1900: A BUSH ODYSSEY. A METAPHYSICAL READING OF 
PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

1. Introduction

On Saturday, 14 February 1900, a party of schoolgirls from Appleyard College picnicked at Hanging Rock near Mt. Macedon in the State of Victoria. During the afternoon, several members of the party disappeared without trace.

This white-on-black summary opens Peter Weir’s second feature-length film, Picnic at Hanging Rock. Shot and released in 1975, Picnic is usually regarded as the standard-bearer of the so-called «Australian Film Renaissance» or «Australian New Wave», probably the most interesting and multifaceted cultural twist in the recent history of Australia.

The movie, produced by anchorwoman Pat Lovell and by Hal and Jim McElroy, is taken from Lady Joan Lindsay’s novel, written in 1967. An elegant blend of fiction and fact, Lindsay’s Picnic revives the Australian tradition of and obsession with the myth of children getting lost in the bush, and narrates the fictional but plausible disappearance of three college students (Miranda, Irma and Marion) and of their maths teacher Miss McCraw during a picnic on an ancient «geological marvel» called Hanging Rock.

The «picnic mystery», which takes place on Saint Valentine’s Day 1900 and is destined to remain unsolved (only one of the three girls, Irma, will be found – in good health but suffering from a permanent amnesia), disrupts the lives of the other college boarders and of headmistress Mrs Appleyard in particular. The investigations that follow result in a series of failures, due to the lack of clues and traces and to the unreliability of the evidence found.

The screenplay to Weir’s film was written by Cliff Green, and the shooting began on February 2nd 1975. The film was released
later that year in its «original» 115 minute-long cut, and at the same time a printed version of the screenplay was published. In 1998, Weir supervised the restoration and remastering of the original negative for the release of the first Picnic DVD. Instead of simply cleaning and adjusting the film, Weir opted for a complete revision of his work. As a result, seven minutes were cut, some minor additions appeared, and some scenes were slightly (but significantly) altered. The 1998 «director’s cut», which according to Weir must be considered the definitive version of the film, is studied here as the final step in the process of transposition of Picnic from novel to film and from thriller to metaphysical drama.

2. Joan Lindsay’s novel

Since its first publication in 1967, Picnic has aroused the interest of the readers for its being probably based on true events. Further investigations and archive research proved that no such incident took place on the Rock on February 14th 1900 – though Lindsay thought it should be up to the reader to decide whether the facts are true or not, and if it really is a major issue to deal with while reading the novel. The ambiguity of the novel resides in Lindsay’s ability to merge plausible events (the disappearance of the girls) with unexplainable occurrences (characters being suddenly stricken by amnesia and hysteria, a white swan appearing every time Miranda’s name is evoked, a «mighty wind […] exploding in the heaviest rain» which accompanies the end of the love affair between the blue-blooded Michael Fitzhubert and Irma): the unstable nature of Picnic incites some readers to inquiries and in-depth analyses, while others are trapped in mystic enchantment. The outcome of the former approach to the book is the impossibility to rationalise the plot: the inconsistencies that can be found through the pages are too many to be put together into unity and to provide us with a one-way interpretation of

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1 **Cliff Green**, Picnic at Hanging Rock. A film, Melbourne, Cheshire, 1975.
2 «Whether Picnic at Hanging Rock is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in this book are long since dead, it hardly seems important.» Joan Lindsay, Picnic at Hanging Rock, London, Vintage, 1998, 6.
3 *Ibidem*, 127.
the novel. As John Taylor, the first reader of the original *Picnic* manuscript, has written:

This is a most unusual novel, quite fascinating in its elusiveness. Once one has accepted the author's motives — that is, not to unravel a remarkable mystery but to describe the effects of the mystery on many of the people involved — the book gathers strength and point.  

Although usually labelled as a «Victorian thriller» or as a «nostalgic, Victorian melodrama», the novel deals with deeper and more sophisticated issues. Through an effective game of oppositions of characters, settings and situations, Joan Lindsay (who wrote *Picnic* «with all the wealth of her life's experience behind her») explores some of the conflicts and topics which are typical of Australian colonial literature, among which are the collision of cultures (that of the settlers versus that of the colonised), the contrast between nature and civilisation and the celebration of natural and sexual release as a reaction to cultural and educational restraint. Moreover, Lindsay's pages are charged with an ineffable sense of mystery, which derives from the impossibility of solving the riddle provided by the plot and to rationally unravel the enigma.

A universal fascination in the published novel of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is its offering of a mystery with no solution. While emphasising the limitations of human knowledge and power, it also sets a puzzle that challenges the ingenuity of readers and engenders the hope that the process of unriddling it will enable them to penetrate to deeper mysteries.

In its being a mystery which combines consciousness and unconsciousness, daydreams and nightmares, the harshness of reality and the escape provided by epiphanies and hallucinations, *Picnic* questions the grasp that reason and language can exert on reality. For example, the characters are incapable of recollecting what happened: Edith, the girl who fled from the Rock leaving three of her friends to their fate, witnessed something that went beyond her knowledge, leaving her shocked and speechless.


7 «An interview with Yvonne Rousseau», cit., 217.
Back from the picnic, the boarders are interviewed by Mrs Appleyard and later by the police. Their answers, as well as the account given by coachman Mr Hussey, are sentences replete with negations:

«It's all so dreadful... I don't know how to begin.»
«My God, Ma'am, if only I could tell you. [...] Nobody knows what's happened.»

