

# How are Film Endings shaped by their socio-historical context? (part II)

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**Abstract (E):** This article explores the aspect of filmic narratology that has been neglected for a long time in cinema and media studies: endings. Richard Neupert's *The End - Narration and Closure in the Cinema* (1995), a rare work on this topic, is examined, and its theory tested on *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), a film that does not easily fit Neupert's framework. This film has raised controversial views about whether it has an open or a closed ending. Trying to shed light on this debate *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is examined a second time by proposing a new model that relates the ending to the context the film was made in.

**Abstract (F):** Cet article analyse un aspect de la narratologie du film qui a été négligé pendant longtemps dans les études spécialisées: les clausules. On analyse d'abord le livre de Richard Neupert, *The End - Narration and Closure in the Cinema* (1995), une des rares études en la matière. On interroge ensuite la théorie de Neupert à la lumière d'un film qui s'accorde mal avec son cadre conceptuel: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975). Ce film a suscité de nombreux débats qui portent sur la nature, ouverte selon les uns, fermée selon les autres, de sa fin. Afin de clarifier ce débat, on propose une nouvelle analyse de la fin de ce film qui rattache la clausule au contexte dans lequel le film a été fait.

**Keywords:** narrative ending, cinema, film, closure, cognitive film theory, total history

## Case Study with alternative approach

As it was shown in the last part, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is an unusual film considering its narrative style and techniques. As Rayner (1995) puts it, 'Peter Weir's films combine attributes of the European arthouse film with generic structures and narratives of Hollywood cinema. The unification of these disparate materials demands a committed and informed act of interpretation by their viewers.' This particular characteristic seems to be the reason why Neupert's framework did not work to classify this film's ending. Therefore, a different strategy will be suggested. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* will be placed in the socio-cultural context it was made in, and it will be analysed how this context shaped its ending. At the same time, this approach will help classifying the ending.

Klinger (1997) asserts that 'the aesthetical or political value of a film is not a matter of its intrinsic characteristics, but of the way those characteristics are deployed by various intertextual and historical forces'. Therefore, she suggests displacing the exploration of meaning and significance from the text to the context, in historically synchronic and diachronic terms. For the purpose of this paper the diachronic approach can be bracketed since a synchronic analysis of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) sufficiently illustrates the argument.

The historical conditions of existence for the film at the moment of its production will be reconstructed. Moreover, contextual aspects will be examined in order to understand how they helped shape the film's social meanings and public reception regarding its narrative end.

It is essential to make clear that the following interpretation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock's* ending, based on the analysis of the context, is not supposed to be from one specific individual's point of view. It rather depicts how social factors encourage viewers to assume standpoints, offering us a variety of possible influences on spectatorship without securing an embodied spectator (Klinger, 1997). In these terms, it refers to the general point of view of the Australian audience in 1975.

As in the previous part the analysis will be divided into *story* and *discourse*. It will be argued that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* has an *open story end* and a *closed discourse end* in the respective context. In each section different aspects, such as cinematic practices, political situation and historical determinants, will be outlined and linked to this specific reading of the ending.

## **The Ending of *Picnic at Hanging Rock***

### **PREDETERMINING ASPECTS**

It is arguable that the open story end of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a symptom of the desire of Australian people to establish a new Australian cinema with a distinctive, national identity in 1975. At that time this desire was a direct result of two main causes: the desolate state and quality of the Australian film industry, as well as a vital Government shift in 1972.

Thompson (1999) explains that, similar to other national cinemas, the shape of Australian cinema was partly defined by the impact of and competition caused by the North American film production and distribution industry. Interestingly, as McFarlane and Mayer (1992) point out, the appealing classical narrative paradigm and the melodramatic tradition of North American cinema are not only unique to Hollywood. The Australian film industry evolved from the same aesthetic norm that dominated literature and theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This might be a major reason for the success and dominance of Hollywood films in Australia prior to the revival of its national cinema. Therefore, earlier attempts of Australian filmmakers to swerve away from the prevailing tradition failed with local exhibitors, as well as distributors (Whitlam, 1994).

Also, as O'Regan (1996) mentions, the lack of budgets was an obstacle for Australian filmmaker's attempts to compete with the dominance of Hollywood. Rayner (2000) and O'Regan point out that vulgar and uncultured 'Ocker' and sex comedies were the only commercially successful Australian products on local markets, however, they achieved neither critical regard nor public approval.

