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# Old myths and new delusions: Peter Weir's Australia

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### **Abstract**

To the layman's eye Gallipoli is technically flawless: superb shots of outback country, a convincing evocation of the period, thoroughly believable Gallipoli cliffs, fine acting (even in the minor roles), and something which is to say the least rare in the Australian film industry, a good script - thanks to David Williamson. Moreover the picture, unlike Picnic at Hanging Rock (an otherwise impressive film which was fumbled towards the end), is dramatically tight, completely under control from first to last. It is full of splendid touches, like the appearance of the wooden horse early in the piece, to which the audience immediately responds, recognizing the allusion to Troy.

## Old Myths and New Delusions: Peter Weir's Australia

To the layman's eye *Gallipoli* is technically flawless: superb shots of outback country, a convincing evocation of the period, thoroughly believable Gallipoli cliffs, fine acting (even in the minor roles), and something which is to say the least rare in the Australian film industry, a good script — thanks to David Williamson. Moreover the picture, unlike *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (an otherwise impressive film which was fumbled towards the end), is dramatically *tight*, completely under control from first to last. It is full of splendid touches, like the appearance of the wooden horse early in the piece, to which the audience immediately responds, recognizing the allusion to Troy. Then there is the perfect miniature, the scene with the camel driver in the desert. There is the parallelism of two wildernesses, the deserts of the new world and the old, and, even more striking, the link drawn between the lights and gaiety of the departure from Perth (and of the nurses' ball in Egypt) and the Luna Park effects of the arrival at Gallipoli. There is the — nicely timed — moment of sheepish, ineffectual dawning of consciousness, when someone realizes the Diggers have carried out rough justice on the *wrong* Egyptian shopkeeper. There is the controlled pathos of all those sequences set in the shadow of the pyramids, particularly the one in which Archy and Frank race towards the tombs. Motifs of innocence and of death combine here — and of course the run for the pyramids ironically prefigures the last run at Gallipoli. There is the sensitive, lyrical effect of the swimming sequence on the beach. At this point the camera takes us under the water, distancing us from the fighting. Suspended in a dreamy fluid the naked Diggers seem remote from the reality above, temporarily freed. Then the illusion is broken, one of them is hurt, and we are returned to the real. Finally, there is the satisfyingly balanced shape of the film as a whole, first the treatment of Innocence, then of Experience, beginning with Western Australia and Egypt, ending with Turkey.

And yet there is a sentimentality about *Gallipoli* which is neither local nor incidental but *structural*, built into the bones of the drama. This becomes more and more apparent as we think systematically about what we have seen, resisting the soft lyricism of the camera whose effect is quite simply to seduce. At this point the question arises: what does the film say? (Not: what is it *intended* to say, but: what, in fact, *does* it say?)

The structure of *Gallipoli* is built on an underlying metaphor: that of the race. The film opens with a scene in which Archy races against himself. Shortly after, Archy races against a doubtful character who, at this stage at least, functions as the villain. Then Archy races against Frank. In Egypt there is the race for the pyramids. Finally there are the runs at Gallipoli, Frank's backwards and forwards from HQ to the front, Archy's towards the Turkish lines. In this case Frank races against time to save the day and Archy races into the arms of death. Interestingly, the protagonists race against each other on three occasions. In the first Archy is handicapped (his feet are wounded), in the last he is killed. In the first and second the two are competing, in the last they are not, at any rate on the face of it. Inevitably Archy wins the race. He *always* wins, except in Egypt, when it does not really matter. In order to grasp the implications of this we have to examine the Archy-Frank pair much more closely. Archy is blond, blue-eyed; he comes from the country; he wants to enlist; he is innocent (and young — too young to enlist, in fact). Frank, by comparison, is dark; he comes from the city; does *not* want to enlist; is not innocent but sceptical. (He is also of Irish origin. *Why should* he join the army, the film pertinently asks. The contradiction, once pointed out, is never examined.) What Weir and Williamson *believe* they are doing is crystal clear. They want to balance the portrait of a naïve boy, eager to serve the cause of Empire, with something more critical. But that is scarcely what emerges.

