May, Jo & Ramsland, John 'The Disenchantment Of Childhood: Exploring The Cultural And Spatial Boundaries Of Childhood in Three Australian Feature Films, 1920s-1970s' *Paedagogica Historica* issue 1 2007.

Abstract

In this paper our primary concern is to outline the cultural and spatial boundaries delineated in the representation of children and childhood in a selection of Australian feature films. To this end we explore in some depth the depiction of children's worlds in three films: *The Kid Stakes* (Ordell, 1927), *Smiley* (Kimmins, 1956), and *Storm Boy* (Safran, 1976). The analysis canvasses class, gender, race and ethnic, as well as geographic, boundaries. These films demonstrate the historicity of the concept of childhood in Australian cinema. They show how over time the boundaries between children and adults became blurred and, while free movement through the landscape was maintained, children's worlds became more restricted and emotionally laden. In Weberian terms, childhood became increasingly disenchanted. These findings are supported by childhood research based on other approaches and sources. At the same time we contextualise the films under discussion and begin the larger task of constructing a map of the two genres of Australian feature films about childhood: children's films and films about children. To this end, the paper traces the brief prominence of the child as central character in *The Kid Stakes*, through the 1950s when there was something of a 'golden age' of films about children, to the re-emergence of child-centred films in the 1970s.

Introduction

The use of images to explore the representation of childhood over time is a well recognised historical methodology. Not so well recognised is the similar, although more multi-faceted, use of feature films to explore this terrain. In this paper we begin to chart the changing representations of childhood in Australian feature films from the 1920s until the 1970s. The analysis concentrates on three films: *The Kid Stakes* (Ordell, 1927), *Smiley* (Kimmins, 1956), and *Storm Boy* (Safran, 1976). We show how over time the boundaries between children and adults became blurred and, while children's free movement through the landscape was maintained, children's worlds became more restricted and emotionally laden. In doing so we extend to the realm of the feature film Jeroen Dekker's use of the concept of disenchantment in his study of twentieth century European childhood.¹ Disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) is a term taken from the Romantic movement, notably from Freidrich Schiller, and employed by Max Weber, to describe the process of secular modernity.² It is variously understood as 'de-divinisation' ('God' has gone from the world) or 'de-magification' or secularisation.³ The disenchanted childhood is one that is knowable and open to impersonal forces.

Dekker wrote that during the twentieth century, 'many aspects of children's life were disenchanted and a conflict between Romanticism and Disenchantment was present in education and child rearing.'⁴ This conflict also became apparent increasingly over time in the changing representations of childhood in Australian feature films. In the first film we examine, *The Kid Stakes*, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are clear-cut, and the Romantic view of childhood is unequivocally shown, however in *Smiley*, as boundaries blur, the conflict manifests as a deep ambivalence about the experience of childhood. By the time of *Storm Boy* childhood as a separate magic place no longer exists, and the child is open to the storms of adult life, and must be given the 'truth' about adult affairs if it is to flourish. Childhood is disenchanted. Before we demonstrate our findings, however, the paper frames the analysis in the various definitions of western childhood described in the literature.

Defining the Boundaries of Western Childhood and Children in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century, interest in the needs and rights of children moved towards the centre of international and national thinking about the future and about the nature and shaping of the 'good' society, especially in the western world. This movement can be traced from 1900 when Ellen Key published *The Century of the Child*, her influential,

¹ Jeroen Dekker. "The Century of the Child revisited." *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 8 (2000): 133-150.

² Mariano Artigas. "The Mind of the Universe: Understanding Science and Religion" The University of Notre Dame, October 21st, 2000. Published in: Alice Ramos and Marie I. George (editors), *Faith, Scholarship, and Culture in the 21st Century* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 113-125. and available at www.unav.es/cryf/themindofuniversenotredame.html

³ Richard Jenkins. "Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium" *Max Weber Studies* 1, no.1 (November 2000): 11-32.; See also the original speech published 1919 in which Weber outlined his idea of 'disenchantment' in Max Weber "Science as Vocation" in *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*. translated, edited and introduced, H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

⁴ Dekker, "The Century of the Child revisited," 143.

utopian vision of the centrality of children in the achievement of a better future, to its apotheosis in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This Convention, among other things, acknowledged children's 'evolving capacities', enshrined the rights of children to be heard in any decision affecting her or his life, and enjoined adults to have a duty of care in the protection of those rights.⁵ According to Dekker: 'The twentieth century became more child-oriented ... in particular since the 1970s [it] became more child-focused than ever before.'⁶ This increasing societal emphasis on the child was reflected in growth of child-centred narratives in literature,⁷ and over time in cinema, as the technology and its use became more widespread and sophisticated, and its audience became vast. Cinema quickly became the vernacular of popular culture in Australia and elsewhere.

