The sunlight reflects off the water as the camera gently guides our vision over the surface of a muddy lake surrounded by Australian bush. Rounding a corner we increasingly hear boys at play. Then we come upon them, frolicking in and on the water, watched over by a man in a cassock. It is autumn 1953 and the teenage boys in the water are, as our hero soon tells us, 'freezing to death'. Thus begins one of the most critically acclaimed films from the era of the Australian 'New Wave', *The Devil's Playground*, released in 1976. This opening sequence establishes a number of important reference points. The beauty and care of the direction, sound and camera work announces that the film is intended as a serious contribution to the new Australian 'national cinema'. The opening conveys that the film will be about boys in the context of Catholic schooling, symbolised by the man in the cassock. The presence of the water suggests that the film will focus on the fluidity of identity and liminality of adolescence. Finally, the near nakedness of the boys in swimsuits, and the water, points to the centrality of the body and sexuality in the film.
Aside from Christos Tsiolkas's meditation on the unfolding meaning of the film for him over a twenty-five year period, there has been little critical engagement with this film compared to other films of its quality from the period. Most work consists of an assertion of the film's significance, an overview of its narrative and major themes, and a statement that the film 'launched' its director Fred Schepisi onto the international scene. Most critics associate the film with the development of the 'national cinema' in the 1970s. As Tom O'Regan points out though, this focus on national cultures in analyses of this and like films from the 'New Wave', cuts off other avenues of exploration. This paper explores *The Devil's Playground* (Schepisi, 1976), with the reference points from the opening sequence as a springboard for a discussion of the representations of male sexualities and gender identities. In the analysis that follows sexualities and masculinities are taken to be diverse and intersecting, and bodies are understood as powerful sites for their interaction. According to R.W. Connell, bodies are 'not blank slates ... Gender is the way bodies are drawn into history; bodies are arenas for the making of gender patterns'. As will be suggested later, the analytic focus on sexualities and masculinities reveals that the film speaks to a much wider historical canvas concerning the production of the modern gender order than a 'national cinema' analysis would show.

*The Devil's Playground* is one of a cluster of coming-of-age films from the cinema revival of the 1970s and 1980s, that included *Storm Boy* (Safran, 1976), *The Mango Tree* (Dobson, 1977) and *My Brilliant Career* (Armstrong, 1979). More specifically, it is one of three Australian feature films produced at the time that used single-sex secondary schools as the setting, the others being *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1975) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (Beresford, 1977). These three films belong to the 'quality' or AFC genre widely applauded for their meticulous attention to period mis-en-scène. The films ostensibly utilise the opposition between the institution of the secondary school and the adolescent quest for freedom and identity to discuss Australian national identity at a time of self-conscious nation building. The schools have repressive routines and act as
Josephine May

‘architectures of limitation’ against which the young protagonists test themselves. Further, the schools are represented as hothouses of sexual energy. Indeed, actual ‘hothouses’ feature prominently in two of the films - *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Devil’s Playground* (1976) - and there is a conservatory in *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977). Adolescence is defined by a burgeoning and as yet undefined sexuality, and homoeroticism occurs in all three films. What makes *The Devil’s Playground* different is that it is set in the twentieth century, rather than the nineteenth; in a Catholic, rather than Protestant, institution; in a seminary rather than a school; and it is the only one of the three in which a boy is the protagonist.

Scripted and directed by Fred Schepisi, the film is set in the 1950s and is loosely based on autobiographical material from Schepisi’s brief schooling in a Catholic minor seminary, or juniorate. The story concerns the sexual and moral awakening of the young protagonist, Tom Allen (Simon Burke), a good natured and devout thirteen year old who is convinced at the start of the film of a priestly vocation, and embarks on his journey through puberty. This journey ends with his rejection of seminary life and, one assumes, his vocation. Throughout the film Tom’s adolescence is sexualised, defined by a growing awareness of the body and sex, ‘the devil’s playground’.

