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Contrasting cultural landscapes and spaces in Peter Weir's film Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), based on Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel with the same title [1]

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Abstract: The following essay explores the relationship between contrasting cultures and cultural spaces within a rural Australian, Victorian, context, with reference to the narrated cultural landscape in Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) and in the film based on the novel, by Peter Weir (1975). In the analysis of the five first scenes of the film, the focus will be on the notion of scenic- and human- beauty that is at once arresting and foreboding, and the various contrasting and parallel spaces that characterise the structure of book and film. The article will draw from a number of additional secondary sources, including various cultural readings which offer alternative methodological approaches to the works analysed, and recorded 1970s interviews with the author and the filmmaker.

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This essay explores the relationship between contrasting cultural spaces within a rural Australian context, with reference to Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel *Picnic at Hanging Roc*k and in Peter Weir's film based on the novel (1975). The original novel may or may not be based on the real disappearance of three young girls in the Macedon area in 1867. In the analysis of the five first scenes of the film, the focus will be on the notion of scenic- and human- beauty that is at once arresting and foreboding, and the various contrasting and parallel spaces that characterise the structure of book and film.

In a recorded interview from 1974, Joan Lindsay likened the experience of writing *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to that of mentally constructing scenes for a film, i.e. a very "visual experience" (Weir 2004).[2] In a similar fashion, cultural geographer Chris Lukinbeal argues that:

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[2] Lindsay claimed that "the story came to her like a film" … and indeed, "*Picnic at Hanging Rock* has the otherworldliness of a dream and the rich symbolic play of images, the plasticity of time and space, of film" (Gleeson-White 2010, 131).

> [f]ilm is … a cultural construct that is intertextually related to other systems of cultural tradition and reproduction such as landscape. The textual metaphor points to an understanding of cinematic space as it relates to narration, voyeurism and the gaze (Lukinbeal 2004, 249).

Weir's screen adaptation of the book shares similarities with Lukinbeal's statement in the sense that landscape in the film is both culturally constructed and naturally untamed, creating a contrast between white civilisation and the primitive prehistoric nature previously inhabited by the Aborigine and now regarded as a type of empty *terra nullius* which members of the white upper class in the film (who could be viewed as representatives of the British colonizers of Australia in the late 1800s to mid-1900s) wish to control and possess, however fruitlessly. The film was part of the so-called Australian "New Wave" cinema in the 1970s, when a number of Australian filmmakers broke through to both a national and an international market with films that celebrated the Australian nation and reflected a pride in the Australian heritage. The main feat of these filmmakers – Peter Weir, Ken Hannam, Gillian Armstrong, and Fred Schepisi being some of them – was their ability to portray Australia in its own right, as a place worthy of attention and about which narratives were constructed that featured also the spiritual and mythical elements of a still not wholly readable continent. As declared by Robin Wright:

> [w]ithin the context of Australia's struggle to establish a national identity, these films point to the Australian landscape as one of the primary determining features of 'Australianness' in cultural products of the 1970s. For the predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, urban Australian cultural elite at the time of production of these films there was no alternative culture, lifestyle, ritual, history or society which could be used to delineate their 'difference' from their British colonial ancestry other than the 'idea' of the Australian bush. The only element with which white Australians could draw upon to explain their 'difference' from other world cultures was their environment, and the short span of history and myth which this had engendered (Wright 1993, 88).

In its parallel focus on the "new Australians" making up the privileged white cultural "elite" and the darker, spiritual and (to the white man) mysterious elements of Aboriginal beliefs (all part of the multifaceted Australian nation) the film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* introduces the interlinked concepts of voyeurism and the gaze, or the "look". This too triggers a notion of foreign yet Australian eyes observing the raw landscape of a place not entirely mapped or controlled. The look, as highlighted by various critics, is in the centre of attention in Weir's film and reminds of Foucault's concept of dual mirror images that are at the same mythical and real: he suggests that by ultimately observing himself, the observer can "reconstitute" himself and be connected with "all the" surrounding space (Foucault 1986, 24). In the case of the Australian nation, had the original British settlers been more open-minded towards the native inhabitants and their culture, this may have fostered a better understanding between indigenous Australians and the foreigner, and as part of this also between the foreign settler and the surrounding native landscape.

