

Like a Lot of Ants

by Molly Kruse

Molly Kruse is a Journalism major from Pantego, TX who wrote this essay in the "Modern Monsters" course taught by David Long.

Along with panic surrounding an oil embargo and a growing mistrust of government, a heightened awareness of environmental issues characterized 1970s America. Ushered in with the inaugural celebration of Earth Day, the decade went on to see a dramatic increase in environmental activism and legislation. America—as well as countries worldwide—did an about-face from the disregard toward the natural world of previous decades; however, the sudden cultural absorption with protecting and preserving nature went hand in hand with deep misgivings about nature's deterioration. In *The American Disaster Film of the Seventies*, Lee Anderson christens this feeling of foreboding "Doomsday Anxiety" (175). Anderson points out that the topics of the decade's best-selling books indicate "a seventies readership that was decidedly fascinated with the prospect of impending Armageddon," citing potentially apocalyptic events like melting polar ice caps, disappearing oceans, and the destruction of the ozone layer (175). This perception colored not only the literature of the era but also birthed new genres of horror and disaster films, many of which involve a man-made structure pitted against the ravages of nature (*The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Earthquake* (1974), and *The Towering Inferno* (1974), for example) or survival in a post-apocalyptic

wasteland where nature had been transgressed (such as *Soylent Green* (1973)). In American films such as *Earthquake* and *The Poseidon Adventure*, natural disasters such as seismic activity and giant waves swiftly strip humans of their defenses and infrastructure, leaving them struggling to stay alive. Alternately, in the world of *Soylent Green*, the disaster has already happened: humans have ruined the environment, turning it into a barren stretch of defunct automobiles and yellow smog. However, transgression against nature is still central to the film's horrific plot. It is also not uncommon for only a handful of main characters to survive a 1970s disaster film, and often such survivors are emotionally traumatized by the events



Lost (1886) by Frederick McCubbin. Director Peter Weir cited the work of Australian impressionists like McCubbin as a major influence on the visual style of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

they've outlived. The underlying fear behind such disaster films seemed to be that nature will repay the egregious errors humans had made in decades past – or, as Anderson puts it, "the primeval fear that the earth and heaven will destroy us all" (177). The tone of these films indicates a shift in belief, particularly in America, as nature went from being regarded a force that could be used and controlled to being viewed as an exhaustible resource that, when trifled with, became unpredictable and often perilous – as if nature were suddenly alive with supernatural terrors and avenging itself on profligate man.

In no disaster film does the natural melt as hauntingly into the supernatural as in Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Released in 1975 in Australia and 1979 in the U.S. to box office success, the film is set in the Australian state of Victoria in 1900 and traces the events of a fateful Valentine's Day picnic taken by a group of schoolgirls at a famous geological formation in the area. Four of the girls – Miranda, Irma, Edith, and Marion – explicitly go against the headmistress's orders and venture away from the base of the Rock to explore it. Three of them vanish into the rock with no given explanation, and only Edith returns, screaming and in a state of shock. Miss McCraw, the mathematics mistress who goes looking for the girls, is also lost to the Rock. Eventually Irma is found, but despite concerted efforts by the local community, the other two girls and their mistress are never seen again. Their disappearance damages the reputation of the school, Appleyard College, and creates an atmosphere of chaos in the school (local) community (*Picnic*). Deliberately vague and otherworldly, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is unlike American disaster films of the time that feature nature as an antagonist, in that, while the rock is "natural," the mysterious disappearance of the schoolgirls is anything but. In Weir's hands, a seemingly benign mass of volcanic rock is transformed into a mysterious, almost supernatural force with the power to destroy. The

Rock – and the aura of mystery and danger surrounding it – becomes almost like another character as it unravels the lives of the story's human protagonists, effectively obliterating their control over themselves and their destinies. However, the cause of nature's deviance in the film still seems to be man's violation of it; in turn, nature renders him helpless and divests him of all semblance of control – a pattern similar to that of many 1970s American disaster films. Even though *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is set in Australia in the early 20th century, this motif of nature as both victim and antagonist stretches across borders to tap into the underlying fears of 1970s American experience: that humankind was unable to exist alongside nature without harming it; that nature had become threatening and chaotic in return; and that nature would slowly undermine civilized life, rendering humanity helpless.

