

***“Behind every suffering, there is a human life worth loving”:  
Receptions and perceptions of uniqueness, universality and hope  
in Warwick Thornton’s Samson and Delilah***

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**Abstract:** Set in a remote community in the Central desert and in Alice Springs, Warwick Thornton’s multi-award-winning feature film *Samson and Delilah* focuses on the love story and hardships of two Aboriginal teenagers. This essay demonstrates that the film’s phenomenal success on its home soil and abroad stems both from its specific emphasis on Aboriginal characters and lives and from its universality, and, notably, from its poignant portrayal of unconditional love between the main characters. The essay examines the reception of the film at the Saint-Tropez Cinéma des Antipodes Festival, and, more broadly, in France. It also focuses on the cinematographic choices that allow the film “to grab the audience’s heart”. Drawing on participant observation, audience study and film analysis, as well as philosophy and Aboriginal epistemologies, this essay foregrounds the notions and interconnected roles of beauty, emotions, and ethics as critical to rethink the efficacy and power of works of art. Bergson’s reflection on universality, in particular, helps illuminate how the film was able to work through empathy and hope to reach different audiences.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal cinema, hope, structural inequalities.



“Les Aborigènes aujourd’hui (Aboriginal people today)”. “Australia, 60,000 years of Aboriginal culture” Exhibition, 15 May-15 December 2010, Quinson Prehistory Museum, France. © Barbara Glowczewski. Courtesy of Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon and Why Not Productions<sup>1</sup>

“Behind every suffering we notice, there is a human life worth loving”. A spectator expressed this view after watching Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* at the Cinéma des Antipodes festival in Saint-Tropez in France. The feature film, which garnered many awards after winning the Caméra d’Or award at the Cannes festival in 2009, is set in a remote community in the Australian Central desert and in Alice Springs. The film takes the spectators into the love story and hardships of two Aboriginal teenagers. The pair are confronted with addiction, the loss or absence of (grand-)parents and indifference or violence from all sides of society: Samson (Rowan McNamara), the rebellious young man, is addicted to petrol-sniffing, while Delilah (Marissa Gibson) looks after her dying Nana (Mitjili Gibson) with no adult supervision or assistance. As the director explained, *Samson and Delilah* gives most Australians access to a place they have never been before and to young people they only see for thirty seconds on the news (2010). *Samson and Delilah*—with the tagline “true love”—also offered most spectators a story that is rarely seen: a story of love without judgment, practised almost in silence.

When Warwick Thornton was awarded the Caméra d’or, his film was publicly described by the jury as “the most beautiful love story we have seen in years”. At the Antipodes Film Festival in Saint-Tropez in 2009 as well as subsequent festivals or

<sup>1</sup> Thanks go to Barbara Glowczewski for sending me this photograph, and to Isabelle Dubset from the Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon and Thomas Russo from Why Not Productions for allowing me to use it here.

screenings that I attended in France and London in 2009 and 2010, many spectators were as moved by the poverty and hardship constitutive of the lives of the main characters as they were by their love story. Many also commented on the uniqueness of the cinematic experience.

This essay examines *Samson and Delilah*'s success and impact on spectators in the light of its specific emphasis on Aboriginal characters and lives, and its universality. It pays particular attention to the living conditions of the two teenagers it pictures and to the sense of care and non-judgemental love between the two characters. The first part will focus on the reception of the film through a particular case study: the 2009 Rencontres Internationales du Cinéma des Antipodes, a much-awaited festival for Australian and New Zealand cinema aficionados, which takes place annually in Saint-Tropez, on the French Riviera. When analysing what the audience gained in watching the film, and what the film brought out in the audience, the use of Henri Bergson's understanding of universality as "ly[ing] in the effect produced" (Bergson, "Laughter") will help illuminate how and why the film was able to promote empathy, generate interest and resonate across different interpretive communities. Bergson's reflections on how the uniqueness and genuineness of a character or a situation are activated through perception are proposed as one possible grid of interpretation to understand the commonalities of spectators' reactions to the portrayal of injustice and love. This essay is, however, not concerned with dealing with the notions of universalism and/or universality per se, as abstractions, or with Bergson's entire philosophical corpus.<sup>2</sup> Despite the understanding encouraged by Bergson's reflections that a situation or character will be perceived differently by different viewers engaged by a work of art, the aim here is not to make the data serve a particular theory, but to use theory to serve the data and film analysis. To extend the study of the relationship between the festival audience and the film narrative, the second part of the essay will further explore how the film's multiple layers of meaning and cinematographic choices allowed it "to grab the audience's heart"—an intention that the director avowed he had when choosing to work with the fictional mode (Thornton).<sup>3</sup> While drawing from participant observation and data analysis, this second part offers my own film analysis and pays attention to the