Notions of childhood in twentieth century narrative film reflected the *mélange* of historic views that had grown up about children and childhood. These ideas, which had their genesis in Enlightenment Europe, carved out a unique childhood space in the social landscape, the boundaries of which protected a type of consciousness and sphere of activity separate to the adult world. Furthermore these notions never quite supplanted one another, although certain understandings gained dominance at different periods.⁸ For example, there was a cluster of main ideas regarding childhood and children that had crystallised at the end of the nineteenth century which carried over strongly into the twentieth. These ideas included: the notion that children were innately good and should be allowed to develop 'naturally', echoing Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of the 'noble savage'; that children were innocent and 'childhood was the best time of life', argued by the Romantic movement; as well as Lockean ideas that the child was a *tabula rasa* or empty vessel. The final influential view arose from the biblical concept of original sin: children were sinners who needed to be disciplined and educated towards goodness and virtue.⁹ These ideas formed the boundaries of the childhood as belonging to 'a separate and different type of human being through a range of dividing practices'.¹⁰

The current western construction of childhood as an idealised space 'quarantined' from the adult world, a 'garden of delight', is under increasing attack. It has been argued that the reality of children's lives in the latter part of twentieth century showed that this separate territory was shrinking and being invaded. Postman went so far as to argue that technological change, primarily television, has caused to be dismantled the essential boundary markers (made up of adult 'secrets') between adulthood and childhood, and

⁵ Beverley Pennell, "Ozzie Kids Flee the Garden of Delight: Reconfigurations of Childhood in Australian Children's Fictions" *Papers* 13, no.2 (2003): 5-14, 6.

⁶ Dekker, "The Century of the Child revisited," 143.

⁷ See E. Storr & M.C.J. Rudolf, "Once upon a time" *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 88, issue 6 (June 2003): 545-549.

⁸ Researchers now agree that prevailing ideas about childhood and children are culturally and historically constructed. Seminal works in this field include Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, London: Cape, 1962; Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1982; Hugh Cunningham, *Childhood and Children in Western Society Since 1500*, London, Longman, 1995. See also Goddard, Chris "The construction of childhood at the end of the millennium. A clash of symbols" *Children Australia* 25, no.1 (2000): 37-40.

⁹ Dekker, "The Century of the Child revisited," *passim*.

¹⁰ Dave Palmer and Garry Gillard "Indigenous Youth and Ambivalence in some Australian Films" *Journal of Australian Studies* 82 (2004): 75-84 plus notes 186-187, 75. Palmer and Gillard are referring to youth in this way, but the same can be said of childhood, indeed of any age grouping.

childhood has ‘disappeared’. Dekker as already mentioned has called this process the ‘disenchantment’ of childhood.

Australian cinema during the period discussed here, from the 1920s until the 1970s, demonstrates that filmmakers were keen to chart this changing childhood territory and to utilise it to make important comments about the nature of Australian society and culture. In what follows we define children as those persons who have not yet acquired secondary sex characteristics, and uphold the historic norm of childhood ending at about fourteen.¹¹ We maintain that cinema about pubescent youth forms another genre with different conceptual bases and agendas. Further we agree with Stratton that there are two distinct genres of child-centred films: children’s films and films about children, although we find that the most successful of the children’s films overlapped both genres, that is, adult members of the audience were catered for in the narrative and/or in the style of humour.¹² We begin our analysis with one such children’s film and one of the first Australian feature films made specifically about children, the silent classic, *The Kid Stakes*.¹³

A Discrete Territory of Childhood in *The Kid Stakes* (1927)

Eric Reade’s pioneering book *Australian Silent Films* illustrates how little interest was shown in the child-centred film in the silent era, with the notable exception of *The Kid Stakes*.¹⁴ Although *The Kid Stakes* had tended to be dismissed as a children’s film, it is now viewed as one of the major films of the Australian silent cinema.¹⁵ The film was directed by entertainer Tal Ordell, starred his son, Robin ‘Pop’ Ordell, and was released in 1927. It was based on the Fatty Finn cartoon characters created by Syd Nicholls which appeared in the *Sunday News* in Sydney. The character of Fatty Finn therefore had already been popularised and had a strong following. The story of *The Kid Stakes* is set in the inner city streets of impoverished Woolloomooloo where it was mainly filmed and in nearby wealthy Potts Point. This is a very different Australia to the bush and beach basis of many subsequent Australian films representing childhood, as well as most of the films being produced at the time. The film tells of the rivalry between two working class children’s gangs, one ‘good’ led by Hubert ‘Fatty’ Finn (whom we are told, is called Fatty because he was not fat) and the other ‘tough’ led by the bully Bruiser Murphy. The episodic plot turns on the competition between the boys and girls of the two gangs to win the Billy Goat Derby at the end of the film, featuring real goats, hence the witty double entendre of the title.

The Kid Stakes is self-consciously populist and aggressively Australian with its contemporary ‘warts and all’ urban setting and working class focus. In representing the Australian milieu, it displays ‘an insistence upon its own ordinary ugliness’ noted ‘as a

¹¹ Pennell, “Ozzie Kids Flee the Garden of Delight,” 8.

¹² David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation. Boom and Bust in the Australian Film Industry*. Melbourne: Pan Macmillan, 1990, 340 & 348.