The American Environmental Movement

In the first half of the 20th century, America's relationship with the environment was largely exploitative and irresponsible. Christine M. Whitney explains that the economic growth that followed the Second World War led to "the mass consumption of everything from energy and detergents to plastics and pesticides." According to Whitney, the environmental impact of this mass consumption was not immediately apparent to Americans, resulting in their continued careless treatment of the natural world with relatively few qualms. But several events in the 1960s and 1970s led to a shift in public perception of environmental issues. An oil well blowout in 1969 caused a massive oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel that "coated beaches in a blanket of crude" and sealed the fates of countless nearby birds (Stewart, et al. 7). Later in the same year, Ohio's Cuyahoga River, badly polluted and clogged with garbage, burst into flames, sending "a burning slick of kerosene and oil [floating] downstream through the city of Cleveland" (Ibid.). DDT, a notorious pesticide and

one of the main subjects of Rachel Carson's then-recent book *Silent Spring*, was banned in 1972, after the pesticide was linked to eggshell-thinning that endangered eagles and other bird species (Gordon).

The repercussions for both people and animals of human abuse of the natural world served in many ways as a wake up-call to Americans that triggered an enormous response. In July of 1970, just a few months after the first Earth Day, the Environmental Protection Agency was established by President Richard Nixon "to consolidate and strengthen federal environment programs" (Stewart, et al. 8). In the years that followed, several major environmental bills were passed to protect wildlife, including the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Legislation was also put in place to ensure clean air and water by preventing further hazards caused by pollution. But despite huge advances in environmental activism, concerns remained around such issues as overpopulation – "the environmental damage that would inevitably result from a population too large for Earth to support" – and the links between technological progress and pollution (Whitney par. 10-11). For perhaps the first time in history, people began to believe that their very existence was inherently harmful to nature.

The Australian Environmental Movement

Although its timeline differed in each country, environmentalism in Australia followed a similar trajectory to that of America, as gross misuse and abuse of natural resources prior to the mid-20th century gave way to national interest in conservation or protection by the 1970s. Just as Americans often treated nature as a commodity prior to the 1970s (and arguably continue to do so today) – altering the landscape, using pesticides to support unsustainable farming practices, and irresponsibly mining precious substances – European newcomers to Australia in the 1800s and early 1900s were intrigued by, but not

necessarily respectful of, their exotic surroundings. Steven White notes that "Australian animals were represented in Britain as extraordinary, unusual, challenging and deserving of considerable sympathetic curiosity"; this curiosity endangered creatures in the colonies themselves for myriad reasons. For example, native wildlife was both hunted for food and trapped and shipped off to Europe as a curiosity. Penny Olsen, an Australian ornithologist and author, writes that "animals were a source of income; they were sold to the live animal trade and taxidermists, to museums and collectors, and as souvenirs and decorations" (qtd. in White). This commodification of nature is evident from the first few minutes of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. A glimpse at the interior of Appleyard College provides an abundance of examples of nature on display: there are collections of shells, potted plants, feathers, some sort of vertebra in a box, and a caged, tropical bird in the room where Sara is supposed to be memorizing a poem. The wallpaper and carpeting of the girls' school are laden with floral motifs. In fact, displays of nature in indoor spaces are almost unnervingly excessive in the film, such that the taming and encasing of natural objects seems to border on obsession.

Besides putting nature on exhibition, Europeans (the British in particular) forced the land in Australia to conform to their conceptions of what nature should look like. To foreigners pining for their motherland, Australia's wildlife was not an especially welcoming sight: "the countryside, to European eyes, could be barren, monotonous, unreadable and truly wild; lacking the familiar sights and sounds of Britain, homesickness was ever-present" (White). This homesickness led the British to attempt to recreate Australia in England's image. Vast swaths of indigenous trees and undergrowth were cleared to make room for pasture land, destroying the homes of inhabiting animals. "Grazing marsupials," wombats, bilbies, and "various avian and mammalian carnivores," among others,