After almost 20 years and the comfortable inactivity of the Liberal Government, led by Sir Robert Menzies, the left-wing Labour government of Gough Whitlam swept to power (Murray, 1994). The arts-loving Prime Minister Whitlam was of the opinion that Australia should eliminate the last traces of British colonialism. He started to invest money into art and media in order to initiate a renaissance of 'Great Australian Art' (Adams, 1994). The young generation of filmmakers saw their chance to rebel against influences and values from the United States and to come to terms with the country's roots. According to Murray (1994), the period films, starting in 1975 with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* were the first films to follow this development. McFarlane and Mayer (1992) argue that in the 1970s an Australian film industry could hardly have existed without the involvement of the federal and state bodies set up and backed by the Labour government, such as the South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC) and the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC), both of which provided the main funding for *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Shiach, 1993).

## **STORY**

Critiques and theorists, such as Monaco (1995) and Shiach (1993) point out that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was the first commercially successful film of the new Australian Cinema. This is due to its use of classical, modern and local elements, combined in a highly meaningful, almost political way.

According to O'Regan (1996) there are two strategies of a national cinema to counter Hollywood competition. It can complement the pre-dominating style and story by including local issues, such as history, myths and social events, or it can take an avantgardistic oppositional approach to Hollywood style. Eventually, it can do both, which the period films, starting with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, did. The film used direct contradictions of Hollywood form, style and narrative. However, it also drew intensely upon local myths, Australian history and current social issues. Both strategies appear to encourage the reading of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as an open story film.

McFarlane and Mayer (1992) state that *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and subsequent films used elements and structures of Classical Hollywood melodrama, such as the process of

narration, the visual style, character-centred stories and three act structures. However, as he continues, at the same time they tried to signal their difference through causal gaps and muted climaxes. This approach was influenced by the European arthouse films (Neorealism, New Wave) of the 1960s. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* deliberately introduces a range of classical techniques in order to contradict them at the end. Milne (1976) makes clear that the story resembles melodrama in terms of its structure and characters. Still, the ending challenges the categorisation of the film as classical melodrama.

For instance, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* uses causal story lines and a conventional three-act structure. The girls are introduced and vanish in the first act. The second act deals with the search for them. There is even a turning point, when one of the girls is found, which encourages the viewer expectation for a resolution of the mystery. However, there is no third act, in which the viewer learns what happened to the girls. The end merely offers a conclusion ('the girls were never found again'), but no resolution. Thus, the story has an open end. Richter (1974) argues that a story is open if the story asks for a closure, but the end is left open. This is the case with *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. A mystery is established, it is thoroughly investigated but not solved (Craven, 1976).

According to McFarlane and Mayer (1992), Weir changed the original ending. The original ending with Mrs. Appleyard climbing the Rock and committing suicide, as depicted in the novel (Lindsay, 1970), was filmed but later replaced by a flashback of the girls at the base of the rock before their disappearance. Apparently the director did this to shift away from the conventions of a 'mystery thriller' and an expected closure. However, this move had a contradictory effect for the story. Since the last third of the film dealt rather with the investigation and consequences of the disappearance, than with the disappearance itself (Shiach, 1993), this flashback reminds the audience directly of the mystery and the avoidance of a solution.

Another example is the subversion of narrative cues. Bordwell (1985) asserts that in Hollywood films causal lines are established by narrative devices, motifs or clues, which are introduced and referenced to or solved later on. This way of foreshadowing and repetition serves the constant hypothesis-making and avoids subsequent unsatisfying surprises. Milne (1976) claims that Peter Weir introduces clues and hints for a solution in

order to compensate the lack of explanation for the disappearance. Yet, as McFarlane and Mayer (1992) point out, the clues and hints throughout the film build up expectations about a solution, which are deliberately not satisfied at the end. The pink cloud seen on the rock, the missing corsets of the girls and the clocks that stopped for no reason on the rock are examples for these narrative clues that are never either explained or investigated, which reinforces the open story end.

Rayner (2000) argues that the period drama and literary adaptation, starting with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in 1975, came to define the Australian cinema abroad. The filmic portrayal of Australia's past (and present) history emphasised the desire to depict the country's cultural heritage. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock* this was represented as having British roots but including the treatment of the Australian landscape as a national determinant. Adapting a popular Australian novel that dealt with landscape and Australian myths (Gibson, 1994), as well as the British establishment was an important strategy of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* regarding the political situation in Australia in 1975.

