

senses of cinema

Love and Social Marginality in *Samson and Delilah*

👤 Therese Davis 🕒 July 2009 📁 Feature Articles 📖 Issue 51



As I write this, *Samson and Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009) has just been awarded the prestigious Camera d'Or for best first feature film at the Cannes Film Festival. Accepting the award on behalf of himself and producer Kath Shelper, the film's multi-talented writer, director and cinematographer, Warwick Thornton, said: "Thank you for believing in our first-born baby. I don't know what to say. Viva Cannes, viva le cinéma!" (1) Back home, audiences are thanking Thornton. The film is screening to full houses, each day brings more and more outpourings of praise and adoration from the country's film critics, and, on Facebook, *Samson and Delilah* has more than 1,200 "friends" expressing their appreciation: "I saw your film last night – breathtaking-amazing-stunning! I cannot stop thinking about it. [...] Thank you." (2)

What exactly is it that so many different love about *Samson and Delilah*? (3) For those who haven't heard, it is an unusual love story about two teenagers living in a remote Aboriginal community in Central Australia. Delilah (Marissa Gibson) is a shy but headstrong 14 year old, solely responsible for the care of her elderly grandmother, Nana (Mitjili Napanangka Gibson), while Samson (Rowan McNamara), also 14, is a "petrol sniffer" – a young Aboriginal teenager addicted to petrol as a form of intoxication. In the Australian popular imagination, petrol sniffers are objects of pity or repulsion, shadowy figures seen mainly in the news reports of the so-called "Aboriginal problem" in the Northern Territory. They are what Thornton calls "the untouchables" – young Aboriginal addicts who are socially marginalised within both their Aboriginal communities and the wider Australian society.

Samson and Delilah gives teenagers like Samson a "voice". Listening to Samson is not, however, a straightforward thing, because throughout he maintains a self-imposed silence, uttering only a single word in the entire length of the film. The film suggests in order to "hear" Samson we need to go beyond spoken language. Indeed, audiences love for *Samson and Delilah* proves the film's point. It draws on the language of cinema and Aboriginal modes of non-verbal expression to create a story told primarily through gesture, looks and sound. This "quiet" approach has succeeded in attracting a level of popular attention and involvement in this social topic that the thousands of words produced by politicians and news reports over the years were largely not able to achieve.

This success undoubtedly lies in the film's intimate mode of storytelling and its powerful sense of truthfulness. Many have already attributed this power to Thornton's biography, in particular his identity as an Aboriginal filmmaker. As he says: "I'm an Aboriginal and I will be all my life. [...] Everything that's in the film I've seen personally." (4) But to reduce the film's appeal with audiences to Thornton's identity and personal experience, its "authenticity", belies Thornton's incredible skills as storyteller and filmmaker, what he calls "the beauty of cinema [...] that kind of lie that tells the truth" (5). It also fails to explain how this particular beautiful "lie" is such an important, groundbreaking film in the Australian cinema and the nation's history of race relations.

Samson and Delilah is Thornton's first feature film, his "first-born baby", as he says. But he's no novice. Based in Alice Springs, he has been working in the Australian film and television industry for nearly 20 years as a leading director of photography. (6) He is also one of the country's best short filmmakers. *Payback* (1996) was one of six films by young Indigenous filmmakers selected to be produced as part of the Australian Film Commission's Indigenous Branch's first drama initiative series, "From Sand to Celluloid". His talents as a writer-director came to the fore in the short comedy-satire *Mimi* (2002), and were fully realised in the international award-winning *Green Bush* (2005), which also marked the beginnings of his collaboration with Shelper. In 2007, he and Shelper made the astounding short film, *Nana*, in which they developed the anti-industrial method of filmmaking they would later apply in *Samson and Delilah*.

In these short films, Thornton experiments with different forms of cyclical time to create episodic structures for exploring various ways in which Aboriginal people negotiate the reality of having to live between two worlds, two sets of law and cultural knowledge. The films also draw on Thornton's experience in media and his intense interest in the role it plays in the lives of Aboriginal people.

