are on the whole are not difficult to categorise, despite the variety of characterisation and setting. His broad theme is the difficulty an individual has in dealing with the outside world or a new environment, which is often depicted as strange, frequently hostile and sometimes teetering on destruction.

Weir was born in 1944 in Sydney and joined the film-making collective Ubu Films while at University. He worked in television for a number of years, making a satirical sketch programmes and also utilising the facilities to make two short films.

In 1974 he made the underground feature 'The Cars That Ate Paris' in which a rural town in Australia named Paris has developed an industry by causing car accidents and making a profit from the wrecks.

'Picnic at Hanging Rock' in 1975 made Weir's reputation and its ethereal mood was widely praised. Weir dealt with Aboriginal culture in a more direct manner in his next film 'The Last Wave' (1977) in which a lawyer looking into a case deals with



forces outside of his control. Weir started the 1980's with 'Gallipoli' (1981) - a milestone work of Australian cinema and one that made Mel Gibson an international star.

Weir has spent most of his time in America since the mid-80's and his list of credits is impressive - it includes 'Witness' (1985) 'Dead Poet's Society' (1989) 'The Truman Show' (1998) and most recently 'Master and Commander (2003)

Weir is interested in society, how it represents itself and the underlying tensions within that society. It is often the case in his films that the lead character becomes caught in a new society or an alien environment and he or she investigates that environment with or for us, the viewer. Weir also seems to have a strong wish to understand and depict the geographical or physical space that the society controls/the environment it exists in e.g. the Aboriginal culture in 'The Last Wave'; the Amish community in 'Witness' or the made up set in 'The Truman Show'. It is suggested that Weir's work is an amalgam of arthouse and generic Hollywood films. It could be said that many of his main characters are standard 'Hollywood' lead characters that have strayed into an arthouse movie - an alien environment.



Synopsis

On St. Valentine's Day in 1900, at a private girl's school – Appleyard College - in rural Australia, the girls share cards amongst each other.

They prepare for a visit to local rock formation called Hanging Rock – a volcanic outcrop of some geological interest. Miss McCraw and Mademoiselle de Poitiers supervise the group of girls. The owner of the school Mrs. Appleyard warns them to be on their best behaviour on the trip. One girl, Sara is left behind.

The girls travel through the local village and arrive at the Rock.

Another family are also visiting there: Colonel Fitzhubert, his wife, son Michael and servant Bertie.

The girls' picnic at the Rock and then four of them, Miranda, Irma, Marion and Edith ask their teachers if they can go further into the outcrop. They are allowed and they begin to steadily walk up the rock. Michael sees them at one point as they move through the bush.

Edith, resting, watches as the other three walk around an overhang. She calls after them.

Distressed, Edith runs screaming from the Rock.

That night, the girls return home late. Mrs. Appleyard finds out that three of the girls and one teacher Miss McCraw are missing. Edith, disheveled and tired can't remember what happened.

A search of the rock is undertaken. The girls are nowhere to be found. Edith is questioned by the police and remembers that she passed Miss McCraw, who was wearing no skirt, only pantaloons, as she ran by. Michael is also questioned by the police.

The police continue to search. The townspeople are uncomfortable

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by the unsolved mystery. Michael is haunted by the matter and goes to search the Rock with Bertie. He stays on the Rock overnight and is found worn out at a cave entrance. Before being taken to hospital, he gives Bertie a piece of cloth. It is from one of the girl's dresses. Bertie searches again and finds Irma alive.

Irma too can't remember anything. The disappearance has caused parents to take their children out of the school. Sara who has created a shrine for one of the missing girls Miranda is asked to leave as her Guardian has not paid her fees. She must return to an orphanage. She commits suicide.

The films end with a narrator describing how Mrs. Appleyard's body was found near Hanging Rock some time later.

Story Repression versus Freedom

The film is set in 1900 in the latter stages of Queen Victoria's reign in Britain (she died in 1901). The Victorian era (1837-1901) has become synonymous with a society that invoked a strong set of moral standards, whilst often acting in the opposite manner.

This was especially true in the area of sexual morality where society went to great lengths to suppress all

suggestions of sexuality. At the same time there was a high level of prostitution mainly due to poverty.

A familiarity with the works of writers such as Brontë sisters, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy will give the viewer a good idea of the moral codes that existed during the time of the film.

We can see that 'Picnic...' sets up as a central theme, the notion of repression and societal control and how that is challenged by the individual's search for freedom and more mysterious external forces.

The College aims to bring the girls up in a manner that befits their upper class Victorian status. The girls



are told not to take off their gloves until they have passed the town, despite the searing heat. They are expected to behave in a specific way. However both inner desires and the draw of the mysterious Rock confront the societal control that has been taught to them.

Three of the four girls who walk up the Rock express a sensuality that was evident in the opening sequence (with the Valentine cards). The girls are seemingly swallowed up by the Rock, with Edith, significantly, unable to follow. She is unable to embrace this sensual world and is left behind.

It is also significant that Sara kills herself towards the end of the film. She expresses the same longings as Miranda. We wonder had she traveled with Miranda, would she too have been lost on the Rock.

Despite these elements of repression, it should be noted that director Weir has said: "I could have placed more emphasis on the outpost of Empire in the bush, the invaders in an alien landscape, the repressive nature of this little piece of Empire; but as the atmosphere resulting from the disappearances became my central interest, these themes disappeared from view."

