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A Happy and Instructive Haunting: Revising the Child, the Gothic, and the Australian Cinema Revival in *Storm Boy* (2019) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018)

A recent spate of remakes of film titles dating from the Australian Cinema Revival in the 1970s suggest a renewed interest in this significant body of films. In the last three years, television mini-series of *Wake in Fright*¹ and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*² have reprised Ted Kotcheff's film of *Wake in Fright* (1971) and Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).³ Henry Safran's feature film of *Storm Boy* (1976)⁴ has been remade as *Storm Boy* (2019).⁵ The reappearance of these famous titles more than 40 years after the original films and in rapid succession in new media has the aura of a haunting. The use of identical titles suggests the uniqueness attributed to the original films that is sought to be preserved in the remakes and both productions represent extensive homage to the original films while, inevitably, transforming the narratives for contemporary audiences. The haunted aura has a deeper resonance insofar as the original films also represent landmarks in Australian Gothic aesthetics. In discussing two of these productions, *Storm Boy* (2019) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018), I consider the renewal

¹ *Wake in Fright*. Directed by Kriv Stenders. TV mini series. Australia: Screen Australia/Network 10/Lingo Pictures, 2017. These productions might be recognised as part of a longer list of remakes of Revival productions, such as the television series of *Puberty Blues* (Imogen Banks and John Edwards 2012-2014) based on Bruce Beresford's film of *Puberty Blues* (1981), and the remake of *Patrick* (Richard Franklin 1978) as *Patrick* (Mark Hartley 2013). However, *Puberty Blues* is not usually associated with the Revival corpus of the 1970s, and *Patrick* (1978), while representative of Australian Gothic cinema, is typically more associated with the Ozploitation cinema of the 1980s (see Ryan and Goldsmith 2017). Even so, the remakes of these productions could be seen as part of the Australian Gothic haunting that I describe, but are beyond the scope of this article.

² *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Directed by Michael Rymer, Larisa Kondracki and Amanda Brotchie, TV Mini-Series. Australia: Amazon Studios/FremantleMedia/Screen Australia, 2018.

³ *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Directed by Peter Weir. Australia: British Empire Films Australia / AFC/SAFC, 1975.

⁴ *Storm Boy*. Directed by Henri Safran. Australia: South Australian Film Corporation, 1976.

⁵ *Storm Boy*. Directed by Shawn Seet. Australia: Ambience Entertainment / Screen Australia / South Australian Film Corporation, 2019.

of the Gothic discourses and the allied figure of the child in suggesting how the remakes are inflected by an optimistic vein of “Post-Millennial Gothic”⁶ and the implications for the larger spectre of the Cinema Revival.

The Revival era of the 1970s followed a long period in which the Australian film industry was dormant from the 1940s. This period of long sleep of the industry remains a dominant feature of Australian cinema history along with the Revival--aka the ‘New Wave’--in which many of the films were preoccupied with reflecting or representing “a distinct Australian cultural identity and national character” such that it is sometimes termed a “nationalist Renaissance”.⁷ The Revival corpus is variously constructed and, in some accounts, includes films from the late 1960s. A defining list is in Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka’s “aesthetic forcefield” of genres described in their two-volume *The Australian Screen*.⁸ They list Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* among the period genre sponsored by the Australian Film Commission (AFC), sometimes called the “AFC genre”. *Storm Boy* is not a period film, nor is it listed among Dermody and Jacka’s genres, although they discuss its importance within the Revival corpus.

However, the transnational connections of the remakes partly testify that in the twenty-first century the Australian film industry is “firmly embedded into a global system of production” and it has largely moved on from those interests in national identity.⁹ While all three productions have the imprimatur of Screen Australia, the remakes transform the nationalist heritage of the original films within the Revival. While it remains a cultural landmark, interest in

⁶ Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of the Happy Gothic* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁷ Mark David Ryan and Ben Goldsmith, “Introduction,” in *Australian Screen in the 2000s*, ed. Ryan and Goldsmith, 1-22. (Cham, Switz: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 1-3.

⁸ Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, Vol. 2 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1988), 28-76.

⁹ Ryan and Goldsmith, Introduction, 2-3.

the Revival is mainly historical and largely among film scholars and enthusiasts. In terms of wider audiences, as Adrian Danks has argued (although not only with respect to Revival cinema), to date there has been “a lack of visibility of older Australia films on free-to-air television and other delivery platforms” and in “retrospective cinema programming”, and there is “a seeming resistance by audiences to Australian cinema’s back catalogue”.¹⁰ This situation is altered by the remakes in the sense that the “back catalogue” is reawakened for new audiences in new ways.

As a haunting, therefore, these remakes do not conform to the more usual paradigm of Jacques Derrida’s hauntology¹¹ that implies a “cultural impasse” and the “failure of the future”, which has become a cliché of explanation for Gothic cultural discourse in the 21st century.¹² Instead, I argue, both productions represent Catherine Spooner’s “Post-Millennial Gothic”, or “happy Gothic”, as she also terms it. While a range of critics continue to interpret Gothic aesthetics through (what Spooner calls) the “anxiety model” of disturbed uneasy worlds, Spooner sees a detectably celebratory shift in mood in a number of 21st century Gothic texts. Spooner is not concerned with remakes or adaptations specifically, and her thesis stems from several concerns, notably, Fred Botting’s claims about the “exhaustion” of the Gothic, and Spooner’s own perception of a tendency for veneration of a “golden age” of historical Gothic to diminish works popular with young women, like the *Twilight* saga.¹³ While her “happy Gothic” is ideally applied to romances and comedies, she uses “happy” advisedly as a “movable, oppositional”

¹⁰ Adrian Danks, “Picking Up the Pieces: Contemporary Australian Cinema and the Representation of Australian Film History,” in *Australian Screen in the 2000s*, ed. Mark David Ryan and Ben Goldsmith (Cham, Switz: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 24.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf (NY and London: Routledge, 1994).