Mimi is a light-hearted critique of how media stereotypes inform white perceptions of Aboriginal identity. *Green Bush* is also underscored by a distinctive Aboriginal humour. At the same time, there is a very serious tone in this film's story of the daily struggle of DJ Kenny (David Page) to keep the community's radio station functioning. As the story takes us through the routines of Kenny's midnight shift – playing requests, attending to victims of domestic violence and cooking for the locals who use the station as a place of shelter – we come to understand Kenny's frustrations about the cycles of violence that impact on his community from his "insider" perspective as a *mediator*, someone who literally mediates between the community and the outside, as well as between different factions within.

Samson and Delilah builds on this work. As in all of Thornton's films, time isn't something that simply passes passively or chronologically. His films make qualities of time palpable, allowing us to feel how time behaves in active ways and experience its complex patterns. The story of *Samson and Delilah* begins by establishing the particular temporal quality of life in the remote community. Boredom permeates the teenagers' world as they listlessly move through the routines of their daily lives. For Delilah, these actions centre on caring for her grandmother: waking her, providing her with medication, preparing food, pushing her in her wheelchair to the medical centre, to the small community chapel. Samson's days are even less eventful. He wakes, he sniffs petrol, he quarrels with his brother and he invents ways to capture Delilah's attention. It's a world where it seems nothing much happens, and the tediousness of the daily routine is reinforced by the use of long takes and a *mise en scène* that paints a sparse, austere picture of this remote part of the world. The community's public phone rings. No one answers. Next day, it rings again. No one answers ...



And yet, as the story unfolds, things do happen, change does occur. In contrast to films where drama and meaning are constructed through chains of cause-and-effect relations, *Samson and Delilah* builds its tensions through the small changes that occur in the film's repetitions of the teenagers' daily actions. We begin to see how none of these actions repeat themselves in exactly the same way. Over a period of several days, for example, Samson attempts to move in with Nana and Delilah. This action takes the form of an entertaining to-and-fro dance as Samson repeatedly brings his bedding to Delilah and Nana's house, while Delilah responds by constantly finding different ways to refuse his advances: such as tossing his mattress over the fence.

The film's energy is also generated by its distinctive use of sound-image relations. Music and sounds clash not only with images but also with each other, again helping to establish the tensions in the relationship between the two silent teens. In a scene that takes place at night, Delilah ensconces herself in the community's shared four-wheel drive, as she does most nights. It's a private space in a story that is mostly set in exterior, public spaces. As usual, she buries herself in the darkness of the car's interior and listens to an old cassette tape of romantic Spanish music. This night, however, her routine is disturbed by music blaring from Samson's beat-up boombox. Looking out into the dark, she sees Samson, luminous in the cool, blue light of an outside floodlight, unselfconsciously dancing to the thumping beat of the music. The two kinds of music clash, each song competing for Delilah's attention. But in the end, the mesmerising image of Samson's sensual performance draws her away from the Latin sounds as she sees her young neighbour as if for the first time, *anew*.

Just as we are becoming acculturated into these rhythms, watching with anticipation as the two teenagers slowly come together, a fraction of an inch at a time, or so it seems, the narrative takes a sudden turn: Nana dies. The elders of the community wrongly accuse Delilah of having not taken proper care of Nana and severely punish her by beating her with wooden poles. At the same time, Samson too has been physically punished for having violently attacked his brother. Samson rescues the abandoned Delilah and together they flee the community, becoming exiles living on the streets of Alice Springs.

There, the rhythms of life spiral into repeated cycles of violence and deprivation: homelessness, hunger, physical and verbal abuse, and, for Delilah, rape. As a spectator, it is more difficult to be in sync with these rhythms than the slow cycles of daily life in the community. This is partly due to problems in the script. The second act is not as strong as the first, rushing us through a number of the events that occur, so we don't have time to fully consider or *feel* their impact on the characters, such as the aftermath of the rape. But it's also because the dynamic between the teenagers begins to change as they become increasingly "out of time" with the rest of world. There is much less tension now as they become interdependent, their love developing into what Thornton has called "a necessary love" – a love that grows out of the most basic needs of survival. As a consequence, Delilah's subjectivity begins to merge with Samson's. She too becomes mute, and she also begins to use petrol, partly it seems as a kind of resignation, but also, perhaps, as her only means of anaesthetising herself to the physical and mental pain she endures. From the opening shots, the film is remarkable for the way in which it avoids moral judgement on addiction.