In fact, the mechanism is one convincingly exposed by Roland Barthes. It might be expressed as follows: *give a little, take a lot*. This works in small ways throughout the film, for example in the scene already referred to, that of the Egyptian shopkeeper. The Diggers discover they have been sold a fake antique, and they confront the dealer with this. To provide an illusion of justice and fairmindedness, one of the Diggers is polite; to provide an illusion of realism, one is aggressive. The dealer, though, will not budge. He is not beaten, nor is his shop destroyed. The troops simply break a few items, and the result is a refund. As the Australians leave, we have the twist: one of them realizes it was the wrong dealer. On the face of it this *denouement* should satisfy everyone. Even honest, well-meaning Australians can make a *mistake*. Even

Egyptians can be *wrongly* accused. What could be fairer than this conclusion? The truth, of course, is that Australian troops behaved like brutal barbarians in Egypt. They did not make the odd mistake: they were — what else? — racist and violent. Once an Australian film might have shown them as good blokes teaching a depraved, shifty Egyptian the lesson of his life. But Australians have come a long way since then. In *Gallipoli* the troops *mean* to do the right thing, but they make an *error of judgement*. No one is to blame, it's a *mistake*. We give a little, take a lot, showing Australians as fallible in order to underline their overall virtue, telling a small, harmless truth in order to promote a whopper.

This mechanism of revealing small flaws in order to obscure sizeable ones recurs, but at this stage it suffices to stress that it underpins the sentimentality of the entire film. Naturally we are not supposed to examine any of this critically. The whole point of sentiment is that one should go no further than the surface, that is to say the enjoyment of a confused combination of sadness and exaltation. Unfortunately, sentiment has a *logic*, and, in spite of Weir's attempts to erase his tracks, this logic is there for anyone to analyse.

It is especially evident in the presentation of Archy, that blond, blue-eyed hero. Certainly the film acknowledges his naïveté (one thinks of his exchange with the camel driver, where he argues the need to stop the enemy before they reach — Western Australia!) but only to *endorse* it. Because Archy *is* a hero, unashamedly, from first to last, though, not, of course, a flawless one. If we follow him into the desert, as Frank does, we are likely to become lost. But Weir's parable does not stop there: Archy is lost, but also providentially rescued and therefore ultimately justified.

One quickly-established characteristic of the hero involves the Aborigines. After a muster Archy and an Aborigine wash at the same trough. And in case we object that this is somewhat idealized, the two tussle and splash, that is, they behave aggressively, but in a context of play. At this stage the audience feels that it is at least plausible, since *some* people in 1915 must have been on familiar terms with Aborigines. Soon after this Archy races barefoot against a white man on horseback who has made a racist remark. He wins (providentially) when his opponent is thrown from his horse, and racism is nicely put in its place. Let us for a moment overlook the patronizing attitude towards the Aborigine revealed in it all. (Moreover Weir slips up badly throughout the scene in having his Aborigine act as eager *servant* to Archy, willing, for example, to prepare his bare feet for the race. And, incidentally, what a piece of nonsense that is, *wallowing* in bad faith! The black man mutters spells while rubbing herbs on Archy's foot. The emotional content is clear: Abor-

igines have 'knowledge' of plants, a quasi-mystical 'wisdom' to be used in the service of virtuous whites. It may be true, but *who* in white Australian society believes in black wisdom, in an other-than-token, sentimental way? But it is safe to endorse a little magic here, given Weir's larger mystification.) The real problem is not the small fib or even the patronising of Aboriginal people. Much worse is the suggestion that X who fights at Gallipoli is a Friend of Aborigines. Now no one could possibly believe that the spirit which carried the Anzacs to Gallipoli to fight for the cause of Empire is a spirit favourable to the Australian Aborigine. It would be enough to ask Xavier Herbert or, better still, Kevin Gilbert or Kath Walker. Weir is here supporting the worst kind of white self-congratulatory mystique. Let us state the objective truth: the spirit of *Anzac*, that is to say the spirit which took Australians half way round the globe to fight under an imperial flag, *is the same spirit which, in their own country, fed black people flour laced with strychnine.*

