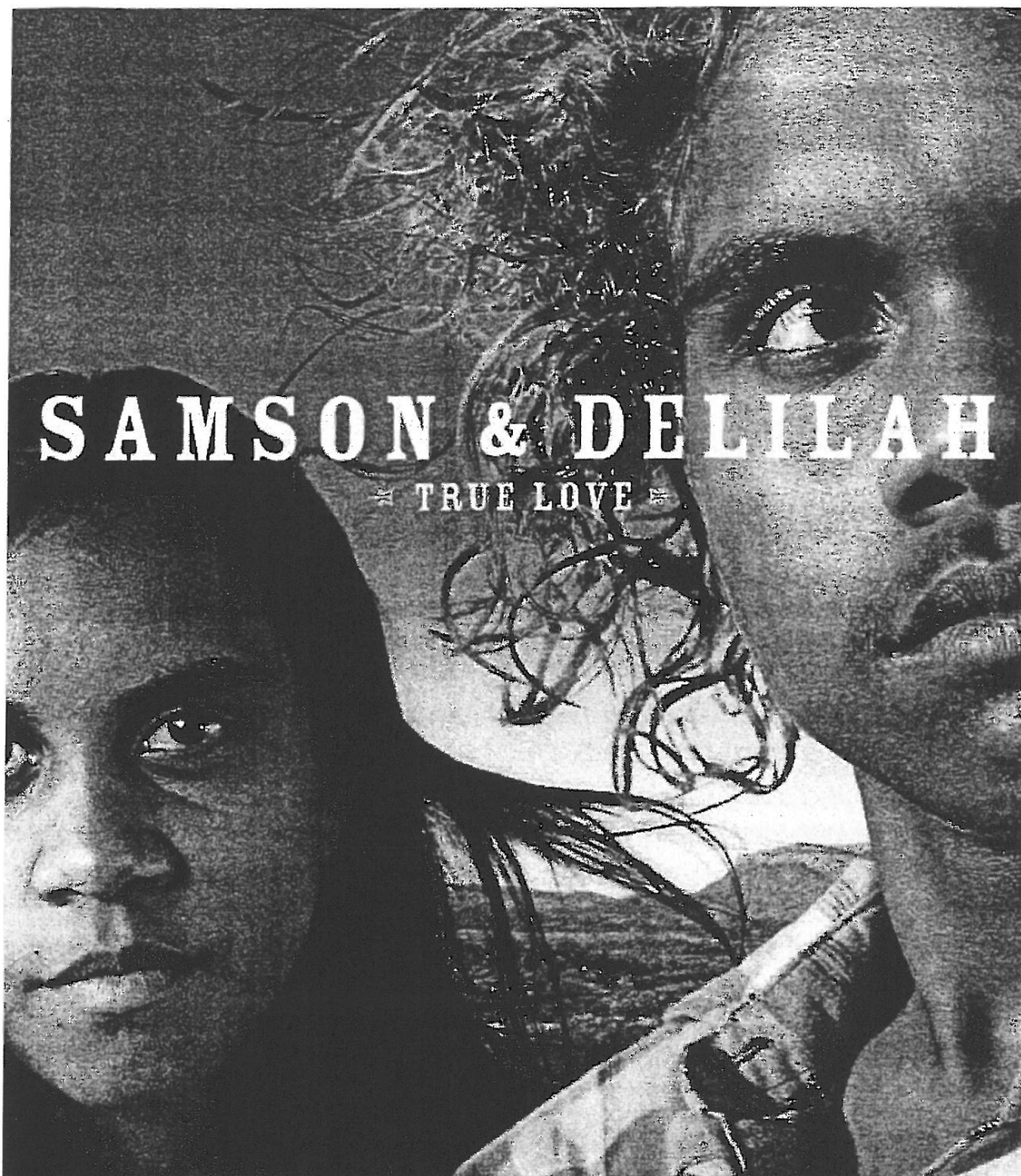


Samson and Delilah
Directed by Warwick Thornton



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY GARY SIMMONS AND VYVYAN STRANIERI



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>



<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>

Samson and Delilah

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Samson & Delilah won the prestigious Camera d'Or award at Cannes (2009) and has had success at Toronto, Zurich, Munich and Telluride Film Festivals. It will also be screened at the London Film Festival.