In this second act, we are no longer aligned with Delilah but with Gonzo (Scott Thornton), a kindly destitute alcoholic who befriends the two teenagers and generously shares his meagre supply of food with them. Night after night, however, it's a one-way conversation, because, despite Gonzo's best efforts to prompt Samson and Delilah to talk, they maintain their silence. Gonzo grows increasingly frustrated: "Talk to me!", he demands. But they have lost their will to communicate. Huddled together under a thin blanket in their makeshift camp on the fringe of town, Samson and Delilah have become a co-joined, silent and barely human creature.

They are eventually released from this place but only after they have reached their lowest point and a catastrophic accident occurs that sees them divided. As the story moves toward its resolution, Delilah returns to the camp to rescue Samson, and together they return home. Interestingly, their "return home" is not premised on an immediate reconciliation with their Aboriginal community or the wider society. Instead, taking us beyond reconciliation – both conceptually and physically – Delilah and Samson travel to her people's "country" (traditional lands), or homelands, as they are called in this region.

Taking over an abandoned out-station dwelling, Delilah begins the overwhelming task of healing both herself and Samson by re-establishing the rhythms of daily life: preparing food, cleaning, bathing. In a moment of great tenderness, Delilah bathes Samson in an outside water trough, gently washing his drug-wrecked body. This image of physical intimacy, set against the wide-open blue sky and red sands of the central Australian landscape, takes on transcendent qualities when Samson fully immerses himself in the water, enacting a kind of spiritual cleansing or re-birth. This is a very unusual ending for a teen love story, for, instead of concluding with a youthful romantic union, their true love is represented as a mature sacred love, a love based on responsibility and care for the self and other, a conception of love not normally associated with 14-year-old teens.

Taking us then into sacred or ritual time, Samson's rebirth strongly resonates with Christian notions of baptism and redemption. But the teenagers' return home is also very much grounded in the historical time of its community-centred perspective. By showing an intertwining of Christian beliefs and Aboriginal spirituality, this conclusion recalls the influence of Christian missionaries in the processes of colonisation as it occurred in this particular part of Aboriginal Australia and how Christian beliefs have been adapted by many Aboriginal people as part of a complex hybrid worldview. The film's title, for example, is more than a biblical allusion. It is also an ironic residue of this particular colonial history: Old Testament names such as Samson and Delilah are commonplace in Aboriginal communities in Central Australia, especially those that began as Lutheran missions. Moreover, Delilah and Samson's return to Delilah's homelands speaks to long-standing political struggles between Aboriginal communities and the government of the Northern Territory over government funding for Aboriginal people opting to live in smaller family groups on their homelands, rather than in larger government settlements. By bringing these historical traces and others to the surface, the film reveals the complexities and contradictions of living in the aftermath of colonialism, making it a profoundly *local*, "insider" representation of Aboriginal experience.

In *Nana*, which Thornton has described as "the back story to Samson and Delilah", Little Girl (Kiara Gibson)/"Delilah" watches Nana (also played by Mitjili Napanangka Gibson) attack a small group of white men when she catches them illegally bringing grog (alcohol) into the community. In the film's hilarious deadpan style, the young "Delilah" says: "When I grow up I want to be just like my Nana." It's a bittersweet moment, however, for its humour is underscored by the terrible sadness of the reality of cycles of poverty, violence and trauma, as borne out in Samson and Delilah's story. As a "solution to the problem of the marginalisation of petrol sniffers that *Samson and Delilah* raises, the ending seems to suggest that Delilah has indeed become like her Nana. The teenagers cannot be integrated back into their community until they have reconnected with Aboriginal culture, spirituality and by law. Delilah's incredible strength and determination makes this possible. But unfortunately, also like Nana, Delilah takes responsibility for recovering both her own and Samson's humanity, their physical and spiritual well-being, with little support from others. This reflects the reality of the many amazingly strong Aboriginal women who live in remote communities and struggle on a daily basis to keep "little children sacred" (7).