¹² Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?” *Film Quarterly* 66.1 (2012): 16.

¹³ Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 10.

term that signifies “a range of positively inclined emotions or moods that are unexpected in conventional Gothic critical discourse”.¹⁴ It is potentially inherently ambiguous: the “post-millennial” aesthetic may refer to a “continuation of pre-millennial Gothic discourse or a repudiation of it” and “possibly both at the same time”.¹⁵

The cultural ambit of this ambiguously happy post-millennial Gothic is not to date recognised in Australian settings. Its potential lies in the understanding that Gothic “is tied to historical processes and works differently at different times and in different locations” because it is a ““process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols””.¹⁶ This poses a larger question about not only what the Gothic is but what it does, or what stories it tells in the 21st century.¹⁷ In youth and children’s fiction, for instance, Spooner has noted the “frequent deployment” of Gothic as a “pedagogical tool” in “using gothic metafictional techniques to draw attention to the process of writing and interpreting history”.¹⁸ These insights are aptly applied to the remakes of *Storm Boy* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* that occur in a wholly different industrial and cultural context to the films of 45 years ago. Accordingly, I suggest post-millennial Gothic is apparent in the styling of the films and the new resolutions of the narratives. It is also apparent in the post-feminist and cultural consciousness of both productions and the embedded layer of social pedagogy.

In *Storm Boy* (2019), this emerges in the renewed environmental theme and in the new frame narrative in which the granddaughter of the protagonist becomes the child hero. Luke

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Catherine Spooner, ““The Gothic is part of history, just as history is part of the Gothic’: Gothicizing History and Historicizing the Gothic in Celia Rees’ Young Adult Fiction,” in *New Directions in Children’s Gothic: Debatable Lands*, ed. Anna Jackson, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com>, 132.

Buckmaster observes that, if an environmental theme was “implied” in *Storm Boy* (1976), it is “italicised” in *Storm Boy* (2019);¹⁹ and Cameron Woodhead describes it as “overpowering didacticism”.²⁰ However, more pointedly, this theme underwrites the generational passage of the story in its retelling from the aged perspective of Mike as a grandfather (Geoffrey Rush) in what is effectively a sequel to the first film. Haunted by the memories of his childhood, Mike shares the story of the pelican, Mr Percival, with his granddaughter, Madeline (Morgana Davies), who becomes the new child hero of the sequel by championing the Coorong lands against her own father, a property developer. Whereas the tragedy of the death of Mr Percival in the 1976 film precipitated Mike’s (Greg Rowe) gaining of education, encouraged by Fingerbone Bill (David Gulpilil), the remake tells of the outcomes of Mike’s education, his progeny and the optimistic fate of the Coorong. A tin element of this scenario, I suggest, is the placement of Fingerbone Bill (Trevor Jamieson) in the remembered past, which seems out of step with the updated environmental and gender consciousness of the remake.

The streamed television series of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is post-millennial Gothic in the sense of its more contemporary and parodic ‘horror’ styling and closer adaptation of Joan Lindsay’s 1967 novel that uncovers its latent appeal as young adult fiction concerning a group of schoolgirls.²¹ There are pedagogical overtones in the transformation of the innocent girls into pro-feminist young-adult heroines, and the recognition of Indigenous people through the characters of Marion (Madeline Madden), Tom (Mark Coles Smith), and Tracker Joe (Bruce R.

¹⁹ Luke Buckmaster, “Storm Boy Review – Not Even a Beloved Pelican Can Save this Epic Downer,” 14 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/14/storm-boy-review-not-even-a-beloved-pelican-can-save-this-epic-downer> (accessed 15 November, 2019).

²⁰ Cameron Woodhead, “Storm Boy is ill suited for the theatre and, perhaps, should’ve been left alone,” 24 June 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/storm-boy-s-erie-pelicans-highlight-the-limitations-of-theatre-20190623-p520gj.html> (accessed 6 December 2019).

²¹ Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1967).

Carter) who comments on the ancestry of the land in which the girls disappear. In this sense, the remake responds to the ‘Miranda Must Go’ campaign,²² and the marginality of Aboriginal characters in the book and 1975 film.²³ The redevise narrative results in a form of resolution to the mystery that transforms the criticised lack of resolution in the 1975 film.²⁴ It also partially restores the final Chapter 18 of Lindsay’s novel that revealed the fate of the girls and which was belatedly published separately in 1987, as I explain later. But in its stronger address to youth, the remake finds horror dimensions of the story that were subordinated to its genteel aesthetic in the novel and 1975 film. In expanding this claim later, I suggest the latent “folk horror”²⁵ of Weir’s film that is noticeably compared with the parodic and darkly playful discourse of the remake.

Neither remake results in a completely ‘happy ending’ in a direct sense, and the ambiguity of “happy Gothic” prevails in both productions. Yet, whatever the perceived success of either of these productions, both pose recognition that the films of the cinema Revival may not speak to a current generation. This is particularly apparent in the revised figure of the child which implicitly reveals the marginality of the child and children’s films within the Cinema Revival. It is to this figure and its colonial genesis and the aesthetic realm of Australian Gothic to which I turn in the next section before examining the ambiguities of the post-millennial Gothic discourses in the remakes.

²² See Kathrin Bartha, “Politics and Society: Must Miranda Go?” 14 February 2017, <https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2017/02/must-miranda-go/> (accessed 21 January 2020); Amy Spiers, “Damaging the Damaging Machine,” 24 May, 2018, <http://unprojects.org.au/un-extended/dear-un/hanging-rock/> (accessed 21 January 2020).