This is a hard truth to swallow, but there is no way of avoiding it. Of course it is not to say that most (or even any) of the men who fought in 1915 were motivated by other than confusedly admirable ideals. The same no doubt was true when colonial troops helped to subjugate a free people, the Boers, and in a way so brutal as to be comparable only to the abominations committed in Vietnam, of which Agent Orange is a discreet reminder. The point is not what Australian soldiers *thought* they were doing but what in fact they *did*. It is in *that* light that we must understand the shocking statement italicized above.

Naturally Archy is simply one man and it is quite possible that one man should have been like that in 1915, that is, anxious to enlist *and* friendly with Aborigines. But that line of argument is, as Americans would say, a copout. *Gallipoli* contains an *objective* message and that message is a cynical (sentimentality usually turns out to be cynical), lazy, comfortable, destructive lie. Today Australians are no longer supposed to be racist. So we give a little, take a lot; we say the spirit of Anzac is favourable to Aborigines, we show Archy and his Aboriginal companion as intimately close — then we forget the racist content of the Anzac myth, the *real* history of Australia before and after 1915. It fools nobody, least of all Aboriginal Australians.

One other point needs to be made in this context. Before crossing the desert, Archy and Frank exchange a few words with a cheerful, confident, not-at-all-abashed Aborigine employed by the railway, and this seems harmless enough until we recognize the stereotype which is being invoked. It is that of Benson in the American TV series, *Soap*. Benson is a negro servant who pushes his masters around. He knows better than

they do, and looks after them with amused, indulgent superiority. Williamson, obviously short of real Australian models, borrows Benson, or someone like him from the U.S. dream factory, for his portrait of an Aborigine in *Celluloid Heroes*. Now that is scandalous enough, but it is not the issue here. The sickening thing about the Benson mystique is its cruel inversion of the truth in the guise of ethnic tolerance. Whites patronize black people; black people have no chance of patronizing whites. To show them doing this, as in *Celluloid Heroes* or *Gallipoli*, even to a minute degree, through misguided goodwill, shamefully distorts reality. It's insufferable for white Australians to think that a pretence of this sort confers dignity on the Aborigine, since dignity comes from the truth, not from make-believe. One wonders how Williamson and Weir can have so little idea of the implications of their own film. In the long run, OMO could not do a better job on the people who distributed funny flour.

To return to the hero. Archy is much more than an unlikely befriender of Aborigines; he is the archetypal Australian, solid as the Dog on the Tucker Box. The fact is signalled even in such trivial details as his bush hat (Frank generally wears a cap). Because Archy is a country boy, and it is a cherished cliché that the true Australian is a bushman, not a city dweller. Now there may be a lot of truth in that. Certainly if Australians ever acquire a genuine nationalism it will come from their understanding of the land. But *Gallipoli* is not concerned with a genuine nationalism, only with what passes for nationalism in this country.

This is the trouble with Archy. He conforms to the Australian legend. He crosses deserts (becoming lost only ties him more securely to the myth, in this case via Burke and Wills); rides horses as well as the Man from Snowy River; is honest, straightforward, innocent, but at the same time willing to Be in It and Do his Bit without too much soul-searching or premeditation. Above all he is a good mate — hence all those shots of the pair, in Western Australia, Egypt, Turkey. With all of this what *else* could he have on his head except a bush hat?

