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“A million years...just for us”: Subversive fixity in Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

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Hanging Rock, a domineering presence in the Australian outback near Victoria, is described on the Rock’s visitor website as “one of the best examples in the world of a volcanic feature known as a mamelon (*French lit. nipple*).”¹ This geological peculiarity problematises consistent interpretations of the rock’s phallic magnitude, formed largely in response to Peter Weir’s period film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), which receives annual screenings at the site itself and is firmly established as a cult classic.

The film centres on the inexplicable disappearance of a group of adolescent schoolgirls at the rock on Valentine’s day 1900. Benita Parry echoes the staid opinion that “the girls are mesmerised into offering themselves up to the phallic rock” (177). This phallicisation of the rock is contextualised within a narrative of palpable sexual repression and burgeoning adolescent desire, conveyed through a classical erotic objectification of the female body. However, despite various low angle shots revealing the phallic dominance of the volcanic structure towering above the young women, several shots from within the narrow interior cavities of the rock, framing the girls as they explore its crevices, convey jarring inter-uterine images. This symbolic shift in the gendered identity of the rock opens up space to deconstruct the apparent phallocentrically re-affirming representation of female subjectivity in the film.

Visually and thematically, *Picnic* is characterised by strong binarisms; between nature and culture, darkness and light, masculinity and femininity. Generically, however, the film evades such clear dichotomies. Despite the turn of the century period consistency of the mise-en-scène, various audience and critical responses highlight the generic ambiguity of Weir’s text. Due to the film’s unexplained events and its eerie atmosphere, resolute speculations—ranging from the girls’ journey to a parallel universe to alien abduction—have associated it with fantasy, sci-fi and horror genres. Subsequently, these paranormal and metaphysical readings, paired with the film’s nostalgic period appeal, afford a perverse

¹ <http://www.hangingrock.info/reserve/general.html>

interface between the post-human and its interest in corporeal transgressions and subject/object destabilisation, and at the same time the heterosexist nostalgia and corporeal fixity that marks the repeated visual objectification of the missing female characters. It is this interface between transgression and fixity that I am interested in exploring further in relation to gendered representation within *Picnic*.

Starting with an analysis of Weir's ostensibly objectifying and 'Otherising' lens, which seemingly perpetuates the concept of woman as enigmatic Other and as subordinate to narrative, I will re-dress the visual and narrative tools that construct this gendered matrix, along with the feminist theory that identifies these tools in negative terms. I will move on to argue a reading of the film where this gendered framework turns back upon itself. Looking at *Picnic's* narrative structure and presentation of time, and in particular at the pivotal moment of the girl's disappearance, we find that the formal and negative binaristic gender codes it outwardly portrays are rebuked, not by a transgression of these codes, but, paradoxically, by the very mechanisms of emplacement and fixity that characterise them.

Adapted from Joan Lyndsay's 1967 novel which claims to be based on real events, the film—with its open-ended narrative and allusions to historical context—continues to foster speculation on the inexplicable mystery it depicts, as Yvonne Rousseau's book *The Murders at Hanging Rock* (1980) and various fan-websites dedicated to the story attest to. These multiple responses reveal a mutual obsessive fascination with the film and a concerted desire to solve its mystery: to metaphorically 'find' the girls or to uncover their enigma.

The idea of enigmatic femininity is interpolated throughout by way of Weir's romanticised 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. This is enhanced by a recurring romanticised soft-focus, the use of diffused lighting, ephemeral dissolves and slow-motion photography, complimented by Gheorghe Zamfir's lulling pan-pipe score.