It is not at all surprising that Thornton chose to make his first feature as community-centred as it is. Thornton was born in a small Aboriginal community called Santa Teresa outside Alice Springs. He has spent most of his life living and working in Alice Springs. He has had a long association with the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), beginning as a young teenager training to be a DJ at the CAAMA radio station. Today, he is part of a close-knit community of Indigenous filmmakers that have developed a distinctive Northern Australian “desert” voice in the new wave of Indigenous cinema. Films such as *Whispering in Our Hearts* (Mitch Torres, 2002), *Wirriya, Small Boy* (Beck Cole, 2004), *Yellow Fella* (Ivan Sen, 2005) and Thornton’s *Green Bush* and *Nana* are notable for the ways in which they have advanced the notion of Aboriginal self-representation by opening up avenues for film as a form of Aboriginal community self-exploration, including self-criticism.

As with these films, *Samson and Delilah* speaks first to its local Aboriginal community and then to others. It is not suggesting that “true love” can be a substitute for social forms of action when it comes to tackling problems like petrol sniffing and social marginality. Rather, it is about using the framework of the love story to create a community-centred Aboriginal perspective that can involve wider audiences in these social issues. This is achieved partly through the film’s remarkable sense of intimacy, created through Thornton’s anti-industrial method of filmmaking: no trucks, no grips, no gaffers, no professional actors. Like the great neo-realist films, Thornton’s distinctive community-based realism conveys a deep sense of truthfulness based on the art of bringing people close to the real.

Less obvious are the ways in which the film's brilliant use of cyclical time and its highly inventive use of sound and music position both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spectators differently to a subject like Samson. Instead of seeing him as a de-humanised object of repulsion or pity, the film invites us to see him as a subject of love. As with Kenny in *Green Bush*, Delilah plays the important role of helping to mediate this new way of seeing. From the astoundingly beautiful opening shot of Samson waking in his bed, Samson is lovingly framed as a good-looking young man very much aware of his charm. As the shy Delilah slowly aligns herself with this viewpoint, she too changes. When she spies Samson dancing alone in the dark, she experiences the first stirrings of Eros. Samson gets under her skin. Later, as their love grows through the necessity of survival, their subjectivities merge. In her homeland, Delilah regains her autonomy and takes on the job of nurturing Samson, helping him to also regain his selfhood. What I am suggesting is that, just like Delilah who, in the end is the one to respond to the persistent ringing of the community's phone, those of us "outside" of the community looking in can come to know ourselves differently through the new languages of this film, both cultural and cinematic. Reformulating the space of the national from an "insider", Aboriginal community-based perspective, the film positions its spectators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in a shared space, a space that allows for new forms of attachment, involvement and self-knowledge, new lines of communication.

Finally, can you love a film *too* much? For all the reasons cited above, *Samson and Delilah* is an important, groundbreaking Australian film that deserves all the accolades it is receiving. But there is a concern that it could, like many great Australian films before it, become caught up in the discourses employed by critics to define the Australian cinema. Already it has been claimed by some as a means to narrowly define what Australian cinema *should* be and thus limit what it could be. Thornton has been described by Tom Redwood in *Metro* as "the new hope of Australian cinema" (8), while Bob Ellis in *Encore* proclaimed, "*Samson and Delilah* is, in my opinion, the best (some would say the first) Australian film yet made" (9). The problem with this kind of critical adoration is that it feeds the notion of anti-diversity. It is an old debate in Australian Cinema Studies, but in this instance anti-diversity it is doubly problematic because it also runs the risk of narrowly defining Indigenous cinema.

As I suggested above, one of the great strengths of this film is its particular Aboriginal community-based perspective and the way in which it constructs a new “relation” in Australian cinema. But I would not want to be seen to be suggesting that all Australian Indigenous films should employ Thornton’s method of filmmaking, that they should all look and sound like *Samson and Delilah*. In the coming months we will see a number of Indigenous features being rolled out, all initially supported by the Indigenous Branch’s Long Black Feature Program, a strategic initiative aimed at encouraging and supporting Indigenous filmmakers to work in the longer format. This set of new films will include a musical and a comedy. It would, in my view, be a colossal catastrophe if *Samson and Delilah*’s particular aesthetic is used as some kind of marker of Aboriginal cultural authenticity against which all new (and old) Indigenous cinema is measured.