Faithful to the original book, the cinematic plot of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* unfolds in the screened state of Victoria, near Mount Macedon, both in the vicinity of and on the very peaks of the prehistoric outcrops called Hanging Rock, a sacred place for Aboriginal people. Taking as its starting point Saint Valentine's Day 1900, i.e. one year prior to the death of the British Commonwealth monarch Queen Victoria of England, the narrative focusses on a group of female students attending Appleyard College in rural south Melbourne, an academic institution fabricated by Joan Lindsay.[3] This "College for Young Ladies" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 7) houses young women whom Weir, in a 1975 interview, referred to as "an elite, … which is gone" (Weir 2004). Their organised picnic excursion to the volcanic rock formation on that very day has dire consequences as some of the college visitors- two students and one female teacher- are never to return to the world of the living, or so it seems. A week later, a third missing student, Irma Leopold, is discovered still alive on the Rock, by a young British aristocrat, Michael Fitzhubert, and is later rescued and brought back to civilization by an all the more self-made man, down-to-earth coachman Albert Crundall (these are the only male characters given any major space in a novel otherwise mainly concerned with the representation of the female and her relationship with the, indeed, generally male symbol of the Rock).

The nature around Appleyard College is controlled and tamed in a rigid colonial manner and the freer nature serving as a visual backdrop in Aboriginal mythology, is almost completely absent. As has been noted by critics analysing both book and film from a feminist perspective, the budding sexuality of the young and generally well-mannered female borders (partly revealed in excited comments and suppressed giggles at a college whose motto is "silence" is "golden" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 15)) on St Valentine's Day – a day charged with sensual and erotic symbolism – is repressed along the taming of the budding floral beauty, seen e.g. in the main protagonist Miranda's pinning of "a bunch of wildflowers into her coat with as much pleasure as a breath-taking diamond brooch" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 10). A similarly controlled landscape is seen in the very painting from which the book lends its name: *At the Hanging Rock*, by William Ford (1875) and where the image is that of a peaceful and accommodating rural landscape, one that is welcoming and appealing to the humans resting in it (in light of the above, Kenneth I. Helphand has highlighted that "[l]andscape studies take for granted the symbiotic relationship between the physical environment and landscape painting, poetry, and literature" (Helphand 1986, 1)).

The headmistress Mrs Appleyard, in charge of the rigid academic establishment, is symbolic of a repressive British authority. She commands respect and the obeying of rules and her college depends on the support of fee-paying affluent parents or sponsors to survive. Come Saint Valentine's Day, Mrs Appleyard allows a group of white-clad students to leave on a picnic excursion to Hanging Rock (the single young orphan of the academic establishment, Sara Waybourne, is penalised by having to stay behind- something that, ironically, turns out to be her – temporary[4] – salvation)**.** Accompanying the touring students as teachers and guardians are the French teacher Mademoiselle Dianne de Poitiers and the scientifically apt mathematics teacher Miss Greta McCraw.

[3] Martindale Hall, in the Clare Valley, served as an important location for the scenes shot at the fictitious Appleyard College.

[4] I use the word "temporary" given that Sara Waybourne is found dead towards the end of the literary and visual narratives.

The only man to partake on the "covered drag from Hussey's Livery Stables" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 13) is the driving coachman Mr Hussey. A sense of melancholia has already been achieved through the introduction of haunting pan flute music composed by Gheorge Zamfir, in the opening sequence of the film, and this instrument repeatedly underscores the visual narrative. The same premonition is sensed when reading the novel: evocative imagery and descriptions of safe, happy moments are paralleled by references to uncertain territories and a dangerous atmosphere around the Rock. As the horse carriage leaves the known and safe college grounds behind[5] and gradually approaches the area of Hanging Rock, the haunting sound of the pan flute again highlights the departure from the known and the subsequent entry into the unknown. This also creates a double sense of parallel spaces: a musical score that is at once beautifully melancholic and foreboding of tragedy to come and that evokes conflicting sentiments in the viewer, and the visual transition from controlled, civilised landscapes reflective of the British colonisation of the Australian outback to a still pastoral yet freer landscape overshadowed by the all the more ominous dark rock above. Miss McCraw's scientifically astute comment as the drag approaches the picnic grounds, that the Rock is "quite young geologically speaking – barely a million years" (Weir 1975), added by Weir for extra effect but not part of the original novel, is echoed in Irma Leopold's subsequent exclamation – also a verbal addition by Weir: "Waiting a million years, just for us!" (Weir 1975). Their words seem to reflect mixed feelings of awe and estrangement – cultural and spiritual – among descendants of European settlers with reference to the untamed, raw natural element symbolised by a rock charged with Aboriginal imagery and mythology.