The enigmatic woman is a culturally embedded staple object of heterosexist construction and a subject for feminist deconstruction, particularly in the field of visual representation where culturally and historically (in classical male driven narratives) woman

appears as spectacle of Otherness; passive object of fascination for the probing camera, rather than subject of narrative movement and control. As a prime example, the femme fatale of typical noir narratives appears as a mysterious and alluring object to be investigated and controlled. She harbours “a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered” (Doane, “Femmes Fatales” 1). Mary Anne Doane, with her psychoanalytic perspective here, follows on from Laura Mulvey’s influential feminist film theory. Published in 1975, the same year as *Picnic*’s release, her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” argues that in popular film woman appears as narrative interval or as a type of visual interlude: her “visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line and to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (243). Feminist theory has moved on from such distinct gendered dichotomies, in image and formal structures, to post-modern deconstruction; queer and post-human imaginings, where cyborg bodies and other queer identities (gay, lesbian, bi, trans-sex and trans-gender alike) refute gender essentialism and expose multiple ambiguities between supposedly normative subject-object distinctions. However, outside these current political and theoretical trends towards movement, transgression and fluidity afforded by post-human technology, and of gender bending through the performative play of queer politics, resistance for marked ‘Others’ can also lie, paradoxically, in the repeated fixity of formal structures of representation. How might we re-politicise woman in terms of the fixed interval, and in turn destabilise the gendered spatial/temporal dichotomy that this interval is purported to enforce? Following on from this, how might we reshape the political evolution of Mulvey’s seminal theory beyond over-ridingly psychoanalytic sentiments? In other words, is there something more queer at work in the interval?

Early feminist film perspectives, such as Mulvey’s and Doane’s identify woman as image, and in this they are spatially rather than temporally configured. This emphasis on space continues to influence much feminist and queer theory, where the shift is towards sub-cultural spaces in relation to identity and representation.² Outside socio-cultural perspectives, though, Mulvey’s argument is specifically against formal structure itself. By

² For example, see Ainley, Rosa. *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies and Gender*. (London: Routledge, 1998); Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, Yolanda Retter (eds). *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*. (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1997); Boone, Joseph et al., (eds). *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

her account woman is placed within an “erotic interval”, or rather effectively constitutes this interval. The time that women occupy in this sense is unreal; they are partitioned, as image solely, from the wider temporal flow of the narrative. The disappearance of the female characters at the rock within Weir’s film (marked by a literal stoppage of time at 12 noon, depicted through a close-up of an immobile watch) seems to graphically articulate this theory of a female interval and may also mark the loss of another historical time; specifically that of colonial power.

To briefly contextualise the film from a post-colonial viewpoint, its events are set in 1900—a year before the formation of Australia’s commonwealth. In light of this, we can read the girls’ disappearance and the disruption of the quintessentially British picnic that precedes it, as a nostalgic allegory for the withdrawal of colonial power; the engulfing rock emblematic of a dark primeval and unconquerable landscape. However, we also find a nostalgia for idealised femininity as over-ridingly prevalent throughout the film, with the symbolic disappearance and search for the missing girls indicative of an anxiety to retain this femininity; to maintain the female body as conquerable in place of lost colonial power and as disavowal of the failure of the civilising process in the face of an indefatigable primordial wilderness. So, a colonial nostalgia manifests also as a patriarchally controlling one, where woman is objectified as Other.

The film conveys a heterosexist nostalgic ideology of femininity as pure, untouched, narcissistic and unthreatening. The adolescent girls are the polished product of a quintessentially British boarding school named Appleyard College, run by the sexually repressed and oppressive Mrs Appleyard. In this cloistered institute, tight corsets restrict, hand gloves are only removed on command, and pupils are literally strapped to the wall to improve posture.

The female body is constrained and controlled in line with Victorian values, and also by way of classic objectification, connoting woman as spectacle. On their way to Hanging Rock, the girls—filmed in slow-motion—are watched by two young men, the English aristocrat Michael and the Australian footman Albert, both of whom lead the subsequent search for the missing characters. We share their voyeuristic point-of view as Albert urges Michael to “have a look at the dark one with the curls... shape like an hourglass.” The corset, as portrayed in the opening sequence where the girls stand in a line tying each other

in, sadistically fashions the hourglass figure; a homogenous ideal that constricts the female body, and metaphorically suggests once again the narrative marginalisation that constitutes female objectivity. The hourglass shape embodied by the corset serves as a visual representative of duration, and symbolically suggests an attempt to contain time, as well as render its passing visible: the women, as missing bodies, are contained within their own narratively ineffectual hourglass, or their own interval.

