Zauberberg investigates the glorification of war mythology and the objectification of the war hero through an adaptation of Thomas Mann’s satire of the bildungsroman, The Magic Mountain (1924), a stifled coming of age story set in the years prior to World War I in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Swiss Alps.

Historian Clare Wright, in her 2014 essay, A Splendid Object Lesson: A Transnational Perspective on the Birth of the Australian Nation sheds light on a persistent and problematic element of nationalism in Australia; its focus on militarism in historical and popular accounts of nationhood:

“…in existential terms, we can rightly view the Gallipoli campaign [April 1915 – January 1916] not as a birth, but a kind of death – the death of the utopian ideal of a better; more peaceful, more just world based on progressive values…[Gallipoli] represented the heady, irresistible triumvirate of militarism, empire, and race.”

In 1902 Australia became the first country in the world where white women could both vote and stand for election on an equal basis with men, it also had introduced the 8 hour work day, the Affiliation Act, and had peacefully transitioned to a federation only a year earlier. As Wright states, Australia was at this time, for white people at least, a “remarkably non-volatile brew of ideas and optimism”, looked to by progressives in the USA and Europe. In my version of this political allegory, Zauberberg, Australia is represented by a woman, Rose, replacing the male character of Hans Castorp in Mann’s novel, reflecting Australia’s strong feminist history.

Historian John Hirst asserts in his 1995 text, Sense and Nonsense in Australia History, that Australia can attribute it’s coming of age as a nation to it’s performance in the Great War, citing that this was the event that “when by common consent Australians threw of their colonial self-doubt and believed themselves to be a nation.”

Here Australia became, as articulated by the narrator in Zauberberg, “stuck in time…. giving birth to forgetfulness”. The peaceful and progressive achievements of the fledgling nation were, in the main, ignored and forgotten by mainstream culture. Australia, as historian Brian Matthews states in his book, Federation (1999), after its radical beginnings, “quickly settled into solid conservatism” after World War I. As Wright says, Australia then always looked back to the Gallipoli campaign, and this “blood sacrifice”, as our coming of age.

Using the structure of Mann’s parody of the coming of age story, I hope to find a way to investigate this so-called birth of a nation – or as Wright declares it, “a kind of death”, and examine this aspect of Australian history through the distance of fiction and allegory.