¹³ There is another film mentioned by Lindsay Foyle in his online history of Ginger Meggs, “The Most Important Boy in Australia: 75 Years of Ginger Meggs” www.hinet.net.au, accessed 30 March 2005. The film is called *Those Terrible Twins*, starring Ginger Meggs, and apparently playing to ‘packed houses in 1925.’

¹⁴ Eric Reade, *Australian Silent Films. A Pictorial History 1890-1929* Melbourne: Landsdowne, 1970.

¹⁵ Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1971 A Guide to Feature Film Production*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980, 178; Brian McFarlane *et al The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999, 250.

challenge that Australian cinema repeats to this day'.¹⁶ The film seems to have been influenced in style and structure by the highly successful Hollywood *Our Gang* silent films.¹⁷ However, Routt has placed it inside of the Australian film-making tradition as drawing on the earlier classic *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919). He claimed that the film was deliberately Australian 'as part of a strategy to appeal to a broad popular audience.'¹⁸ He further suggested that *The Kid Stakes*, as one of the few examples of Australian slapstick comedy, has modernist features in that it begins with a cross-media reference to its origins as a cartoon. This self-referentiality occurs in the opening scene in which 'Fatty' asks the cartoonist Syd Nicholls who is working away at his comic strip: 'what sort of job have I got to do this week Mr Nicholls?'. The idea of modernity, with its central apprehension that time is speeding up, is neatly alluded to in the next series of intertitles that read:

1. 'This is the age of speed.';
2. 'In comparison with the past we are born faster, live faster, eat faster, make love faster, get married faster, get divorced faster and die faster.';
3. 'Every modern child is a potential speed demon.'; and
4. 'Fatty Finn, the world's greatest speed king.'

This leads directly into a dream sequence, another feature of modernist film-making, in which Fatty daydreams winning the golden cup at a racing car meeting. McFarlane has written that, given its cartoon origins, the 'picture of childhood presented here is surprisingly delicately observed. There is slapstick and farce ... but there is also the wonderfully realistic cricket match on the vacant lot, and the fight between Fatty and the rich boy from Potts Point.'¹⁹

The representation of children and childhood in *The Kid Stakes*, is marked out as an almost entirely separate space from the adult world. The only time that the adults in the film - a corpulent policeman, Constable Claffey, in the style of Oliver Hardy, an Italian suburbanite, a Chinese green grocer, a pair of lovers (Horatio and Madeleine), the rich Mr Twirt and his gardener - intrude upon their world is either to help or hinder the children in their endeavours. The streets mostly belong to the children and they are never shown inside any buildings: they are either on the street, congregated on a vacant block of land, or in the backyard, or ultimately, at the races. They seem to roam this borderless urban frontier at will. However the cultural boundaries of the adult world, including those based on gender, class and race, are curiously mirrored although the children literally *play* with and within these boundaries which are empty of any real power or malevolence.

The children's relationships within and between the gangs mirror prevailing gender norms. Both gangs are led by competitive, dominant boys who have trusted 'lieutenants' and a raggle-taggle assortment of mainly little boys identified by nicknames. Both gang

¹⁶ Bill Routt, "More Australian than Aristotelian: The Australian Bushranger Film, 1904-1914", *Senses of Cinema*, no. 18 (January-February 2002).

¹⁷ Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema. The First Eighty Years* Sydney: Angus & Robertson Currency Press, 1983, 86.

¹⁸ William D. Routt, "'Shall We Jazz?' - Modernism in Australian Films of the '20s" *Senses of Cinema*, no. 9 (Sep-Oct 2000).

¹⁹ McFarlane, *The Oxford Companion*, 250.

leaders make decisions about what the gang will do and when. They also have 'girlfriends' who ape Australian feminine stereotypes: the 'damned whore' can be found in Bruiser Murphy's tough no-nonsense girlfriend Betty Briggs who is always depicted in the act of powdering her nose and is revealed in one scene as tougher than Bruiser himself; and in Fatty's girlfriend, Kitty Kelly, who is shown as a resolute member of 'God's Police', always on the side of 'good'. At one stage Kitty whispers in Fatty's ear a suggestion that he dress up as a girl in order to escape from Constable Claffey, and he replies: 'Gee! Fancy a girl having a beaut idea like that. You should have been a boy.' The bashful courtship between Fatty and Kitty is one narrative arc in the film. The adult courtship of the wealthy Madeleine Twirt and Horatio John Wart ('whose heart is in the right place although his face has slipped a bit') provides a narrative counterpoint for the children's 'love' relationships. In their balcony love scene, Madeleine and Horatio seem to provide homage to the incorporation of *Romeo and Juliet* in the *The Sentimental Bloke*. However, while normative gender roles are playfully re-enacted in *The Kid Stakes*, social class is problematized.