Endnotes

1. “Aboriginal Film ‘Samson and Delilah’ wins Cannes First Film Prize

[[HTTP://WWW.GOOGLE.COM/HOSTEDNEWS/AFP/ARTICLE/ALEQM5I-TEDYPJYEC54CLAJQJQWKOKREAA](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALEQM5I-TEDYPJYEC54CLAJQJQWKOKREAA)]”, *AFP*, 25 May 2009.

2. “Samson and Delilah is on Facebook”: www.facebook.com/pages/Samson-Delilah/57868371709

[[HTTP://WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/PAGES/SAMSON-DELILAH/57868371709](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Samson-Delilah/57868371709)] .

3. I am very grateful for the conversations with friends and colleagues, such as Chris Healy and Fiona Trigg, that helped me to sort out some of my thoughts about this question. I am especially grateful to my Monash colleague Adrian Martin and Belinda Smaill for our conversation about love and the politics of emotionality, sparked by a wonderful research paper by Belinda on emotions in documentary film. Her book, *Documentary Film: Politics, Emotion, Culture*, will be published by Palgrave MacMillan later this year.

4. “Aboriginal Film ‘Samson and Delilah’ wins Cannes First Film Prize”.

5. Rochelle Siemienowicz, “‘That kind of lie that tells the truth’: Interview with Warwick Thornton and Kath Shelper

[[HTTP://WWW.AFL.ORG.AU/AM/CONTENTMANAGERNET/HTMLDISPLAY.ASPX?CONTENTID=7341&SECTION=SAMSON_AND_DELILAH_INTERVIEW_WITH_WARWICK_THORNTON_AND_KATH_SHELPER](http://www.afl.org.au/am/contentmanagernet/htmldisplay.aspx?contentid=7341§ion=samson_and_delilah_interview_with_warwick_thornton_and_kath_shelper)]”, *Australian Film Institute*, 6 May 2009.

6. Thornton was the Director of Photography of Rachel Perkins’ *Radiance* (1998) and the seven-part television documentary series, *First Australians* (Beck Cole and Rachel Perkins, 2008). In addition to his short films mentioned here, he has also made a number of documentary films: *Photographic Memory: A Portrait of Mervyn Bishop* (1999), *Yeperenye Federation Festival: The Road Ahead Concert* (2003), *Rosalie’s Journey* (2003) and *Country Song* (2008).

7. See Rex Wild and Patricia Anderson, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle*, “*Little Children are Sacred*”, *Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, 2007. From the inside cover of the Report (p. 1): “The title ‘Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle’ is derived from the Arrandic languages of the Central Desert Region of the Northern Territory [...]. The title quote ‘In our Law children are very sacred because they carry the two spring wells of water from our country within them’”, reflects the traditional Aboriginal law of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, and was provided by a senior Yolngu lawman. The Cover Design was painted by Heather Laughton, an Eastern Arrente (Central Australia) woman. The core design came out of a workshop discussion at the Board of Inquiry’s Alice Springs Regional Forum held on 7 March 2007. The design represents the coming together of different people to help tackle the problem of child sexual abuse: mothers, children, grandmothers at a safe place, fathers and

grandfathers at a safe place, and in the middle a resource centre with a mentor/counsellor/educator and family members and other support people. The resource centre represents a place where people can come together to work out their problems as a family or as a community, and also to learn how the mainstream law system and Aboriginal law are both strong ways of protecting children.” In 2007, the Australian Federal Government used the Report to justify a range of interventions, including taking over Aboriginal communities in the Territory for five years, banning alcohol and pornography and testing children for signs of abuse. But those moves weren’t among the 97 recommendations in the Report written by Aboriginal leader Pat Anderson and lawyer Rex Wild, QC.

8. Tom Redwood, “Warwick Thornton and Kath Shelper on Making *Samson and Delilah*”, *Metro*, No. 160 (2009), p. 31.

9. See “**Reviews** [[HTTP://SAMSONANDELILAH.COM.AU/REVIEWS.PHP](http://samsonandelilah.com.au/reviews.php)]”, *Samson and Delilah.com*.

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