²³ See Kathleen Steele, “Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in *Bush Studies* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.” *Colloquy: text, theory, critique* 20 (2010): 35.

²⁴ See Harriet Wild, “Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 8.2-3 (2014): 124.

²⁵ See Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Leighton Buzzard, UK: Auteur, 2017).

The Child Lost in the Margins of the Revival

Australian Gothic aesthetics pervade the Revival films, and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Storm Boy* owe much to the literary tradition of bush melancholy, the pessimistic vein of colonial writing about the fatal menacing bush²⁶ which was adapted in a number of Revival films. ‘Australian Gothic’ has a competing definition based on a number of Australian films from 1973-1987 that Dermody and Jacka classified as “Australian Gothic” for featuring darkly comic portrayals of small, isolated towns with the perverse and malevolent authorities and gauche, disaffected people. Elsewhere, I have argued that these dual traditions often converge in reception of Australian cinema, and Jane Stadler and others have suggested the diverse range of Gothic influences in Australian films.²⁷ But it is the bush melancholy strain that surrounds the haunting mystery of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975).²⁸ Joan Lindsay’s novel has long been associated with Australian Gothic²⁹ and Weir’s film has a melancholy “dream” logic that is structured through a “nature/civilisation binary” that has been construed as metaphoric of an “old world’ of implanted Victorian England” giving way to “the (white) Australian settler society”.³⁰ In *Storm Boy* (1976), with its realist, contemporary setting, the Gothic dimension is

²⁶ See, for instance, Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver, eds. *The Anthology of Australian Gothic Fiction* (Carleton: Melbourne UP, 2007); Lesley Kathryn Hawkes, “Fear, Voice, and the Environment in Sonya Hartnett’s *Forest and The Midnight Zoo*,” *Papers: Explorations in Children’s Literature*, 21.1 (2011): 67–76.

²⁷ See, for instance, Jane Stadler, “Atopian Landscapes: Gothic Tropes in Australian Cinema,” in *A Companion to Australian Cinema*, ed. Felicity Collins, Jane Landman and Susan Bye (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 336–354; Stephen Gaunson, “Spirits Do Come Back: Bunyips and the European Gothic in *The Babadook*,” in *A Companion to Australian Cinema*, ed. Collins, Landman and Bye, 355-369; Jonathan Rayner, “Gothic Definitions: The New Australian ‘Cinema of Horrors’,” *Antipodes* 25.1(2011): 91–97; Allison Craven, “The Ambiguities of Ancestry: Antiquity, Ruins and the Converging Literary Traditions of Australian Gothic Cinema,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 14.3 (2020 forthcoming).

²⁸ Steele, “Fear and Loathing,” 35.

²⁹ Gerry Turcotte, “Australian Gothic,” in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, Marie Mulvey Roberts, ed. (New York: NY UP, 1998), 10-19.

³⁰ Wild, “Darling Miranda,” 123-126; Steele, “Fear and Loathing”, 35.

endowed largely through the presence and dreaming of the Aboriginal character, Fingerbone Bill.

Within both films is the quasi-historical or folkloric figure of the lost child in the bush which Stadler sees as elemental in Australian Gothic cinema.³¹ This figure is described at length by Peter Pierce in *The Country of Lost Children*.³² In “the history and folklore of colonial Australia” the “lost child” is figured constantly, he argues, by the “girls and boys of European origin who strayed to the Australian bush” and whose stories of “endurance and suffering, of their deaths or providential rescues” emerge predominantly in the second half of the nineteenth century in news reportage, fiction, painting, and fairy tales.³³ With the “cross-fertilisation between the reported and the imagined tales of children lost in the bush” the stories “take on a generic, composite air; thus to become the stuff of cautionary legend as well as of plaintive history”.³⁴ This composite history/folklore bespeaks the blighted pioneering condition, Pierce argues. The dominant trope is “European children ... taken by the land” as they strayed in response to the allure of the bush, innocent of its menace and naïve of its threats.³⁵ This quasi-imaginary lost child allegorises the emigrant experience, “disoriented and vulnerable” (with the presumption that said emigrants are from “Britain and Ireland”) and suggests the “insecurity of the new Australians’ own tenure of the land to which they had come”.³⁶ As the stories often end with the saving or near saving by Aboriginal men, the ‘trackers’ who were “dispossessed of this

³¹ Stadler, “Atopian Landscapes,” 348-349.

³² Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). Jane Stadler also detects this figure of the lost child in films in the 1970s and 1980s. She traces them to *The Australian Babes in the Wood* by Sarah Maria Fry in 1866 (Stadler, “Atopian Landscapes,” 349), a work that is readily identified as an example of hybrid folklore-history and which Pierce discusses at length (17-20); see also Terry Waddell, *The Lost Child Complex in Australia Film: Jung, Story and Playing Beneath the Past* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

³³ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

same land”, Pierce laments the lost potential of these “potent image[s] of reconciliation” in that era.³⁷

Pierce identifies the lost child figure in a number of Australian films, including *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, although the role of the tracker is very marginal. *Storm Boy* represents a variant on this trope in which Mike is isolated and runs away to town, and Fingerbone Bill is not a tracker but a friend and mentor to Mike’s education. A persistent and discriminating myth, Pierce argues that the lost child speaks to the imperilled condition of childhood in Australia.³⁸ His description refracts the Romantic idea of childhood innocence in the way the child “strays” into the bush and becomes lost while picking flowers or in a similar unthreatened encounter with nature. In only one instance does Pierce detect the sinister influence of parental neglect, and he does not speculate at all on the agency of the children in heading into the landscape purposefully, as occurs in *Storm Boy* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

In recent work, Felicity Collins and Therese Davis refer to Pierce’s thesis in describing how the white child and the black tracker are “entwined in Australian popular culture”.³⁹ These “enigmatic tropes of cultural memory” derive from a time when “national identity was generated by an Anglo-Celtic social imaginary ... tied to white settler experience of the bush and outback”.⁴⁰ Observing how stock images of lost children have “been reprised in melodramatic narratives” including *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975),⁴¹ Collins and Davis argue that the

³⁷ Ibid., xii-xiii.

