



The Sounds of Love and Monotony

Telling Stories without Speech in *Samson & Delilah*

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S*amson & Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009) has been heralded as one of Australia's most important and incisive creative works. Critic Tim Robey called it 'a triumph of independent production',¹ and Margaret Pomeranz described it as 'one of the most wonderful films this country has ever produced'.² The film won the prestigious Cannes Film Festival's *Caméra d'Or* in 2009, as well as a score of other accolades, including Best Film at the 2009 Australian Film

Institute Awards.³ Highly praised for its visual and acting feats, *Samson & Delilah* was also recognised as containing a particularly interesting soundtrack,⁴ especially in relation to the connections between image and sound, and sound and music. Director Warwick Thornton has said that the musical and sonic components of the film were not simply an add-on; rather, they were crucial to the film, and chosen well before the production process so as to underpin the whole structure of the narrative.⁵

Recognising the power of sound

In recent years scholars have begun to more fully recognise the embedded meanings that can be found in the cinema soundtrack, challenging the notion that sound is subservient to image, a purely emotional resonance or simply a device to help clarify filmic meaning. Academics and theorists such as Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman and Rick Altman argue that in many cases throughout cinematic history soundtracks have been central to the process of making meaning.⁶ This is certainly true in the case of *Samson & Delilah*, the auditory components of which greatly contribute to the cohesion of its narrative themes.

In this sense, *Samson & Delilah*'s soundtrack differs from that of many mainstream Australian films. *The Man from Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982), *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, 2008) and, more recently, *Red Dog* (Kriv



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Stenders, 2011), for example, tend to rely upon tightly synched conventional scoring approaches, and these typically manifest as grandiose orchestral pieces that capitalise on the beauty of the landscape and the characters of the outback. *Samson & Delilah*'s soundtrack transcends these established forms; it functions on various sociological, emotional, psychological, thematic, spatial, symbolic and temporal levels. It could be argued that it is the first film to significantly explore the aftermath of colonialism in Aboriginal society through the use of sound, and it does so at a time of heightened tension surrounding these issues.

Recent films such as *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005) certainly delve into current issues relating to the systemic problems in Aboriginal Australia, but they are somewhat limited in their sonic choices. For example, Peter Gabriel's score for *Rabbit-Proof Fence* seeks to evoke an Aboriginal oneness with the land but is ultimately compromised by the international, exotic and at times racially codified scoring approach he chooses to adopt. The heavily manipulated palette of sounds could neither be seen as authentic, nor as a poignant exploration of the issues discussed above. Although *One Night the Moon* places music at the forefront of its text, the film's form, style and structure falls somewhere between the Hollywood musical and the European opera, whereas *Samson & Delilah* is largely devoid of typical Western cinematic sensibilities and musical clichés. Instead, it crafts a complex web of spatio-temporal relationships to explore the divide in contemporary perceptions of Australian identity.

A holistic approach

So why has the film been so hard-hitting and so effective in calling to attention the deep-seated issues and realities of contemporary life in remote Aboriginal communities? One possible explanation for this poignancy might lie in Thornton's strong sense of veracity and his intimate, powerful and holistic approach to filmmaking: not only did he write the screenplay, but he also directed and shot the film, and compiled its score – an achievement rarely seen in contemporary cinema. Due to financial and licensing restraints, Thornton also used his own musical talent in the soundtrack, playing guitar and performing a number of the compositions. His daughter Rona played violin on one track, and his other daughter, Luka May, is credited with the background sounds.⁷ This personal approach is echoed elsewhere in the film, such as in the use of a handheld camera, which allowed the small production team of a cinematographer and a sound recordist to interact personally and intimately with the performers. As Thornton reflected, this was particularly important since the key actors were untrained and had no experience on film sets, and he wanted to create a one-on-one engagement with them where he could maintain eye contact.⁸ In the same interview he also notes that the film's story directly draws from his life experiences growing up as an Indigenous Australian in Alice Springs, and that he thoroughly considered every detail of the film for two years prior to shooting.⁹

Thornton's rigorous and personal approach to filmmaking has resulted in a powerful and considered exploration of two

narrative themes: love, which develops between Samson (Rowan McNamara) and Delilah (Marissa Gibson), and monotony, which underscores the way the two protagonists deal with the hardships and boredom of growing up in Indigenous Australia. These narrative themes contribute to the far-reaching scope and intelligence of the film, and the soundtrack plays an integral role in bringing them to fruition.

The sound of true love

The first narrative theme of love is cinematically and sonically unique, in that it is explored in a non-verbal manner. Although small clusters of conversation take place, there is little in the way of sustained dialogue. Some scenes run for fifteen minutes or more without a word being spoken, and Samson himself only makes one utterance in the entire film. At no point do the characters explicitly display their emotions. This is a sharp contrast to the long monologues that have come to characterise many modern teen love stories,¹⁰ and, for that matter, the soaring strings common in classical Hollywood romances.¹¹ So how and why does the film manage to maintain the audience's engagement for over ninety-five minutes without substantial dialogue?