Style Sensuality

In order to create a feeling of desire, longing and sensuality, cinematographer Russell Boyd and director Weir shot the film in a certain manner to achieve this effect.

The girl's bedrooms in the College are airy, the light suffused through the windows, their clothes white and fresh. The girls exist in a world of possibilities. Contrast this with Mrs. Appleyard, her hair tied tightly, in a heavy stiff dress. Appleyard's office too, is formal with dark furniture.

At Hanging Rock, we have a feeling of senses being lulled. The

Australian New Wave Cinema

'Picnic at Hanging Rock' is described as one of the films that epitomized the new Wave of films that emerged from Australia in the mid-70's. As with any burgeoning movement, there were a number of specific factors, which underpinned this growth in film-making:

The Conservative government of the 1960's gave way to the Liberal Gorton government, which attempted to foster interest in the Arts as a means of expressing national identity. The government set up the EFF (Experimental Film Fund) with the aim of identifying and encouraging the best film-making talents. It was also decided that these people would be asked to join a National Film School.

A Labour Government, under Gough Whitlam replaced the Liberal Government in 1972 and this policy was carried on. The Government set up the Australian Film, Television & Radio School. The AFDC, a film funding body, was also set up to stimulate production.

Around the same time, an influx of foreign films under a new 'R' certification also opened up audiences to alternative non-English speaking films in their cinemas.

This merging of elements allowed new films to be made. Film-makers emerged from Film School and film-co-operatives and nearly

four hundred films were made between 1970 and 1985.

Film-makers such as Weir, Gillian Armstrong, Phillip Noyce and Bruce Beresford and screen actors such as Mel Gibson, Judy Davis, Bryan Brown and Sam Neill emerged from films, which were rapturously received both locally and internationally.

Two specific bodies or styles of work have been noted during this period. The mid to late 1970's period of generally arthouse work such as 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' and Armstrong's 'My Brilliant Career' and the early eighties commercially driven films such as George Miller's 'Mad Max' trilogy.

As with many developing film industries, the talented artists that worked in them were lured to Hollywood by the dominant American industry. Weir left to make such films as 'Green Card' and 'The Truman Show', Miller to make 'The Witches Of Eastwick' (1987) and Armstrong to make 'Little Women' (1994). Many of the original New Wave film-makers now work between both countries.

Despite this, the Australian film industry remains a strongly performing one. Films such as, PJ Hogan's 'Muriels Wedding' (1994) the Oscar-winning 'Shine' (1996) and Phillip Noyce's 'Rabbit Proof Fence' (2002) all attest to the ongoing health of the industry.

girls, as they travel up the Rock, are sometimes shot in slow motion; we have images of Miranda in double-exposure with the rock as if she is in a dream state, becoming part of the rock; a lizard slowly crawls by her, contrasting exotically with her dress. The girls remove their stockings as if giving in to an overwhelming feeling. This is repeated when the three

arise in a single movement and walk towards their inevitable 'doom'.

From the very start of the film, this dream state has been maintained. Miranda paraphrases Edgar Allan Poe in the opening sequence whispering "what we see and what we seem are but a dream; a dream within a dream". There also seems to be a sense of futility amongst the girls and



they speak of the doom that is awaiting them. It is as if they know that their disappearance is pre-ordained.

The soundtrack should also be pointed out here. The pan-flute of Gheorghe Zamfir adds an elegiac touch to the soundtrack emphasising a sense of loss. Bruce Smeaton's soundtrack also includes electronic droning which creates an unsettling air of menace, especially during those periods of the film where the girls are absorbed in their journey.

Historical Accuracy

'Picnic at Hanging Rock' remains a film, which doesn't attempt to find a solution to the mystery at its core, but instead has been described as a 'film full of clues'.

The same can be said of the discussion about the truth of the story. The book 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' was written in 1967 by author Joan Lindsay. The original version of the

book contained an additional chapter (Chapter 18) in which the secret was revealed, however this version was not published until 1987. This version has a complete though unusual ending and tells exactly what happens to the girls and their teacher. (Search the internet for 'Secrets of Hanging Rock' to know more!)

The film suggests in both its opening and closing lines that we are watching a dramatized version of a real event. Author Joan Lindsay also remained tight-lipped about whether the story was based on actual events. However, looking back through historical records there have been no reports of a disappearance on that date and Valentine's Day did not fall on a Saturday in 1900.

The disappearance depicted at the Rock may have happened at some point, perhaps even in another place and been transferred to Hanging Rock by the author.

Summing Up

Peter Weir's 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' is regarded as one of the best examples of Australian New Wave cinema. The film works on many levels offering a view of doomed youth in the midst of a repressive society and an alien environment.

The collision of these elements takes place at Hanging Rock where a group of girls seem willingly to confront and accept their fate. This mysterious acceptance and the ultimate disappearance that follows are the catalyst for the break up of the societal order - the school they came from. Their disappearance remains unsolved and all that are left behind can only ponder on what actually happened.

Further information

Books

The Films of Peter Weir

Jonathan Rayner, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003

Picnic At Hanging Rock

Joan Lindsay/Chesire Books/1967

Websites

Fansite:www.peterweircave.com

Weir article by Romy Sutherland
<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/05/weir.html>

Other Films

The Blair Witch Project

Dirs. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez/USA/1999/86 mins

Don't Look Now

Dir. Nicolas Roeg/UK-Australia/1973/110 mins