The difficulty is not that Archy is the type of the Australian. As far as that goes, we could have a worse image. The difficulty is that he wants to enlist, that he does in fact enlist, and that he fights at Gallipoli. In short Weir's film reiterates the spurious myth: that the true Australian is a Gallipoli Digger, that the Digger is the spiritual descendant of the bushman, that Gallipoli must be set at the heart of the quest for nationhood.

Which is simply not true. If Anzac is a source of nationalism it can only be a source of a pseudo-nationalism. To say this is not to belittle the

Anzacs, only to insist on a point of logic. Gallipoli was not fought for an Australian, but for an English cause. The Anzacs were not an Australian, but an imperial force: the A.I.F. They served under English, not Australian (or New Zealand) leaders: Hamilton and Birdwood. Gallipoli itself was (disastrously) conceived by a man who had no loyalty whatever to Australia, as his behaviour in the next war demonstrated: Churchill. Its aim was, among other things, to uphold not those (supposed) democratic principles associated with the Australian stereotype, but Tsarism in Russia. In short, Gallipoli can only be linked to the development of national sentiment in this country by ignoring every rule of common sense. You simply cannot foster nationalism in place A by fostering allegiance to place B. All this has been said, in different words, by Manning Clark in the latest volume of his *History*. Now we are not seeking to enlist volume five of the *History*, with its detailed examination of the phenomenon of the Australian-Briton, on the side of the present argument as a whole. As it happens, volume five (which culminates in the story of Gallipoli) was released at much the same time as Peter Weir's film. Its point is that Gallipoli, far from strengthening the search for a national identity, emasculated it. How could it be otherwise? By definition there could be nothing *patriotic* about Gallipoli, if by patriotism we mean (what else?) allegiance to one's own country. That *is* Australia — isn't it?

The film is not unaware of the problem, naturally. It introduces subtle references to Empire, the reading of Kipling's *Jungle Book*, for example. It introduces the camel driver's doubts (why is a European war *our* war?), not to mention Frank's or his father's (why fight for the English?). Give a little, take a lot. *Gallipoli* points to the contradiction only to dispose of it. In the end we are left with the overwhelming sense that people like Archy are quintessentially Australian and that people like Archy fight at Gallipoli. The best that Weir can do is to hint that Archy might be mistaken, and *that* suggestion is forgotten in the pathos and the glory of the finish. It is still the old myth, brought out of the cupboard, dusted and paraded every Anzac Day. Repetition will never resolve its inherent contradiction.

How does the end of Weir's film comment on these problems? We conclude with two runs, one for life, one towards death. It should be noted, by the way, that, in the shorthand of the film, 'running' is equivalent to 'integrity'. Archy's run is the culmination of his entire life. As the bullets enter his chest and blood appears, movement is stopped. That signals a change in the nature of time as far as Archy is concerned. Archy, in fact, is no longer in time but in eternity, frozen in an image, that of death. The film ends with this image, about which more later. We could equally say that in this moment *sub specie aeternitatis* Archy is



On the cliff-face at Anzac Cove.



Archy just before he goes over the 'top'.

no longer an individual, but a myth — *the* myth: an 'Anzac', which is something timeless (*Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn*). The message was implicit in that run to the pyramids. There Archy runs, symbolically, not only towards a tomb, i.e. towards death, but towards a monument to immortality, to life-after-death. Life-after-death is life-in-myth, and Archy's last run ensures that. So Archy's life ends, appropriately, on the top of a high mountain. His last run is his apotheosis. What about Frank's run, though, the one which *loses*?