³⁸ Ibid., xviii.

³⁹ Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, “Remembering the Lost Child and the Black Tracker in Australian Cinema,” in *The Politics of Cultural Memory*, eds. Jim Aulich, Lucy Burke and Simon Faulkner (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020), 92.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 99, 92.

⁴¹ Ibid, 95. Collins and Davis firmly demarcate these films from the costume-Revival films of the 1970s.

persistence speaks to something “unassimilated in Australian history that insistently returns.”⁴² They compare the revival of the trope since the late 1990s in films that became grist to “media debates about the legacy of colonial violence in the present”, notably *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002).⁴³ For Collins and Davis, these films instance their concept of cinematic “backtracking” which, with its “shocks of recognition where past collides with present”, “reverse” the meaning of the trope and offer a “bi-cultural understanding of history”.⁴⁴

Another phase of “backtracking” seems afoot in the remakes of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Storm Boy*. The myth of the lost child is revised again and the stories are resolved in new ways. If a “bi-cultural” perspective is achieved in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, it is arguably diminished in *Storm Boy*. Yet, rather than history per se, the effect is towards the perception of the cinema Revival where the child and the tracker were marginal figures. In each case, this entails a reconceptualization of the child less as a figure of nostalgia and disorientation than an agent or avatar of new ways of seeing and imagining the past. The haunting aesthetics are renewed in ways that evoke post-millennial Gothic and refer to the cultural and gender politics of the present while maintaining selective homage to the cinema of the past.

About a Girl: *Storm Boy*

The original *Storm Boy* (1976) was effectively a children’s film, and its genesis from Colin Thiele’s 1964 novel assumed this genre, but it held cross-over appeal. Its critical reception over the years has largely concerned its landscape spectacle, which is the more vaunted aspect of

⁴² Ibid, 110.

⁴³ Ibid, 93. Collins and Davis’s discussion of the trope has a context of debate about popular cinema and “authentic historical representation” which they link to the “history wars” of the 1990s (93).

⁴⁴ Ibid, 94.

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the Revival films. *Storm Boy* (2019) preserves this landscape spectacle but updates the story, as noted earlier, from the perspective of the child hero, Mike, as a grandfather. The boy hero is eclipsed by a new character, Madeline, his granddaughter, who champions the environmental plight of the Coorong lands by persuading Mike to lobby her property developer father, Malcolm Downer (Erik Thompson) not to lease the land for mining. As a grandfather, and father-in-law, Mike supports Madeline at the board table, as she is due to inherit a 25% stake in the business on her 18th birthday in the near future. Compared with the lingering tragedy of the loss of Mr Percival to the hunters in the 1976 film, it becomes an optimistic story of environmental success over climate grief in the remake.

The environmental heroism of Madeline expands the agency of children in the story over both the bush and the boardroom and displaces the Gothic melancholy of the Revival-era *Storm Boy*. Yet this melancholy is strangely preserved in the inner near-replica rendering of the original film framed as Mike's recollections to Madeline of his boyhood in the Coorong with Mr Percival. This takes the form of an extended realist flashback that occupies at least half of the film. The cinematography is very comparable, even identical at times, with the filming of the coastal landscapes in the 1976 film. At the climax, when recalling that the bird was shot by hunters, the old man is shown side by side with his child-self, as if haunted by the spectral child.

This largely faithful inner retelling, framed in the past, will not be detected by new audiences but seems pitched at audiences who know the old film, one of who is the director, Shawn Seet. He has explained his motivation to direct the remake out of personal nostalgia for the first film.⁴⁵ He describes his memories of the original (1976) film as a child who was born in

⁴⁵ Don Groves, "Shawn Seet on Why the new 'Storm Boy' resonates with today's audience." 15 January 2019, <https://www.if.com.au/shawn-seet-on-why-the-new-storm-boy-resonates-with-todays-audience/>

Australia but lived much of his childhood in Malaysia, and how it resonated with him as a 12-year-old after returning to Australia. In identifying these childhood memories as a motivating passion, Seet implicitly draws attention to the intersecting desires of past and contemporary audiences for Revival films. However, this does not entirely explain the decisions made in constructing the framed narrative of the remake, in which the figure of the boy held in flashback in the past is juxtaposed with the grandfather of the present.

The granddaughter, on the other hand, in eclipsing Mike as the main child hero, does not become ‘Storm Girl’. ‘Storm Boy’ is still Mike, who translates the meaning of the Aboriginal name given to him by Fingerbone Bill in the very last line of the film. Indeed, Madeline is less in the image of Mike than the current teenage icon of climate change politics, Greta Thunberg, in her passionate and unremitting conviction about the environment. But, unlike Thunberg, this girl will inherit the land and is thus projected as the model environmental land-owning citizen of the future in which the memory of the boy and his beloved pelicans will recede. Rather than the hunters, the true bogeyman is the corporation – the family business – and its activities of the (fictional) present in which Storm Boy is his grand-daughter’s champion, gathering his middle-aged peers on the board to vote in support of her against her father. The replacement of the pre-adolescent boy with the mid-teen young woman as a key child protagonist is in keeping with pro-feminist sentiments in contemporary culture and film industry more generally. Yet there is anomaly in the remembrance of the fictional past that affects the bi-cultural perspective (of the 1976 film), and the world of the revised child hero.