The narrative element of class is most forcefully introduced in the figure of Algie Snoops, a lonely little rich boy from the wealthy, elevated suburb of Potts Point. Algie, we are told, 'longed to play with other children' and that 'under his velvet jacket beats a hot and restless heart'. When he makes his first appearance, he stands peering down through the bars of the fence that separates his Potts Point 'prison' from the streets of neighbouring Woolloomooloo below where Fatty's gang runs free. The intertitle caption for this moment reads: 'The call of the wild'. After escaping into this 'wild' territory, Algie must endure the torrent of ridicule from the boys and girls of Fatty's gang, then fight Fatty himself, before he is accepted and is allowed to stay, having successfully crossed the boundary and negotiated a rite of passage in working class masculinity. It is upper class Algie who is deprived of the freedom of a 'natural' childhood and association with normal fun-loving Australian working class culture. Further, the gate at the top of the steps between Woolloomooloo and Potts Point, through which Fatty and his gang enter the territory of the upper class, is broken and watched over by the sleeping policeman, symbolically indicating that class boundaries in Australia are poorly maintained and permeable. The egalitarian myth is thus affirmed.

Racial stereotypes are a more malign feature of *The Kid Stakes*. At times Fatty's gang seems to include an Aboriginal boy, at least when at play on the vacant block in Woolloomooloo, although he does not appear in the group that ventures up the stairs to Potts Point in search of Fatty's goat Hector. He is featured though performing a strange joyful solo dance in front of the gang when, at the film's end, Fatty and Hector win the Kid Stakes. This scene had a distinct resonance of the racist notion of childlike ebullience depicted as a characteristic of African Americans in early Hollywood films. Another stereotypical inclusion is the southern European man, swarthy and complete with gold earring, who appears when Fatty breaks his window in the cricket game: the intertile inscription has him remonstrating: 'Fatta da Finn hitta da ball, smasha da win.' Finally there is the Chinese green grocer who inadvertently helps one of Fatty's gang to escape and when questioned by the Constable Chaffey, replies 'No Savee'. The saving grace of all this is the definite understanding that Australia in the mid 1920s was multicultural even though the cultural mythology was unproblematically white. There is a clear sense

however of 'White Australian' ascendancy in cultural terms, rather awkwardly juxtaposed against the egalitarian myth.

The representation of childhood in this early example of child-centred Australian cinema features a white, working class little boy who is master of his discrete childhood urban domain. Fatty is a bit of a scallywag, but his intentions are mostly good. He undertakes no emotional journey in the film. This static loveable figure of the boy was clearly a transportable image. In *The Kid Stakes* Ordell transferred the cartoon character of Fatty Finn into the medium of cinema. Fatty Finn in turn seems to be related to the nineteenth century cartoon representation of Australia, The Little Boy from Manly, created by Livingston Hopkins in April 1885 for the *Bulletin*, and which continued to be used as a symbol long after Federation. Furthermore this character of the boy has continued to be renewed in Australian cinema, especially with the 1950s upsurge in interest in the child-centred film. However, while *The Kid Stakes* presents the Romantic view of childhood with Fatty and friends as 'noble savages' having the best, most carefree time of life, the next film for discussion, *Smiley* (1956) exemplifies the increasing conflict between the Romantic and Disenchanted view of childhood that results in an ambivalent representation of children's experiences.

1950s and the Dissolving Boundaries of Childhood: *Smiley* (Kimmins 1956)

While there were few films about or for children in the 1930s, with the notable, and for some forgettable, exception of *Seven Little Australians* (Arthur Collins, 1939),²⁰ child-centred cinema underwent something of a golden age in the postwar period. In these films, however, childhood is no longer represented as a play area, but instead is beset by various adult problematics, including adult crime (*Bush Christmas*, Ralph Smart, 1947), childlessness and cultural assimilation (*Jedda*, Chauvel, 1955), and marriage breakdown and abandonment (*The Shiralee*, Leslie Norman, 1957). Films such as these were produced mostly with British funding at a time when the local industry was near collapse. The British interest was stimulated by the establishment of the Children's Film Foundation.²¹ One of the most successful of these films was *Smiley* (1956), which was based on the novel by Moore Raymond who also wrote the screenplay, and which was directed by Englishman Anthony Kimmins. The film has been well received by commentators on Australian film as 'an unusually honest', affectionate and unsentimental view of the bush society²² with 'an authentic Australian feel'.²³

Smiley transports the earlier idea of the little boy as depicted in *The Kid Stakes* and updates it for the earnest aspirations of the postwar audience. This time, while still based on a cartoon character, Ginger Meggs, the little boy, nine year old Smiley (Colin Petersen) lives in a small country town called Murrumbilla. Smiley is an only child to Ma

²⁰ Shirley & Adams, *Australian Cinema. The First Eighty Years*, 86. The 1930s was mainly given over to adult themes including comedies, romances, bushrangers, pioneers. According to Pike and Cooper, *Seven Little Australians* was a 'crudely made and rambling film.' *Australian Film 1900-1971*, 244.

²¹ From 1944 until 1950, the Rank Organisation ran a Children's Entertainment Film (CEF) division. The Children's Film Foundation was launched on 7 June 1951 following the Wheare Committee on Children and the Cinema. Rowana Agajanian, "Just for kids?: Saturday morning cinema and Britain's Children Film" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. August, 1998, http://www.powell-pressburger.org/Reviews/72_BWTY/CFF.html

²² Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1971*, 289.

²³ McFarlane, *The Oxford Companion*, 457.