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of "universalism(s)", see Tsing (2005), Balibar (2007), and Wolfe (2007). The reasons for which the notion is regarded with suspicion in some contexts, especially in settler-colonial and neo-colonial contexts, include that: "the gap between theory and practice ... is intrinsic to ... any language that endeavours to 'speak the universal'" (Balibar); "to oppose the inequities of capitalism, we should set our sights on the mechanics of exclusion rather than allow ourselves to be diverted by the rhetoric of inclusion" (Wolfe, 118). For an overview of the anthropological debate on relativism and its relationship to universals, see Whitaker (478-481). For an understanding that "[u]niversalism is implicated in both imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment", see Tsing, who proposes to consider "engaged universals" and "[t]o turn to universals ... to identify knowledge that moves—mobile and mobilizing—across localities and cultures" (7). For "the responsibility (or responsibilities) involved in a 'politics of the universal'", and the importance of thinking about "civic universality" as "an effort, a conatus", see Balibar (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Most of the session is provided as an extra on the French DVD (*Samson & Delilah*).

many ways that beauty and hope are themes of the film and central concerns of the directorial vision.

The interpretations and the methodology that this essay offers are informed by a decade of working with Aboriginal writers and artists in Australia and France and by my engagement across French, Aboriginal and Australian intellectual traditions. My approach is therefore attentive to the challenge for Aboriginal people—and, I believe, for researchers—raised by Marcia Langton, and taken up by *Samson and Delilah*, which “lies not in identifying the social expressions of racism in daily life but in finding the expression of one’s own humanity in the face of so much that can dehumanise” (Langton 78). The first part of this essay examines the responses provided by thirty-six spectators to questionnaires that I handed out at the Antipodes Festival. The essay is also informed by discussions I had about the film with spectators in France, the UK and Australia, over a three-year period, and with Daran Fulham, the film’s production designer. Finally, it is based on research collated from attending, chairing, or gathering information reported from Q&A sessions in France and in England (ten and two respectively). The scholars and cultural actors from whom I gained insights and information regarding spectators’ questions and reactions at festivals or other screening events included anthropologist Barbara Glowczewski, anthropologist and art historian, Géraldine Le Roux, Antipodes Festival Director, Bernard Bories, and Daran Fulham.<sup>4</sup> I chaired Q&A sessions at the Rochefort Pacifique Festival in May 2010 and after a screening in London organised by Cinephilia West (a venue which hosts monthly film events) the same month. In Saint-Tropez, where I was also the festival interpreter in 2009, and in Rochefort, participant observation was conducted. As I am interested in identifying how this particular work of art captivated, moved and in some cases confounded audiences, my approach is, to some extent, quantitative, but principally qualitative. Choosing a qualitative, questionnaire-based approach that abandons the notion of a homogeneous or “implied audience” (Livingstone 193) allows researchers “to pay attention to domains not necessarily of their own choosing, but also to research questions not necessarily on their own agenda” (Livingstone 202). Moreover, at Q&A sessions, reactions from quiet, shy spectators often go unnoticed. Of course, in some instances, even questionnaire respondents might opt to leave personal or confrontational opinions unsaid. With the understanding that audiences are “motivated, diverse, interpretative” (Livingstone 199) and “plural in their decodings” (Livingstone 195), and that a spectator is “a corporeal presence but a slippery concept” (Kennedy 3), this essay will seek to identify trends and patterns while not conflating responses. Representing and interpreting audiences’ responses always involves making subjective choices, however. When, for practical reasons, I needed to make such choices, the methodological bias was to favour resonance and depth.