[From Ben Hussey's report:] Nobody in our party had the correct time. [...] The girl Edith Horton [...] seemed to have no idea. [...] I couldn't believe my senses that three or four sensible people could disappear so quickly [...] without some kind of tracks. [...] We had no means of knowing the exact time except by the sinking sun.8

Here, the urgent need of relating the facts collides with the inability to do so, either because of some missing elements, or because of the incomprehensibility of the events. That is, either the picnickers didn't see anything, or they saw (or felt) something they cannot explain – either they lack the knowledge (they have no tracks, no instruments, no means of investigation) or they lack the words (and are therefore puzzled not only by the things they witnessed but also by the fact that they cannot relate it in any human language).

Lindsay's writing does not help to reconstruct the truth, since the external narrator is not omniscient: the point of view shifts from one character to the other, and to «objective» newspapers (which are interested in the events as much as in the fortunes of the girls' families); facts are reconstructed through fragmentary dialogues, sketchy news and blurred memories, which do not catch and tell the truth. The multiplication of angles and the altered perception of reality contribute to a jigsaw puzzle never to be completed: the sum of the elements does not result in the expected total.

The novel itself is not to be trusted: it does not tell the truth, but puts together many different partial and conflicting truths, embracing literary relativism and «seeking something half-understood and just out of reach».9

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8 Joan Lindsay, Picnic, cit., 42-5. The emphases are mine.
9 Joan Lindsay, Time without clocks, London, Angus & Robertson, 1963, 87.
3. Approaching the Fantastic

In *Picnic*, both the readers and the characters are witnesses to something which remains unexplained and unexplainable, and which produces a feeling of bewilderment, dismay and inadequacy which is similar to the kind of *hesitation* Tzvetan Todorov indicates as the fundamental element to gain access to the Fantastic:

The fantastic is that *hesitation* experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.  

Each character has a different reaction when «suddenly confronted with the inexplicable».  
Some of the protagonists, after witnessing the disappearance of the girls and their Maths teacher, give discordant, undependable testimonies. Most of them do not remember or have actually repressed what happened. A rock-like Mrs Appleyard could not possibly compromise with supernatural issues, nor admit defeat, and so tries to uphold the honour of her College. Avoiding the fantastic and all its implications, Mrs Appleyard also refuses to answer some of the most common questions about existence. Her strict discipline and her irreproachable behaviour are in themselves a rite which is meant to prevent her from questioning herself about the meaning of life.

Catatonia, amnesia and distortion of reality are all the police can deal with while investigating. The lack of clues, the unreliability of the evidence, the use of questionable points of view, are part of a shrewd removal of elements the novel owes its peculiarity to. The absence of any kind of track on the Rock adds more mystery to the mystery, and mirrors the reader’s lack of information.

The only way to cope with the apparently contradictory fragments of meaning that Lindsay scattered throughout the novel is to ascribe *Picnic* to the literary category postulated by Todorov. This can also justify the characters’ apparent amnesia and their reluctance to relate the facts, since there are no words to express the fantastic, for its nature and its manifestation do not refer to actual concepts. *Picnic* is a novel that tries to describe the indescribable; it is permeated by the terror of not knowing, of facing

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the fact that rationality, the cornerstone of Western philosophy, cannot be of any help.

An attentive reading of Lindsay’s pages will also allow the reader to find traces of the Freudian unheimlich (the uncanny), by which homely, familiar places and objects become threatening and disturbing, and simple situations, like a picnic, or everyday actions, like taking a stroll with friends and crossing a creek, show their tragic side and open the door to mystery.

*Picnic* explores the threshold separating wakefulness from sleep, the impossible from the incredible, reality from fantasy, fiction from facts, the «old order» from the «new lands». These characteristics are not only the novel’s main concerns but also the distinguishing features of Peter Weir’s cinema. It is no wonder, then, that Weir, after reading the novel, felt that it was

so compatible with my thinking, particularly at that time. With my state of mind, I think, rather than my thinking. It was as if it had suddenly touched that part of my mind, and from that moment on, I simply had to make the film. [..]

The great power of the story lies in its ability to unlock your own ghosts. [..] The deepest power of the story is something which is very difficult to discuss. 12

4. *Australia*

In a larger sense, *Picnic’s* 1900 Australia is a symbol for an existential condition: the turn of the century is a borderline historical moment which has traditionally been charged with superstition and with the sense of incoming new fashions, technologies, wealth. On the contrary, by the end of the nineteenth century a sense of spiritual and intellectual crisis began to startle the European continent and developed in the colonial world as well.

*Picnic* deals with the crisis of the modern man facing an ancient territory, who finds himself compelled to give up the usual rational categories and surrender to unknown, un-codified forces. The land, and the outback in particular, become a metaphor for the loss of points of reference and for the aridity of modern life. As Graeme Turner maintains,

The Romantic desire to find oneself spiritually in Nature has in Australia to deal with a material version of nature which is antithetical to Romantici-

A METAPHYSICAL READING OF PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK

sm: inverted in season, in mood and meaning, the Australian landscape as mirror to the soul reflects the grotesque and the desolate rather than the beautiful and the tranquil. Stow's Heriot sees this reflection and recognises in his closing remark: «My soul is a strange country». [....]

Nature does not only offer a Romantic retreat from society; it offers also a withdrawal from the political, socio-economic realities of existence — into, eventually, the spiritual and the metaphysical. 13

5. From the College to the Rock: a transition from physical to metaphysical issues

Picnic is based on the juxtaposition of two monoliths: the Rock and the College. Their opposition reflects and condenses the general scheme of antitheses on which Picnic is based: nature against civilisation, Australian identity against British identity, release against constraint, etc.