*The Devil’s Playground* presents a biologically essentialist view of male sexuality, and in the process sets up a basic opposition between normative heterosexual masculinity and the Rule of the 1950s Catholic seminary. Sex is a drive, a hydraulic *force majeure*, in men’s lives. Attempts at stringent sexual control will result in alcohol abuse, ‘inversion’, perversion, madness, death at worst, and bodily dysfunction at least (although not paedophilia which is not mentioned in the film at all). The film’s main contention is that repression of sexual activity in (white) males is unhealthy and unnatural. It should be noted however, that while the film privileges one form of sexuality, heterosexuality, and one form of masculinity, normative Australian masculinity, it also shows that these categories are by no means stable or monolithic. Indeed the film was ahead of its time theoretically in its...
Josephine May

recognition of the diversity of male sexualities and styles of masculinity. On the other hand, the Rule of the Catholic seminary that includes celibacy and denial of the body through rigorous routines and rituals, is monolithic. It is an unrelenting feminising agent that unmans good men.

*The Devil's Playground* focuses on relationships to explore the issue of ‘unnatural’ sexual repression. The few women who appear briefly in the film, help define the masculine as well as the sexual problematic. They represent stereotypes of the old crone (the seminary’s house-keeper, Mrs Sullivan, played by Sheila Florence), the virtuous and loving mother (played by Gerda Nicholson), the dangerous sirens in the pub (Anne Phelan and Jillian Archer), and the sweetheart Lynette (Danni Lindsay). In *The Devil’s Playground*, as Kirkham and Thumin have noted elsewhere, in such roles, ‘women only appear as signs, ciphers, markers of boundaries of the masculine.’

However the relational space between women and men constitutes only one set of boundary markers for masculinities and sexuality in the film. There are also the narratively more important boundaries explored in the relationships of boys to boys, of men to boys, and of men to men. The clear-eyed and accepting way in which these relational spaces are portrayed, especially with regard to the young protagonist’s homosexual impulses, explains the challenging effect of *The Devil’s Playground* at the time of its release. Before examining the representation of the sexualities and gender identities of the adolescent students and the teaching Brothers more closely, the discussion turns briefly to the historical setting of the film in the Catholic seminary of the 1950s, in order to understand the strictures of the Rule, and to evaluate its cinematic representation.

**The Rule of the 1950s Seminary**

From the few mainly autobiographical studies of seminary life in Australia at this time, it is clear that the 1950s saw an unprecedented period of growth in young males seeking to enter the priesthood before the dramatic decline in numbers that followed the modernising
revisions of Vatican II in the 1960s. For example, 1957 and 1958 witnessed record intakes for the eight year course to enter the priesthood at Corpus Christi College, which were not to be achieved again.  

The Rule at Corpus Christi, to which all must submit, comprised the College routines, regulations and rituals, and was viewed as ‘an expression of God’s will for the student’. It consisted of no radios, no newspapers, no personal transport, water only between meals, and no visitors before Easter and thereafter no more than once a month. Celibacy was compulsory. Students rose at 5.55am with lights out at 10pm. Four sessions daily were held ‘in community in the chapel’. There were about two and half hours of formal prayer per day. Instruction included lessons, sport, and work. Meals were usually eaten in silence while listening to a reading (in The Devil’s Playground the reading is aptly enough from Don Camillo). There were also visiting speakers and annual retreats. The retreat in the film is led by the visiting monk, Father Marshall, played by a cherubic Tom Keneally, who delivers a fire and brimstone speech that threatens the boys with the ‘the stench [and] the rotting flesh’ in hell ‘where there is no unconsciousness ... forevermore the howling damned who do not see God’s face’. This demanding form of personal and institutional governance, the ‘Rule’, is faithfully represented in the film as it existed at a pivotal time in Australian Catholic history, just before it was about to change.

Fred Schepisi was well aware that his story occurred at this historical juncture. He knew that, in the seminary he had attended, for example, the juniorate was disbanded shortly after he had left it for the reasons presented in the film, and the boys were sent to ‘normal school’.

The film challenges the already mythic ‘Golden Age’ of the 1950s as safe, secure and sexually more contained. Indeed it characterises the seminary as a sexually active place, repressed by an abusive old world culture of the Rule. Peter Malone asked Schepisi if the film, in its use of forthright language and sexual material, was a dramatisation of the 1950s from a 1970s perspective. In response, Schepisi asserted that
he had ‘held back’ to a considerable degree on ‘all this bizarre behaviour’ in recording his own experience of seminary life. This was because: ‘Nobody would believe it. So I deliberately pulled back on all sorts of things, so the impression was shocking enough or jangling enough without going the whole hog.’25 One can only wonder what the film might have been if the strong self-censorship alluded to here had not been in place and Schepisi had conveyed more of his experiences of the minor seminary.