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<sup>4</sup> The press kit for the film’s release in France included a contextualising interview with Barbara Glowczewski, who has conducted work with Aboriginal people, and notably with Warlpiri people, since 1979 (*Samson & Delilah. Dossier de presse*). Glowczewski chaired Q&A sessions at the Festival du Livre de Mouans-Sartoux, a major gathering of writers in Southern France, and in four venues in Paris: the Quai Branly Museum, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the Cinéma du Panthéon (for a screening organised for teachers), and for the monthly gathering of psychoanalysts from *UneBévue*. Géraldine Le Roux chaired the Q&A session at the screening of *Survival* in Paris in June 2010.

### ***Samson and Delilah* in Saint-Tropez**

The *Rencontres Internationales du Cinéma des Antipodes* festival was founded in Saint-Tropez in 1998 by Bernard Bories, an Antipodes cinema devotee, who has remained its director. The French Riviera town is renowned for hosting affluent and famous visitors, while the annual Antipodes Festival is regarded in France, Australia and New Zealand as *the* Australian and New Zealand film celebration and showcase in France. The festival offers an intensive programme over seven days. When *Samson and Delilah* was screened at the 11<sup>th</sup> Edition of the festival in October 2009, the film had won the prestigious Cannes award but had not yet received all the Australian Film Institute awards and subsequent international awards which are now listed on the film website. Press reviews or interviews had coincided with and followed the awards ceremony in Cannes, but the movie had not yet been released in France.<sup>5</sup> So it is likely that most spectators in Saint-Tropez would not have heard of or read about the movie before attending the festival. When the spectators handed back their questionnaires, the prize night had not yet taken place. Hence festival attendees did not know that the Antipodes Grand Jury Prize for Best Feature Film, and Best Female and Male Talent Prizes would be awarded to *Samson and Delilah*, Marissa Gibson and Rowan McNamara (the lead actors) by the jury presided over by Anthony LaPaglia.

*Samson and Delilah*'s multiple themes address issues of petrol-sniffing, the neglect of children, incarceration, the impact of the lack of male role models and family structures on youths, the lack of services in remote communities, racism, and the inequitable exploitation of Aboriginal art by non-Aboriginal dealers. The movie's central theme, however, is love, which is explored through the relationship between the two main characters. Warwick Thornton has indicated that the movie reflects what he saw as he grew up in Alice Springs: "the way our children are treated—the neglect. ... Not just the neglect of white society, it's the neglect of Aboriginal [people], of parents" (Q&A Paris). With *Samson and Delilah*, he wanted "to make a film of how incredibly beautiful and strong our children are" (Q&A Paris). While scholarship (Collins 65-66, 73-74; Henderson) has addressed the timely significance of *Samson and Delilah* in the Australian context, most spectators in France and at the Saint-Tropez festival would have been unaware that the film constituted an "affective and ethical reframing of the intense media coverage of Aboriginal violence and suffering, reported 'every second day' by the newspapers [in Australia]" (Collins 73). This essay sheds light on how an international albeit predominantly French audience responded to the film at the earliest stage of its screening history outside Australia.

In the 36 questionnaires, 11 men and 21 women ticked the gender question; 8 people indicated they were 65 +, 13 were between 55-65, 2 were between 45-55, 7 between 35-45, 4 between 25-35, 1 between 15-20 and 1 between 10-15. Nine questionnaires were filled out in English. English-speakers attending the screenings at the festival can be festival volunteers, filmmakers, Saint-Tropez residents, or tourists passing by. Some people asked me if they could bring their questionnaire back later or the following day and did so. It was clear they wanted to carefully think about their answers (all questions are provided in the appendix).

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<sup>5</sup> For reviews published in the French press, see *Critique presse*.

