

The Mystical Gaze of the Cinema

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The Films of Peter Weir

Richard Leonard



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Introduction

Peter Weir, in his films, constructs and deploys what is most accurately described as a 'mystical gaze'. This gaze constitutes one of the most important but neglected forms of spectatorship in the cinema. It leads spectators to contemplate their place in a larger frame of reference where physical laws count for less and a relationship with a metaphysical and, often, a meta-ethical world, is taken seriously. Either in the short or long term this leads the viewers to a new consciousness of their surroundings, ideologies and moral imperatives. The mystical gaze transforms the viewers' awareness, suggests that there are realities beyond their sight and that the cinema is one way to contemplate and encounter this Otherness, especially in Western countries where religious collectives now play a lesser role than they have historically in providing a context for a mystical encounter. I am not arguing that watching a film is the same as a mystical experience, just that audiences report the occurrence as a meeting with Otherness. By an encounter with Otherness I mean that a film (intentionally or otherwise) has the power to lift viewers out of their daily, mundane world to encounter the mystical world—the belief patterns, ethical systems or personal and social mythologies of which transcend the everyday.

Initially Peter Weir received little critical attention from the academic film community and most commentary on his films was in the press, where critics and journalists began to notice his mystical and metaphysical predilections. Academics then began to name these qualities as the essential elements of a Peter Weir film and account for how and why this mystical element was present.

Every one of Weir's films has been described, in varying degrees, as mystical, spiritual or attending to the metaphysical but the significance of this in relation to the deployment of a mystical gaze has not been fully appreciated. The cinema now rivals the previously popular venues of churches, temples or synagogues as the place where spectators deploy the mystical gaze. The language of magic and mysticism has been generously applied to the cinema from its inception to the present day. The primitive mysticism of magic and the more elaborate mystical traditions of the passion plays and light shows shaped the expectations of the cinema's first viewers. Some of the most important hypotheses about the look or gaze of the cinema draw on the language and iconography of mysticism and magic, and have a hitherto unacknowledged relationship with these categories.

Some theorists have been interested in this relationship between religion and the cinema. They have variously described the cinema as transcendental, mythological, hierophantic, metaphysical, mesmeric, awe-inspiring, spiritual, theological, iconographic, sacramental or liturgical—but they have named or theorised mysticism as a constitutive element of the spectator's gaze. There are shared codes within the act of spectatorship and mysticism and the cinema offers a place or context within which an increasingly secular audience encounters Otherness. I believe that the spectator's memory and experience of light and dark, time and space, sight and sound, private and public, hierarchies and stars, sacred stories and ritual have strong roots in multi-faith and multicultural mystical consciousness. The cinema replicates the preconditions for a secular version of an encounter with Otherness and has borrowed the language of mysticism to describe the outcome. Of course, just as many mystical settings do not always lead to a mystical experience, not all film viewing leads to an encounter with Otherness. The cinema is a space within which a filmic text, in the hands of a director with a conscious or unconscious interest in the exploration of the metaphysical, can

lead a viewer to report an encounter with Otherness using language previously reserved for religious experience.

Codified in the act of cinematic spectatorship is a mystical consciousness within which the cinema apparatus—the technical elements employed by directors: camera angles, framing of shots, lighting, sound design, music and editing, as well the positioning of the spectator to identify with the action upon the screen—provides the preconditions for people to exercise a mystical gaze. Like all other gazes, the mystical gaze does not exist in isolation from its object and is instituted or constructed within the cinema, and that meaning is constructed in the interaction between spectator and film.

The mystical gaze, in Peter Weir's work and further afield as well, is achieved through a careful construction of elements in the narrative: in the mystical resonances in the text and especially in the intertexts; in the empathetic position of the audience to take the hero's quest and make it their own; in the mobile and omniscient position the audience assume as they preside over the hero's search; and in the illumination the audience achieves in relation to the narrative, as well as to the fluidity of boundaries between the seen and unseen, in this world and in the mystical domains. The mystical quality of films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Gallipoli* and *Witness* goes beyond the creation of a distinctive atmosphere or an aesthetic construct. Their mystical quality demonstrates that Weir is one of many auteurs who knows how to exploit the mystical gaze of the spectator, constructed as illuminatory, mobile, cross-cultural and secular.

Some of the works I will quote in this thesis are gender exclusive. Rather than regularly refer to [sic], the reader can presume that in each case I am directly and accurately quoting the original text and am aware of its gender presumptions.