To recognise the sheer magnitude of such a task, one should first consider the roles that sound and music typically play in relation to the spoken word in cinema. Michel Chion points out that film sound is primarily 'vococentric'; it almost always privileges the voice, highlighting it and setting it off from other sounds.¹² One might go further and say that cinema itself is inherently 'vococentric' in that the written script and its dialogue are the first steps to a film's creation and that all the other filmic elements tend to revolve and develop around this first point. In *Samson & Delilah*, however, this is not the case. Thornton has noted that for two whole years the different scenes developed in his mind rather than with pen and paper, and many of the scenes were inspired by specific songs, such as 'Sunshiny Day' by Charley Pride.¹³ He also comments that:

When a song does come on, people are connecting to the lyrics a lot more because they haven't heard the words. So the songs have a sort of potency and importance to do with the time and the place in the script, and how the characters are feeling.¹⁴

This lack of emphasis on spoken words is perhaps what gives greater importance to the other aspects of the film, and is the driving force behind the film's carefully constructed visual and sonic narrative. Through clever cinematic craftsmanship the two main characters effectively speak through gestures and mannerisms rather than words. Their love is of a special type, free of sentimentality and extravagant musical and visual cues. Thornton paints an austere picture but notes that this is the reality for many Aboriginal kids who do not articulate their love for one another.¹⁵ Instead he establishes an evocative code of body language that the two can communicate with: Samson rubs his fingers and points to his mouth to indicate that he wants food and Delilah shrugs and walks on.

This non-verbal communication in the film is enhanced and strengthened through the other sonic elements; when Samson

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brings his foam mattress to Delilah's campsite, for example, Delilah quickly shuts the gate to prevent him from entering, and here the metallic noise of the gate aurally symbolises her protest. But it is the way that music, sound and image clash throughout that allows the film to cohesively express feelings. Music itself is used as part of the cinematic apparatus that fashions the basic love narrative between the two characters.

The romantic Mexican music that Delilah cathartically escapes to every night with the cassette player in the community's shared four-wheel drive provides the first marker of Delilah's curiosity in Samson. The narrative cue becomes explicit when Delilah's nightly routine is disturbed by the abrasive music blaring from Samson's boom box. Looking across the road, Delilah watches Samson's half-naked body dance freely and fluidly to the rhythm of the music, which gradually rises in volume as Delilah's interest in Samson increases. The different sounds clash but it is the romance of Mexican singer Ana Gabriel that ends up drowning out Samson's rock and roll, while the sensual performance and image of Samson's floodlit body mesmerises Delilah. The sonic dynamics of this scene are further complicated when Samson's brother appears. Agitated by the loud rock music (which at this stage the viewer cannot actually hear), he slaps Samson across the head and pulls the microphone from the amplifier socket. The Mexican music is abruptly silenced amid a wall of feedback. This is followed by a close-up shot of Delilah's face, which is complemented by the sound of a crackling fire. In this scene the soundtrack transcends typical uses of sound in film, as it does not merely provide mood or materialise specific actions, events or atmospheres. The logic to the soundtrack lies not in realism but in the way it aurally corresponds to the psychological and emotional states of the characters. It is the vehicle through which the love narrative becomes apparent.

Monotony and musical repetition

The second narrative theme, monotony, at times overlaps with the theme of love insofar as the love that the two share develops out of their tedious and isolated existence in the community, and is further strengthened through a general need to survive in this community. Every day the two characters go through the same motions: Samson lies about sniffing petrol in his brother's derelict shack, finding ways to attract Delilah's attention, and Delilah cares for her debilitated grandmother, providing her with daily medicine, preparing food, painting pictures and so on.

The theme of monotony permeates every aspect of the *mise en scène* and of the soundtrack. This is especially evident in the landscape, which is precise, simple and restrained in its representation and presents nothing exciting or new for the two characters. Unlike typical perceptions that place Indigenous people in harmony and at one with the land,¹⁶ the landscape here, especially in its sonic portrayal, takes on a more empty, isolated and oppressive quality. In one scene where Samson looks upon the town from a hill, a violin motif occurs. The violin, which is a very common musical device in Australian cinema because of its English and Irish descent, and more recently as a signifier of colonialism, plays some drawn-out, dissonant notes.¹⁷ The broken sound of the instrument symbolises the fractured and disconnected reality that many Indigenous people feel with their surroundings. These sorts of musical motifs play on clichéd representations of the Australian outback that tend to highlight the majestic beauty and vastness of the landscape; Baz Luhrmann's epic *Australia* is a recent example of this style.

The tedium of landscape in *Samson & Delilah*, on the other hand, is conveyed in the soundtrack's rejection of such dramatic staples as bombastic orchestral strings, ethereal didgeridoos and reverberant world music instruments. Rather than being musically characterised as a vast, exotic, formidable, mystical or unconquerable terrain, the sounds are sparse, dry, realistic and organic. Silence is marked by the all-too-familiar Australian sounds of wind moving plangently through eucalyptus trees, screeching cockatoos, flies buzzing and so on.¹⁸ The lack of dialogue and the long takes of stark remote landscapes intensify the desert sounds and bring them to the forefront of the narrative. Through the repetition of diegetic music (occurring within the world of the film), the routines, realities and geographical entrapment for both Samson and Delilah are highlighted. The music of Ana Gabriel also serves this purpose because its exotic and dramatic qualities provide Delilah with an escape from the boredom of everyday life.