As for general patterns of response, the poverty or injustice Aboriginal people face today was mentioned in at least one of the answers of all but two questionnaires. About a third of the answers to “what struck you the most” (question 2) referred to the characters’ dire living conditions and the poverty of their communities. One spectator noted that the film reflected “a reality which should not exist anymore” and that tears came to her eyes.<sup>6</sup> The answers to the question “what did you like the most” (question 3) were more varied. Coming from the same 10 questionnaires, the responses included: “the love”, “the love story”, “the characters’ tenacity”, “a more positive ending, bringing hope”, “the slowness of the film, the parsimony of words”, and “the solidarity between two solitudes”. The overwhelming reaction to the depicted injustice and to the living conditions of the two teenagers testifies to the success of the director in having engaged people with seeing how difficult life is for Aboriginal children (Thornton Q&A Paris). The responses given to questions 2 and 3 show, however, that spectators went beyond this reading of the film (two thirds commented upon other aspects of the film when answering the question on what struck them the most). They particularly appreciated the beauty of the films’ emotions, acting and cinematography, as well as the love story, thus being receptive to the director’s stated desire of showing how beautiful Aboriginal children are.

A third of the responses to questions 2, 3 and 4 are included below to represent the diversity and singularity of spectators’ responses. They are provided here as part of an attempt at a horizontal and constructive—rather than deconstructive—methodological starting point. Professor of applied and social theatre James Thompson explains that “research based on being next to the work ensures that we are only ever collaborators, co-inquirers, experiencing the work in an entirely valid but never superior way”: to him, adopting a horizontal method “ensures an examination of systems of possibilities” rather than “assertions of certainties” (134). His standpoint aptly describes the methodology used to develop this essay: for Thompson, “[s]tanding (or sitting for that matter) beside colleagues, co-participants, audience members and other members of our communities and pausing to acknowledge the affective resonance of any art practice, therefore, provides the starting point of a method of enquiry” (134). In the landmark collaborative book *Reading the country*, Stephen Muecke captures the texture of texts when he writes: “Texts are woven—with different colours, if you like—different voices mingling, allusions to someone else’s words, citations, different points of view” (Benterrak, Muecke and Roe 21). Muecke also highlights a challenge with which anthropology is confronted as a discipline. Comparing it to psychoanalysis, he explains:

They both require their subjects, in the fieldwork situation or on the couch, to *keep talking* and at the same time to “remain quiet”. The professional’s knowledge depends on listening to, and interpreting the words of the unknown subjects, but these words are at the same time disarmed. What is actually said by the subjects is lost as it gives away to the more powerful discourse which interprets the words and finds a “deeper meaning” for them. (Muecke 185)

I would suggest that a pausing (or horizontal) and constructive strategy—that could also be seen as a kind of “hermeneutics of restoration” (Josselson 3)—might work as a

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

challenging model for weaving a text about audience research and study involving people's testimonies or stories. Making the words of spectators visible on the page allows them to stand on their own.<sup>7</sup>

	2. "What struck you the most in the movie?"	3. "What did you like the most?" (if different from 2)	4 "Have you learnt anything thanks to this movie?"
Spectator 1	The sincerity of the director, of the two protagonists.	The (short) sequence of the young man <u>dancing</u> on the deck of the house	Yes. The destructive force of petrol sniffing.
Spectator 2	The rhythm	The colours	Yes: patience
Spectator 3	The beauty of the emotions	The greatness and power of emotions in the absence of any words or dialogue but what violence there is against Aboriginal people.	Yes. I would not have imagined there was so much indifference and violence in Australia.
Spectator 4	The difficult moments, only a little future	The more positive ending, bringing hope	Yes and no, it is a contemporary problem in this MODERN WORLD. TOO MUCH MATERIALISM AND NOT ENOUGH SPIRITUALITY (capitals used by spectator)
Spectator 5	The lack of connection to an everyday – albeit limited	The image	Learnt, no, but impressed, yes.
Spectator 6	The maturity of the young girl with regards to the grandmother's behaviour and that of the woman who does not want to see them any more.	The love between the 2 heroes	Not specifically with this movie – but I have learnt a lot over the years thanks to this Antipodes festival which I have attended since its