Now at one level the tragedy hinges on Frank's run. It is in fact a tragedy of the he-didn't-make-it-in-time variety, a familiar enough device of melodrama. Even at this level it is sentimental: as if it *could* all be stopped, prevented, by a *run*! The film itself, having introduced it, cannot swallow this romanticism — and of course the run has to fail. But we toy sentimentally with the idea that it might have succeeded, which is meaningless. There is more to Frank's failure, however, because it is this which gives Archy the crown, or at any rate the martyr's wreath. Why should Frank be *morally* defeated by Archy? Let us be clear about it: he *is*. Archy, as already observed, always wins the race, and the race is, ultimately, a moral one. Moreover, just as Archy deliberately handicapped himself in the first race against Frank (where he ran with wounded feet), so, in the last, he is also handicapped. After all, he *wills* to sacrifice himself, just as he wills to run with hurt feet. He could have taken the job of runner, but he gave it to an unsuspecting Frank. So he dies instead of Frank. At this point the Christ parallel is inescapable, though Weir does not press it. Archy, then, is *doubly* endorsed. He dies, and for someone else.

Absurdities abound here. A blond (read British) Australian lays down his life for a reluctant Irish Australian when, historically, people like Archy, serving causes like Archy's, have not *saved* Irish lives but *taken* them. Obviously Weir has not heard of Easter, 1916 (in the year following Gallipoli), or of Belfast, 1982. Of course one can generously *imagine* a possible reconciliation of the two sides of these conflicts. And that is all the parable at the end of the film is: *imaginary*. But this is only one mystification, as we ponder the *meaning* (the objective, not the intended, sentimental meaning) of Frank's failure. Doesn't Frank run fast enough, that is to say, *try* hard enough? Or is it just that the blond, blue-eyed Australians will not *listen* to people like him? This second possibility is effectively negated by the ending of the film, i.e. by the apotheosis of Archy. Had Frank had his way Archy would not have died — or even been there at Gallipoli. But Archy — and this is the essential message of the film — *has* to die. Dying is his supreme achievement, his



Mel Gibson as Frank and Mark Lee as Archy. On this occasion both are wearing hats but even here the difference in the hats reflects the difference in their social status.

Photographs by courtesy of Paramount Picture Corporation.

glory, his fate. Only one conclusion is possible, then: that this film endorses Archy's way as superior to Frank's. Frank tries, but Archy makes it.

And yet Weir makes Frank the voice of reason. All the more damning that *Gallipoli* should in the end give itself wholly to the ecstatic contemplation of Archy's sacrifice. Actually it was never a question of anything else. The pairing of Frank and Archy perfectly illustrates the mechanism of give a little, take a lot. Frank's *caveat* serves only to underline the central message. Archy was, all along, the innocent, the spotless lamb, worthy of sacrifice. In the same way Weir's film as a whole, for all its supposed open-mindedness, its up-to-dateness, its trendy tolerance — indeed *because* of all these things — reinforces the Gallipoli myth, and in the most uncritical way. The logic of giving in order to take leads to this conclusion: *even if the war was dubious, the sacrifice was good.*

Sixty-six years after the event, all Australians can do is to retell the self-same story, with the self-same moral. This myopia extends to detail after detail of the film. Weir introduces the wooden horse only to negate its implicit irony at the end. He shows us a confused general and an unpleasant colonel only to highlight the goodness of a major and of the troops themselves. In a crudely hammed scene he offers us a caricature of English officers in Egypt, complete with monocle and moustache. Of course the democratic Anzacs show them up. This reveals the British as foolish in one minor stereotyped instance, only to obscure the fact that the Anzacs are fighting for them and so to endorse the larger military escapade. Later the massacre on the ridge will be blamed (inaccurately) on the British landing at Suvla Bay. Local criticism substitutes for a searching analysis of the social and political facts of the war. The invincible stupidity of Weir's film consists precisely in this: that it points something out only to forget it promptly. *Gallipoli* is like a magician's act: now you see it, now you don't. In the end you don't.