(accessed 5 December 2019); Screen Australia, “Storm Boy- Behind the Scenes,” 15 January 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIu1Pss1H6A> (accessed 15 November 2019).

The nostalgia of the reconstructed 'flashback' becomes diffused in the melancholic sentiment of the grandfather and the layers of father figures who date from the first film, including Mike's father (Jai Courtney) and Fingerbone Bill (Trevor Jamieson). Originally played by David Gulpilil, Fingerbone Bill helps Mike raise and teach the birds, and performs the dance with the bird that is an iconic element of the first film. In the 1976 film, Fingerbone Bill, with his pathetically limited literacy, persuades young Mike of the virtue of education so that he runs away and is rescued by the local school teacher. However, in the remake, this incident does not occur. Instead, local money is raised to send Mike to a "good boarding school". Fingerbone Bill is presented like a modern Indigenous educator who acts in *loco parentis* compared with the earlier film, and is strangely aged in the flashback which is emphasised when he remembers his "Dad" who is played by Gulpilil in a brief cameo. While Mike as a grandfather and Fingerbone Bill are both characters who have grown old, only one of them survives into the fictional present of the remake. The re-characterisation of Fingerbone Bill suggests the greater authority of Aboriginal educators today and his dance with the bird seem pedagogically inflected in this spirit. He does not perform the humiliating lack of literacy of his predecessor in the old film. But in spite of this updated portrayal, Fingerbone Bill is strangely omitted from the present, and anomalously framed along with his "Dad" as a figure only of the remembered past.

The brief cameo by Gulpilil suggests a moment of pure nostalgia for the Australian film renaissance in which these characters first appeared on screen, and in which Gulpilil was an anchoring figure of Indigenous identity. Yet the role of Fingerbone Bill is reduced in the remake. No longer a mentor to Mike's education, the "good boarding school" is implied to have paid off in the remake with the generational progeny of Mike's granddaughter who now almost owns the land. As a grandfather, Mike reflects pragmatically on the death of Mr Percival at the hands of

the hunters as resulting in the extension of the National Park to twice the area. But there is no suggestion that the land was handed to Aboriginal custodians, the descendants of Fingerbone's "Dad" which would seem in keeping with the updated environmental theme. The sentimentality of Gulpilil's appearance and the error of meta-continuity in placing Fingerbone and his Dad wholly in memory negates the bi-cultural perspective that Collins and Davis suggest emanates from revisions to the 'lost child' trope. While *Storm Boy* in 1976 was a relatively progressive variant of this trope, it is strangely annulled in the remake.

Like the nostalgia of the reminiscences of the aged hero, and the reconstruction of the original film within the flashback, new audiences will not recognise this anomaly. Nor is it noted in the mixed reviews (some of which attribute more significance to the reputational cloud surrounding Geoffrey Rush whose court action regarding sexual misconduct allegations was in the news at roughly the same time as the release of the film). But amidst the environmental polemic audiences might question why Traditional Owners are not consulted about the future of the land. The film attributes to its heroine alone the power to disrupt the haunted gloom of *Storm Boy* and the melancholy reverie of Mike's memories of his younger self. With her sympathetic corporate elders, Madeline embodies the aspirations of a feminised child-centred consciousness in the post-millennial boardroom.

While the tragic heroines of the re-made *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are not envisioned in any reconfigured future like *Storm Boy*, they acquire a comparable pro-feminist aura to his granddaughter that did not accompany their first iteration on screen. To this extent, as Diana Sandars argues, the remake, like *Storm Boy* (2019), sits well among a number of recent Australian titles about daughters which speaks to a larger pro-feminist sentiment in Australian

filmmaking.⁴⁶ This pro-feminist spirit breaks out in a number of ways in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018), from the various ‘red herrings’ about the fate of the girls to the several elements of the novel that are retrieved and developed as threads of narrative complexity. In introducing greater Indigenous cultural awareness the production “backtracks” to a limited bi-cultural perspective on the story which, while alert to cultural sensitivities, does not entirely “reverse” the lost child trope or disrupt its colonial mystique.

Girls, Girls, Girls: The Post-Millennial *Picnic*

The production team of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018) make no secret that their re-imagining was inspired with greater attention to the 1967 novel, as part of their effort to avoid disturbing the regard for Weir’s 1975 film.⁴⁷ Albeit, the 1975 film was faithful to Lindsay’s novel which left the mystery dangling after the publishers persuaded Lindsay not to include her final chapter. Parts of this Chapter 18 are incorporated into the remake, making it both homage to, and parody of, the old mystery and almost restoring the strangely fractured publication of Lindsay’s novel. Thus the post-millennial Gothic of the remake reprises not only the pastiche and fictional historicism of Lindsay’s novel, and the latent folk horror of the 1975 film, but its historical aura as the lead film in the Australian Cinema Revival. In bringing to a new conclusion the mystery of the missing young women, the production, oddly, both preserves and transforms the tale and, in this ambiguous sense, is celebratory of its enduring appeal.

⁴⁶ Diana Sandars, “Disruptive Daughters: The Heroine’s Journey in Four Films,” in *A Companion to Australian Cinema*, edited by Collins, Landman and Bye, 313—335; idem., “Why the Lost Daughters of Hanging Rock Still Haunt Us,” 3 May 2018, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/why-the-lost-daughters-of-picnic-at-hanging-rock-still-haunt-us> (accessed 29 October 2018).

⁴⁷ “The Making of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.” In Rymer, Kondracki, Brotchie, dirs. DVD. 2018.