Samson & Delilah is not only written and directed by Warwick Thornton, it is his debut feature after several short films which also have won national and international acclaim and prizes.

Warwick Thornton, the director, puts it so honestly and accurately in one of the many interviews he has done in the wake of the film's success. In an interview with Jim Schembri (The Age, 21 October 2009), Warwick Thornton asserts, "*We gave Australians access to a place they'd never been before. The only time they'd ever been to that community or met kids like Samson and Delilah was on the five o'clock news! It's made me so proud and so happy that people were watching this film and getting access to information they didn't have before.*"

In light of the Rudd Government's official 2008 apology to Australia's indigenous people for past wrongs, Thornton believes *Samson & Delilah* can also be seen as a back-handed post-Sorry film.

"'Sorry' doesn't fill fridges, either," he says. "It makes a lot of people stronger and makes them take bigger steps towards their future, but in my camp it pretty well doesn't mean anything."

The 'sorry' word was designed for our grandmothers, and it did work. But for the Samson and Delilahs of the world it doesn't mean shit. When you're starving on the streets and you're homeless, that word just doesn't cut it.

Food for Thought

The screen is a cultural marker and refractor of Indigenous identity. In cinema, there is a continuum of the representation of Indigenous experience and identity. This continuum on the screen starts from the ethnographic/anthropological gaze of non-Indigenous filmmakers in the late nineteenth century and goes to the emergence of screen narratives that privilege and promote heterogeneous Indigenous identities and voices. More and more of these films are being made by Indigenous filmmakers such as Warwick Thornton.

The following websites have comprehensive lists of films made by both non-Indigenous and the growing number of Indigenous filmmakers.

Both <<http://australianscreen.com.au/indigenous/>> and <<http://www.creativespirits.info/resources/movies/index.html>> have this information.

Look for early films like *Uncivilised* (1936) and *Jedda* (1955) made by Charles Chauvel. Elsa Chauvel also worked on the second of these films. Have a look at a recent film like *Beneath Clouds* and you will get a strong sense of this continuum.

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Samson and Delilah live in a remote Aboriginal community in the Central Australian desert. In a small Indigenous community, everything seems to hap- pen in a cycle. There are daily rhythms which are repeated and despite a phone link into the community, this is a world which is out of sight and out of mind, except for those who live there.

Samson is a mischievous, yet shy, fifteen year old who yearns for some- thing more. Although boredom set in long ago, Samson's spirit is often expressed via his humour, his love of music and an awkward and growing love for an initially reluctant Delilah.

Unable to express his desire for some- thing more, Samson's personal escape comes in sniffing petrol. When a violent outburst takes place at home, Samson breaks the cycle and his journey begins.

Sixteen-year-old Delilah is the sole carer of her artist grandmother, Nana fancies Samson for her son-in-law. When Nana passes away, Delilah is held responsible and the traditional punishment is harsh. After a period respecting Delilah's grief, Samson feels compelled to step into the breach and in his own way protects Delilah from the ostracism of the community.

In a stolen car with no food, money or idea where they are headed they turn their backs on the community and head towards the desert horizon. The next day, out of fuel, they walk into the closest town.

The two teenagers soon discover that life outside their community can be harsh. Lost, hungry and marginalised, Samson and Delilah sense a growing love which fills the void in their lives. But this love is tough love, given their predicament, their vulnerability and their place on the margins.

Delilah searches for a way to improve their situation and begins to paint. She tries desperately to sell her work, but fruitlessly. In frustration, she pushes her work at potential buyers aware of their discomfort. Samson is caught between his addiction and his love for Delilah. Delilah also succumbs to petrol sniffing after the trauma of male violence and violation.

They are separated for a short time when Delilah is injured but Delilah re-appears like an angel of mercy as Samson slowly self-destructs alone and under the bridge. But ultimately and hopefully, Delilah's love guides him away from the nemesis of addiction and takes him home.

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Activity 1

1. Watch the follow trailer of Samson and Delilah and write down what you think the main themes/issues are.

<http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2542612.htm>

2. Look at the poster of the film and deconstruct its elements using the elements of visual literacy.

http://www.impawards.com/intl/australia/2009/samson_and_delilah.html

Who and what frames culture?