A number of critics have provided a cultural reading of book and film. Thus, Pablo Armellino has said that Lindsay's book "perfectly embodies the anxieties of the Victorian age" and "presents an alternative perception of the outback" (Armellino 2009, 77), while Victoria Bladen notes the pastoral aspects of the Australian landscape, stressing that it is "only superficially and temporarily idyllic, not the nurturing landscapes of Virgilian pastoral" (Bladen 2012, 164). Annabel Carr in turn likens the Rock and its surrounding areas to sacral places and spaces; however similar to Bladen, Carr too senses the lurking dangers in the apparently peaceful landscape. She talks of a "[v]ibration of Sacrality" and places the film "somewhere between metaphysical horror and lush Victorian melodrama" (Carr 2008, 123). Expanding on the concept of horror, Kathleen Steele is concerned with the gothic landscapes in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* which are beautiful and appealing yet deeply unsettling (Steele 2010).

Providing a brief historical flashback, Steele also reflects on the first contact between Aborigines and white settlers through the arrival of the First Fleet to Australia in 1788 and the troubled relationship between settler and native. This eventually resulted in a reluctance or refusal by the new European settlers to accept the Aboriginal culture and way of life. The natives were "denied" their existence by being textually stripped of their past: "By the late 1890s... Aborigines all but disappeared from literature" (Steele 2010, 36). Finally, Rex Ingamells also refers to the mysterious Australian landscape that awaited European settlers. Having a "darker spiritual aura, a resonant pathetic fallacy"

[5] Miranda has previously expressed a desire to visit the countryside, seemingly forgetting that the college is already situated in the rural area. She seems to equal the Australian countryside to a more untamed rural landscape than the one surrounding the college grounds.

(Ingamells 1969, 245), the Australian outback came across as strange and hostile to British settlers. This is interesting in a gothic sense since that very ghostly or eerie aspect of the Australian cultural landscape may have stemmed from a lack of acknowledgement of the Aborigines and their culture despite the fact that Aboriginal beliefs were still very much present and influencing the mythical character of the rural Australian landscape. Steele talks of "gothic landscapes of settler imaginations" as "landscapes where time and people disappear" (Steele 2010, 44) and later refers to Paul Ricoeur's notion of the "uncanny", with reference to the historical past: "The feeling of uneasiness – *Unheimlichkeit* – joined to the feeling of not being in one's place, of not feeling at home, haunts us and this would be the realm of emptiness" (Ricoeur 2006, 146). These observations resonate with Weir's own "unease" when reading the book, "directly linked to something which doesn't have all the answers supplied", as highlighted in the same 1975 recorded interview with the Adelaide filmmaker (Weir 2004).

The film, which is apparently partly influenced by Bo Widerberg's award-winning 1967 film *Elvira Madigan* (Bennett, Strauss, and Wallace-Crabbe 1998, 356-358), has a vivid visual imagery and is charged with cultural and sexual symbolism. There is also a strong sense of temporal displacement created by the sudden stalling of time. Both Mr Hussey's and Miss McCraw's watches mysteriously stop working at the picnic grounds: "Stopped at 12. Never stopped before, must be something magnetic" (Weir 1975) concludes the ever lucid and rational Miss McCraw. This creates a sensation of time standing still and a notion of time not being relevant anymore; "[e]vents are being shaped outside the ordinary structure of time" (Dutton 1985, 316). The sophisticated college students and their guardians have now left their own artificially constructed milieu behind and entered wilder territory, where a raw landscape embraces them for better or worse and Aboriginal dreamtime, steeped in creation stories, seemingly takes over and replaces white man's fanatical obsession with time. The non-functioning watches could also symbolise British colonial decay or, as Alex Tate would have it, "the loss of another historical time: specifically that of colonial power" (Tate 2006). Anne Crittenden has reflected extensively on clocks in the film and she too views "clocktime … as a symbol of destructive, unnatural order because true time is natural time" (Crittenden 1976, 168). And, interestingly, in the 1974 interview referred to earlier, Joan Lindsay herself stated that she viewed time as something "that was all around one; not just in a long line in a calendar. I feel that one's in the middle of time, and past, present and future is really all around and I'm in the middle of it" (Weir 2004).