posed a threat to British attempts to civilize their new environment, and were treated with distaste at best, eradicated at worst (Franklin qtd. in White). The British in the film attempt to surround themselves with remnants of home: copious amounts of non-native flowers, such as roses and carnations, appear in vases in every room in the girls' school, and lush, groomed lawns are prevalent at the estates pictured in the film. Similarly, Americans altered their country's landscape to their liking, often in a way detrimental to the environment: for example, the modern American lawn originated with the European aristocracy, whose lawns were originally status symbols to show that the landowner was affluent and did not need to farm all his land. The lawn made its way into American culture, and by the 1950s a lush, green lawn was the suburbanite dream. But the maintenance of these decadent swaths of grass required the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and liberal amounts of water—all to maintain a miniature environment that did nothing to support, feed, or provide a home for wildlife.

Both acclimatization societies created to bring in exotic wildlife and farmers also quickly introduced foreign species—from English songbirds to game such as rabbits and foxes to livestock such as pigs and cattle—into the wilds of Australia (White). Animals also entered Australia by accidentally escaping the fleets of ships sent to colonize the land. Many of the animals introduced grew invasive—some escaped, became feral, and spread diseases to native wildlife. The most striking example in the film of a non-native animal is the recurring white swan—a bird that functions as an icon for Miranda. Both the swan and the girl represent a foreign presence in Australia: Miranda says she comes from a station, an often-commercial Australian sheep or cattle farm, in Queensland, and the white swan is one of the non-native species introduced in the previous century by British colonists. British colonists also favored

plants native to their homeland to the unfamiliar flora of Australia. Plants native to Europe, like gorse, blackberries, and willows, are now listed as Weeds of National Significance by the Australian government ("Measuring"). American history is also rife with the introduction of non-native flora and fauna: the starlings that now loudly swarm North America were imported from England in 1890 in a tribute to Shakespeare that quickly got out of hand, and the rat-like, rapidly breeding nutria were brought into the U.S. for their fur. Now both species, along with many others, interfere with native wildlife and ecosystems.

However, just as Britain's exploitation and control of nature in Australia mirrors the destructive patterns that Europeans settlers introduced into the U.S., so does its eventual shift to conservation and protection. At the time Weir filmed *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in Australia, attitudes toward the disruption of native ecosystems had changed. White points out that "the legal protection of native wild animals... was further enhanced when the Commonwealth began playing a significant regulatory role, especially from the 1970s," a role that included treaties to safeguard native flora and fauna. The similar path that both countries followed from a place of environmental disregard to one of awareness probably led to common cultural anxieties about the impact of their actions on the natural world, which accounts for the film's commercial success and resonance with both Australian and American audiences—audiences with a shared history of abusing natural ecosystems, and a growing recognition of the consequences.

Humans Harm Nature

Sara's predicament in particular serves as a small-scale model of a prominent pattern in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*: humankind's inability to coexist with nature, exhibited again and again in the attitudes of the film's characters. When, during a conversation with her schoolmates that takes

place on the Rock, Irma prophetically proclaims that Sara is doomed, she compares her to a deer that her father brought home for her once: "I looked after it, but it died. Mama always said it was doomed." Similar to the weak and helpless deer, Sara is a poor orphan sent to the girls' school by an unnamed patron and forced to adopt the patterns and rules of civilized society. At one point in the film she confesses that she once dreamed of being a circus rider, a wild fantasy that she'd have small chance of realizing in Appleyard College's formal environment. Throughout the film, Sara appears out of place and deeply uncomfortable in her surroundings. Mrs. Appleyard makes repeated attempts to "tame" her, such as forbidding her to journey to the Rock, forcing her to memorize a poem, and strapping her to the wall to straighten her back. At the end of the movie, Sara is found dead after she jumps – or is thrown – out of her bedroom window and falls through the roof of the greenhouse. Although the ambiguity of Irma's story asks the question whether the deer was already fated to die or human care brought about its passing (as Mrs. Appleyard's persecution arguably contributes to Sara's demise), it is evident in both Sara's and the deer's cases that human intervention with nature – even attempts to cure it or make it more pleasing – ultimately does more harm than good in the film.