In line with the 'intact' structure of the hourglass, the film shows a male complacency in the myth of woman as ideal 'intact' image. When two of the female characters—Edith, who abandons the girls at the rock, and the later rescued amnesic Irma—are each medically examined, the doctor (looking for signs of violation) makes the same observation about each girl, assuring that they are both "quite intact". The repetition of this phrase "quite intact" articulates the theme of virginal preservation and repressed sexuality running throughout the film.

This infantilist-like desire to keep the adolescent body virginally 'intact', and sexually repressed, manifests ultimately as the grand metaphor of absence: in the girl's disappearance, symbolically, their pure idealised adolescence is fixed or immortalised, as image per se.

Irma, the only girl to be found at the rock, is symbolically marked out as sexually developed or menstrual through a scarlet red costume that she wears, juxtaposed with the pure white hourglass uniforms; a graphic externalisation of the internal bloody hourglass of the uterus. Irma's body is no longer 'intact.' The vibrant red is striking on a screen whose colours are substantially pale and muted, and is significantly noticeable elsewhere in the crimson military-style jacket worn by an Aboriginal tracker who aids the search for the missing girls. Here, the racially marginal figure is clearly marked as 'other' in allegiance with the 'tainted' body of Irma. Both are expunged from the environment of Appleyard College—as Irma returns to England, and the indigenous Aboriginal is elsewhere entirely absent from the text. So, through chromatic coding, the film's visual field maintains the intactness of a sexually and racially symbolic white purity, ensuring that binaristic codes between self and Other remain themselves seemingly intact.

This ideal of 'intact' or fixed femininity, emblematised by the hour-glass shaping of the corset, is evident in today's visual culture with infantilist body slimming obsession; the

clinically controlled shape of the impossible waif-like body is perhaps indicative of a perverse desire for sustained adolescence. Likewise, Weir's soft focus camera and slow-motion lens has a counterpart in more advanced new media techniques such as the air-brush, cgi body sculpting and the virtual pixels that shape the uber-bodies of games console heroines, constructing a different kind of impermeable and infallible intact body-as-image: the desire is for clinical and technological control and fixity. Thus, despite the transgressions of corporeal reality that new technology has the capacity to invoke, new virtual and digital tools of representation are not necessarily indicative of transgressive gender and identity politics, but can also contribute further to their fixed and carefully controlled construction. By the same token, resistance to reductive objectification, whether applied to new or older fields of visibility, can bring about its own fixed readings of formal structures of representation. In challenging gender essentialism within visual representation, that is, the apparent normative divides between gender, we need to analyse how certain representative or narrative models and formal constructs have come to be 'coded' as negative and phallogcentrically serving, and how they have shaped the visual and discursive evolution of gendered identity. With this in mind, and taking Donna Haraway's suggestion, in her "Cyborg Manifesto", that women "seize the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (171), I would like to negotiate between this methodology and older feminist discourses (in particular Mulvey's) to reconsider the film's representation of gendered identity and the female 'Other'. How can we positively resignify these concepts by 'seizing' the formal tools that construct female absence and presence within the film?

The girls' disappearance is preceded by what I have referred to as the 'interval' sequence, where a slow-motion camera depicts the young women—focussing primarily on Miranda and Irma—as they move floatingly about in a trance-like state upon Hanging Rock, their heads raised, suggestively looking upwards to the rock, although we are deprived their point-of-view. The camera is purely objectifying, and absence of dialogue is replaced by the dream-like sounds of the pan-pipe, as the girls remove their shoes and stockings before lying down to sleep. The scene is accentuated and drawn out as a moment of "erotic contemplation" by slow-motion photography, fetishised close-ups—such as the lingering shot of Irma's bare leg emerging as she slowly rolls down her stocking—and

layered dissolves between the girls; all facilitating a voyeuristic gaze and lending a temporal and non-disruptive intact consistency to the visual interlude or interval.

