Picnic at Hanging Rock

Peter Weir

Film Credits
DIRECTOR: Peter Weir
SCRIPTWRITER: Cliff Green (Based on a novel by Joan Lindsay)
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Russell Boyd
PRODUCER: Hal McElroy and Jim McElroy
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Patricia Lovell
PRODUCTION COMPANY: McElroy and McElroy Productions

LEAD ACTORS:
Rachel Roberts
Dominic Guard
Helen Morse
Jacki Weaver
Vivean Gray
Anne Lambert
John Jarratt
Margaret Nelson

Picnic at Hanging Rock was distributed by B.E.F. and had its world premiere at the Hindley Cinema Complex in Adelaide on the 8th of August 1975. Box office figures were unavailable.

Criticism
The film Picnic at Hanging Rock was released in Australia in 1975. The film itself was taken from a novel written in 1967 by author Joan Lindsay and she in turn had based the novel on a true story which had occurred in Victoria in 1900. Both author and scriptwriter attempted to keep the information in their writings as true to the real events as possible in an effort to keep their stories as realistic and chilling as the event itself. This fact needs to be acknowledged and respected when discussing the plot of Picnic at Hanging Rock as it helps to explain the structure of the film.

It has been labeled a period film, set on St Valentines Day in 1900 the film is about a group of girls from an exclusive boarding school, Appleyard College, who set off for a picnic at the Victorian relaxation spot, Hanging Rock. Some time in to the picnic four of the girls decide to go for a walk up to the rock and in their travels the group are spotted by two young men one of whom becomes intrigued with the girls and follows them.

They become weary on the rock and stop for a rest. One girl, Edith, falls asleep and awakes to find the other three have taken off their shoes and stockings and are climbing higher. She protests to them but is not acknowledged so turns and begins running back down to be with the remainder of the group. During this time one of the teachers, Miss McGraw, has also left the picnic to go looking for the girls. When Edith returns to the group she raises the alarm and when none of the four return to camp a search is carried out, but to no avail.

The lack of explanation as to how or why the girls left and never returned begins to disturb many people and the plot continues to explore why these particular people are troubled and what they do about it. The English boy, Michael, who had followed the girls on the day goes
back on his own to search the area and spends a night alone at the rock. The next day he is found by a friend with a mysterious head wound and no recollection of happenings. That same day one of the girls who went missing, Irma, is also found with a similar head wound and no memory of events.

The plot then attempts to offer the audience several possible explanations for the disappearances which to this day remain unsolved. It favours none of these options and does not try to offer any concrete explanation of events. This was probably due to the fact that the scriptwriter was interested in sticking to the facts for optimum realism, but I felt it made the story suffer in some ways as a film. The idea of the film had always intrigued me and this was the first time I had ever seen it, but I actually found it to be a bit lacking in some parts and often boring.

For me there was no great build up of suspense and events were simply being stated rather than created. I can appreciate the aesthetically pleasing, beautiful photography and the realistic depiction of the Australian landscape, however it has also been acclaimed for it's ability to build up suspense and fantastic incrimination of characters and for me this just wasn't there in any great detail. The plot also included a few subplots, some of which I found to be a little irrelevant to the important focus and it seemed they were there not to add to the story but to add to the running time of the film. Perhaps it is just that the true meaning behind these events eluded me and if they were made more obvious it would of made more sense, but in that case it would still remain the responsibility of the scriptwriter, and in this case he has failed me, the audience.

For the time it was released I would say this would have been a very good effort and similar to the level and style of other great works, hence leading to the good reviews. Reviews by authors such as Scott Murray who in an article in 1975 considered it to be one of the most intelligent and best ever films made in Australia. He saw it in some parts to be, “surreal rather than just a recreation of school life in the 1900's”(Murray,1975:264).

At the time of it's release critics loved this film, they saw it as Australia's first big break in to the international market and it helped Australian films to really become noticed throughout the world. Many Australian films had been commercially successful before, but none had achieved commercial success, critical regard and public endorsement like Picnic did. For the critics it presented not only an aspect of Australian history and social conditions but a sophisticated style in Australian films never seen before.

As National Times film reviewer, P.P. McGuiness writes, "With Picnic at Hanging Rock Australian film has truly entered in to the field of open and equal international comparisons. Such national and international success made Australian cinema more than simply another film industry. It made it a producer of celebrated international films." (O'Regan,1996:12).

The fact that many of these opinions have held and the film is still very highly regarded today is a little surprising, because for me viewing it for the first time in the nineties I would have to say I can see there was some talent involved in production, but as far as being one of Australia's best films, that I just don't understand. However many authors still write that Picnic at Hanging Rock made Australian film making respectable both to it's local audience and to the world market. They write it is one of the first films which made Australians feel comfortable with their local product.