The fluid notion of time in the film is, in a way, the first sign of the turn of events to come. From noon onwards, the Appleyard College members seemingly enter a different dimension of time and space and they interact in a relaxed and carefree manner, some of the students reciting love poems in honour of Saint Valentine (curiously, throughout most of the film, the majority of the articulate young women speak softly and in subdued voices, as if almost whispering. In the context of the picnic excursion, it is as if they were aware of being constantly observed, even by the stony "male" monolith of Hanging Rock).[6] Three senior students lead by "Botticelli-faced" Miranda – a sudden aesthetic revelation that comes to Mademoiselle de Poitiers – and accompanied by one

[6] Alex Tate makes the interesting observation that the volcanic rock formation called *mamelon* means "nipple" in French; thus the Rock holds both male and female connotations (Tate 2006).

junior student, the down-to-earth and rather lethargic Edith Horton, are surprisingly granted permission to explore the Rock for amateurish scientific purposes. Their supposedly brief exploration of the minerals of the area is at odds with Mrs Appleyard's prior warnings or rather prohibition to do so:

> Once again, let me remind you that the Rock itself is extremely dangerous and you are therefore forbidden to engage in any tomboy foolishness in the matter of exploration, even on the lower slopes (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 13).

The low voices and carefully premeditated utterances of the young female academics who set out to explore the area and the seemingly effortless manner in which they slide across the lush and sunny landscape down below the Rock create a timeless and surreal atmosphere (also achieved through the initial cinematic voiceover: "What we see and what we seem is but a dream – a dream within a dream"(Weir 1975)) and transport the viewer even further from the rigid academic establishment back at Appleyard College. It is as if the exploring students had already entered a different dimension of time and space, one more in line with Aboriginal dreamtime than with conventional time as it is recorded by the colonial white settler. The landscape that the young women almost glide through seems to open up a path for them to tread on and it takes on maternal aspects in its welcoming, warm and sunlit, yet also ominous character- as noted and expanded on by Armellino who compares Australia to a "nurturing/castrating mother" (Armellino 2009, 77). Tussocks move softly in the light breeze, the grass that the girls step on resembles a smooth carpet, and the atmosphere is light, hopeful and happy. Miranda, whose name "stands for beauty and grace" (Armellino 2009, 78) and whose inner goodness and all-forgiving personality and empathy for those around her – including those physically and intellectually "inferior" to her – has been analysed from a religious perspective, as mirrored in Anne Crittenden's claim that Miranda embodies higher spiritual values that contrast with the material values of the college, and which makes Hanging Rock a "stepping ground to heaven" (Crittenden 1976, 170). The physical and inner beauty of Miranda not only grants her natural access to the wild nature around her but also makes her the natural leader of the four-girl troop which, apart from Miranda, consists of Irma Leopold, Marion Quade, and the previously mentioned younger adept, plump "college dunce" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 5) Edith Horton. The girl tags along first without objections then gradually all the more reluctantly and keeps staring doggedly into the ground the closer they get to the Rock- a tendency which mirrors her more earthly, less divine, and also less inquisitive personality compared to the other females whose steadfast gazes are fixed either ahead or upward.

The generally aesthetically pleasing images, matched during the female stroll through the pastoral landscape by the quintessential beauty of Miranda (and also partly by the more sensual beauty of her friend Irma whose apparent hourglass figure is admired by male onlookers), have been defined as part of a "romanticized visual imagery":

> Dressed in white petticoats, the girls are visually paralleled with swans, Botticelli Angels and pre-Raphaelite beauties. Depicted languorously reclining, narcissistically gazing in mirrors and orating love sonnets, an

> illusory aesthetic inflects the girls and heightens their presence as enigmatic others (Tate 2006).

Having already had a premonition of radical changes to come, envisaged through her comment to her roommate Sara prior to the rock excursion – "You must learn to love someone else apart from me, Sara. I won't be here much longer" (Weir 1975) – Miranda is seemingly subconsciously aware that their ascent to the Rock through the waist-high grass of a welcoming maternal summer landscape, may be a trip from which there is no earthly return but instead a surreal divine ascension awaits once they have entered the very core of the monolith. As they gradually ascend the rocky formation, the young women move through open, sunny spaces and the warm, stony surface comes across as inviting. The binary structure of a narrative which moves from light to darkness, from maternal warmth to phallic roughness, is quite obvious yet the symbolic interpretations of the narrative vary and differ, reflecting a dilemma faced by critics to separate a clear "right" from "wrong." That is to say that even though the Rock comes across as raw, hostile and unwelcoming, even sinister – an element that "originates from the silence of the Hanging Rock, and the … oppressive accusation the Europeans feel pressing upon them whenever they confront the reality of the Australian landscape" (Steele 2010, 44) – it seems as if ultimately the female sacrifice to a "male" monolith is essential for at least two of these young women to reach a higher spiritual level, which could not have been achieved under more conventional circumstances. By becoming one with the Rock, Miranda is accepted into its innermost circle and may reach divine catharsis – if one chooses to read the narrative from a religious angle – and the word "catharsis" may be replaced by "climax" if the analysis is made from a sexuality and gender perspective. In the case of the latter alternative, the female entry into darker crevasses and passageways of the phallic rock prior to the four students lying down at the foot of the monolith (each of the three rocky outcrops an apparent "partner" to be matched up with each senior student) adds an erotic undertone to the scene but the narrow entrance into the Rock also resembles a dark birth canal and the image is that of a daughter returning to her mother's womb. Thus, the Rock again takes on both male and female connotations. This has also been highlighted by Crittenden who argues that "[l]ike the Earth mother, the Rock is both womb and tomb, life and death" (Crittenden 1976, 146). The voyeuristic camera eye now shifts its focus from female wanderers observing the Rock in mutual silence, to a bird perspective of the females seen from above. This creates a disconcerting sensation of a rock gazing down on the students as they feel their way through the damp and cold inner regions of this "geological marvel" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 13), a stony corridor which may symbolise a rite of passage for the young women before they deliver themselves to the Rock (alternatively the Rock could be seen as claiming them as a dominating man would a woman).