Spooner's mobile, oppositional sense of 'happy Gothic' is suggested by the resolution of the abiding mystery of the disappearance of the girls and the re-characterisation of the girls that resituates the drama with respect to contemporary feminism and consciousness of Indigenous identity. In this deft reworking, the fate of the girls is arrived at in ways that make their disappearance seem more explicable, and which challenge the idealisation of their innocence compared with the novel and 1975 film. The casting of Mrs Appleyard (Nattie Dormer) as a much younger woman, closer in age to the missing schoolgirls, creates a complex layer of tension in their subversion of her authority. It also challenges the genteel illusion of colonial society that conceals the misogynies and racism of the Victorian era in Lindsay's novel and the 1975 film. The remake does not do away with the melancholy bush mythos nor cancels the lost child motif but intensifies and parodies its horror spectacle. In this sense, along with the contemporising of the girls' tensions with their families and guardians, and the pedagogical overtones of the resituated drama, the streamed series of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is most post-millennial for its parodic Gothic aesthetic and its transnational appeal to youth.

The Australian Gothic tones of Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* had a latent relationship to the 'horror' genre that was carried into the 1975 film. Jonathan Rayner saw it as resonant of the British Gothic novel for its symbolic 'Radcliffian' setting, a reading that is prescient of the heightened horror elements of its remake.⁴⁸ However, Lindsay's novel might have been more readily seen as horror if the original ending, the bizarre Chapter 18 which was published 20 years after the novel and more than 10 years after the film, had been published at the same time.⁴⁹ This final chapter shifts the mystery to a fully horror scenario in which, propelled by the magnetism of the rock, the girls voluntarily enter into it, shepherded by the

⁴⁸ Rayner, "Gothic Definitions," 92.

⁴⁹ Joan Lindsay, *The Secret of Hanging Rock* (North Ryde and London: Angus & Robertson, 1987).

mathematics mistress, Miss McCraw, and leaving Irma behind. In an exegesis to this Chapter 18, published with it in 1987, Yvonne Rousseau (who earlier authored a speculative book of explanations to the fictional mysteries, *The Murders at Hanging Rock*) draws on the published Chapter 3 in the novel of 1967, in which the girls ascend the rock and disappear, and the belated Chapter 18 to explain their fate.⁵⁰ With a composite of theories derived from quantum physics, J.B. Priestly's occult literature, Aboriginal Dreaming theory - in which the landscape is attributed a conscious state - and Buddhist ideas of the afterlife, Rousseau's exegesis is its own kind of mediumistic criticism.⁵¹ But, even with this rigorous explanation, it is hardly surprising that the publishers in 1967 successfully persuaded Lindsay to drop the last chapter. After all the hyperfeminine Victoriana of the college and genteel colonialism of Woodend society, the quasi-science-fictional Gothic myth that insinuates proto-feminism in the girls (who dispense with their corsetry under the spell of the Rock and the garments hang in the air like washing!) comes from left-field in terms of the larger presentation of the mystery in the novel.⁵²

Yet, even without Chapter 18, the latent horror of the story also emerged in the mystique surrounding the novel, which acquired a folklore of its own pertaining to the mysticism of its author and the story of how she was inspired to write it by a series of recurring dreams.⁵³

Lindsay planted various truth/fiction modifiers in the text, aside from the authentic setting of Woodend and Mt Macedon, including a statement to readers, and footnotes authenticating details

⁵⁰ Yvonne Rousseau, "A Commentary on Chapter Eighteen," in *The Secret of Hanging Rock* by Joan Lindsay, 34-38.

⁵¹ Rousseau scrutinises the textual detail to explain that a hole in space opens which has an entry via the Rock into which Miss McCraw, transformed into a crab totem, leads the girls and that their various totems are suggested in the reptile and bird life that approach them on the Rock. Irma, she argues, is left behind because, as she is Jewish, she is a "foreigner".

⁵² See also Steele 35; and 55 where she finds Rousseau's theory "unlikely".

⁵³ Janelle McCullough, "The extraordinary story behind Picnic at Hanging Rock," *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 March, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/the-extraordinary-story-behind-picnic-at-hanging-rock-20170328-gv7upc.html> (accessed 5 Oct 2019).

such as William Ford's painting of Hanging Rock 1875,⁵⁴ which Janelle McCullough notes was possibly an inspiration for the novel⁵⁵. This mystique of the story as quasi- or possible truth that Lindsay cultivated is not out of keeping with what Jerrold Hogle calls the "exaggerated fictionality" of the historical Gothic novel⁵⁶ and it has since accompanied the discussion and reputation of the 1975 film adaptation.

The latent horror of Weir's film is more apparent if compared with Adam Scovell's description of "folk horror" which is modelled on British films from the 1960s and 1970s. Scovell defines a narrative chain that begins with foreboding images of landscape that signify the isolation of the setting, a community who inhabits a skewed belief system, and a happening or summoning of the enchanted, uncanny or eerie element of the drama.⁵⁷ Without detracting from its Australian Gothic identity, Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* conforms to Scovell's folk horror chain, frankly, perfectly. The opening haunting images of Hanging Rock are reiterated throughout the film; the isolation of the College in remote Woodend is doubled-down in the bushland setting of the picnic and the girls' ascent of the Rock. The ideology of Victorian girls' education and the folklore of St Valentine's Day would constitute the skewed beliefs; and the magnetism that draws the girls to the Rock is unmistakably the enchanted call.

The remake maintains this folk-horror patterning but with parodic embellishment. Various devices – flashbacks, slow motion, invented angles, time lapse, swishpan – suggest haunting as homage and parody. In the picnic scenes, the greenery of the bush is enhanced to surreally distort the memory of the old film's allegiance to the Heidelberg school in Weir's

⁵⁴ Lindsay, *Picnic*, 29.

⁵⁵ It is referred to in the remake when Miranda picks her way up the Rock by remembering a painting shown to her by her father (Episode 6).

⁵⁶ Jerrold E. Hogle, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002), 14.