One cyclic motif that plays on this idea of boredom manifests in the day in, day out music that Samson's brother plays with his bandmates on the porch. The three-chord reggae progression features in more than ten scenes throughout the film and sonically symbolises the cyclic and monotonous existence of the characters and the town in which they live. Samson longs to play in his brother's band, but his style of free-form rock that seeks to break free from the shackles of reggae minimalism is ultimately too rebellious. The repetitive jamming of this music becomes so unbearable for Samson that sniffing petrol provides the only escape because it filters and dulls the noise. The idea is further explored in a later scene where, unlike on previous

noise occurs and Samson screams 'Yeah!' and jumps up and strums the guitar, and 'Sunshiny Day' miraculously attenuates. Frustrated by the disturbance, his brother snatches the guitar from him; more feedback occurs and triggers the audibility of the band's reggae music. These sounds do not realistically coincide with the events taking place, but are instead disorientated, symbolising Samson's petrol-induced mental disarray.

This remarkable scene is followed by Delilah waking on the other side of town. We know that this happens simultaneously to the previous events as we can hear the same reggae music, though it is now distant and less cohesive. This distance gives the viewer a spatial understanding of the topographical features of the community. As we can already appreciate, this very complex sound design not only establishes the overall mood and tone, but it also speaks the voice of the story to come, initiating a series of ideas and issues that relate to the central themes of love and monotony – and it does all this before the powers of image and dialogue manifest.

Conclusion

Perhaps *Samson & Delilah* has set a new precedent, giving rise to a new kind of filmmaking: an Indigenous realist approach that seeks to explore a sonic as well as social reality within Aboriginal Australia. Thornton's film avoids sugar-coating its message through the use of a non-diegetic orchestral score or those all-too-familiar haunting didgeridoos and exotic instrumentations. Instead, this approach looks to music that Aboriginal people actually listen to – music that is part of their everyday life such as country and reggae. *Samson & Delilah*'s soundtrack also undergoes various sonic mutations, variations and juxtapositions. These elements are crucial in highlighting and exploring the primary themes of the film – drug abuse, boredom, monotony, unemployment and teenage love – and in turn they contribute to locating Aboriginal Australia in a contemporary cinematic context.

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Endnotes

¹ Tim Robey, 'Samson and Delilah Review', *The Telegraph*, 1 April 2010, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/7545839/Samson-and-Delilah-review.html>>, accessed 24 April 2012.

² Margaret Pomeranz, 'Samson & Delilah', *At the Movies*, 29 April 2009, <<http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2542612.htm>>, accessed 24 April 2012.

³ Warwick Thornton, *Samson & Delilah* (website), <<http://www.samsonanddelilah.com.au>>, accessed 24 April 2012.

⁴ Accolades include Best Achievement in Sound Design, Australian Screen Sound Guild Awards 2009; Best Sound, Australian Film Institute Awards 2009; and Best Music, IF (Inside Film) Awards 2009.

⁵ Luke Buckmaster, 'Interview with Warwick Thornton, writer/director of *Samson & Delilah*', *Crikey*, <<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/cinetology/2009/05/12/interview-with-warwick-thornton-writerdirector-of-samson-delilah>>, accessed 24 April 2012.

⁶ For example: Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press, 1994; Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*, BFI, 1987; Philip Brophy, *100 Modern Soundtracks*, British Film Institute, 2004.

⁷ Thornton, *Samson & Delilah* (website), op. cit.

⁸ Warwick Thornton, Interview with Fenella Kernebone, *Sunday Arts*, ABC TV, 10 May 2009.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ For example, the hugely successful teen drama series *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003).

¹¹ For example, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942).

¹² Chion, op. cit., pp. 5–6.

¹³ Tim Milfull, 'Cinema: An Interview with Warwick Thornton (Director of *Samson & Delilah*)', *M/C Reviews*, <<http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3304>>, accessed 24 April 2012.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Thornton, *Sunday Arts*, op. cit.

¹⁶ There are exceptions to such representations, such as Ivan Sen's recent *Toomelah* (2011), which similarly explores alternative perspectives on the pertinent issues in Aboriginal communities through its soundtrack of commercial hip-hop.

¹⁷ The dissonant violin is a device that is occurring increasingly in recent Australian cinema. For example, *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005) and *Van Diemen's Land* (Jonathan auf der Heide, 2009).

¹⁸ These types of sounds, often balanced elsewhere by a prominent music track, have been used in other Australian films, most significantly in sequences of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975).

¹⁹ Graeme Smith & Judith Brett, 'Nation, Authenticity and Social Difference in Australian Popular Music: Folk, Country, Multicultural', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 22, issue 58, 1998. 'Sunshiny Day' is performed by Charley Pride – the only African-American country singer to be inducted into the Grand Ole Opry, and one of very few to receive widespread commercial success; it might be that the back story to this music has its own symbolic significance to consider.

²⁰ Milfull, op. cit.