Greevins (Margaret Christensen), a respectable working class woman who takes in washing to support the family, and the feckless Pa Greevins (Reg Lye), who is a drover with a drinking and gambling problem. The story revolves around Smiley's quest to buy a Ralieg bicycle, 'four pound delivered to your door'. Three times, by dint mostly of hard work, he amasses and loses some of the capital to purchase the bicycle. The climax of the film comes when Smiley becomes lost in the bush, believing that he has killed his father in a fit of passion (caused when he found out that Pa Greevins had stolen his savings to gamble) and that he had innocently smuggled opium to the Aborigines. The whole town searches for Smiley, but he is found by an immigrant stranger, Bill McVie, a British remittance man cum boundary rider and dingo trapper. To cap it off Smiley is bitten by the snake he had first warned McVie about, and is rushed to hospital by a posse of mounted searchers. The film ends at the local dance with McVie presenting Smiley with the bicycle for saving his life.

As in other postwar films the childhood depicted in *Smiley* is far more complex and careworn than that shown in *The Kid Stakes*. Rather than slapstick comedy, the film is social realist in approach. In *Smiley*, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood have become blurred, and the child's world is contaminated by adult culture and adult subterfuge. Shaped as a quest, the little boy Smiley undergoes a significant emotional journey. White and Burke maintained that by the 1950s the titles of a film had become a 'film within a film, a microcosm which projected the values, thematic concerns and aesthetic qualities of the film itself' and *Smiley* is a fine example of this feature.²⁴

The film opens with the voice of Ma Greevins sternly calling Smiley's name as the credits roll and the Australian landscape is majestically portrayed: just as society intrudes upon the natural world, so does the adult world intrude upon the child's domain. Child and nature are co-extensive and must be tamed.²⁵ Smiley responds over the opening credits: 'Coming Mum.' The premise is established: Smiley's adventures in growing up mainly concern his interactions and negotiations with the adult world which makes demands of him to learn its hard lessons. Further Smiley is responding to his mother's call to learn a different, more responsible style of masculinity than that represented by his father, the quintessential 'boom and bust' bushman outlined by Russell Ward in 1958 in *The Australian Legend* as the Australian 'mystique'.²⁶

Family relationships, almost entirely absent from *The Kid Stakes*, are problematised in *Smiley*. Smiley's childhood home, while reflecting the nuclear family structure which had its apotheosis in the postwar period, is not a happy one. His poor, working class parents have a difficult marriage. The father is absent for most of the film driving cattle. He is depicted as shiftless,²⁷ a man who cannot control his gambling and drinking to such an

²⁴ Peter White & Simon Burke, "The Grammar of Cinema: Typography in Australian Films in the 1950s" *Metro Magazine*, 129/130 (Spring 2001): 240-246, 246.

²⁵ Stuart Hanson "Children in film" in Jean Mills and Richard Mills eds *Childhood Studies. A Reader in Perspectives of Childhood*. London: Routledge, 2000, 147. Hanson has listed five themes that are prevalent in the social construction of childhood: child as nature is the first. The other four are: child as 'incomplete adult'; child as vulnerable and in need of protection; gender identity and transgression; and child's condition as comment on social condition.

²⁶ Russell Ward *The Australian Legend*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1958, Chapter 1 "The Legend Explained", passim.

²⁷ McFarlane, *The Oxford Companion*, 457.

extent that he steals his son's hard earned savings from under his pillow. Despite this, throughout the film Smiley wants his father's approval and tries hard to achieve the bicycle before his father returns from droving. At one point he says: 'Dad'll be flabbergasted when he comes home and sees me with a bike'; and at another, Smiley prays: 'Will thou please have mercy on my soul and help me to buy a bike before Dad gets home?' Indeed much of the narrative and temporal momentum of the film is driven by the four cutaway scenes of the approach of the cattle drive, emphasising the importance of the father's return (as well as providing opportunities to showcase quintessential Australian bush images of the 'wide brown land'). Smiley's mother is a long-suffering martyr to her marriage, emotionally distant, when not overtly angry. She is openly critical of her husband to Smiley and to the wider community: for example, she comments at church that her husband's imminent return, will be 'Too soon if you ask me.' She demands that Smiley work and be responsible: to chastise him she claims that he is 'becoming more like your father everyday' and that he doesn't 'care either' that she has to take in washing for half the town. Smiley's best mate Joe comments: 'Gee your mum's a terror' and Smiley is defensively indignant on his mother's behalf. Further Smiley's relations with his family are echoed in the sad punishing relationship of the middle class School Principal Mr Stevens (Bud Tingwell) and his fat obnoxious son, Fred. It is through Fred that the notion of class snobbery is explored. Fred introduces Smiley to the mail order catalogue with the bike in it, while asserting that a 'menial' like Smiley, the 'son of a washerwoman', would never be able to afford one.