⁵⁷ Scovell, *Folk Horror*, 15-24.

painterly *mise-en-scene*.⁵⁸ In contrast to the celebrated, haunting pipe music of the 1975 film, the soundscape ranges from playfully eerie to demonic, with persistent chiming and ticking clocks that suggest the themes of time in the novel. Furthermore, some elements of Chapter 18 are incorporated into the remake in ways that are seamless because the series not only explores the horror potential but develops a feminist sensibility in the girls from the outset, an aspect of its contemporary bi-cultural consciousness.

This infusion of contemporary consciousness is most obvious in the adaptation of Indigenous characters in Marion and Tom and Tracker Joe, formerly constrained to the almost invisible tracker deployed by the police. Tracker Joe appears and speaks about the sacred nature of the country where Hanging Rock is located (Episode 2). He tells how it is a place where young men would prepare for initiation, suggesting the possibility of sexual violence having befallen the girls, or he fears a “ghost” may be involved. While it is genuine cultural knowledge, it is incorporated as one of the several ‘red herrings’ in the mystery trail. But it is the missing girls themselves who embody the spectacle of female disobedience in an historical setting that resembles a post-feminist carnival of girl power and the ambiguity of lacy frocks as symbols of contemporary femininity.

Collectively, the atmosphere of the girls’ innocence is dashed from the opening when the showy schoolgirls are seen using the potty and rehearsing their fashions for a fete. Irma (Samara Weaving) strikes a pose in her lingerie. Assembled for the pre-picnic photograph in their dresses and straw hats to the strains of extra-diegetic rock guitars, the girls are more reminiscent of St Trinian’s than the Appleyard College of old, which is said to have been based on Lindsay’s own

⁵⁸ See Bonnie Elliot, “Period,” in *Directory of World Cinema: Australia and New Zealand*, eds. Ben Goldsmith and Geoff Lealand (Bristol, BGR: Intellect, 2010), 147-150.

education at Clyde Grammar. In an ironic homage, Mrs Appleyard sees them off to the picnic with the same speech as the novel and 1975 film: a warning about “venomous snakes” and “poisonous ants”, and the promise to remove their gloves after the drag has left Woodend. But the lead girls, Miranda, Irma and Marion are transformed into Appleyard’s nemeses in ways that depart from their representation in the novel and earlier film.

Miranda (Lily Sullivan) is singled out by Mrs Appleyard as a “ruinously spoilt child” and one to be “watched”. Soon after, Miranda stabs the foot of a would-be sexual predator with a pitchfork, a devilish sign of her spirit in contrast to the “Botticelli angel” of the novel and 1975 film. Her close affection for Sara – played as a much younger girl, according to the novel – is aligned by Appleyard with demonic potential by her claim that Sara’s “true father” has “horns and hooves” (Episode 1). Thus Miranda transforms from Lindsay’s idealised portrait of the girl with the “golden”, “cornsilk” hair, and nigh-demonises the ethereal goddess-like figure played by Anne-Louise Lambert in the old film. Irma, whose Jewishness (from the novel) is highlighted, does not physically resemble Lindsay’s heroine with the “inky black” curls so faithfully portrayed by Karen Robson as Irma in 1975. Weaving’s Irma is blonde, glamorous and demonstrative. Marion, who is Indigenous, is in love with Miss McCraw (Anna McGahan).

While Dylan Sweetwood describes the “queerness” of the remake as “revelatory”, the desires between the girls derive from the Victorian setting.⁵⁹ Following the caning of Miranda (Episode 1) she is cared for by her peers in tender scenes of undressing, washing and sleeping together. The romance between Marion and McCraw resembles the Gothic motifs in mid-twentieth century women’s films where Patricia White describes “an excess of female sexuality”

⁵⁹ Dylan Sweetwood, “Queer and Vow: the radical, revelatory queerness of “Picnic at Hanging Rock”, 13 July 2018, <https://medium.com/@dylansweetwood/queer-and-vow-the-radical-revelatory-queerness-of-picnic-at-hanging-rock-149121fd3b9a> (accessed 15 November 2019).

which “cannot be contained without recourse to the super-natural [sic]” and leads to “eerie lesbian overtones”, or ghosts code the “lesbian menace”.⁶⁰ In their intimate moments, Marion and McCraw chat about Henry James’s novel, *The Turn of the Screw* and Marion asks McCraw a coded question as to whether she believes in ghosts. But McCraw seeks to live “in-between” to the despair of Marion who thinks this must be due to her mixed race. These tender motifs of lesbian desire are counter-posed with the conflicting moral currents of the teachers and their defiance of, or submission to, the fraudulent authority of Mrs Appleyard. Miss Lumley (Yael Stone) is a volatile Evangelical; the art mistress (Sybilla Budd) reminisces about Stonehenge where the Druid priestesses were young women who hunted wild animals; and Mademoiselle, the demure French mistress (Lola Bessis) has a passionate affair with the watchmaker.

As a posse, the subversive schoolgirls seem more vengeful than doomed. The plan of their escape from the prison-like school is another ‘red-herring’ alluded to through splintered flashbacks showing the girls making a pact that they honour on the Rock (Episode 6). All three have motivations for not wanting to finish school: Miranda does not want to marry; Irma is disaffected from her family; Marion loves Miss McCraw. The spectacle of their disappearance is beset with more challenging possibilities than simply the fading of three young beauties into the bush. It is not a surprise when – as in Lindsay’s lost Chapter 18 – they hoist their corsets off the Rock and ridicule the garments (Episode 6). The role of Mrs Appleyard in this conclusion is a tad ambiguous (it does not entirely follow Lindsay’s Chapter 18). She is shown ascending, and

⁶⁰ Patricia White, “Female Spectator, Lesbian Spectre: *The Haunting*,” in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatrice Columbina (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 132.