Attention was called to the fact that Joan Lindsay's book would make a potentially good film by a scriptwriter named David Williamson. Director Peter Weir became interested in the idea but then David was unable to continue with the project and suggested Cliff Green should have a go at the script, and he did. Screen rights were secured by Patricia Lovell in 1973 and after two years of searching for funds they were finally received from the Australian Film Development Corporation, B.E.F Distributors (Greater Union Cinemas) and the South Australian Film Corporation, whose investment was conditional upon the film being shot substantially in South Australia.

The total budget for the film was around $450,000 and production finally began in February of 1975. The shooting schedule was a mere six weeks and began taking place at Hanging Rock in Victoria followed by all the remaining work in South Australia. By August 1975 the film was complete and had it's premiere in Adelaide.

For director Peter Weir Picnic at Hanging Rock was his second big feature film, (The Cars That Ate Paris being his first), and following in it's huge local and international success he directed several more films which audience and critics alike were probably more inclined to
take a good look at. Films such as The Last Wave (1977), The Plumber tele-feature (1979), Mosquito Coast (1980), Gallipoli (1981), Year of Living Dangerously (1982), Witness (1985), Dead Poets Society and Green Card (1991). Weir, in his earlier films dealt with many typically and true Australian themes and it seems as he began running out of those he moved to begin co-producing films with other national cinemas such as the French in Green Card and American in Dead Poets Society.

Regardless of where he chooses to work now, Peter Weir will always be considered an Australian director and a very fine, highly respected one at that. This consideration and high respect can be attributed largely to his initial huge success, locally and internationally, with the totally Australian product and theme in Picnic at Hanging Rock.

Patricia Lovell, the executive producer of Picnic, quickly became one of Australia's busiest producers due to the strength of it's success. She had previously worked as a compare on Mr Squiggle, for the ABC, as a reporter on the current affairs program Today and for the seven network as an actress in series such as Skippy and Homicide. Likewise for it's scriptwriter Cliff Green. He had previously worked as a Crawford's scriptwriter from 1969-1971 producing programs such as Homicide and Matlock, but then resigned to work freelance. (Tittensor, 1974:309). After completing a few plays he became involved in Picnic at Hanging Rock and since then his career has been greatly bolstered.

When the film was first released it did very well for itself in the marketplace and is often still listed amongst some of Australia's finest films. Providing for itself, Australia and everyone involved in it's production a very good and strong reputation throughout the world. The reason for this huge success may have been due to the films adoption of a universally accepted genre, ie suspense. Where many Australian films are often produced in their own witty, rocker style, Picnic tended to utilize more widely accepted film conventions and this may account for the film-worlds positive reaction to it.

Hollywood is considered by the majority of film critics and audiences to be the ultimate in correct and polished products and if a film from another national cinema such as the Australian one comes close to producing a Hollywood style film it will often receive better reviews and reactions in general. Perhaps before Picnic in 1975 Australia had not achieved this and hence the strong positive opinions and reviews when it was released. By no means this is the way the situation should be, however I feel that it is a well known fact that this is the case.

Australian audiences constantly having their market flooded with works from other national cinemas namely Hollywood, would probably feel the same. Where it would seem natural and politically correct for audiences to hold their own products in higher regard, in reality I don't think this is the case. Hollywood is fairly much self supporting, where funds for future films are simply generated from the success of previous works and little outside and government support is required. In Australia, films such as Picnic were groundbreaking as it was the first time a feature film had received such multifaceted support, from government departments and private investors. It laid paths for future investment and it's success perhaps strengthening the general position of Australian film. With the likelihood and potential for some large investors, Australia could perhaps begin to produce some much finer work, and since 1975 it definitely has.

Picnic at Hanging Rock was an Australian product through and through. It was set in Australia, was produced with totally Australian funding, the cast and crew were all Australian and it was a specifically Australian topic. It was a successful film from all angles and has aided it's crew and Australian national cinema to really make a name for them selves. Achieving such worldwide success meant for Australian film in 1975 that a standard had been attained which proceeding films may have found easier to reach, but indeed a higher level which it were possible for them to reach. This may have worked to push film-makers to levels they thought were not possible in such a middle sized cinema, and hence resulted in some further outstanding Australian works.

Through this process our national cinema has been able to compete more successfully with other medium sized cinemas and indeed the larger ones. Success around 1975 saw more funding made available to film-makers from many more diverse areas and film making in Australia viewed more as a twentieth century art form, a potential resource for Australians and the world to be proud. (O'Regan, 1996:11) Picnic at Hanging Rock played a huge part in this.