Moreover, the contrast between the Rock and the College is functional to a discussion on the metaphysical instances in Picnic. The College is clearly depicted as the place of physical restraint. The girls are trapped in tight and stifling clothes and in the film they are shown helping one another lace up their corsets. 14 Mrs Appleyard’s bust is «encased in a fortress of steel busks and stiffy grey calico», which at the same time props her up, protects her and cages her in an artificial structure (almost a prosthesis) that adds to her strictness: her body identifies with the stability of her educational institution, 15 and her authority is first of all a «physical» authority, her respectability depending on the faultlessness of her dresses and coiffure.

The girls are shown doing gymnastic exercises in a grotesque scene set in the College gymnasium. The room, «commonly known

14 The first sequence of the film set in the College shows the girls waking up on Saint Valentine's day, washing, getting dressed and reading their valentines. The «train of corsets» shown in the movie is one of Weir’s inventions. Both this image and that of Marion putting a rose in a flower press are metaphors sharing the same common ground, that of constraint.
15 If the prestige of the College is embodied in the headmistress’ proud bearing, its decline is announced by a revealing imperfection in her otherwise perfectly sculpted hair: «The camera has frequently stressed [Mrs Appleyard’s] heavily repressive dominance. [...] Mrs Appleyard’s appearance – upholstered rather than dressed, hair sculpted – has been a striking aspect of the film’s mise-en-scène, and no symbol of disintegration is more shocking than the grey wisps of hair that threaten the fearful symmetry of her coiffure». Brian McFarlane, Words and Images. Australian Novels into film, Victoria, Heinemann, 1983, 53.
to the boarders as the Chamber of Horrors», seems to be meant not for training purposes but for some sadistic form of constraint. With its heavy steel-cold apparatus and the wooden board on which the vulnerable Sara is laid and tied (and forgotten), it is depicted as an actual torture chamber which «proclaimed Authority's high-handed disregard of Nature's basic laws».  

On their journey to the picnic grounds, the girls are allowed to take their «obligatory gloves» off: it is the beginning of the transition from the «physical» world of the College to the «metaphysical» realm of the Rock. The transition is achieved through the removal of obstacles and restraints: first of all the symbolic taking-off of the gloves; then the opening of the gate into the picnic grounds, «the gate between “the known dependable present” and “the unknown future”»;  

the crossing of the creek, usually interpreted as a metaphor for the girls’ becoming of age; and finally, the shedding of stockings and shoes during the climbing. Only when their bodies are free from constraint can the characters interact with the environment and regress to a sort of natural state, in which they can more clearly see, think and feel. After getting rid of all these obstacles, the girls start asking the most enigmatic questions and uttering oracular sentences, as for example: «A surprising number of human beings are without purpose... Although it’s probable that they are performing some function unknown to themselves», and: «Everything begins – and ends – at exactly the right time and place».  

The Rock is then represented as the place where metaphysical issues are (and must be) dealt with. The meditations on time, predestination, fate and love which pervade both the novel and the film and which involve all the characters, even those who seem reluctant and refuse such existential instances, seem to be originated from the influence that the Rock exerts on them even before the picnic – an influence which is represented in the film by a low rumbling sound which characterises some shots of the Rock and which is meant to provide the Rock itself with a primitive and all-pervasive charge, as if it was actually alive.

16 Joan Lindsay, Picnic, cit., 134.
18 Cf. Cliff Green, op. cit., 29.
6. The creek as a threshold

After lunch, Miranda, Marion and Irma, accompanied by the plump and childish Edith, leave the picnic grounds for an in-depth exploration of the Rock. To access the Rock’s surroundings, the four girls must wade a creek: the crossing of the creek, then, becomes a pivotal moment in the development of the plot. In the film the action is seen in slow motion through the eyes of Michael Fitzhubert (who falls in love at first sight with Miranda), and acquires different connotations. Referring to Todorov’s theories, the crossing of the creek represents the moment in which characters abandon their state of hesitation and decide to leap into the fantastic. The same action can also be regarded as the natural passage from adolescence to adulthood: entering the woods and exploring the wild nature that surrounds the Rock is an obvious metaphor for accessing the mysterious, dark, violent and taboo side of life, which coincides with the acquiring of self-consciousness, the taking of responsibility and the beginning of a conscious reflection on/of the self. The crossing of the threshold also represents the moment in which one realises that, beyond the microcosm in which one is used to living, there are larger questions that need be answered or at least dealt with. It is a moment of disclosure: soon after jumping over the creek, in fact, Miranda lifts her finger to the Rock and invites her mates (and us) to look, thus directing their attention (and ours) to the most important and imposing issues, and in particular to the mystery of existence and sacredness.