then plunging from, the Rock to suggest that Appleyard either killed the girls, or that the events of the story are entirely her delusion; that is, “[i]nventions of her mind that die with her”.⁶¹

Appleyard is prime suspect from the opening scenes of the series, an expansion of the hints of her mystery in the novel.⁶² In Episode 1, in expensive widow’s weeds, she purchases the college property while apparently communing behind her veil with her dead husband about the stiff terms of the cash deal. The sequence is shot entirely from behind her in point of view and leads to the predominance of her gaze on the events thereafter. In the montage that follows, bush melancholy becomes bush-logic with a girl seen upside down by a billabong, prefiguring the girls’ subversion of Appleyard. Suspicion of Appleyard unfolds through the narrative thread of her haunting by her (presumed late) husband and herself as a child. Dream sequences show her reciting *The Wreck of the Hesperus* at the Gentleman’s club in London where she was pimped by the husband after he married her from an orphanage. The motif of the poem passes to the orphan Sara Waybourne (Inez Curro) through the punishment for failure to memorise it that keeps her home from the fatal picnic (as occurs in the novel). This connection with the orphaned Sara who is the object of Appleyard’s sadistic punishments is doubled in Appleyard’s own tortured child-dream-self. Her cockney voice is heard in the final scene as Mrs Appleyard prepares to jump from the Rock, accusing herself as the culprit, or so it seems.

The resolution could represent a happy Gothic adaptation, as I suggest. Although there is a sense in which this ending is yet another speculation on the old mystery, or reproduces earlier speculations. As restoration of the fractured publication of Lindsay’s novel, it is only partial.

⁶¹ See MashableInc., “What the end of ‘Picnic at Hanging Rock’ means, according to the cast and director,” 2020, <https://mashable.com/2018/06/01/amazon-picnic-at-hanging-rock-ending-explained/> (accessed 19 January 2020).

⁶² In the novel, Mrs Appleyard arrived in Australia as a “stately stranger” with letters of introduction and knowing that “looking the part” of an English schoolmistress was “half the battle” (Lindsay, *Picnic*, 3).

This self-haunting of Appleyard, along with the red herrings, the fake ghosts, the Gothic lesbians are packaged in a cinematic discourse that alludes to the disturbance and melancholy of historical and Australian Gothic but in playful parody. This parodic treatment draws attention to the new elements: the sassy, rebellious girls, the assimilated Aboriginal characters, and the dubious colonial authorities. These elements are both instructive of the change in gender and cultural values, and in tune with contemporary perceptions of implicit racism and anti-feminism that was less acute in 1975. The insistence of the chiming clocks in the soundscape exceeds the series in a related sense that alludes to the passing of time before the Picnic became Post-millennial, if only for those who remember and revere its nascence as a landmark in the Australian Cinema Revival.

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Conclusion: Time, Homage and Parody

Over the years, there have been various attempts to problematise the Cinema Revival as a nationalist construct.⁶³ In a way, the remaking of the Revival films is an industry-based reframing of the past. Between the homage to, and the parody of, the earlier films is a space for a certain rejoicing about those years of the Revival in which the prototypes appeared, while also providing new ways of seeing the events of the old films, and the moment of their appearance.

The idea of happy Gothic can assist in the interpretation of *Storm Boy* (2019) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2018), and the spectre of the Cinema Revival that they represent. In particular, this is insofar as the reception of both productions has referred almost without exception to the genesis of the productions as remakes of the original films. Both films derived their power from the melancholic Gothic folklore of the Australian bush and became works of

⁶³ See, for instance, Olivia Khoo, Belinda Smaill and Audrey Yue, *Transnational Australian Cinema: Ethics in Asian Diasporas* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015); Ryan and Goldsmith, "Introduction", 5.

national myth that are now offered in post-Millennial discourses of transnational Gothic. Where *Storm Boy* is retold with an eye to the generational passage of its audience, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* receives a freshening makeover that readily sits with the taste for Gothic in transnational young adult fiction. If “happy” can be applied directly, this sentiment is suggested in the optimistic extension of *Storm Boy* into the climate politics of the present, and the pro-feminist retelling of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and the sense of resolution to the tale. Albeit, the pedagogy of the conservation polemic in *Storm Boy* (2019) seems to overlook the ownership of the land by First Nations people, and the resolution of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is hardly joyous in that the missing girls neither survive nor are found, and the ending is ambiguous.

The ambiguities and omissions suggest how post-millennial Gothic may continue or repudiate earlier discourses, or do both, as Spooner suggests.⁶⁴ But, as noted earlier, she offers a rationale for examining what Gothic “is” in order to discover “what it does”. This question is well asked of the remakes of *Storm Boy* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in that the primary revision in common is in highlighting the heroism of young women. This is amplified by the revisions to both narratives that involve the adult protagonists remembering themselves as children – Mrs Appleyard, *Storm Boy* (Mike) and, in referring to his “Dad”, Fingerbone Bill. In Mrs Appleyard’s dream-hauntings by her younger self and the framing of Fingerbone Bill in the memories of the past, these characters also become ‘lost children’ in the updated tales – Bill in his omission from the fictional present, and Mrs Appleyard in her reduction to a tragic orphan embellished from the hint of the mysterious school principal in Lindsay’s novel. In this sense, these productions pay homage to and parody the quasi-folkloric figure of the ‘lost child’ itself.

⁶⁴ Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic*, 7.

By disrupting the residual Victorian pathos of this figure, and that of the child as a distilled emblem of the nostalgic discourse of childhood, these productions index changing perspectives on historical national cinema and its appeal in the present. In revisiting the Australian “back catalogue” in a renewed Gothic mode, they assert the currency of these works and the adaptable and hence negotiable myths contained within the old stories they tell.