Both groups, the students and the Brothers, are caught up in the central filmic opposition of institutional power, represented by the Rule, versus that of the individual. The Rule is also one of the key ways in which the masculinities of the boys and the Brothers are framed, and the medium in which their sexualities are negotiated. Since the protagonist of the story belongs to the first group, the analysis begins with the boys.

**The boys: adolescence and insistent bodies**

In *The Devil’s Playground* adolescence proves the ideal vehicle for the filmic exposition of the fluidity of masculinities and sexualities, because it is shown as a liminal time centred on sexual awakening and identity formation. This representation of adolescence is in keeping with historians’ understandings of the concept. Jan Kociumbas argues that sexuality was at the heart of the late nineteenth century concept ‘adolescence’, coined by American psychologist Stanley Hall, and of its later incarnation, ‘the teenager’, normalised as a new age status during the 1950s. Kociumbas notes: ‘no sooner had adolescence been constructed than it was eroticised.’ However, the erotic flavour to understandings of adolescence was thoroughly gendered. While girls were ruled by ‘unconscious instincts’ that must be forbidden, or at the very least postponed until marriage, the sexuality of boys was to be ‘monitored and managed’.26 In her discussion of adolescence as transition, Speed writes that adolescence is ‘a psychosocial moratorium ... a delay of adult commitments for the purposes of identity formation’ which is linked to ideas of freedom and...
Josephine May

These notions of adolescence as a sexualised period of identity formation, are made visible in the film.

This association of male adolescence with the insistence of sexuality has both historic and contemporary currency. Kenneth Kidd shows how those offering expert advice on how to ‘manage’ the teenage boy from the very early, and the very late, twentieth century tell the same story: they assert that the key to understanding the adolescent male is his sexual biology. Kidd cites one such expert who in 1998 claimed that males are ‘testosterone driven’; that ‘testosterone is a hormone that wants sex’; and that adolescent males are subject to seven surges of the hormone per day. Kidd shows how this recent view is in fact a revisitation of the early twentieth century master narrative of masculinity. The Devil’s Playground argues similarly from the 1970s that ‘boys will be boys’ and ‘men will be men’ as another way of expressing this biological essentialism and determinism.

The story of Tom Allen, the protagonist, encapsulates these themes. His burgeoning sexuality is irrepressible. This is signified by the fact that his body is prone to leakage of all kinds of fluids, including embarrassing bed wetting (four separate scenes of washing his soiled sheets punctuate the narrative), as well as a hearty interest in masturbation. In one confessional scene Tom admits to masturbating two or three times a day – a statistic rejected as an impossible lie by the old Brother hearing the boy’s shameful admission. Tom begins to masturbate over a brassiere advertisement in a magazine while he waits outside the Head Brother’s office, ironically for a sex education talk. Brother Victor says of him: ‘Too impressionable, that Allen. Tries, he’s got the right feelings. He’s an untidy little bugger though; he’s constantly got an erection.’ Clearly young Tom has an insistent body that ‘can’t stop spurting’. The slow pan around the lake at the start of the film alludes to this liquid abundance that provides such joy and healthy exercise, but which can and later does threaten destruction with the drowning of the boy Turner (Michael David). Tom’s enuresis also points to the neurotic underside of the effort of bodily containment demanded by the seminary. As Brother Francine warns
the boys early on, ‘your body is your worst enemy’.

The sexual nature of male adolescence and its capacity, if repressed, to derail ‘normal’ sexuality, is strongly represented in Tom’s relationships with some of the other boys. Very early in the film, in a brief half-naked wrestle in which the winner’s prize is ‘to do anything he likes to the other’, we are introduced to one of Tom’s friendships that is characterised by awkward and increasingly homoerotic encounters. This relationship between Tom and Waite (Alan Cinis) suggests there’s fine line between the homosociality of life in the seminary and homosexuality. The two boys meet in the unused greenhouse where they nervously discuss the appearance of pubic hair and ‘embarrassing’ swellings. In this delicately portrayed scene, the camera conveys their awkwardness by focusing on their hands and feet, as if it is too embarrassed to look at them directly while such matters are discussed. Later in the film, they engage in an unsatisfactory mutual masturbation during which Tom angrily finds that Waite does not know how to ‘do it properly’. These homosexual encounters are gently represented, without judgement. This is in contrast to the disapproving rendition of the fanatical group of boys in the secret society, ‘The Fidelity’. On numerous occasions Tom is warned against these boys who embrace self-flagellation as means of ‘purification’. Turner’s quest to ‘purify’ himself eventually leads to his drowning in the waters of the wintry lake. Sexual repression is a deadly business.