The film, as earlier stated, is structured around the opposition of Innocence and Experience. Of course this innocence is itself a myth which needs to be challenged. No doubt in 1915 Australians *were* naïve and a little provincial, just as they are today. But that is hardly the same thing as innocence. Subjectively, Gallipoli may have had the quality of a dream, or of a nightmare. Objectively, it was a real war, fought by real people against real people. That is to say it was a *political*, not a mythical, act. Interestingly, Weir's film never looks *closely* at the fighting. Most of the time is spent in Western Australia and Egypt, and once at Gallipoli, we move very quickly to Archy's death. This provides no time for the depiction of disillusionment at Anzac Cove. But the

Diggers *did* become disillusioned, eventually. In the film we see them in high spirits, at least up to the point where they are being massacred on the ridge. However, this comes at the very end of the film, and everything is over before we have time to think. This is in contrast to the time lavished on establishing the motif of innocence.

Consequently *Gallipoli* offers its protagonists no possibility of *learning* from their experience. First Archy is innocent, then he is — dead. Nor does it offer the audience this possibility. Because Weir only wants to do one thing, to focus attention on the legend, which in this context may be defined as an unexamined assumption. When the guide shows us the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, he does not encourage us to examine it, to actually look at *it*. It is a masterpiece, a myth. Enough to see the *myth*. Gallipoli is Australia's enigmatic Mona Lisa. We are not *supposed* to look. Or rather, when we look, we are supposed to see only the stereotypes: youthful idealism, self-sacrifice, and so on. Of course Weir will object that he did not want to make a political film, just to see it all through the eyes of a simple soldier. There must have been people like Archy at Gallipoli. Unfortunately such 'realism' is anything but neutral. To present the archy legend uncritically is not apolitical, far from it.

We now turn to a very different kind of objectivity, concentrating on Archy and Frank and especially that moment of glory at the top of the ridge at Gallipoli. Exactly like the heroine of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Archy disappears at the summit of a rock. In each case the context is shrouded in mystery. This parallel points up other aspects of *Gallipoli's* hero.

Superficially Archy seems to choose his course of action whereas Frank seems to be carried along. This is totally misleading. In fact it is Archy who is passive. In the first scene we see him as a running machine, manipulated by an older man. Later he seems to know his own mind, but his enlisting is another expression of his passivity, since he is doing what everyone is expected to do. At the end he appears to choose when he changes places with Frank, but that too is passive, a submission to his own fate. Archy's passivity, which the film does not recognize, is the source of his innocent simplicity. By contrast Frank is complex, problematical. It is important to see that what is implicit in this contrast is the kind of opposition of Subject and Object so persuasively analysed by Sartre. Archy has all the characteristics of the Object. He is presented as an image without depth, smiling that open, vulnerable smile which prefigures his final wound. The smile *is* Archy. It conveys his inarticulate, uncomplicated goodness, his status as Object — because Archy's smile represents an *offering* of himself to *others*, to Frank, to the audience. Just

as he is passive in the eyes of his audience, Archy is passive before his fate: he is carried along to Gallipoli. We know he will die because his passivity anticipates that too. Archy is made for death. A corpse is the ultimate Object. It has no existence for itself. It exists only as Object of another's mind. The essential feature of Archy, then, is that he is there to be *looked* at. That, incidentally, is why he comes across as *beautiful*.

Frank on the other hand resists objectification. Where Archy *is*, Frank is conscious, he is active, he *thinks*. He is to Archy as mind is to body. Consequently he is not borne along, he seems to *resist* fate. In Sartrean terms he takes responsibility for his actions, no matter how confused these might be. All this explains why there is no mystery about him. Archy of course is mysterious, even to himself. We know why Frank enlists, more or less: he is pushed into it through opportunism (when he tries to join the Light Horse) and mateship (when he joins the infantry). But why does Archy enlist? To be like uncle Jack? The only answer is in that smile which seems to suggest that Archy knows, which he doesn't. For Archy it is all so — inevitable.