The notion of culture or cultures is inherent in all lives. *Samson & Delilah* as a film challenges the assumptions not only about cultures but also perceptions of cultures. As an idea and a reality, 'culture' is often framed by Western and non-Indigenous interests and criteria. This can lead to what is called ethnocentrism; a narrow perception of culture in which the dominant culture is always the cultural benchmark.

But culture is a lived, living and breath- ing experience which, while it can invite comparisons, is autonomous and specific to a time, place and the inhabitants of that time and place. So culture is not really singular or one-dimensional.

Activity 2

- How do you define your own culture?
- How would you define identity?
- What influences your culture and identity?
- What do you understand of Indigenous identities and culture prior to watching *Samson & Delilah*?
- There are cultural stereotypes which have been perpetuated about Indigenous identities and culture. Why do you think these attitudes and stereotypes existed in non- Indigenous, mainstream circles in the first place?

Activity 3: see chart below

Write your personal definitions in the right-hand column. Most of these are open to interpretation. Then write a short responses on how these concepts are realised in the experiences of characters in *Samson & Delilah*.

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| EXPERIENCES | PERSONAL DEFINITION | SAMSON & DELILAH |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| GRIEF | | |
| SURVIVAL | | |
| COMPASSION | | |
| LOVE | | |
| DESPAIR | | |
| LOSS | | |
| VLAME | | |
| SPIRIT | | |
| SELF - KNOWLEDGE | | |
| DESIRE | | |
| HOPE | | |
| ANXIETY | | |
| REDEMPTION | | |
| FEAR | | |
| FATE | | |
| CHANCE | | |
| CHOICE | | |
| COMMITMENT | | |
| RESPONSIBILITY | | |

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Activity 4

Samson & Delilah

1. What ideas, themes and issues does the film explore? How are they analysed or explored?
2. How does the narrative structure of the film work to support its ideas? Is the film linear? Do we have to fill in gaps?
3. How do the physical setting and the cultural context work in the film to develop its themes and ideas?
4. Are characters represented sympathetically? Do they change? Are the characters stereotyped? Are they polarised? Do we feel am- bivalent about them?
5. How do voice, dialogue, action and image (visual cues and codes) and their interaction define character? Look here at the mood created by the use of colour or lack of colour at particular moments.
6. What values seem to be transmitted in *Samson & Delilah*? How is the viewer positioned? Or to put it another way, what are you as viewer invited to accept or reject in the representation of the world of *Samson & Delilah* and its closure?
7. Who or what is missing from the story?
8. What does it say about children, adults, males, females, and cultures?

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Themes

1. Love

Warwick Thornton talks about his ideas that generated the making of the film. Read what Warwick has to say about the love story.

Samson & Delilah is a love story, but perhaps not in the traditional sense. It is a story that deals with life on a remote Aboriginal community and the ways in which one young couple manage to escape from this mundane existence. The central theme that I wanted to explore is love, but not in the conventional sense, not a usual sort of love – a love that develops out of survival.

It is a story about the many different ways in which love grows. Samson and Delilah have a very unusual relationship and their love is strong but understated and it develops as their trust develops. But will it save them?

It's a film about people who are classed not even as people – let alone people who are allowed to love or have emotions. They're not allowed to be human. They are the untouchables.

I believe that the story of these two young lovers, Samson and Delilah, is an important and unique story to tell – it's an untold story. In the end, even though life is going to be hard, I want the audience to feel like there are real possibilities of success for them ... A new life ... Hope.

Activity 5

- What kind of a love story do you see in *Samson & Delilah* and how does it differ from a conventional cinematic love story?

2. Exploitation of indigenous art

There has been a real boon in the commercial growth of Indigenous art. The film explores the commodification of Indigenous Australian art, which is the strongest sector of Australia's fine arts industry with an annual turnover of about \$100 million a year in 2007. Investors have capitalised on the popularity of Indigenous art, and in some cases have been accused of profiteering from Indigenous artists.

In the film, this is revealed in Delilah discovering one of Nana Kitty's paintings in a gallery run by a nonIndigenous owner. The price tag on one of her paintings is \$22K.