Aside from these examples of the ways in which the seminary’s Rule of bodily restraint distorts male relationships with each other and with their bodies, Tom has two other relationships that seek to establish his bone fides within the schema of Australian hegemonic masculinity. His relationship with his ‘girlfriend’ Lynette, for example, affirms his heterosexuality. Indeed the film goes to some narratively suspect lengths to introduce Lynette to the plot. These include having Tom’s mother, for some unknown reason leaving her younger children to stay in a boarding house near the seminary, where Lynette, one of the girls of the Christian Fellowship Association, is also staying. There is
a brief, lyrical and somewhat unlikely passage, including a first kiss, which establishes Tom and Lynette’s relationship. They promise to write to one another, even though this is against the Rule. When he is caught out, Tom is told he must not write to her again. This incident is evidence that the Rule works against ‘normal’ heterosexual relationships.

Tom’s most important normalising relationship, however, is with the older athletic boy, Fitz (John Diedrich). It represents conventional mateship. Fitz, who has a more confident masculine identity than Tom, advises and rescues him at various points in the narrative, and discusses issues of faith with him. So important is this relationship that, when Fitz is mysteriously told to ‘take his pen’ and leave the seminary, and Tom is advised by the Head Brother Celian (John Frawley) that he must thereafter think of Fitz as ‘dead’, Tom finally rejects his God and the seminary life. Tom can handle the directive not to communicate with his girlfriend Lynette, but he considers the enforced separation from his ‘mate’ as the last straw.

In general the relational spaces between the boys represent a range of encounters between different possible masculinities or styles of boy. Some boys are shown to be more sensitive, some are sporty, some are more neurotic, some are more pious and some are more fanatical. No malign hierarchies seem to exist among the boys, and, although Tom is teased about his bed-wetting, it is affectionate enough. No boy is shown as scholarly, instead each appears to be obsessed with bodies and sex.

**The Brothers: faith versus masculinity**

These patterns of relations and styles are mostly mirrored in the other group of males in the film, the Brothers. Schepisi commented that each of the Brothers, who were based on ‘real men’ as he recalled them, represents the possibility of what the boy Tom might become. Although they exercise power over the boys, the Brothers are subject to the institutional discipline of the Rule in an even more virulent form and are its end products. From the outset the mature masculinities of
the Brothers are deviant from Australian norms. They are scholars, rather than men of action. They are Catholic and spiritual, rather than secular and practical. They wear cassocks, not trousers. They are teachers whose job is to nurture and care for children, roles traditionally taken as feminine. Most importantly though, they are celibate.

In the seminary, faith, like masculinity itself, is not only innate but also performative. The Brothers seek to establish their faith by denial bound up with the demands of the religious life for bodily ‘purity’ and chastity. Their faith is posited as the false heroic kind of masculinity, ‘centred on sacrifice, stoicism and self-sufficiency’. The Rule, the practice of faith through self-control, is positioned as feminine. The church is ‘Mother Church’ and the celibacy it demands is inimical to healthy manhood. The word ‘unnatural’ is used repeatedly in the film to describe the seminary’s emasculating self-discipline. Self-denial is not shown as heroic but as against normative masculinity and its maintenance, especially around the understanding that ‘real’ or ‘normal’ or ‘masculine’ men need sex, masturbatory at the very least, and optimally with women. Even real-life seminarians sometimes alluded to this sense of emasculation when they referred to the Diaconate, which involved a formal commitment to celibacy, as the ‘de-knackerate’.

In his notes towards a taxonomy of everyday religious figures in feature films, Kozlovic identifies eight basic thematic categories. Category five includes those ‘struggling with vocational, psychotic, erotic or neurotic tensions’ where their vocations are ‘characterised as an unusual inhibitor to the biological thrust of life’. Almost all of the Brothers in The Devil’s Playground in one way or another, fall into this category and fall short of the demands of the Rule with ‘a variety of tragic consequences’.