Now the film pays lip service to Frank's reasonable point of view. Its affection, however, is reserved for Archy. One is reminded of those (homosexual) pairs in Jean Genet's novels consisting of an outward, unthinking, attractive personality and a partner who is inward, keenly intelligent, *aware*. The first is the one on whom Genet lavishes attention, but only to demonstrate at last that this beautiful Object is hollow, that real power resides with thought, not with the Image, the Mask. Because the Object is by nature vulnerable, it collapses under the weight of the adoring eyes fixed on it, like Marilyn Monroe.

The Subject survives, the Object dies: that is the rule and it is scrupulously observed in *Gallipoli*. We note at once a lack of distinct personal characteristics in Archy. One example: when the Diggers are confronted by sex in Egypt they respond either with coarse enthusiasm or puritanically (Barney and Billy enter the brothel; Snowy refuses). Archy, though, is kept well clear of a situation like this: he is untainted by whoring or by puritanism. This is necessary not simply to ensure the purity of his sacrifice but also to maintain his status as a *mask*, that is, something other than a real human being.

And this is the insidious fascination of the Object: that what attracts us is precisely the inhuman perfection of the statue, the work of art. The last scene of *Gallipoli* can come as no surprise. The entire film has prepared us for Archy's apotheosis, which is his dying. Its aim is to elevate not an individual (like Frank), but the Hero, the Myth, the Smile. We all share in this mystique. Kill Frank and we kill one man, on one

occasion. Kill Archy and we objectify Death itself, we evoke all the pathos of a death which is eternal. That last frozen shot of the movie is no aberration. *Gallipoli* really does glorify death, long before Archy actually dies. Weir does not intend this, of course. It simply happens, and it happens because the image of Archy is something Weir is unable to control. The fascination of Archy is the fascination of death or rather of life-in-death, which is life-in-myth. *They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old*. Archy lives on in death, and he never ages. Frank, who is alive, is mortal: he will age. Archy is immortal.

There are terrifying contradictions in all of this. Archy's glory is a mask without a human face behind it. As preparation for death Archy repeats his uncle's words of authority, the magical spell (it is nothing short of that) whose utterance has the power to transform him into an animal (a leopard, to be precise) or a machine. Archy *wills* himself to be something other than a human Subject, he wills, in the end, that transformation which makes him timeless and therefore material for myth. What chance has Frank in this race? Sadly, it is a tragic vacuousness which is glorified in Archy, the victory of the non-thinking, the non-questioning: ours not to reason why. How on earth has a trendy, tolerant film maker of the 1980s got himself in this predicament?

In this context we are bound to return to the exaltation of sport in the film. (The fact that a football match between Western Australians and Victorians in Egypt reveals the *unsporting* side of the Diggers, merely points up the larger exaltation of sport in the character of Archy.) Running, like cricket or football, is a type of the national mystique. Life, however, is not comparable to a race or to a game. What is needed in this country is not athletics but thought. Of course Australians have traditionally glorified physical achievement and belittled intellectual efforts. In so doing they have in another way put the Object first.

There is a further perspective on all of this. In our society the Object is quintessentially female. And, sure enough, the hero of *Gallipoli* is closer than one might have thought to the heroine of *Picnic*. He is not just boyishly beautiful: he has something of a girl about him. Actually his relationship with Frank is not without sexual overtones, and, to a degree, Weir and Williamson are probably aware of it. But, as usual, the material escapes their control. It is noteworthy that there are no real women in *Gallipoli*, only two classic types: the type of the chaste mother or wife (in Western Australia), and of the whore (in Egypt). The reason for this is clear: the myth of Gallipoli is a specifically *male* myth. We notice that Frank chases girls. He kisses his partner at the nurses' ball (Archy does not), he performs a male display (complete with Light Horse

feathers) for a group of women visiting the pyramids. Archy is eyed by a lass in Western Australia, but he initiates no moves.