This incompatibility between humans and nature is evident from when the girls commence their journey to Hanging Rock by scattering hothouse flowers across the steps of the schoolyard. In an arid Australian climate, these flowers would likely have been cultivated in a greenhouse. The carelessly-disposed flowers are symbols of Britain's extravagant waste of Australia's natural resources, indicative of its consumeristic attitude toward nature. The lawns surrounding Appleyard College and the Fitzhubert estate also reflect this view toward the environment, as they are wasteful on multiple fronts. They are, for instance, a prime example of

cleared land that once might have housed native wildlife. Although Australia does count grasslands among its ecosystems, they consist of taller, native grasses that, unlike the short, probably imported turf of a mansion's front lawn, provide hiding places and homes for small animals, insects, and birds. In contrast, the turfgrasses used for aristocratic front lawns in the film are kept mown close to the ground and do not parallel any natural ecosystem. They would also likely require more water and care than hardy native grasses – water that would be a scarce commodity in the bush.

Michael Fitzhubert, a local aristocrat present at Hanging Rock the day the girls disappear, undertakes a solo journey to the Rock in search of the missing girls. In her thesis about the book *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which applies in many ways to the movie as well, Lindsay G. Pettee notes that Michael is a perfect example of the British colonist, a foreign transplant "too far removed from Australia to ever completely assimilate" (78). Unlike Albert, the stable boy with whom he sometimes keeps company, Michael seems distinctly uncomfortable outside the sphere of civilization. The realm of the wild and natural – be it in the form of the uncontrolled natural environment or in the manifestation of sexuality and sexual urges – puts Michael ill at ease. Michael also comes from an aristocratic family with distinctly British accents; it is the kind of family that has the means to recreate their motherland in the wilds of Australia rather than needing to adapt to the natural patterns of the bush. During his quest to rescue the missing schoolgirls, he scrambles awkwardly up the slopes of the Rock in tight trousers and riding boots, sticking white papers to bushes and trees. Michael is no Aboriginal tracker, but his paper trail eventually helps rescuers find both him and Irma after he collapses on the Rock. However, it is still a trail of waste. The image of bleached paper skewered by gnarly, prickly twigs and branches is a stark juxtaposition of British cultivation and the

wild Australian environment—two things that, both historically and in the film, seem unable to exist side by side without harm to the native environment.

Although Wainwright believes that the girls' actions in the film are "hardly reasons for earth's intrusion or revenge," *Picnic at Hanging Rock* provides manifold examples of the cavalier misuse of natural resources to a modern environmentalist (121). The attitude of the characters toward nature echoes that of both early American and early Australian history—that it primarily existed for human use and consumption, however irresponsible. When Irma says that the Rock has been "waiting a million years... just for us," she is unconsciously echoing the greedy assumption made by European and other colonists to both the U.S. and Australia spanning two separate time periods: that nature exists solely for man's benefit and personal gain.

Nature Becomes Violent

Michael is not the only character that appears ill at ease in the natural world; many of the characters seem at odds with the rugged environment of the Australian bush. The elder Fitzhuberts prefer not to venture beyond their small table when they lunch in the woods, and it is apparent by the excitement with which the announcement of the picnic is met that the members of the girls' school are seldom allowed to venture into the wild. This aversion to nature could stem from an underlying fear of its perceived violence and omnipotence. The doctor repeatedly testifies to various apprehensive inquirers that Edith and Irma, though shell-shocked, are "quite intact" when they return from the Rock, meaning that they haven't been sexually assaulted. Pettee posits that "the British essentially gained ownership over the land through the exertion of force in what could be interpreted as the metaphorical 'rape' of the Australian motherland," and that subsequent fears of the girls' molestation seem to "radiate

from the natural environment" (84). It is otherwise difficult to explain why the immediate assumption would be that molestation was involved in a disappearance that took place in such an isolated area, when there are many more plausible explanations. And the Rock is not only detrimental to the helpless schoolgirls—it also proves a formidable opponent to Michael, leaving him speechless and dehydrated when he attempts to traverse it alone. The theme of nature as an inherently hostile force surfaces, and this hostility can be interpreted as direct result of mistreatment exacted by human hands.