It is exactly in these scenes (from the crossing of the creek to the climbing of the Rock) that cinema reveals itself as an evocative medium rather than as a narrative one: the frequent use of slow motion, which produces a sort of time-warping effect; the evanescent, soft focused photography, which idolises the image of Miranda; the cross-fading images of Miranda, Irma and the rocks, which connect the girls’ lives to that of nature surrounding them; the low rumbling noise which characterises the soundtrack, suggesting that the Rock might be alive, like a heart constantly beating on very low frequencies... *Picnic* is not precisely a narrative film, its plot being summarised in the opening at its very beginning. It does not concentrate on narrating a story: Weir’s use of photography (skilfully engineered by Russell Boyd, who obtained *Picnic*’s characteristic colours and texture by placing wedding veils across the lenses) and sound design
(not only Gheorghe Zamfir's flute-de-pan, but also the intricate pattern of natural sounds and artificial noises) aims at involving our senses rather than our intellect in the process of perception of the film. As far as the visual quality of the film is concerned, Peter Weir has said:

Many people have said to me that [the photography] reminds them of summers past, and that's what we wanted to achieve. It's something within the story, I think, which you feel: things passing, time passing, time passing... 19

7. The flowing of time

As Joan Kirkby underlines, «a powerful description of the prehistoric rock highlights human insignificance in confrontation with "such monumental configurations of nature"». 20 When Miss McCraw and coachman Mr Hussey discuss the age of the Rock they speak of «thousands o’ years old», «a million years old», «350 million years old», «thousands, millions... devil of a long time anyway»; eventually, the girl Irma highlights the still unconscious desire for a long-awaited union with the Rock: «Waiting a million years – just for us!». In an existential reading, these lines arouse questions on the meaning and relevance of human life when compared to the long- or everlasting dominance of nature as seen from our perspective. The few dozen years we are supposed to live are belittled by the million-year-old Rock, a silent witness of the flowing of time and of the passing of human lives and generations.

Time is probably Picnic’s major concern and seems to be the most important subject matter in the characters’ dialogues. The pattern of references to time is very thick: the first words we hear in the film, apart from the initial voice-off, are pronounced by Miranda reading Sara’s card: «Meet me love, when day is ending». A few moments later, she invites Sara to learn to love someone else, because she «won’t be here much longer», which substantially contradicts the previous sentence: Sara would love to meet Miranda at the end of the day (that is, when she returns from the picnic), but Miranda already knows that she will not be coming back. Time is all-pervasive in Mrs Appleyard’s study, through the

20 Joan Kirkby, op. cit., 260.
heavy ticking of clocks, and also, as we have already seen, in Mr Hussey’s drag. Particularly in the novel, the treatment of time is ambiguous: on the one hand, the book presents an orderly and linear structure, going from the day of the picnic (dating February, 14th, 1900) to the day of Mrs Appleyard’s death (March, 27th, 1900), with an appendix taken from a newspaper article dating February, 14th, 1913; the narration is mainly straightforward, with the exception of a few flashes forward and back.

On the other hand, the most significant events in the novel happen when time is stuck, frozen or simply not measurable. At the foot of the Rock, all the watches stop at noon, and this anomaly, which only in the film is ascribed to «something magnetic», asserts the Rock’s independence from the basic laws of the «physical» world. The Rock represents the temporary or definitive escape from time, a place where stillness is a sort of limbo preceding eternity or, as the film’s finale suggests, recurrence, eternal reiteration.

8. Spirituality and mythology

Gianni Canova defines the Rock as a «deposito di sensi e crittogrammi perduti, [...] una sorta di monumento alla morfologia del possibile», in which it is almost impossible not to get lost. What Picnic stages is the continuous but unsuccessful deciphering of signs and symbols, an inconclusive quest for meaning. In those cryptograms, in fact, are the unreadable answers to all the questions posed by Picnic. Since such answers cannot be grasped nor understood, one cannot but sit (or kneel) and contemplate that monolithic «deposit of meanings», waiting for it to radiate its knowledge.

21 Lindsay intentionally injected a long-discussed discrepancy in the narration: in 1900, Saint Valentine’s Day fell on a Wednesday, not on a Saturday. In a context in which time is as relative as truth, days and dates which seem to correspond to a precise moment in human history turn out to be a fake, an imaginative shift from truth. Yvonne Rousseau maintains that «there are many indications, in the Picnic novel, that the events described took place not in our universe, but in a parallel universe», in which the oddities of our world «may be even commonplace». See YVONNE ROUSSEAU, The murders at Hanging Rock, Fitzroy, Scribe Publications, 1980, 25.

In this sense, the inclusion in the screenplay (and in the 1975 release of Picnic) of the Christian hymn Rock of Ages can be read as a corroboration of the spiritual and religious implications residing in the image/sign of the Rock, though Weir’s manipulations of the scenes in which the hymn is sung imply a more sophisticated reading of the «religious» question.

Rock of Ages, written by Reverend Augustus Montague Toplady (music by Thomas Hastings) is a hymn about a man who finds himself at the foot of a rock which radiates protection, safety, a sense of eternity, mystery, and sacredness. Some of its lines seem to refer directly to the film, and specifically to Hanging Rock, lending the Rock an ancient, mysterious and metaphysical power: it is an eternal presence in time, which interacts with man’s fate («cleft for me»), providing him with shelter from the storm of everyday life («let me hide myself in Thee», which in the film can be read as a hint at a pantheistic merging of man with nature) and with redemption. Nevertheless, the rock remains inscrutable, silent. It performs a function which is unknown and could only be guessed at. The rock is also seen as a doorway («When I soar to worlds unknown»), a passage through time and space. In this case, the hymn refers to eternal life after death, but the general idea is that of unknown places and well-kept secrets to be explored only after one’s disappearance.