In terms of class, *Smiley* can be read as a tough capitalist homily in praise of the Protestant work ethic and middle class rectitude required to amass material goods and overcome the disadvantages of coming from the working poor. Indeed the surprising aspect of the childhood depicted in *Smiley* is the amount of work the child undertakes during the course of the film. His early comment that he is 'a beast of burden, a miserable beast of burden' appears to be true. No matter which adult he comes into contact with, and there are many, Smiley ends up working for them in some way. This is often shown as a kindness on the adults' behalf because they are helping Smiley achieve his goal of buying a bicycle. In the course of the film Smiley raises money in a variety of ways: he catches and sells crawchies, chops wood, grooms the horse and cleans its saddle and bridle for the town's policeman, Sergeant Flaxman (Chips Rafferty), rings the bells at church ('one penny per tintinnabulation'), incredibly leaves home with his little mate Joe for three weeks to act as a roustabout for the shearing shed at one pound a week each, busks at the pub, and unknowingly, runs drugs to the Aborigines. Rarely shown as playing, Smiley literally runs from one job to another. There are eight separate passages showing Smiley running through the sun drenched Australian countryside and only two when he is shown walking. While this was intended in all likelihood to indicate Smiley's youthful energy and enthusiasm, it rather speaks to Smiley's manic desire (and perhaps need) for a bike. For all of his great efforts, however, Smiley loses all or some of his savings three times: once to vandalism (having to pay for a broken window), once to gambling (in an ominous echo of his father's profligacy he loses a pound at 2-Up to the mantra of 'if you don't speculate, you can't accumulate'), and once to theft by his father. In the end Smiley receives the bicycle, not because of his efforts, but because of his heroism. In a rite of passage sequence of separation, ambiguity and re-integration that sits uneasily at the film's end, Smiley literally almost dies to come to his new life as the

worthy owner of a bike. Hidden by the Australian flag, the bicycle is unveiled as the promise of the young country to those who earn it – at least to white male Australians.

Race and gender boundaries in *Smiley* are clearly delineated. For example, amid the film's normative whiteness, the river, where Smiley has his secret place 'beyond the ken of mankind', forms a physical, social, and cultural barrier in the town that separates black from white. The Aboriginal camp, on the 'other side', displays Aboriginal poverty, drug use, separation and oppression. Smiley swims the river to deliver to 'King Billy' what he has been told by the devious publican Rankin is chocolate, but which actually contains opium. Nor are Aborigines the only victims of opium: Chinese market gardener, 'Charlie Coy' and his wife are reported 'dead to the world' from the effects of the drug. Another Chinese man, Willy or Ah Foo, assists Rankin in his trade. As in *The Kid Stakes*, the presentation of the racial landscape of 'Murrumbilla' is unvarnished. Further both films represent whiteness in Australian society as a culturally dominant racial form, rather than depicting a society that is culturally homogenous. Similarly, normative gender stereotypes are affirmed, including the homosocial nature of Australian boy culture. Echoing Anzac notions of masculine society Smiley's closest relationship is with his best mate Joe. They play, work, sleep and fight side by side. They have nothing to do with girls, although they are keenly interested to observe the courtship between the nubile young female teacher and Sergeant Flaxman. Adult females are vocal, especially Ma Greevins who does not accept her domesticity with equanimity, and the school teacher Miss Workman who has an independent spirit. Female children though are hardly heard and rarely seen in the film, and when they are, it is inside the classroom or the church. The open spaces belong to males, even if they do not enjoy them so much as occupy them.²⁸

The childhood in *Smiley* ultimately fails to portray the child's world as that of the Romantic innocent, the noble savage, and as the best time of life. Although the character of Smiley echoes not only Ginger Meggs but also his American counterpart, Huckleberry Finn, Smiley is burdened by the fact that there is 'no territory to light out into'. His destiny is to be civilised as bicycle owner and breadwinner. His childhood is already compromised by the knowledge of his father's inadequacy, his mother's resentment, the perfidy of adults like the publican, and the random danger in the bush. The conflict between the 'magic' childhood that the film struggles to show, and the harshness of the society it depicts, produces an ambivalent portrait and points to the disenchantment of childhood. Further the unbounded interaction between children and the landscape in *The Kid Stakes* gives way in *Smiley* to a more uneasy relationship where the landscape must be negotiated with some care. This disenchantment and unease are deepened in the next film under consideration, *Storm Boy*.

The New Wave of the 1970s: *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976)

During the 1950s, the film industry was 'dog-paddling' and a little over twenty feature films were made in Australia, often financed and produced overseas. In the first three

²⁸ *Smiley* was followed by *Smiley Gets a Gun* (producer-director, Anthony Kimmins 1958) was not only less successful but also did not have the original's 'complexity and charm.' The projected third film *Smiley Wins the Ashes* was abandoned. Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1971*, 296. Graham and Adams claimed that it substituted 'the harsh social background [of the original film] with a string of clichés typified by a pet kangaroo and a hidden cache of gold.' *Australian Cinema. The First Eighty Years*, 205.

years of the 1970s however the number of films produced exceeded that of the 1950s and 1960s combined.²⁹ This 'new wave' of Australian film production in the 1970s was characterised by two types of films: the commercially-driven 'ocker' films and the 'quality' films self-consciously promoted as a cinema, that is, as 'a body of art works'. The latter group included such films as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *Sunday too Far Away* (1975), *Caddie* (1976), *The Devil's Playground* (1976), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1976), *Newsfront* (1978), and *My Brilliant Career* (1979). These quality films were 'the flagships of the film revival as well as carrying the burden for communicating the unique nature of Australian identity.'³⁰ With high production values, they possessed lyrical cinematography featuring the Australian landscape, atmospheric plots, and were all concerned in way or another with growing up and 'throwing off repressive authority'.³¹ *Storm Boy* (1976), one of the most successful of the quality films,³² exhibits all of these features, and is the only one aimed specifically at the children's market.