Brother Victor (Nick Tate), for example, is a problem drinker. His role in the film is to serve as the narrative counterpart of the protagonist, Tom Allen. Like Tom, he is an attractive character who
displays many of the virtues of conventional Australian masculine identity: he drinks, smokes, and swears, and has a mateship relationship with the younger Brother James. He is passionate about football and he is dangerously attracted to women. He teaches manly Maths. In an attempt to settle the contradiction of his presence in the seminary at all, which writer Christos Tsiolkas finds ‘perplexing’, Victor states that he feels he ‘belongs’ in the communal life of the seminary because of its ‘brotherhood’. But ‘brotherhood’ comes at a great cost. Watching the boys at play with a daytime drink in his hand, he comments on his inner turmoil: ‘The devil’s playground. I wish he’d play in someone-else’s playground and leave me alone.’ Through Brother Victor, the film communicates its essential disgust with the seminary’s ‘abnormal’ Rule. When he leaves the seminary to go to the football dressed in civilian clothes, he is glad to be a ‘normal human again’. He argues that the Rule makes the seminary a ‘breeding ground for poofers’. While Victor is what former seminarian Brian Scarlett would recognise as a ‘latitudinarian’ style of seminarian, his opposite is Brother Francine, who suffers from ‘scrupulosity’. Scarlett writes: ‘Scrupulosity [was] acknowledged by all to be a spiritual and psychological peril and likely to lead to an “N.B.” or nervous breakdown.’ This is the fate of Brother Francine.

Of all the Brothers, Francine (Arthur Dignam), with his oddly feminine name, is represented as the most disturbed by the sexual demands of his insistent body. The narrative correspondence for his character is Turner. They are the tortured fanatics. Francine is tormented by his desire for women. He secretly visits the public baths to spy on women’s bodies, and is distracted by erotic dreams, rendered as a nude underwater sequence in the film. The deaths of Turner and the old Brother Sebastian finally unmask Francine. In a long speech, he states his hatred of life. He cries out that he used to have a beautiful body but his ‘body now dominates his mind’, and ‘the mind has sinned’. The audience later learns that Francine has had a breakdown and is in hospital.

The oldest brother, Sebastian (Charles McCallum), is the film’s truth-
sayer. In great age, Sebastian is reconciled. He successfully lives the religious life by privately altering the Rule to make it workable for himself. He tells Tom to ‘stop worrying about being perfect’, and advises him to ‘hang on to life, enjoy life’ because ‘half of the rules are unnecessary and unnatural’. He also warns him about Turner, ‘to be careful of fanatics’. Brother Sebastian makes the plea of the film:

What’s so wrong with masturbation anyway? ... I’ve fought against it for years. All you learn is to hate your body ...
Our religion is based on love and we spent our time hating ourselves. And another thing, what if God isn’t there?’

Sebastian’s death reveals the depth and familial quality of emotional attachment among the men in the teaching order. The grief of Brother Hanrahan (Gerry Duggan), Sebastian’s contemporary and crusty friend, and the other Brothers, is touchingly enacted in the wake scene to the haunting refrain of Erik Satie’s ‘Variations on a Theme’. Francine, who hated Sebastian, intones that ‘he could see right through us’ and that he ‘needs him now’. The death of Brother Sebastian indicates that the old order has died.

In terms of power, the use of which is a defining characteristic of normative masculinity, the Brothers do exercise authority over the boys and many examples occur in the film, including Brother Francine lecturing the boys on the necessity of modesty in the showers and Brother Victor throwing chalk at Tom in class – ‘You’re an idiot Allen. What are you?’ ‘An idiot, Brother.’ Relationships between Brothers and boys however seem to be largely based on mutual respect and affection. The narrative shows that the Brothers are caught up in the same punishing bind, and are as disempowered by it, as their charges.

Finally, Turner’s death indicates the need for change and makes the Brothers realize that the Rule has failed and so have they, as its agents. One Brother asks ‘My God, what have we done?’ and they mutter distractedly to one another about ‘too many rules’,
Josephine May

‘homosexuality, sadism, masochism’, and ‘too much protection’. The junior boys should be in a ‘normal school’. The only dissenter, the one with the most perilous psychic position, is Francine who counters that surely it’s only ‘a few rotten apples’, that ‘it’s worked up until now’ and asks ‘Look at us, nothing wrong with us is there?’ The Devil’s Playground makes a case for a more ‘natural’ life for the boys and men, based on bodily freedom and expression.