The brutal indifference of the owner is also revealed in the scene in which Delilah tries to sell one of her own paintings. Warwick Thornton also addressed this issue of exploitation in his short film *Mimi*.

Activity: 6 - one paragraph

From your own understanding what are the cultural and ethical considerations that surround Indigenous art? You could view this link for more info <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2008/s2314182.htm>>

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Themes

3. Petrol sniffing

Like the film *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Samson & Delilah* confronts petrol sniffing head on. The perpetual image of Samson inhaling fumes addictively, reinforced by Delilah's own use of petrol to obliterate the pain of violent assault provides a clear picture of a social problem, that while not endemic, must be recognised and confronted in young Indigenous lives. This honesty is one of the strengths of the film. There is no skirting around petrol sniffing and its consequences. Interestingly enough, it is Delilah who is the catalyst in Samson's detox. She removes the temptation and the source of Samson's addiction in more ways than one.

It is very easy to jump to conclusions on any sort of substance abuse. Warwick Thornton has decided to grasp the nettle on this issue and subvert prejudices and stereotypes that surround those who fall into substance abuse. One of the messages of the film is that the petrol sniffer is someone's friend or family. In the case of Samson, there is also a young man with a generous spirit who is being extinguished by his addiction.

For more info look up on petrol sniffing :

<<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/health/petrol-sniffing.html>>.

4. Role of christianity in Delilah's life

There is a sequence in the film in which Delilah wanders into a church. She looks at all the iconography with a kind of reverence. Throughout, the clergyman looks on without saying a word and watches her leave without any attempt to comfort her, given her state of mind and her physical injuries.

At the end of the film, Delilah places a cross on the tin wall.

5. Cultural practices

As distant observers, we might be puzzled by some of the cultural practices that are integral to the community in which Samson and Delilah live. You might have been puzzled by the cutting of hair by both Delilah and Samson at an intense moment of sadness. You might have been puzzled by the attack on Delilah by the 'aunties' on Nana's death. You might be puzzled by the lack of verbal communication between Samson and Delilah (even in the context of Samson's apparent inability to speak). You might be unfamiliar with Nana's reference to the matching skin or kinship of Samson and Delilah.

The official website <<http://samsonanddelilah.com.au/faqs.php>> will provide you with responses to these elements of the film which you might have found outside your own experience.

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6. Violence against women

Without wanting to reduce this to just an issue, violence against Indigenous women is clearly illustrated in the sequence in which Delilah is abducted and violated by the young non-Indigenous males.

There are two contexts in looking at this sequence.

The first is that there has been a lot of adverse publicity in the press about violence against Indigenous women in Aboriginal communities and nearby towns as if the perpetrators of violence are usually Indigenous males.

The second context is the history of violence against Indigenous females by non-Indigenous males going back centuries.

Activity 7 - one paragraph

- Why did the filmmaker include this sequence and why did he not reveal the violence first-hand?

7. Inequality

There are obvious moments in the film in which the inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are highlighted.

Some of these moments in the film are highlighted when Delilah sits watching the two schoolgirls eating ice cream and using a mobile phone. Delilah is so near yet so far. There is a gaping chasm between Delilah and the girls here. The indifference and discomfort of non-Indigenous diners in the cafe strip is another moment in which this divide is tangible.

In the community, it is the very basic health care services. Nana is merely given prescription drugs as a panacea. It is the basic housing and lack of any infrastructure which might also draw attention to the inequalities.

While the film is both personal and political, there is a stronger emphasis on the human story of Samson and Delilah. However, the film should make you think further about these inequalities and perhaps about what should and can be done to overcome these inequalities.

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Themes

8. Moving forward

Over the last few years, some measures of Indigenous wellbeing have improved, for example more Indigenous children are completing school than in the past.

But Australia has also gone backwards in other measures. For example, more Indigenous people are being locked up than ever before. Between 2002 and 2006, the imprisonment rate for Indigenous women increased by thirty- four per cent and the imprisonment rate for Indigenous men increased by over twenty per cent.