It's hardly coincidental that both the characters' word choices and the poems they favor directly reflect the friction between humans and nature in the world of *Hanging Rock*, and depict nature in a violent light. Miss McCraw describes the formation of *Hanging Rock* itself in very violent terms: "Siliceous lava forced up from deep down below. Soda trachytes extruded in a highly viscous state, building the steep-sided mountains we see in *Hanging Rock*" (11:50).

The fragment of a poem recited during the film's opening shots—"All that we see or seem/ Is but a dream within a dream"—is from "A Dream Within a Dream" by Edgar Allan Poe, a poem containing themes about man's helplessness and insignificance in the face of some powerful, cruel force—a force that is personified as nature with such phrases as "pitiless wave" and the "... roar/ of a surf-tormented shore." At another point in the film, Mrs. Appleyard forces Sara to memorize "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (although apparently the headmistress confuses it with another poem by Felicia Hemans), a poem that details a ship's demise in a hurricane. Rhetoric that depicts nature as malevolent is woven throughout the film, and all points back to *Hanging Rock* itself. The Rock is scorchingly hot and bright and contains nooks and holes that could easily house dangerous creatures. It is a wild and ancient space that, once invaded by humans, retaliates by

dooming them to disappearance, loss of consciousness, or, in some cases, death. Environmental rhetoric in the '70s also often had a panicked and threatening ring to it. For example, *PBS.org* has collected desperate-sounding advertisements of the era such as one that read: "It can be the beginning of the end of pollution. Or the beginning of the end" ("Timeline").

In the storyline of the film, the bush in its natural state is an inherently dangerous, alien force, compared to the tamed, civilized plants and animals found at Appleyard College and the Fitzhubert estate. Although in the greenhouse at Appleyard, even the scene featuring a touch-responsive fern elicits a mixed reaction of awe and disgust from a servant, the Australian bush contains far more unnerving specimens of nature. In contrast to the domestic ducks on the front lawns of Appleyard College, the land around Hanging Rock is home to "reptiles and other animals entirely strange to the school's imported, civil world...one of them an out-of-proportion and frog-like creature with mouth agape" ("Current" 122). Before the girls set out for Hanging Rock, Mrs. Appleyard reminds them to beware of venomous snakes and poisonous ants, a sentiment that Michael's aunt echoes later on. Other hazards on the Rock include prickly bushes that scratch Edith's legs as she flees the scene of her schoolmates' disappearance, and intense waves of heat that ripple the air above. Hanging Rock is neither safe nor domesticated; even its name suggests a looming peril that threatens to overshadow the order of civilization with the chaos of the wilderness. Besides the obvious hazards presented by the wildlife that inhabits the Rock and by the intense exposure to natural elements a journey to the Rock entails, there is the inexplicable danger of complete disappearance—a sort of abduction by the Rock. This is no "pet rock" of the '70s; it instead represents a facet of nature that proves hostile to civilized life and impossible to tame.

The Collapse of Human Control

Besides its mysterious role in the disappearances of Miranda, Irma, and Miss McCraw, Hanging Rock has a more far-reaching and subtle influence that extends to the inhabitants of Appleyard College. The film presents what Gary A. By describes as "an obsessive perception of how fragile civilized defenses may be against the forces of nature or the unknown"—and this is not only the case with physical defenses, but also with mental ones (B3). Appleyard is initially depicted as a fortress where "all nature bends to the boundaries of the College, as to Mrs.

Appleyard's corseted will" (Wainwright 121). Even the name suggests an apple orchard, a space in which nature is confined and domesticated for human consumption. Mrs. Appleyard holds sway over servants, schoolmistresses, and students; for example, she rings for servants at all hours of the night, forbids Miss Lumley to accompany the others to the Rock, and straps Sara to a wall to "cure her terrible stooping." But following the fateful encounter with the Rock, the potency of Mrs. Appleyard's control—and of human control in general—begins to deteriorate.