In fact Archy is a virgin, a type of *feminine* purity — who dies. Traditionally, a girl 'dies' when she loses her innocence, that is to say when the maidenhead is broken. The sexual parable of *Gallipoli* is precisely that. Over and above the coy hints of a vaguely sexual bond between two males, *Gallipoli* produces an unintended message: that Archy's sexual consummation comes in death. *Gallipoli* is, from one angle, a drama of virginity lost. When Archy is ravished, he *disappears* (a similar sexual pattern existed in *Picnic*), while Frank, the type of the male, is left to mourn. Anyone prepared to scoff at this line of argument should think very hard first.

Weir's mystification of a vital episode in Australian history has a more sophisticated counterpart in Sidney Nolan's pictures of Gallipoli. Nolan's Gallipoli is a faint, evanescent landscape, peopled by ghostlike Diggers who bathe naked on the beaches, or rather who levitate like apparitions, weightless, drifting. Occasionally there is a suggestion of a uniform, a few strokes of paint, a slouch hat. On the whole, though, nakedness implies vulnerable, passive flesh, the body of someone who is going to die. Then again, Nolan's Diggers are already dead. Like Archy, they are dead long before the bullets come. Their Gallipoli seems very far away. It is a Gallipoli which exists not in Turkey but in Australia. Moreover it exists in the mind, it is strictly timeless, archetypal — if there had not been a Gallipoli, Australians would have *invented* it. In this context there is no difficulty in seeing a connection with the Homeric epic and, indeed, Nolan's soldiers, in their nakedness, hint at a realm of myth in which Australians fuse with ancient Greeks, re-enacting the siege of Troy. That siege is the archetypal war of the European imagination. Of course, as everyone knows, Gallipoli is not so far from the site of Troy. Weir too cannot resist drawing the parallel in his film. The difference is that Nolan *knows* that he is painting the myth, whereas Weir is not quite sure what he is doing. Nolan is interested not in the real Gallipoli, but in Gallipoli as it lives on in the Australian psyche. That accounts for the fuzziness of the image: it is all like that dreamy swim in the film, an underwater Gallipoli, deliberately ahistorical.

In the end, though, Nolan's failure is as spectacular as Weir's. What objective meaning is there in the parallel with Troy, except a misleading one? Nolan's earlier myth-making actually *taught* us something about, for example, the archetypal Ned Kelly, the rebel inside us all. That series was both visually and intellectually analytic: it had something to say. The Gallipoli pictures, like Weir's film, preempt analysis, they insist on a

surface reading only. Instead of revealing Gallipoli, they *conceal* it, they pickle it in a dense, amniotic fluid.

Of course Nolan's Gallipoli paintings are in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra — and they *belong* there. Canberra's neo-Egyptian mausoleum looks down and across the lake to Parliament House. Not one tree is permitted to interfere with the flow of air between these two sites. The two stand in a relation which is broadly that of Archy and Frank. The Memorial is Object to Parliament's Subject. Again, it is to Parliament as Body is to Mind. Across the lake, a lot of mental activity is carried out. At the Memorial, everything is still. Time, in Parliament, feeds on the timelessness of the Memorial. All our allegiance, all our reverence, is for the myth enshrined in the Memorial. For what goes on in the other place, we have nothing but contempt. And yet the other place is where things can be *done*. Because there can be no action, only the silent perfection of death, in the Memorial.

Ironically, Parliament House, that colonial replica of the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, looks to the Memorial for inspiration. That is the whole point of the axis. It is ironic because, like Weir's film or Nolan's pictures, the Memorial can only offer a contradictory oracle. The Anzac myth cannot be made to yield an unambiguously patriotic content, no matter how hard we try. On the contrary the Memorial speaks, for the most part, of wars fought for other-than-Australian causes. Like Gallipoli, it *negates* nationalism rather than affirming it. And yet it is a place of pilgrimage. Thousands visit it every year.

Thousands will see Peter Weir's film. They will walk away just a little more confused than they went in. The question arises: why are Australians so loth to see themselves as they are? If after all these years they cannot focus on 1915, when will they focus on 1975, or 1982?