Storm Boy is the rite of passage story of Mike, an unhappy and lonely ten year old boy being raised by his embittered father, 'Hideaway Tom'. Together they live in a ramshackle hut without modern conveniences on the deserted edge of the South Australian coastal reserve known as the Coorong. Kept from formal education, Mike is illiterate and struggling with his longing for his mother (whom he believes left them because she had died) and his desire to be with other people, represented in the film as the flickering lights of Goolwa, a town on other side of the bay. In the course of the film, Mike makes friends with a pelican, Mr Percival, and an Aboriginal man, Fingerbone Bill, who gives him his name, 'Storm Boy' ('You run like a black fella ... like the wind'). Storm Boy eventually learns that his father, after lecturing him about the importance of honesty for manhood - 'Lyn's about as low as a man can get' - has lied to him about his mother who left them both first, then died later in car accident. He also loses his beloved Mr Percival to a hunter's bullet. In the end, sadder but wiser, plans are made for the child to join the world and attend school. While Pike and Cooper have said that this film is 'a romantic portrait of a boy growing up close to nature and isolated from the disciplines and disillusionments of more conventional childhoods,'³³ McFarlane more tellingly reflected the film's more serious, overlapping themes 'of alienation, marginalisation, and loss that connect Storm Boy, the outcast 'Fingerbone' Bill, and the pelicans.'³⁴ As the child interacts with the Aboriginal man, with his father and with the environment/ Nature (Mr Percival), the film builds a powerful, sad portrait of Australian disillusionment in late modernity, and offers a way forward out of this predicament. *Storm Boy's* didactic function is to assert that the answer to the problematics of Aboriginal dispossession, environmental despoliation and personal alienation lies not in withdrawal and protecting boundaries, but in coming into honest and respectful relationship with each condition. In

²⁹ White & Burke, "The Grammar of Cinema", 241.

³⁰ Jo May "Imagining the Secondary School: the 'pictorial turn' and representations of secondary schools in two Australian feature films of the 1970s", *History of Education Review* 35, no.1 (2006): 13-22, 15.

³¹ Sylvia Lawson "The Film Industry" in Ann Curthoys, A.W. Martin and Tim Rouse eds *Australians from 1939* Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987, 246.

³² *Storm Boy* was highly successful and much praised. It was for example the first Australian film to attract a major distributor in Japan. It was sold to and distributed in over one hundred countries. Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1971*, 387.

³³ Pike & Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1971*, 386.

³⁴ McFarlane, *The Oxford Companion*, 471.

this way the boundaries of childhood must be removed – the child must be told the truth. Childhood is disenchanted and can no longer be protected from the secular world. ‘Innocence’ is really ignorance and leads to unnamed, and therefore unresolved, suffering.

The representation of childhood in *Storm Boy* is complex, and is bound up with the claustrophobic relationship between the child and his father. There are, for example, elements in this relationship of the Romantic notion of the child as ‘a force for innate goodness which could rescue embittered adults’.³⁵ It is Storm Boy who teaches his father to face the truth and to show his love again. Here the child really is ‘father of the man.’ This is graphically underlined towards the end of the film when Hideaway Tom finally allows his son to go to boarding school, that is, to venture beyond the boundaries of the exile he has so rigorously imposed. Storm Boy worriedly asks: ‘Would you be all right without me?’ Pennell has observed that in Australian children’s fiction: ‘The relational dimension of interactions with adults is discursively constructed to represent the possibilities of decolonisation of childhood, with child participants recognising – some much earlier than others – that lived experience is no ‘garden of delight’.³⁶ It is clear from the film’s outset that Storm Boy already lives a life that is a lonely battle. Indeed as with *Smiley*, the opening few minutes of the film set up this premise. From high overhead the camera swoops down onto a windswept beach in the Coorong where the only tiny figure occupying the vast liminal space between land and sea and air is the boy, dragging his load of wood into the wind, his serious face full of effort. The only leavening in the scene is his brief smile at the pelicans wheeling overhead. This childhood already partakes of adult sorrow. In Pennell’s terms *Storm Boy* is a ‘transformative fiction’ which is one ‘that disrupt[s] metanarratives of adult/child separation and address[es] adult-child power relationships.’³⁷ The metanarrative of black/white separation is also disrupted.