Although the Appleyard girls are forced to wear multiple layers of clothing on their excursion—including corsets, petticoats, stockings, gloves, and boots—the girls who climb the Rock shed more and more clothes the further they go. Shoes and stockings are slipped off, along with all pretense of civilized restraint. When Irma is found, she is inexplicably lacking her corset. Edith reports that she spotted Miss McCraw running up the Rock without a skirt, something she considers so shameful that she can't bring herself to voice it aloud to the policeman and must instead whisper it in a school mistress's ear. Pettee points out that the women of Appleyard "retaining their traditional dress and etiquette also helps uphold reason and order in the untamed, irrational setting" (73); although Pettee believes that the mysterious power to disrobe that the Rock exerts is an indication of the "numinous taking over the rational space" (74), it also seems

indicative of a more direct undoing of human control by processes more ordinary than the supernatural. The girls' shedding of various garments in these scenes can be seen as a regression—an attempt at a back-to-nature approach that costs them the fragile barriers they have erected between themselves and the natural world.

The sexual undertones in these scenes are inescapable, and prove yet another facet of lost control. Victorian propriety in the film is the backbone of civilized society: the girls are segregated from interaction with males in an almost convent-like environment, the possibility of rape or a schoolmistress walking around without her skirt is only spoken of in hushed tones and euphemisms, and Michael is noticeably uncomfortable when Albert comments on Miranda's body. The journey into the Rock can be viewed as a journey into sexual liberation, as noted by many critics—it is an adventure that is at once sensuous, dangerous, and forbidden. The girls discarding their clothes can also be seen in this light as an act of embracing female sexuality, but this seeming act of emancipation is short-lived and chaos-inducing. While Edith's distaste for the Rock and its carnal call of the wild is rewarded—she not only escapes with her life but is accepted back into the society of the girls' school without the negative reception that Irma later receives—the girls that choose to answer the call are lost to the rock. As far as loss of control, sexuality and passion are seemingly punished in the film, or at least portrayed as inherently hazardous forces. In this way, the spirit of sexual liberation, which was also a hallmark of the '70s, is linked to the danger and chaos of the natural environment—something that, when trifled with, threatens to trample rationality and civilized restraint. Such undertones probably resonated with those in a '70s audience who were tense about the changing sexual climate.

Technological systems—especially those used to measure time—also collapse slowly during

and after the encounter with Hanging Rock. Punctuality and attention to time are extremely important to Mrs. Appleyard: "she clings to the strict predictability of Newtonian time... in an attempt to create a sense of order and control within the infinite and eternal landscape of Australia" (Pettee 91-92). Numerous clocks are present at the girls' school, and the headmistress is firm in her mandate that the picnickers return by 8:00 that evening. However, during the picnic, several watches belonging to members of the party stop at 12:00, with no explanation. Visitors to the Rock seem to lose concept of time: they wander it aimlessly, eventually succumbing to sleep. Edith and Irma both experience acute amnesia that blocks out all memory of their respective encounters with the Rock; in effect, they lose track of the past. Most disturbing of all, the ticking sound of Mrs. Appleyard's grandfather clock stops abruptly in the last shot of the film, when the gardener rushes in to inform her of Sara's death, and it becomes apparent that all order in Appleyard has ceased to exist. Hanging Rock seems capable of distorting human concepts of time, creating chaos in spite of human technology. In a society where punctuality is prized, loss of temporal order translates to loss of social order as well.

People in the film also lose control after the disaster at the Rock, both over each other and over themselves. Mrs. Appleyard's control over Miss Lumley slips when Miss Lumley gives notice shortly after the incident. The headmistress still attempts to take charge of her circumstances—Wainwright posits that Mrs. Appleyard's determination to get rid of Sara is an attempt at restoration of order in the school: "she has fixed on Sara, who has refused to learn her lines by rote, as symbolic of the breakdown of order and the familiar at the College" (123). Upon losing Miranda and being told she must leave Appleyard, Sara quickly descends into a depression that ends in her suicide (or murder by Mrs. Appleyard—either scenario would indicate a

loss of human rationality). When Irma returns to visit her classmates after her miraculous rescue from the Rock, their actions devolve into those of vicious animals as they claw and scream at her. By the end of the film, Mrs. Appleyard has turned to heavy drinking to soothe her anxieties and subsequently loses her usual stiff decorum. In short, “the infrastructure of the rational space begins to crumble and Appleyard College is reduced to chaos” (Petee 73). This deterioration is mirrored almost comically in Mrs. Appleyard’s appearance, as her once-neatly coiffed hair progressively falls into disarray as the film unfolds, showing that even her civilized appearance is no longer under her command.