In the screenplay we can also find a scene showing Irma sitting on a rock shelf and singing the hymn. Miranda and Marion take up her singing as they climb the Rock, as though they were actually following a songline. The scene showing Irma and the other girls singing the song does not appear in either versions of the film, while the 1998 director’s cut omits the scene set in the Church of Woodend in which the hymn is sung, thus eliminating any reference to Rock of Ages. The audience is then prevented from finding the longed-for answers in the interpretation of the Rock as a Christian place for redemption, the same way the reader will not be able to detect any reference to Aboriginal beliefs in the novel.

23 «Rock of Ages, cleft for me, / Let me hide myself in Thee; / [...] Naked, come to Thee for dress; / Helpless look to Thee for grace; / [...] While I draw this fleeting breath, / When mine eyes shall close in death, / When I soar to worlds unknown, / See Thee on Thy judgement throne, / Rock of Ages, cleft for me,/ Let me hide myself in Thee.»


25 It is true, however, that the posthumous and final chapter of Picnic.
According to Donald Barrett, the spiritual side of the journey to the Rock might be found in a different type of religion or cult: the Greek myth of Pan. Of all the interpretations given by critics in the last forty years, Barrett’s detection of the myth of Pan in the novel seems to be the most plausible and exhaustive. 26 Many of the otherwise unintelligible occurrences in Picnic can actually be explained by considering the Rock and its surroundings as the «territory of Pan», and are confirmed by the presence in the text of almost subliminal clues: the motif of sleep, dreams, nightmares and drowsiness induced in the picnickers, as well as the pivotal importance given to the watches stopping at noon (traditionally, the hour of Pan) 27 or to the arcane powers of the environment were certainly present, though subconsciously, in the author’s mind. 28 The presence of the Shepherd God as a sub-text in the novel and in the film highlights the importance of the influence of nature in the development of the plot and possibly in the «solution» of the mystery. The recourse to classical mythology, on the other hand, clears the ground from the illusion that the answers are to be found in an institutionalised religion.

Furthermore, Pan’s duality «as destroyer and preserver» reflects the dual role of the Australian environment in literature. Nature in Australia is both feared and venerated; 29 the same way Pan,

published as The secret of Hanging Rock in 1985, contains elements which can be traced back to the ancient Aboriginal model of the supernatural. See Joan Lindsay, The secret of Hanging Rock, London, Angus & Robertson, 1987, including commentaries by John Taylor and Yvonne Rousseau.


27 «The ancients believed Pan slept at noonday and that one should be quiet for fear of incurring his anger if he should be disturbed. It was at noon that the captain of the Methymnaeans was cast into a sleep and upbraided by Pan for the abduction of Chloe. It seems more than a coincidence that noon is a crucial time in Picnic at Hanging Rock also.» Donald Barrett, op. cit., 307.

28 As Joan Lindsay wrote after reading Barrett’s essay: «Apparently I have used certain symbols well known to the classics [...] simply because they seemed to fit in with my very clear vision, which I always saw as a whole. [...] (Incidentally, it was Peter Weir, who directed the Picnic film, who suggested Pan pipes as music and I felt that was good)», Ibidem, 299-308. When referring to mythology, we must keep in mind that director Peter Weir has always been interested in Jung and has therefore always interpreted the myths as a product of the unconscious.

29 As Ross Gibson and Graeme Turner underline, Australian territories were at first looked at as an idyllic uncontaminated place where the union of Man and Nature could actually be pursued and where a new society could be established and nurtured, though later this image of paradise gives way to
who is physically displayed by his being half man and half goat, is both worshipped as a pagan cult that protects and controls the environment and regarded as an entity that fills people and animals with madness. The removal of Pan from human history, culture and beliefs, resulted in a separation from the natural state the girls are trying to restore by shedding their clothes on their way to the top of the Rock. Probably, the girls’ disappearance is the product of their attempt at re-establishing a pantheistic union with the land.

9. The centrality of nature

The centrality of nature in the deciphering of the riddle set up by Joan Lindsay is confirmed by a scene placed right in the middle of the film: set in the College hot-house, it shows gardener Mr Whitehead acquainting Tom, a simple-minded handyman, with a species of plants which can move. Here, Tom represents the audience, as he expresses the need for a prompt and plausible solution of the picnic mystery:

Someone reported seein’ a light flashin’ around a pigsty on a place about a mile from the Rock. […] There’ll be a solution turn up d’reckly. […] Like kidnapping, or… you know… […] They could’ve fallen down a hole! Oh, there’ll be a solution somewhere, all right. There’s gotta be."

Gardener Mr Whitehead, an elderly man, impersonates wisdom and judgement, derived from his age and experience of the natural world. Nevertheless, he does not answer Tom’s questions directly. While Tom speaks to him, he does not seem to respond; then, interrupting Tom’s lucubration, says (a bit à-la Miranda): «There’s some questions that’ve got answers and some haven’t…». Then, he shows Tom a plant whose leaves close when touched, and another one which bends when approached by the gardener’s hand. Cliff Green writes:

«the harshness and indifference of the land, and thus the difficulty of surviving on it». See Graeme Turner, op. cit., 28, and Ross Gibson, The Diminishing Paradise, Hong Kong, Angus & Robertson, 1984, 2.

See Eric M. Moorman, Wilfried Uitterhove, Van Achillens tot Zeus; (it. trans. by Elisa Tetamo), Miti e personaggi del mondo classico, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1997, 564.

This and the following quotations from the scene in the hot-house are taken from Cliff Green, op. cit., 71-72.
The demonstration has a chilling effect on Tom, even if he doesn’t quite know why. Whitehead has made his point about nature and he moves away, a trace of a smile on his lips. Tom is left staring at the still crimped leaf.