At the end of The Devil’s Playground, Tom escapes from the seminary. Hitchhiking, he is delivered out of it by the most ‘normal’ of the Brothers, Victor and James, who pick him up on their way once again to the secular world of football. The last view of Tom is through the reflection of gum trees and sunlight on the window of the car, as it speeds him down the highway to a new life. Tom Allen is a reflective surface, free of the damaging restraint of the Rule, and free to create himself in the wider world. That the ending of the film does not attempt to show what Tom is running toward rings true as a way to capture adolescent experience. He does not know what is ahead. Tom however does know the Rule, which has defined for him what he is not and what he does not want. He has learned that he is not homosexual; that he is not a fanatic; that he does not want to regard his mate as ‘dead’ because he is told to do so; and he knows that the price of attaining the priesthood is too high. He has rejected community in favour of individualism.

Conclusions

It has been argued that The Devil’s Playground presents a range of masculinities and sexualities, while privileging normative heterosexual masculinity. Although the film goes to some lengths to establish Tom’s heterosexuality, his involvement in homosexual acts is accepted. The boy who is designated as ‘homosexual’ is not demonised and his fellow students do not eschew his company. The real deviance in the film is spiritual fanaticism represented by the boys who flagellate themselves to ‘purification’ and the boy who eventually dies of it. The real ‘crime’ is the sexual repression of the Rule.
Josephine May

The Rule of the seminary is discursively constructed in *The Devil's Playground* as unhealthy, unnatural, and in the end, unacceptable. Beyond the Rule, outside of the seminary, lies healthy and natural manhood. Tom escapes from the seminarians' 'abnormal' sexualities and masculinities, which are in a state of endemic crisis due to their subjection to the Rule. When he runs towards freedom, heterosexuality, mateship, football and beer, narratively constructed as 'normal Australian life' in the film, he embraces Australia's dominant idea of masculinity at the time, but as the film shows, only one of its realities.

*The Devil's Playground* enters into historic territory in the production of the modern Western gender order, which according to R.W. Connell, was marked over the last four centuries or so by the triumph of heterosexual conjugal masculinity, and the gradual decline in the idea that celibacy and monastic self-denial constituted the 'most honoured form' of male sexuality. The 1950s in Australia was a turning point in this history when the desirability of this celibate sexuality experienced a last hurrah, epitomised by the large numbers of young men entering the priesthood, never to be seen thereafter, and as yet not properly understood. Schepisi's story is emblematic of this decisive moment in the long decline in cultural authority of an ancient and previously honoured way of being a Catholic man in the world, the celibate priest. His film contributes to the trend by raising the lid on the disordered sexual culture of the minor seminary created by the old Rules. In recent years, the decline in the prestige of the celibate masculinity of the priesthood continues with the ongoing revelations of sexual abuse of children within the church in such films as *Mystic River* (Eastwood, 2003) and *Bad Education* (Almodóvar, 2004).

At another level Schepisi employs the 'double vision' of film by using the 1950s setting to speak from and to the film's present, the 1970s, to promote the idea of the 'naturalness' of insistent male sexuality. In its forthright treatment of its subject matter *The Devil's Playground* affirms the growing openness about sex and the advocacy of sexual
Josephine May

freedoms of the 1970s. However I would suggest that it also addresses
the challenge to normative heterosexual masculinity posed by feminist
critiques in films like Journey Among Women (Cowan, 1976) and My
Brilliant Career (Armstrong, 1979). Schepisi’s film, which is about
the ‘crisis’ of masculinities, especially at the site of the body, reflects
a fear of feminising power, represented by the emasculating Rule. The
assault upon the primacy of patriarchal relations offered by the
women’s movement provoked a reassertion of the desirability of
normative heterosexual masculinity and its healthy sexual exercise.
Let the boys be boys and the men be men is The Devil’s Playground’s
central cri de coeur.