While there is an Aboriginal presence in all three films under discussion, only *Storm Boy* has a central character who is Aboriginal. The film is a good example of the claim made by Palmer and Gillard that Australian cinema, through its romantic representations of Aboriginal people (a form of ‘liberal racism’³⁸ or ‘Aboriginalism’³⁹) disrupts, and generates ambivalence in, the colonising culture, and reveals ‘the yearning for association with Aboriginal culture’.⁴⁰ Indeed the character of Fingerbone Bill (David Gulpilil) carries a heavy narrative and symbolic burden in the film. He is the healer, the linchpin for the resolution of the estranged relationship between Hideaway Tom and Storm Boy, and by extension between the colonising culture (the parent/father) and the threatened natural environment (the child/nature). The threats to the environment are represented in the film by the hunters, the fishermen and the hooligans. Further Fingerbone is shown to have a unique, mystical contact with the natural world, he ‘reads’ its signs and knows its stories. Childhood may be disenchanted in the film but Aboriginality is not. At the same time, Fingerbone develops a friendship with the lonely child and his father, in which his

³⁵ Hugh Cunningham cited in Pennell, “Ozzie Kids Flee the Garden of Delight”, 13.

³⁶ Pennell, “Ozzie Kids Flee the Garden of Delight”.

³⁷ Pennell, “Ozzie Kids Flee the Garden of Delight”, 6.

³⁸ Sylvia Lawson, “The Film Industry” in Ann Curthoys, A.W. Martin and Tim Rouse (eds) *Australians from 1939* Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987, 247.

³⁹ Dave Palmer & Garry Gillard, “Aborigines, Ambivalence and Australian Film” *Metro Magazine* no.134 (2002): 128-134, 130.

⁴⁰ Palmer & Gillard, “Aborigines, Ambivalence”, 130.

function is pedagogical. While Lawson has argued that in *Storm Boy* 'the Aborigine is set outside society and history, as the white boy is not',⁴¹ it would be more accurate to say that Fingerbone Bill is set firmly within two histories: his 'white' history of dispossession and mission life, and his other history through his tribe and its laws. He contains both cultures. For the child Fingerbone is not only the bearer of the white culture (he gives the child what is probably his first book and begins to teach him to read) but also the holder of the black culture which he also gives to the boy in the form of stories and knowledge, especially about pelicans. In the end the two men, Aboriginal and white father, unite in their care of the boy. The resolution to the colonialist problematic is in coming together and sharing stewardship, accepting and negotiating 'Australia's dual history as colonised and coloniser'.⁴²

The representation of gender in *Storm Boy* works with this narrative resolution by advocating a more gentle, nurturing and thoughtful style of masculinity while at the same time, taking a strong stand against the "huntin', shootin' and drinkin'" of stereotypical Australian frontier masculinity. The depiction of femininities, while brief, hints at a conflict that is outside of the discussion. National identity, colonisation, the environment – all issues that function as thematic principles in the plot – are shown as unequivocally men's business. The only one female character who actually appears in the film - the white schoolteacher, Miss Walker - represents the civilising influences of women, of the school and the town. Besides her, two women are 'off stage': first, Storm Boy's mother who deserted her family and provoked her husband's isolation and grief; and the second is the 'wrong woman' Fingerbone 'sang', causing his exile from his tribe. Women are trouble whichever way they are looked at.

Conclusion

As Sinyard has written: 'childhood is the great universal theme',⁴³ and Australian feature film making has demonstrated that this so by producing a large body of films about and for children. The three films analysed above show changing representations of childhood over time, with increasing loss of boundaries between the worlds of the adult and the child. In *The Kid Stakes* the children are *observed* like some foreign species, rather than analysed. Theirs is the garden of wild delight, and they the 'noble savages' that occupy its spaces. They run free in their urban wilderness making their own rules and following their own concerns, which parody adult behaviours. Meanwhile the version of childhood presented nearly thirty years later in *Smiley*, while styled as a nostalgic pastoral idyll, 'speaks against itself' in that it presents an uneasy relationship between the child and society, between the child and the landscape, between the races, between the sexes and between the ages in society. In *Smiley*, the little boy is more deeply implicated in his family's and in his community's affairs. While he has the use of the geographic space, he is seen mostly as running through it to some profitable work or other. In *The Kid Stakes* the children belong to a gang, and they have each other within and against the adult world. In *Smiley*, Smiley has only his mate Joe for emotional support. Storm Boy has no-one his own age: he lives in the emotional/psychic space of the adult world. This claustrophobic space is ironically juxtaposed to the wide open empty spaces of the

⁴¹ Sylvia Lawson, "The Film Industry", 247.

⁴² John Stephens, "Editor's introduction: Always facing the issues - preoccupations in Australian children's literature" *The Lion and the Unicorn* 27, no.2, (April 2003): 13 pages. via *ProQuest*.

⁴³ Cited in Hanson, "Children in film", 146.

Coorong. What good if he has a continent to roam but is unhappy, the film asks? The direction of the representations of childhood from the 1920s until the 1970s seems to be toward disenchantment. The child's world is the same in kind as that of the adult and is amenable to adult knowledge and adult solutions for its problems. It will be interesting to see if this preliminary schema is borne out in the study of other Australian feature films about childhood.

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- Storm Boy* (Safran, 1976)
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