Images of Miranda return throughout the film, sustained until the end sequence where the idyllic picnic scene plays itself out again, in hyper-exaggerated slow motion, to the tune of Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto. So, although the girls are narratively absent, they return by way of a visual haunting. In this way, they constantly vacillate, like spectral figures, between absence and presence throughout the film. This endorses itself very easily to a psychoanalytic-feminist reading where, considered to be passive by a dominant patriarchy, and configured with metaphors such as the abyss and the symbolic "grand zero" of femininity (see Cixous), in phallogocentric terms, woman is never complete but is always characterised by a lack. We can see the engulfing hanging rock as a metaphor for this. Furthermore, from this perspective, the girls' corporeal disappearance and fantasised return literalises all these metaphors of partial subjectivity. Significantly, these are all spatial metaphors, and so, in a sense woman is measurable in terms of marginalised or Other space, in opposition to non-figurative time, which, as Mulvey argues, is male gendered and manifests as narrative control. We can see this spatial confinement in cinema most obviously through the use of the voyeuristic close-up deployed in this sequence: this (according to Mulvey again) locates wholeness or intactness in the image itself, acting to disavow woman's symbolic lack.

As pointed out, the slow-motion here engenders a voyeuristic gaze and also, like the body-as-hourglass metaphor, marks a separate temporal period outside the 'normal' and continuous temporal flow of narrative, thus evoking almost perfectly Mulvey's argument that narrative progression and movement are male gendered, whereas female presence appears as narrative interval: "For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's land outside its own time and space" (Mulvey 243.) Doane's argument that the female bears a relation of "over-presence" to the image, to an extent "she *is* the image" ("Film and the Masquerade" 78), seems likewise exemplary in this interval, where women dissolve interchangeably and narcissistically into one another—suffusing any subjective distance. At the same time, it is this sequence, I believe, that provides a pivotal point for us to depart from this traditional feminist view; to deconstruct the apparent

marginalised treatment of the film's female characters, and the overall essentialist gendered framework set-up.

This challenge comes from an analysis of *Picnic*'s wider narrative structure, and shifting from the alignment of femininity with spatial metaphors, we can explore its careful construction of time in relation to subjective positioning. The theme of physical intactness, embodied by woman as hourglass—her 'Other' time defined as purely visual and subordinate to narrative—is juxtaposed by a recurring non-visual motif of linear and constant chronological time that epitomises the repressive pedagogical order of the college. This is indicated by the perpetuity of a ticking clock, noticeably audible in Mrs Appleyard's office. This sound accompanies her like a militant signature tune, as she reprimands her benign pupils. The college's panoptical structure is encapsulated within this framework of linear and ordered time: the picnic takes place at a set interval; 12 noon. A literal cessation of time at mid-day, where the watches become fixed on the day of the picnic, breaks this linear and ordered continuity and marks the girls' disappearance at the rock. The mid-day interval becomes sustained. Although this also codes the women as belonging elliptically to an 'other' time, outside the linear progression of phallogentric and colonial time, what makes this particular interval unsafe—along with the film's constant return to woman's 'enigmatic' image—is its perpetual fixity: there is no balanced return to a male narrative order and corresponding female narrative suppression. The fragmentation of linear time is symbolically conveyed, preceding the girl's disappearance, in a close-up shot of the picnic food crawling with ants. The diminishing food suggests that the order and structure signified by the regimented set-time of the picnic, is likewise deteriorating: the immanent and inexplicable interval that marks the girls' disappearance threatens a return to the patriarchal knowledge and power exerted by chronological linearity.

Effectively, in being sustained, the interval ceases to become interval. Typically, the erotic interval proves inconsequential to the grand narrative and wider visual structure of the film; hence its marking as interval, suggesting a momentary unthreatening lapse before a return to forward-moving phallogentric narrative. Rather than subsidiary to the wider narrative, however, *Picnic*'s dream-like interval and its apparently marginalised missing female characters, dominate (through their visual haunting) as its defining moment. So, the interval's complacent status as temporary moment of erotic contemplation becomes de-

privileged. This is maintained right through to the open ending, where the project to uncover the mystery of the disappearance fails.

