

Silent but deadly: a review of *Samson & Delilah*

Rayane Tamer

University of Technology Sydney, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, PO Box 123, Ultimo NSW 2007, Australia. rayane.tamer@student.uts.edu.au

Ironically, since European colonisation, there has been a deafening silence of Indigenous representation in all forms and at all societal levels. As Stanner asserts, Indigenous people have been written out of history (1967, p. 22), but the disappearance of our First Nations people is not limited to just the encyclopaedias. Australians have long been viewing media and cinema through a white lens, largely representing an Anglo society, and by its binary, neglecting the Indigenous society that – while subjugated to a near nothingness – remains poignant to this nation’s existence. Indigenous filmmaker Warwick Thornton challenges this white lens in *Samson & Delilah* (2009), in what has been hailed as Australia’s ‘most important film’ (Redwood 2009, p. 27). Thornton’s film encapsulates the post-colonial state of Indigenous society through a perspective that is rarely shown, but is necessary for the nation and, more generally, the world, to understand the ways in which the First Nations people are subordinated on their own land.

The strategically constructed narrative begins with a resounding irony; happy non-diegetic music of ‘every day is going to be a sun-shiny day’ corresponds with a young Indigenous teenage boy waking up to his addiction towards petrol-sniffing in the Central Australian desert. Troubled as he is, Samson is a desolate reject in the small community who finds refuge in Delilah, a young girl who has her own established daily routine around caring for her sick grandmother. Here, Thornton places the viewer in the pinnacle of what is coined as a ‘sonic and social reality’ within Aboriginal Australia (Milner 2012, p. 104), a bleak monotonous life that is led by their youth... and the film has only just begun. Upon being subjected to assault from her own elderly people after being seen to be responsible for the death of her grandmother, Delilah feeds into what was initially considered an unrequited love-chase, and the unlikely pair set off to discover a life that they naively believe can be found in Alice Springs. However, what awaits Samson and Delilah is the even bleaker reality that, wherever they turn, they will always be met with an Australia that hold distaste in allowing the misunderstood youth to belong. Poised as the most ‘caustic scene’ of a film that is holistically harrowing, Delilah is rejected after offering her traditional dot paintings to a



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Western gallery selling her grandmother's art for a blistering profit (Genzlinger 2010). Thornton presents a stark contrast from a Delilah who had initially accepted her domestic role in her rural home-town, to one who spirals downwards - alongside Samson - into a life of homelessness, drug-addiction, poverty and, primarily, rejection from her homeland. Therein lies the representation of genuine Indigenous displacement from their own Australia. It is that discomfort that remains in the viewers' stomachs after completing the film - despite its positive spiritual ending - is what Thornton intended to share for the nation to see and understand.

Thornton is praised for his work in *Samson & Delilah* for more than just a great plot with an unconventional love story. By casting two ordinary Indigenous teenagers and placing them in the heart of a traditional Indigenous Australian setting, the filmmaker provokes the unsettling idea that Samson and Delilah are just one symbol, representing many Indigenous youth that are struggling to find their place in the world. Drawing from his own experiences and understanding of a culture that is either unspoken of, or spoken inaccurately about, Thornton took to cinema to project the genuine plight of Indigenous communities post-colonisation. This self-representation in the political domain is not only what Langton describes as a 'sophisticated device' but is crucial for the First Nations people to be heard on their own accord, rather than being heard on behalf of white Australia (1994, p. 104). Across a whole hundred minutes, Samson says only his name - even to his companion, Delilah - and this deliberate work of Thornton is to represent the ever-silenced group that have been robbed of a voice since settler colonisation (Gook 2017, p. 181). By galvanising public attention to the contemporary issues in his film that are derived from systematic violence, dispossession and trauma, Thornton challenges the very essence of the inescapable silence between Samson and Delilah (Gook 2017, p. 172). That is not to say, however, that the story engulfs the viewer in an eerily quiet darkness simply for a fictional character symbol. The Indigenous filmmaker asserted that, indeed, these characters parallel the true lives of those that Australian society either severely ignores or misunderstands (Redwood 2014, p. 87).

Samson & Delilah is uncomfortable to watch, predominantly for non-Indigenous people in Australia, because it forces them to shift the perspective of post-colonisation from their majority to the Indigenous 'other'. The disposition that settlement in Australia is an injustice served only generations ago and, for that, it is unfair to condemn today's Anglo society for past mistreatments, is fantastically challenged in this film. Delilah is ignored as she walks through what is representative of every viewer's daily setting, except by a group of men who sexually assault her. Not often do non-Indigenous people receive an insight into the context of poverty-stricken strangers that ask for money on the street. Therefore, to know Samson and Delilah's tragic story, and to see 'ordinary' people reject the children's plea for help, that all viewers can see as themselves, is damning. Thornton forces Australia to grapple with the contentious perspective that is rarely portrayed on the television screen. Redwood explains Thornton's presents 'an indictment of the prevailing attitudes of racial apathy and cynicism in this country' (2009, p. 28). For this reason, *Samson & Delilah* is not received with just praise. However, regardless of the different views in which the film was received, it cannot be argued that *Samson & Delilah* crudely yet importantly displays the product of settler

colonialism as a structure, rather than a single event (Wolfe 2008, p. 103). While settler colonialism took place over two centuries ago as an ‘inclusive land-centred project... with a view to eliminating indigenous societies’, its catastrophic consequences can be seen in the trauma on Samson’s tongue and Delilah’s sanity (Wolfe 2008, p. 108).

Dubbed as ‘dark’ and ‘fucked up’ by Thornton himself, *Samson & Delilah* highlights all that is left neglected in Aboriginal Australia in the twenty-first century. Without the discomfort that is inevitably felt by the end of the film, the crucial message of post-colonial injustice would not have been truly encompassed. As paradoxical as it may seem, minimal dialogue between characters in *Samson & Delilah* has had the profoundness to trigger conversation on transgenerational trauma all around the country – and the world, for that matter.

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