Messias (1995) refers to the binary oppositional systems that underline the theme of the colonised past: dark, brown-coloured interiors in the repressive college / bright, green-coloured exteriors at the Rock; Miranda, the graceful and wise Australian schoolgirl that vanishes / Mrs. Appleyard, the decadent British headmistress who commits suicide; Albert, the impulsive Australian coachman / Michael, the stiff British aristocrat; the elegiac 5<sup>th</sup> piano concerto of Beethoven / Zamfir's cheerful pan-pipe music. Peter Weir uses *mise-en-scène* to portray the Hanging Rock as a living entity and to convey a duality of attractiveness and fascination, but at the same time mystery and menace (O'Regan 1996). He constantly shows close-ups of animals and insects on the rock, the schoolgirls are filmed from inside caves suggesting they are observed by the rock, the sound of howling wind is overlaid over the images making the rock breathe and face-like formations on the rock are shown in close-up.

Thus, as Shiach (1993) makes clear, the story establishes a clash between Australian culture (represented by the mystical landscape) and British culture (represented by the decadent aristocrats and incapable authorities). As Jonathan Rayner points out:

The symbolic nature of the rock versus the college pairing, and the caricatured portraits

of the English aristocracy, middle-class schoolmistress and lower-class Australians which the film contains, it can be seen that the imposition of foreign (British) institutions upon the Australian natural and social landscape is unwise and unwanted . (Rayner, 2000, p. 68)

He further explains that after the contact with the menacing Australian landscape the vulnerability of the British establishment is emphasised. Thus, in metaphorical terms, the open story end (i.e. the unsolved mystery) defies the previously unshakable regulatory order of Victorian society, which, as Murray (1994) concludes, clearly reflects the political situation in Australia in 1975.

Last but not least, director Peter Weir and the themes of his early films have to be considered. Without touching the debate of Auteurism, the fact that Weir is a writer-director (Shiach, 1993) is an important point, especially in terms of his first three feature films that contributed to the revival of Australian cinema: *The Cars that ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Last Wave* (1977). *The Cars that ate Paris* and *The Last Wave* were both based on stories by Weir himself, and he agreed to make *Picnic at Hanging Rock* since he greatly admired Joan Lindsay's novel. The negative portrayal of establishment authority, the 'gothic' treatment of nature as threatening (Rayner, 2000) and especially the open story ends (McFarlane and Mayer, 1992) are significant common features of these Weir films. Apart from the obvious contextual political motivation, the avoidance of a secure closure seems to be a recurrent attribute in all Weir films (Shiach, 1993). As Weir himself states:

Personally, I always found it [the open end] the most satisfying and fascinating aspect of the film. I usually find endings disappointing: they're totally unnatural. You are creating life on the screen, and life doesn't have endings. It's always moving on to something else and there are always unexplained elements. (cited in Dawson, 1976, p.83)

## **DISCOURSE**

McFarlane and Mayer (1992) assert that the independence of the Australian cinema from mainstream Hollywood cinema is not that apparent, since Australian films bear the same

process of narration and the same visual style. Indeed the discourse of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, seems to fit into Bordwell's characterisations of the style and plot in Hollywood films: the discourse is almost invisible, does not attract attention to itself and serves the story and characters (Bordwell, 1985), as opposed to Godard's *Weekend*, for example.

McFarlane and Mayer (1992) further state that a key aspect of Hollywood films is the use of mise-en-scène to build knowledge of plot or character. From Shiach's (1993), McFarlane and Mayer's (1992) and Bruzzi's (1997) accounts on *Picnic at Hanging Rock* it is apparent that the movie relies heavily on mise-en-scène to tell the story or to express character traits and themes that were discussed in this and the previous part: The symbolism of the clothes characterising the girls, the shots on the rock representing it as a living entity, the swan and the Venus of Boticelli symbolising Miranda, the juxtaposition of liberating nature and oppressive college and the corset as a repressive metaphor which is deliberately removed by the girls before they disappear are a few examples for the discourse serving the story.