Notes

1 The Devil’s Playground (Fred Schepisi dir., The Film House, 1976). The film was selected
for the Director’s Fortnight at the Cannes Festival and won Best Film, Best Director, Best
Actor (Simon Burke and Nick Tate), Best Cinematography, Best Original Screenplay and the
Jury Prize at the 1976 Australian Film Awards. Many sources have noted the film’s success.
See, for example, Sandra Hal Critical Business: The New Australian Cinema in Review
Adelaide: Rigby, 1985, p. 56.
2 The author has referred in a previous study to Peter White and Simon Burke’s invaluable
work on the opening sequences of post 1950s films as a ‘film within a film, a microcosm
which projected the values, thematic concerns and aesthetic qualities of the film itself’, in
their article ‘The Grammar of Cinema: Typology in Australian Films in the 1950s’ Metro
Disenchantment Of Childhood: Exploring The Cultural And Spatial Boundaries Of Childhood
in Three Australian Feature Films, 1920s-1970s’ Pedagogica Historica 2006 (forthcoming)
4 Tom O’Regan ‘Australian film in the 1970s: the ocker and the quality film’
6 The other two films are Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir dir., South Australian Film
Corporation, 1975) and The Getting of Wisdom (Bruce Beresford dir., Southern Cross Film
7 Tom O’Regan, ‘Film in the 1970s: The Ocker and the Quality Film’ From: Australian
Feature Films, CD ROM produced by RMIT and The Australian Catalogue of New Films &
Videos 1995.
8 Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, The Screening of Australia. Volume 2 Anatomy of a
9 For a discussion of these themes in the other two films see Jo May, ‘Imagining the
Secondary School: the ‘pictorial turn’ and representations of secondary schools in two
(forthcoming).

Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies
Vol.10, no.1, January 2006
Josephine May

11 Schepisi had attended the Juniorate of the Victorian Marist Brothers at Mount Macedon. See Peter Malone 'Brides of Christ in Devil's Playgrounds' in John Benson, Ken Berryman and Wayne Levy editors Screening the Past: the Sixth Australian History and Film Conference Papers The Sixth Australian History and Film Conference, 1993, c/- the Media Centre, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Melbourne, 1993, p.64.
14 Schepisi said that the film 'unerved a lot of people.' in David Stratton The Last New Wave. The Australian Film Revival Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980, p.133.
15 The Devil's Playground was shot on location at the Chirnside mansion in Werribee, Victoria, the long-time home of Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi College did not however have a 'Juniorate' and therefore did not take 13 year olds as the seminary in the film did. Nevertheless students could begin there at 16 years. The details and flavour of the Rule there are indicative. See Brian Scarlett, 'Making Godly Men' Eureka Street Jan-Feb 1997: 16-18.
16 Val Noone, 'Post-war Catholic Intellectual Life A View From the Seminary' Footprints June 1999: 2-28, p. 2. For some idea of the quantum of students that this involved overall, see 'Cassocks in the Wilderness: Remembering the Seminary at Springwood' ABC Radio Religion Report, On Wednesday 6/2/2002. www.abc.net.au/religion accessed 6 January 2006. 'In 1963/64 ... within the geographical confines of the Sydney archdiocese, there were 135 students studying for the priesthood at the seminary at Manly. 165 students at the seminary at Springwood, in the Blue Mountains, and a further 183 students in other seminaries around Sydney, run by various religious orders, like the Vincentians, the Passionist fathers, the Marist, the Jesuits and so on. 483 student priests, just in Sydney at that one time, and there were comparable numbers in Melbourne and elsewhere.'
18 Noone 'Post-war Catholic Intellectual Life', p.16.
19 Brian Scarlett, 'Making Godly Men', p.16.
22 Maurice Ryan, 'Remembering Religious Education' p.4 According to Ryan, the end of the 1950s represented a turning point in 'some dominant forms of Catholic life in Australia'. This same terrain was canvassed in the more recent all female Catholic television drama The Brides of Christ (ABC Television, 1991).
Josephine May

24 Malone, ‘Brides of Christ in Devil’s Playgrounds’, p.65. In this conference paper, Malone had asserted that The Devil’s Playground was a 1970s interpretation of the 1950s. As is shown Schepisi categorically denied this.
29 Tsiolkas, The Devil’s Playground, p.8.
30 For the classic statement of hegemonic Australian masculine identity see Russel Ward The Australian Legend Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1958, especially Chapter 1 ‘The Legend Explained’.
32 Kirkam & Thumim (eds) You Tarzan, p.23.
35 Among the minor characters, young Brother James (Peter Cox) is studious; Brother Celian (John Frawley) attends to his administrative functions and Brother Arnold (Jonathan Hardy) only seems at peace with himself.
36 At Nick Tate’s website his role in The Devil’s Playground is described as the ‘alcoholic Brother Victor’. See www.nicktate.com
37 Tsiolkas, The Devil’s Playground ‘a.1.
38 Apparently, although called to enact severe sexual restraint in chastity, young men were attracted by ‘the masculinity of the life’, its barrack room quality. Brian Scarlett, “Making Godly Men’, p.18.