In the hot-house, something is revealed which is vital in the understanding of nature’s response to the presence of man, and probably a solution to the mystery is given. The interaction of man with nature produces a response: nature not only surrounds, but welcomes, guides and sometimes swallows its visitors. If nature can move, it can possibly «absorb» three people during an exploration. Miranda, Marion and Miss McCraw have understood that they are a part of a whole, which does not distinguish between organic and inorganic elements. Nature, the Rock, has a soul, a conscience, a historical memory, a characteristic which is confirmed by the nightmares it induces in Mike («I’m an expert in nightmares since I came to Australia», he says). If the word did not sound banal, we would say that the Rock can feel. The same way the girls, as suggested by Russell Boyd’s dusty and shimmering photography, are able to vanish into thin air, like a cloud or a handful of sand.

10. Miranda

The main character in Picnic is Miranda: her image is central to the development of the film. Her importance, though, must be ascribed not to her presence but to her absence. During the film’s first sequence, the camera captures Miranda’s reflection in two mirrors and then in one: even before leaving for the picnic, the girl is already the image of herself. The audience is shown the possibility that the girl might not have a physical body, but only an ectoplasmic (or «metaphysical») one, and that her image might be more powerful than her earthly self. Following Todorov, mirrors are devices that can grant a character the access to the fantastic: if «reason, which rejects the marvelous, [...] also renounces the mirror», then Miranda, who is looking at herself through the looking-glass, is not a girl of reason but a girl of spirit. Evanescent and prophetic, Miranda refuses to be framed within a scheme of ordinary social conventions: for this reason

32 Joan Lindsay, Picnic, cit., 155.
33 Tzvetan Todorov, op. cit., 121.
she states that she does not wear her watch anymore: «I can’t stand hearing it ticking all day long just above my heart». Her «chronophobia» may derive from a sense of not belonging to this world, or from her reluctance to be confined to any of the common guiding principles of human life. Her internal beat (her biological time, her intimate, spiritual rhythm) is not synchronised with the speed of the rest of the world, and this lag adds to the appeal the girl has for the most sensitive people around her. As Yvonne Rousseau points out,

The sense of oneself as a unique, unpredictable individual, pulsating in one’s own personal rhythm, is upset by the intrusion of remorselessly succeeding seconds. […] Miranda eschews the watch’s regular ticking off of mechanical divisions, defining the passage of time. [Her] sensibility instinctively opposes itself to «clock time». 34

For this reason, that is, her refusal to comply with a linear conception of time, Miranda is endowed with the possibility to live in an ever-present (in the novel) or circular time (in the film), and is awarded the gift of prophecy: «I won’t be here much longer» and «Everything begins – and ends – at exactly the right time and place» are not simple oracular and cryptic sentences, but exact predictions of what is about to happen.

As Miranda says, we can use our mind to guess, and our hearts to inquire and know. Knowledge is therefore not a question of education, culture or rational powers, but pertains to the soul. Reversing Greek philosophy, we can say that doxa is the product of our rationality while aletheia comes from the spirit. Probably, then, it is within our dreams that we can read, decipher and know that system of references we call reality. Or rather, reality itself is to be found inside our dreams. The oneiric quality of Picnic, then, originates from and leads to the quest for a truth, an ontological truth we dare say, which finds its foundation in spiritual rather than physical/bodily activities. 35

In the novel, the French teacher Mademoiselle De Poitiers compares Miranda to a «Botticelli angel from the Uffizi [sic]». 36 Weir narrows the field of this general allusion by showing a picture from the art book Mademoiselle is leafing through: it is

34 Yvonne Rousseau, op. cit., 42.
35 Following one of Lindsay’s implicit suggestions, the importance of dreams and dream-like reality is suggested by the choice of Miranda’s name, which refers to Prospero’s daughter in William Shakespeare’s The Tempest.
36 Joan Lindsay, Picnic, cit., 24.
Botticelli’s *The birth of Venus*. Thus, the character of Miranda gains importance and the girl is awarded a place in the myth or, in modern terms, in the collective conscience. Italian art critic Piero Adorno writes that Botticelli’s Venus «does not represent the triumphal birth of the Goddess of love, but rather the awareness of the transience of things». Speaking of Botticelli, the Italian Renaissance, and the rediscovery of myth due to Marsilio Ficino, Adorno underlines that Ficino’s Neoplatonic theories «assert the supremacy of spirit over matter, in an ascensional movement which leads the immortal soul, through intellect and love, to God». Speaking of «intellect» (a translation from the Greek *noûs*, as opposed to *diánoia*, «reason»), we may recall that to Plato it corresponded to the highest degree of knowledge: it means contemplation of the Ideas and of their interrelations. The association of Miranda with Botticelli and his *Venus*, then, brings forth a system of references which permits a deeper and more complex penetration into her character and the picnic mystery, and is sustained by Weir’s iconographical references. In the light of all this, Miranda’s behaviour, which might look bizarre and oracular, is more intelligible, less obscure. She is a function of, has knowledge of and partakes in, that ascensional movement (of which the climbing of the Rock is a metaphor) which elevates the human soul to the divine mystery. She will achieve it, along with Marion, who is as wise and insightful as her, and Miss McCraw who, though rigid and shrewish, contemplates the movement of the Spheres through her maths and trigonometry books. Irma, a child of the Earth, is returned to her friends, her family and her considerable inheritance. Edith, too heavy and with her feet on the ground, lacks the ethereal qualities needed for such a journey.