Rayner (2000) states that the Australian period films could not be described as strictly non-commercial in their approach. The huge box office success of films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which secured further productions (Murray, 1994), is a case in point. Thus, the period films seem to have unified the artistic and commercial poles at that time by assimilating arthouse cinema with classical cinema features (McFarlane and Mayer, 1992). O'Regan (1996) suggests that this fusion of art and mass entertainment might explain *Picnic at Hanging Rock's* broad success, nationally and internationally.

In general terms the open story can be attributed to the artistic aspects and the closed discourse to the mainstream aspects of the film. Also, it should not be forgotten that Hollywood films were still appealing and intelligible to Australian mass audiences, and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was supposed to establish a national identity in Australian cinema that would reach the broad middle-class audience (McFarlane and Mayer, 1992), not only the educated minority. In this respect it could be said that the open story is somewhat compensated, or made acceptable, by a closed discourse. The closure of the discourse is achieved by several stylistic devices, which were examined by Neupert in part one.

Firstly, there is a multiple bracketing. As mentioned earlier Weir changed the original ending, which shows the headmistress Mrs. Appleyard climbing the rock and dying at its base. According to McFarlane and Mayer (1992), Weir substituted this ending with a flashback of the girls picnicking shortly before their disappearance because 'it did not have any money in it'. Thus, the end in the final cut mirrors the opening scenes with the girls. Furthermore, the first and last shot showing Miranda, the dominant character of the movie, represents an additional bracketing. This decision of Weir is clear evidence that the story would have been too open if finished in the previous way.

Bellour (1976) states that Classical Hollywood film endings often reflect the beginnings in order to stress the final resolution of the narrative and smoothly finish the film experience. This final flashback offers no resolution and opens up the story, contradicting Hollywood story conventions, as mentioned earlier. However, on a discursive level it smoothly closes the diegesis by bracketing and indicates the closed end of the film experience. Hence, this ending reinforces the openness of the story, but at the same time it lessens it by closing the discourse.

Another bracketing takes place when the non-diegetic voice over at the end states that the girls were never found, which mirrors the non-diegetic caption at the beginning conveying the same information.

Secondly, the discourse is closed by a break of the diegesis before the flashback: the shot of the headmistress looking to the audience disrupts the diegetic world, which ends the film experience of the spectator and closes the discourse.

A third discursive closure device is the music. In their psycho-musicological study Thompson et al. (1994) demonstrate that musical underscoring in films influences the viewer's judgements of closure. According to their empirical study, a tonally closed piece of music discourages expectations of continuation and reinforces closure, independently from the visual information. In *Picnic at Hanging Rock* underscoring the final flashback and the end credits with the tonally closed *Adagio* of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> piano concerto appears to close the discourse and is a further clue for the attempt of the filmmakers to compensate the openness of the story.

*Picnic at Hanging Rock's* commercial and political success, both nationally and internationally, was based on its diverse style and story. It couples mainstream with arthouse techniques, it establishes a new cultural identity by dealing with past and recent local myths and issues such as British colonialism, Hollywood dominance, the Australian bush, Aboriginal myths, male and female adolescence and maturity. It employs classical style and storytelling, but at the same time contradicts them. In this part it has been made clear that all these factors, which contribute to its huge impact on the Australian audience, are mostly visible in the ending. The open story and closed discourse of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* seem to indicate the political situation at the time of its production. As Neupert explains, especially the ending of a narrative is determined by film practice, film language and ideological aspects. Investigating the ending in relation to the narrative of a film gives insight to a range of social, cultural and political determinants that shaped its story and discourse.

Neupert's system applied to *Picnic at Hanging Rock* does not lead to a particular reading of its ending. The variety of this film's narrative and discursive techniques outlined in this part is consistent with those highlighted in the previous part. Yet, whereas in the previous part those features could not lead to a classification of its ending, in this part from a socio-historical point of view they enable a clear evaluation of the end as open, in terms of story, and closed, in terms of discourse. According to Neupert, the viewer as a subjective reader decides himself on the openness or closure of a film's end. However, the approach and reading proposed here is examined in the local context of the film's production and refers to the Australian audience in 1975, the year of its local exhibition. Hence, this analysis gives account of how social and political issues encouraged this particular audience read *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in this particular way.