Other measures, like health and life expectancy, have only gotten a little better. Australia compares badly to other similar countries in terms of the ongoing treatment of its Indigenous peoples. In Canada and New Zealand for example, there have been massive improvements in areas of disadvantage like life expectancy. In these countries the gap between how long Indigenous and non-Indigenous people live has narrowed from about twenty years to seven years. This shows that real change is possible – and Australia could do a lot better.

9. Indigenous languages

The conversations between Nana and Delilah are in their own local language. This adds an authenticity to the film and underlines a film made to privilege Indigenous experience.



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Style and the language of film

One of the differences between *Samson & Delilah* and many other films that you will watch is the use of natural rhythms of both the day and the night to register human experience. Quite often the light of a dying campfire will become a cue that indicates the dying day and this precedes the dawn of

a new day with its fresh and intense light.

There is also a focus on image, given the paucity of dialogue.

Warwick Thornton's evocative visual style seems a perfect medium for telling his stories. The use of the visual medium has a tangible link to the Indigenous tradition of oral story telling. Film is the storyteller of the twenty-first century and has become a vehicle for foregrounding Indigenous experience.

Stylistically, Thornton uses wide-angle long shots and extreme close ups. The camera lingers and caresses characters lovingly. He records the reactions, those reflective moments that betray flickers of understanding and growth. You can see and feel the aching heart at times, the inner pain, the tension and confusion, the rhythms of a growing affection.

Warwick Thornton trained at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in radio and filmmaking, he then went on to study cinematography at the Australian Film Television and Radio School in NSW (AFTRS). The first film that he shot was for Rachel Perkins from the Arrernte, Kalkadoon nation: the award-winning *Radiance* (1998).

Warwick Thornton likes to spend considerable time on his projects during the pre-production stage. Rather than writing his script, he photographs how he sees his films.

Activity 8

- How does this work process affect the look and feel of *Samson & Delilah*?
- Warwick Thornton allows the viewer to get close to his characters. How does the camera position the viewer in specific sequences?

Soundtrack and sound design

The sound of the wheels of cars as they hit bumps in the bitumen as they pass over the bridge, the sounds of the natural world are all part of the organic soundscape of *Samson & Delilah*. The film also relies on music to tell its story. The music of Ana Gabriel, a Mexican singer, is important to Delilah. She swims in this music.

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Images and their effectiveness

A useful way to start thinking about the film after first viewing is to identify the images, dialogue or sounds that made an immediate impact on the viewer. Explaining why these aspects of the film (the microcosm) made an impression and then speculating on how the emotional effects and traces are deposited in the viewer. This will provide a framework for crystallising an understanding of the film's broader perspective (the macrocosm).

Activity 9

The following exercise will help you delineate your first impressions of *Samson & Delilah* by identifying and recording the indelible and memorable moments in the film. Write about five of your lasting images or impressions from the film. There is an example to start you off.

Example:

WHAT – the image, sound, dialogue.

(The reflection of Samson in the water when Delilah is bathing him ...)

WHY – the reason that the impact was profound

(I wasn't expecting to see this reflection. Warwick Thornton likes to suggest rather than show everything. He arouses curiosity in the viewer by ...)

HOW – the ways in which these emotional effects are created (There is great tenderness in this sequence. They are both enjoying the moment for a range of reasons. And as a ritual, it is also washing away their pasts.)

Characters

Landscape as character

Landscape is naturally imbued with meanings and stories. What might look like the middle of nowhere for one person can become the middle of somewhere for someone else. A landscape can enter the inner world of lives. Humans can feel it and breathe it. It can trigger memories and de-

sire and transform minds, souls and hearts. The landscape can go from being real to being a metaphor for something else.

Activity

- Write a comparison of the landscapes of the community in which Samson and Delilah live and their life in Alice Springs.

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Characters in brief

- Write a fifty-word character portrait for each of the four main characters

in the film. Use the segmentation to reveal which moments in the film define them as characters.

- Samson
- Delilah
- Nana
- Gonzo



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Websites

<http://www.samsonanddelilah.com.au>

[http://www.facebook.com/pages/ Samson-Delilah/57868371709](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Samson-Delilah/57868371709)

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<http://www.blacklist.org.au/index.cfm>

Australian Centre for the Moving Image

<http://www.acmi.net.au>