Woman as image becomes unsafe, because it is non-reinsertible into a dominant controlled narrative logic. Queering the text, we find that this draws out a latent erotics between the two central male characters, Michael and Albert. Their initial objectification of the girls and consequent obsession to find them, serves to disavow an inferred sexual desire between the two of them, indicated through several homoerotic looks they exchange, along with nervous swigs from a shared beer bottle—an intimate reciprocal gesture that recurs in a later sequence, flouting the class divide between them. To contextualise this in terms of gender positioning, the desire to locate absent femininity (the missing girls) reveals a wider need to re-establish femininity as crucial to the heterosexual order, revealing codes of gender and heterosexuality not as essential or normative but as produced and anxiously *re*-produced, especially within the field of visual representation.

What appears at first as a phallogentric move within *Picnic* to disinvest woman of narrative consequence, by consigning her as image or spectacle per-se, becomes self-defeating: woman as erotic interval and lack (devoid of narrative substance) comes to literally embody this nightmare of vacuous presence, exaggerating an objectifying structure and a passive positioning to the point that both become transparently constructed and exposed as illusory ideals. This is prophetically hinted at in Miranda's opening voice-over: "What we see and what we seem are but a dream... a dream within a dream", succinctly articulating the deeply embedded mechanisms of visual and narrative artifice that deploy a concept of idealised femininity on screen.

Analysing the typical erotic interval we find that what is most intact is not the spectacle of the female body itself but, more importantly, the actual mode of its production and reproduction, characterised by a spatial female coding that emphasises the dominance of an opposite temporal male coding. In order for this binary to function, a return from the interval to the wider narrative flow must take place. What we have, perversely in *Picnic* though, is a suspension of this interval, so that it is no longer separate or "intact" from a would-be controlling narrative time. The binaristic colour coding at work in the representation of sexual and racial impurity (the red-white divide) is eclipsed by a far more emphatic negation of a smoothly functioning gendered polarity, evinced in the denial of a

linear, climactic and containing phallogentric narrative, and also in the subversive excess of female-as-image that spills over from the safety of Mulvey's marginalising interval.

Rather than non-disruptive and phallogentrically reaffirming, woman's strange time, her visual interval, does not reinforce the masculine linear drive of the narrative, which Mulvey would identify, but continually frustrates it and ultimately overthrows it with the paradoxically visually fixed, yet at the same time narratively open ending. This depicts a freeze-frame shot of Miranda, her flowing hair caught in suspended motion as she turns her head eerily away from the camera; an archetypally enigmatic image, but one that literally and unsettlingly, rather than symbolically or complacently, "freezes the flow of action".

So, we can argue that these passive female characters have taken the ideology of the suspended narrative interval to its natural but extreme conclusion; literally freezing the story, thus refusing a reciprocal return to 'real' patriarchal time that would re-inscribe them as safe Others. Woman's relationship to narrative time is reclaimed: she is no longer subordinate to it or outside it; no longer intact interval. To echo my title, this subjective control over time is encapsulated by Irma's view of the rock: "A million years... just for us".

Returning to Haraway's method of reclaiming or "seizing the tools" of oppression, the visual and narrative tools that originally mark the female characters as Other and serve to contain them, are ultimately used to destabilise the ideology of an intact heterosexual diegesis that is all-too reliant on a gendered divide between visual objectification and narrative dominance. Rather than serving to affirm female objectivity, by way of a consistent enigmatisation of femininity that masquerades as natural, the camera lends an unnatural air to the female spectre—as defined by the excessively protracted slow-motion end freeze-frame of the interval and end sequences, where the covert functioning of the gendered image/time divide is brought to the fore-ground. Ultimately, the line between visual and narrative pleasure, through the protracted female interval, becomes uncomfortably distorted.

In revisiting films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* through Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure", and in re-tracing the political line of evolution from 1975 to more contemporary, post-human feminist perspectives, such as Haraway's, we find that this evolution itself is not linear or intact, but becomes fractured, open and pliable: feminist resistance to

marginalising strategies no longer progresses as we might expect (and as Mulvey advocates in her favouring of experimental forms of cinema) from formally conventional modes of representation to formally transgressive or unconventional forms. Rather, in interrogating these dominant and apparently ‘fixed’ gendered structures, we find that subversive viewings, readings and counter-readings emerge to re-shape the figurative and theoretical origins and development of women on screen, opening up potential pasts, presents and futures for the production and consumption of the female image.

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