## **Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction, it is in general easier to start a piece of work than to finish it. Consequently, the debate on endings could go on infinitely. It was simple to raise a discourse about this topic, for it is almost unexplored in film studies. However, exactly the same reason makes the process of ending this thesis so hard. In Neupert's terms this would be an open story/closed discourse study, stylistically finishing with a conclusion,

but in terms of the story it is open-ended since more research has to be done, and more theories and approaches have to be applied to the ending in cinema. Neupert has done the first step by using narrative theory and formalism, which, in my opinion is perfectly valid. In this paper, endings have been analysed in terms of their context because for me, as a film practitioner, it is essential to gain insight into the impact of the industry and the political situation on filmic narratives. However, future studies should cover further areas, such as experimental psychology.

This study focused on cinematic endings, and the starting point was Richard Neupert's *The End - Narration and Closure in the Cinema* (1995), the first and so far only profound work on this topic. My objective was to examine Neupert's book and find areas for improvement. The first part showed that Neupert's framework works very well formalistically, and it can analyse and classify the ending of various, especially generic, films (New Wave, Neorealist, Classical Hollywood, etc.). On the other hand, external factors that shape the film industry and the film product are not considered by Neupert. The consequence is that certain films, especially non-genre films, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* are too 'incongruent' for his system, as demonstrated in part two. The choice for this case study was for its discrepancies in narrative and discursive features, which were problematic for Neupert's approach. However, with the approach proposed in part three the ending was fully established, and it gave insight into the political and cultural conditions that shaped the film.

Neupert followed a comprehensible and logical framework aiming to explore the ending in cinema. His formalistic system of categorising the end should not be entirely neglected since it offers valuable ideas and strategies in terms of narratology and film aesthetics. However, there are significant limitations, which can be overcome by considering the socio-cultural background of the film examined.

The method proposed by me to explain the ending used a variety of formalistic and aesthetic explanations of narrative and narration, too. Yet, these were examined in conjunction with the local background of the Australian audience at the time of the film's production. In contrast, Neupert assumes that the audience perceives openness/closure only in terms of narratology. However, I believe that the overall perception of openness

and closure can shift to different levels, such as theme and style. For instance, placing Godard's *Weekend*, which Neupert establishes as totally open-ended, in the French historical context of the 1960s might encourage the reading of a political conclusion at the end, and thus the interpretation of a closed end.

Furthermore, the ending itself, disregarding the whole narrative, can make the viewer perceive closure or aperture. For example, Wexman asserts that a romantic union at the end can be powerful enough to provide the audience a satisfying sense of closure despite gaps and confusions in the story (Wexman 1993, in Neupert 1995. p. 178). Again this also depends on the audience and its background.

As it has been argued, a film's ending can be fully established if positioned in a particular context. However, if the context is changed, the end might be read differently. *Picnic at Hanging Rock's* ending was examined from the point of view of an Australian audience in 1975. However, analysing the ending from a British audience's point of view in 2003, might lead to a different interpretation.

The main purpose of this work is identifying the significance of film endings and how external factors shape them. The end is not only crucial for the film itself, but it also gives insight into its theme and political implications, if regarded in the context of its production. If *Picnic at Hanging Rock* would not have the ending that it has, it could be seen as a period film striving to conform to Classical Hollywood cinema or British Period Drama. However, the open story ending makes its political meaning clear and shows that one major function was to contradict Classical Hollywood style in order to establish a distinctive Australian cinema. On the other hand, the closure of the discourse is evidence of the prevailing mainstream style, established by Hollywood.

Since narrative is subject to political changes and has undergone considerable transformations in the last decades, theorists should devote more studies to the ending, not only in films, but also in other audio-visual sectors, such as the internet or video games. Nevertheless, regardless of which approach is used and which audio-visual medium is explored, it should always be made clear in which context and from whose point of view it is.

One possible weakness of this thesis is that the audience was not directly considered. It has explored contextual factors that shaped the audience's perception and opinion. However, future studies on the ending in cinema should also directly involve the viewer and provide empirical data of specific audience groups. Experiments should be carried out in which an audience from a particular social and/or cultural background is shown a film and gets a questionnaire at the end in order to evaluate their perception of the ending. This would offer more insight into the notion of openness/closure, and new concepts for the ending will have to be considered and researched, such as memorability or psychological impact. Experiments of this kind can be found in musical psychology, mentioning Thompson et al's study (1994) as an example. However, in a film there is a combination of various stylistic devices such as visual composition, editing and the soundtrack that should all be examined in relation with the ending and its impact on the spectator.

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