Despite considerable human effort to detach from the natural world, the chaos of nature seeps slowly into civilization in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Although there is nothing inherently frightening about Hanging Rock itself or even what it does to people (the film’s characters, for the most part, meet far kinder fates than people in classic ‘70s slasher films), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is often categorized as a horror film for good reason. At the time it came out, both in America and in Australia, humans were experiencing a very lack of control over the vast and perilous world they inhabited. The post-World War II insulating bubble that people had created for themselves—a rational space of time-saving technology, sterile suburban lawns, and gas-guzzling cars—burst. Such innovations, heralded by past decades as proof of man’s superiority and dominance over nature, proved incompatible with the environment and led to often-disastrous consequences. As a result, some people went “back to nature”—but living life on nature’s terms meant a certain surrendering of the power and boundaries that had been central to modern, civilized life up to that point.

Although made in Australia, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* successfully captures the apprehensive climate of ‘70s America, as well as its secret phobias—prevailing fears equal parts realistic and otherworldly. The first fear, that

humankind was wreaking havoc on the natural world, had been firmly established by the 1970s, and is still a logical concern today. The second, that nature had ceased to be benevolent and had instead become a threat to civilization, was a mounting anxiety not only 40 years ago, in an era of mass pollution, dirty rivers, and exploding oil wells, but also remains a viable concern today, as climate change creates unexpected new problems for humans. Finally, perhaps the most abstract fear—that nature’s violence would sabotage human progress and development, effectually stripping humanity of its defenses—as come disastrously close to coming true several times within the past few decades, making *Picnic at Hanging Rock* a horrific harbinger of what could happen in the future. In the film, Marion sums up this cultural phobia from her vantage point on the Rock, observing that the humans below simply look “like a lot of ants” from the Rock’s perspective: busy with attempts to build a civilization, but easily crushed in the end.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Lee. *The American Disaster Film of the Seventies*, University of Southern California, Ann Arbor, 1983. Print.
- Bible, *The*. New International Version. 2011. Print.
- By, Gary A. "Victorian 'Picnic.'" *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., March 14, 1979. Web. 20 Dec. 2016.
- "Current Cinema." *The New Yorker*. 23 Apr 1979, vol. 55, Condé Nast. 122. Print.
- Gordon, Erin L. "History of the Modern Environmental Movement in America." *American Center*, Jun 2012. Web. 20 Dec. 2016.
- "Measuring Australia's Progress, 2002." *Australian Bureau of Statistics*. 19 June 2002. Web. 20 Dec. 2016.
- Pettee, Lindsay G. *Terra Australis Incognita: A Geocritical Analysis of Australian Gothic Literature*. ProQuest LLC, 2015. Print.
- Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Directed by Peter Weir, Janus Films, 1979. Film.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "A Dream Within a Dream." *Poetry Foundation*. 15 Nov 2016.
- Reddick, Laura A. P. *Spirit of an Earthly Practice: The Roots of Pagan Religions in America*, California Institute of Integral Studies, Ann Arbor, 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2016.
- Stewart, Doug, Lisa Drew, and Mark Wexler. "Diary of a Century: How Conservation Grew from a Whisper to a Roar." *National Wildlife*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2000. 22-43. Print.
- "Timeline: The Modern Environmental Movement." *PBS.org*. 2013. Web. 20 December 2016.
- Wainwright, J.A. "Desolation Angels—World and Earth in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*." *Antipodes*, Dec 1996, vol. 10, no. 2, 121-123. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. Print.
- White, Steven. "British colonialism, Australian nationalism and the law: hierarchies of wild animal protection." *Monash University Law Review*. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University, Sept. 2013, 452.
- Whitney, Christine M. "Environmental movement." *Pollution Issues*. N.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.