Miranda’s deep connection to the land and to nature is often underlined in the film: first of all, Weir superimposes her image to that of the rocks, of the woods and of a flock of flying parrots. After her disappearance, Miranda «comes back» in the shape of a swan. The connection between Miranda and the swan is first established in Michael’s mind, and is clearly due to Michael’s love for the lost girl. In a sense, it is Mike who (arbitrarily or not) decides that the lost girl should return transformed or translated into that particular animal. The meaning of the swan is within

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everybody's reach: traditionally, the swan embodies grace, lightness, beauty; Miranda's movements are never abrupt, and so the swan's are sinuous, winding; the girl and the swan have the predominant colour white in common.

Because of its pure white colour, the swan is a symbol of light in many parts of the world. [...] As a feminine symbol, the swan represents intuition and gracefulness, and goddesses such as Aphrodite and Artemis were sometimes accompanied by swans. [...] As a dream symbol, the swan can signify self transformation, intuition, sensitivity, and even the soul, the «higher Self» within each person. [...] In shamanism, the Swan totem is associated with love, inspiration, intuition, self-transformation, gracefulness and beauty, and also with traveling to the Otherworld. As a water bird, it is also connected with emotions. Swan can help you with seeing the inner beauty in yourself and others, developing your intuition, accepting transformations and balancing your emotions. 39

There is no need to underline that all these symbolic characteristics perfectly fit Miranda's portrait and the general spirit of the film. As far as «travelling to the Otherworld» is concerned, the whole film can be read as a journey to a place unknown as seen from the point of view of those who could not enter those regions. Picnic's final shot, after the announcement of Mrs Appleyard's death, shows the picnic party in slow motion: Irma, Marion, McCraw and Miranda are there, perpetuated by the memory of cinema itself. Significantly, the final freeze-frame is not on Miranda's face, but on her head already turned towards the Rock, towards her future, which will perpetuate her forever. She, who has always sensed things before they happened, is once more ahead of us: frozen in time and eternally present, Miranda is endlessly wandering the regions of the Rock while we, astounded and bewildered, are left alone, with questions unanswered.

11. The 1998 director's cut: towards the metaphysical drama

So far we have analysed some of the metaphysical instances in Picnic, but we must not forget that Lindsay's novel is not in itself a metaphysical novel. Judging from the mysterious plot triggered at the beginning of the book, the insistence on police investigations, testimonies, reports, newspaper articles, contradicting clues

etc., the novel is affected by the tradition of detective stories and can also be read as a thriller. In his screenplay, Cliff Green omits some of the sub-plots concerning minor characters but, in order to keep the picnic mystery alive, he does not avoid those elements which could arouse suspicion in the audience nor does he avoid romance (the unfulfilled love between Irma and Michael). Green recalls that, after the final draft of the screenplay was written, the process of cutting and re-working scenes continued on the set, and then in the cutting room.

During the shooting and the editing, then, Weir was intent on dropping redundant or unnecessary sequences. It is important to underline that on the set and during the editing no major changes were made, and that most of the cuts concern minor scenes, plethoric dialogues, repetitive internal rhymes and cross-references, easy-to-decipher symbolism. The first (the «original») version of Picnic can still be found on videocassettes printed before 1998.

Each of the variations operated by Weir in his 1998 director's cut is relevant in so far as it changes the audience's perception of the film. In our opinion, the alternative version of Picnic emphasises a shift in the film's genre: the «old» thriller has definitely become a «metaphysical drama», and the evidence of this mutation can be produced by the film itself.

First of all, the director's cut omits all the elements that may arouse suspicion on any of the characters regarding the girls' disappearance or Sara's suicide. When Albert, the Fitzhubert's stableman, having trouble sleeping, turns the recent occurrences over and over in his mind, a voice-off, the flashback of Mike saying: «I'll just stretch my legs a bit before we go» reveals that Albert is pondering over Mike's possible involvement in the vanishing. The silencing of Albert's thoughts in the 1998 version exonerates Mike of the charge. Before Sara's suicide, another manipulation of the soundtrack removes the sound of breaking glass, so that we do not hear the girl falling from her window. Furthermore, the sequence showing Mrs Appleyard sneaking into Sara's room after the girl's suicide is dropped, in order to exclude the headmistress' direct involvement in the tragedy.

Moreover, Weir cuts all the factors that could distract the audience from the very core of the film. Concerned with the film's grasp on the modern spectator, Weir eliminates the romantic side.

40 Cliff Green, «A note about the screenplay», in Cliff Green, op. cit., xxii.
of the story: the relationship between Mike and Irma completely disappears. In the director’s cut, Mike is in love with and obsessed by Miranda, or better, by the image of her, which is a continuous reiteration of the same few seconds when she turned to him by the creek. This cut, then, stresses the importance of Miranda and, by eliminating the brand new settings of the Fitzhuberts’ garden, the lake and the boathouse, reasserts the centrality of the duality Rock versus College.