There is a sudden lack of music which adds to the eerie atmosphere inside the stony crevasses and passageways but once the girls are back in the sun the haunting sound of the pan flute again makes itself noticeable, and later organ music will also be heard. A superimposed image of Miranda's face visualised against the Rock as she turns and gazes up at it adds to her otherworldliness and appears to be a premonition of her imminent symbiosis with the Rock through her disappearance from the world beneath – and the humans that inhabit it. The subsequent interaction between humans and animals, the merging of rock and humans, and the replacement of a very much younger European culture by an older, more primitive, and perhaps as such also more multi-layered and

secretive culture, are also reflected in the ancient-looking lizard that slides along Miranda's outstretched arm (in the original text it is not Miranda but Marion who is accompanied by the lizard) and in "queer looking beetles in bronze armour" that make a "leisurely crossing of Miranda's ankle" (Lindsay 2009 (1967), 35). This contact between humans and animals seems like a logical transition from conventional human interaction to a more spiritual state of being. It also puts into perspective Marion's prior pondering on the purpose of humans as she gazes down on the picnic party below: "A surprising number of human beings are without purpose though it is probable that they are performing some function unknown to themselves" (Weir 1975).

The ever good-hearted Miranda, whose intelligence, compassion and empathy for others are equalled by her physical beauty, is granted final entrance to a world which other students are (seemingly) not worthy of discovering. And so, "everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place" (Weir 1975). Edith Horton, who has repeatedly insulted the Rock, watches as her female companions hypnotically rise to their feet, start walking, then disappear and "become one" with the beckoning Rock, and she lets out a shrill, almost primeval scream. The musical score has now been replaced by a dark murmur of collective whispers which serves to further heighten the dramatic image of vanishing individuals and a horrified fellow student who hurriedly returns to her companions on the picnic area beneath. As Edith stumbles across a suddenly hostile landscape, the sky turns violently red (Crittenden has interpreted this scene as Saturn; "the death planet" devouring his children on the very day dedicated to Saturn; i.e. Saturday, "the day of the picnic" (Crittenden 1976, 168-169)). It is as if nature takes revenge on Edith (but perhaps especially on the three others given that Edith manages to "escape" from the Rock) for her disrespect towards the monolith and the inner secrets that it holds. The Rock proceeds to devour its new "willing victims" – or is it really so? Again, the mystery is left intact. In a 1975 on-set interview by Hanging Rock, Joan Lindsay declared that:

> … everyone who has enjoyed my book or read it, they really have to work it out for themselves. I know it's a mystery but I hope it's a bit more than a whodunit … I feel that this is something, that it was a sort of a mysterious thing that could have only happened where I write of it and I can't really and wouldn't wish to try and explain it anymore fully than that; you'll all have to work out what you think is true for you, because truth is everything to me (Weir 2004).

It is this feeling of "uncanny uncertainty" prevalent throughout most of the film (and in the book, especially prior to the posthumous publication of an 18th and final chapter) that is so captivating and enthralling. There is a contradictory beauty in this gothic horror which attracts readers, viewers and visitors to revisit the text, film and physical site of Hanging Rock time and again. To conclude with a finishing remark from Annabel Carr:

> [I]t 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 (Carr 2008, 131).

In summary, both Joan Lindsay and Peter Weir have shown an astonishing ability to include a number of elements into textual and visual narratives which draw us in both mentally and physically and stay with us well beyond the last read page and viewed scene.

Martindale Hall, Clare Valley (South Australia), was an important location for the scenes shot at the fictitious Appleyard College of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (photographs by Jytte Holmqvist).

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