Bibliography
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Presence on line and in the literature

In order to collect information for this assignment I firstly consulted the Oz Film site on the Internet. In the Excite Web Reviews I searched for "Picnic at Hanging Rock" and found one article which was just the film title on a subscribers list of favorite movies. I then searched for "Picnic at Hanging Rock" on the entire net and it came up with 171 documents. Upon briefly looking through them I found none to be of any relevance to me and so did not continue searching this medium. The fact that I was not able to utilize the Internet may have been due to my inexperience with it, as far as not knowing what to look up and were to look for it, or it may have just been that Australian films do not occupy a great presence on the net.

I then consulted the Murdoch libraries CD ROM. Using the AUSTROM database under Australian Public Affairs Information Service I searched for Picnic at Hanging Rock. Under this heading I recovered 25 references of which about half were useful. I then searched for Peter Weir and recovered 39 references also of which about half were useful. I then looked these references and other relevant headings up on the Murdoch libraries catalog and consulted the available texts for relevant information.

I also visited the Film and Television Institutes Library in Fremantle. This is a small but very helpful library when it comes to looking up Australian works, directors, producers and the like. Using the books and magazines made available here, I gathered the majority of my information. The film also provided some of the information.

HTML author: Cassandra Ellis
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I heard from Tom O'Regan, the teacher who set up the Aussie Film Database. It was actually the first assignment that the students had worked on, some 4 weeks into the unit. Most of the students had no previous experience with the web, and Mr. O'Regan choose Netscape to teach them with. Most of the students also had little or no experience with bibliographical tools previous to taking the class. Mr. O'Regan writes: "The idea was to get them to appreciate the literature on Australian film and to make that at least available to others."

Mr. O'Regan ran 2 hour long computer lab seminars on the web for 4 groups over a 7 week period. He was concentrating on the organization of film information, and notes that he also had a University librarian talk to the students about search strategies.

(I did not make any changes to the contents of the report except to delete a few headings that were redundant.)

My own comments. I find it somewhat hard to understand how the author could find 171 documents on the film on the Internet, yet not find one single document of any relevance to her. (Actually, I wonder about 171 documents about the film, as I've never managed to find that many myself). Perhaps, as the author notes, it was a lack of experience with the Internet which led to that problem.

The author also comes straight out and says the film was based on a factual event in 1900. Yet the author apparently does not know that St. Valentine's Day in 1900 did not occur on a Saturday at all, which is the day the film said the events happened on. The issue of whether or not the film is based on factual events is itself one filled with controversy and "evidence" on both, diametrically opposed, sides of the issue.

Yet the bulk of her article is good, indicating a lot of hard work put into the report.
Historical Context of Picnic at Hanging Rock. The geological formation and former volcano now known as Hanging Rock is an ancient mamelon long sacred to several Aboriginal Australian tribes: the Djadja Wurrung, Wurundjeri, and Taungurong. The rock is believed to have once been an important place for inter-tribal meetings, and may have also served as the demarcation of the place where the tribes’ boundaries met. Picnic at Hanging Rock is a 1975 Australian mystery film that was produced by Hal and Jim McElroy, directed by Peter Weir, and starring Rachel Roberts, Dominic Guard, Helen Morse, Vivean Gray and Jacki Weaver. It was adapted by Cliff Green from the 1967 novel of the same name by Joan Lindsay, who was deliberately ambiguous about whether the events had really taken place; however, the story is entirely fictitious. Visually mesmerizing, Picnic at Hanging Rock is moody, unsettling, and enigmatic -- a masterpiece of Australian cinema and a major early triumph for director Peter Weir. 90%. TOMATOMETER. This 10-digit number is your confirmation number. Your AMC Ticket Confirmation# can be found in your order confirmation email. Picnic at Hanging Rock Photos. View All Photos (10). Movie Info. In the early 1900s, Miranda (Anne Lambert) attends a girls boarding school in Australia. One Valentine's Day, the school's typically strict headmistress (Rachel Roberts) treats the girls to a picnic field trip to an unusual but scenic volcanic formation called Hanging Rock. Despite rules against it, Miranda and several other girls venture off. On this foundation, Peter Weir's "Picnic at Hanging Rock" (1975) constructs a film of haunting mystery and buried sexual hysteria. It also employs two of the hallmarks of modern Australian films: beautiful cinematography and stories about the chasm between settlers from Europe and the mysteries of their ancient new home. A cottage industry grew up in Australia about the novel and the movie; old newspapers and other records were searched without success for reports of disappearing schoolgirls. Much was made of the fact that the movie is set on a Saturday, and Valentine's Day did not fall on a Saturday in 1900; did the girls disappear into another time line? Were they raped by two teenage boys who were also on Hanging Rock that day? Did they simply fall into a crevice?