In the process of transposition of the novel from the written page to the screen, the progressive elimination of elements, occurrences and data brought to a streamlining of the narrative structure which inevitably leads to the very core of Picnic. When dealing with the 1998 director’s cut, we can assert that the film has been reduced to a sequence of powerful symbols connected to one another not through causation but through continuity. These symbols are: the Rock, with its metaphysical, mysterious, and totemic values that we have already discussed; the creek, a threshold between two different states of consciousness, or two different ages or worlds; the swan, a totem, a fetish and an aesthetic/ecstatic object which is the symbol of love and desire; the clocks, stuck at noon at the foot of the Rock, and ruthlessly ticking in the College hall and in Mrs Appleyard’s study; the College, «an agency of the Empire» 41 which stubbornly opposes itself to the bush (and which, at the end of the novel, is burnt down by a bush fire, which both destroys the building and redeems that plot of land). And, last but not least, Australia itself, the metaphor for an existential state, the land of the unknown and of the unexplored (in the novel, the Rock is still uncharted at the time of the picnic), which is founded on a system of reference and values and on a primitive culture which are perceived with awe.

Picnic, then, stages a discussion on time, nature, sacredness, beauty, truth and existence in which many questions are posed but no answer is given. Looking at the Rock, tall and dark against the sky, we cannot avoid thinking of the monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: a Space Odyssey: a black rectangle with the extraordinary metatextual power (among others) to stimulate the audience’s re-

spose, and activate a system of references which can potentially lead anywhere, up to the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The monolith is an anthropological symbol, which refers to ancient monuments made of erect stones [...] whose function is still unknown. [...] They make us dream, with the obstinate silence of their presence. [...] Because of its vertical shape, the monolith is a totem, a phallic symbol of power, an object that must be worshipped. [...] The monolith is a symbol of burial. [...] In the end, the monolith is the embodiment of both memory and monument. 43

In *Picnic*, the Rock itself (or, why not, the film itself) is by definition a monolith, and at its foot the lost girls sleep, dance, dream and disappear. It is at the same time a place of closure (for us) and disclosure (for them) – a disclosure which goes beyond reality, subjectivity, sensibility.

*Picnic* stages the disappearance [of the girls] and leaves it unexplained, thus alluding to the manifestation of a *monstrum* (that is, etymologically, of an extraordinary and prodigious event) which the film does not clarify. To our curious and excited gaze, Weir only offers the image of an absence, or of an utterly unjustified void. 43

What if this *monstrum* were the absence itself, the necessary absence of answers, explanations, even of clues and tracks? What if the picnic mystery were not a mystery but something that the human race knows too well, like death, for instance? What if the picnic mystery were based on the vexing impossibility of knowing what there is beyond the threshold while we are standing on *this* side? The fascination emanating from the film resides in the *horror vacui* it generates in the audience, the same *horror vacui* felt by the characters; the question, the real question, the unanswerable one, is not: Where has Miranda gone? But: Why do we fear this absence, why are we afraid of this void?

The transition from thriller to metaphysical drama is complete: *Picnic*, especially in its director’s cut, deals with things that go beyond the realm of physical phenomena. Like dreams, for example, or like the hopes and desires pertaining to the ineffable regions of the soul. In the end, *Picnic* produces two distinct ef-

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43 *Gianni Canova, op. cit.*, 98. My translation.
fects in the readers/audience. We may call the first one persistence. Lindsay's words and Weir's images know how to make their way to a remote region of our brains, souls and conscience. There they dwell, ready to wake up in the most unexpected moments, as the image of Miranda does in Mike.

The second effect is what the French call signification, which Adrian Martin explains as follows: «traces of meaning, fragments of sense, but never a coherent, fixed, final truth delivered easily to us».  

12. Postscript: back to the gym

Even those who came back from the Rock could not possibly provide a final and true explanation for what happened; like Irma, for example, who, after being rescued, visits her mates for the last time. Her presence in the College gym unleashes the girls' hysteria and the quest of knowledge now finds its way through inhibitions and prohibitions, exploding in ferocious questions, to which the amnesiac Irma cannot answer, thus supporting the topos of the «unexplainable truth»:

«Come on, Irma – tell us. We waited long enough.» [...] «What can I tell you? Have you all gone crazy?» [...] «The Hanging Rock. [...] Nobody in this rat-hole never tells us anything!» Other voices joined in: «Miranda! Marion Quade! Where are they?»

«I can't tell you! I don't know.»  

When Irma turns her back and walks away from Appleyard College, she leaves the others wondering exactly as they did the first day after the picnic: when the only eyewitness is not able to report her truth, one can do nothing but guess. And soon, guessing turns out to be a frustrating and inconclusive activity. The reader and the audience should keep in mind that the image of Irma's departure, «filled with an infinite compassion for sorrows unguessed at and forever unexplained», can be read as a warning to give up any further investigation. Irma, with that compassionate look at her audience, may be addressing not only

45 Joan Lindsay, Picnic, cit., 138.
46 Ibidem, 139.
her friends but also us, who have been and will be looking for an explanation which has not and will not come.

And the sun sank again on the grand Australia bush –
the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird,
and of much that is different from things in other lands.

Henry Lawson, *The bush undertaker*

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ABSTRACT
Written in 1968 by Joan Lindsay, adapted for the screen by Cliff Green and directed in 1975 by Peter Weir, Picnic at Hanging Rock is a complex and compelling example of transposition from novel to film. Since Picnic is one of the most important films in the history of Australian cinema, it has already been studied several times, though the metaphysical side of Weir’s transposition (which the 1998 director’s cut has emphasised) has seldom been examined in depth. This essay analyses the metaphors, symbols and patterns that lead to an existential reading of Weir’s film, and discusses such issues as time, truth, nature and spirituality, which are at the very core of Weir’s film, especially of its shorter and neater version released in 1998.

KEYWORDS