<sup>7</sup> Answers from Spectators 1 to 8 were written in French. Answers from Spectators 9 to 13 were in English. Thanks to Charlotte Gleghorn for advice on some translation options.

			first edition.
Spectator 7	The relationships between people, the veracity of the characters' feelings. The landscapes, the colours, the atmosphere.	The authenticity in the actors' performance, minimalist technique	No, that's an environment I discovered in Australia. I have learnt however that [ <i>indecipherable</i> ] these things continue to happen.
Spectator 8	It reflects a reality that should not exist anymore.	The absence of dialogue and the solidarity between these 2 solitudes.	No, because I have been very close to this sort of situation in Brazil. I did not know however that this tragedy was also taking place in Australia.
Spectator 9	Loneliness/silence	Landscapes	Difficulty of getting out of habits + solidarity
Spectator 10	The lack of verbal communication between people	The way no words were necessary	Appalled by the way they lived + the lack of hope
Spectator 11	Could happen not only with these people – situations parallel to this happen in different worlds	The cinematography	Yes – a point of view of a filmmaker.
Spectator 12	How real it was.	The acting was superb!	Yes – I didn't realise how bad the living conditions are for a lot of Aborigines.
Spectator 13	The substance abuse and violence	An ending with hope	A small insight into life in Central Australia

The table above reveals that the spectators' responses encompassed aesthetic, affective, ethical, spiritual and political concerns or comments. Spectators thought that the socio-political context of the film was important. Many indicated in their answers to other questions that they gained awareness of the situation of Aboriginal people and children in Australia and/or identified the characters' situations with similar histories or experiences elsewhere. Spectators were also very moved by the relationship between the two main characters and, in some instances, by the relationship between Delilah and her Nana. Spectators were emotionally affected and engaged by the film, as well as sensitive to what Claire Colebrook calls "the sensible force or style through which [art] produces content" (qtd. in Thompson 117). Spectators' responses thus highlight the educational, political, and affective functions of the film, which, as we will see, all have

a role to play in enabling the discourse of hope offered by the film. I am not here claiming that all spectators found the film hopeful, although the majority of respondents in Saint-Tropez did. Alternative responses are evidenced in the above table and the questionnaires reveal that the feelings expressed by spectators ranged from empathy, shame (for the Australians), despair, anger, hope and upliftment. Responses also reveal that people were very concerned about the film's issues and with the issue of hope—whether they found hope present or lacking in the film. The efficacy of the film is thus perhaps best measured not in terms of whether the film gave people hope but in terms of how audiences engaged with the issue of the prospect of hope in Aboriginal communities.

The educational, or awareness-raising, function of the film was suggested by a quarter of all respondents. This group expressed their shock or surprise at the conditions in which Aboriginal people live. One French spectator said she found it hard to believe there could be such despair and asked whether there really was such a cleavage between the white and black worlds. A young girl said that she was “unaware like many Aussies [of] the major challenges many Aborigines face” (spectator 12, response from questionnaire). She also said she could “definitely relate to it, being Australian” (response from questionnaire), and was “deeply concerned by the issues tackled” (response from questionnaire). However, as a singularity in the French context—due to the specific Australian focus of the festival and the commitment of its director to showcase films by Aboriginal directors and on Indigenous issues (Bories), which is evidenced by the festival programmes and publicity posters over the years (Rencontres internationales Page)—two thirds of spectators said that to them the situation was well known. Some commented that the current situation was common knowledge; others explained that they had learnt about it through their reading, from the films they had seen at the festival over the years or because they had lived or spent time in Australia. Susan Sontag argues that “the familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past” (76). The various answers from spectators indicate that the same comment could be made about the ripple effect of not only *Samson and Delilah* but also of the Antipodes Festival, which plays the role of a relay platform for sociopoetic concerns emanating from Australia and New Zealand.

The political function and impact of the film is suggested by the responses of spectators who compared the situation of the characters in the film to situations outside Australia. As a sign perhaps that the singularity of a situation is often more acutely experienced when one is close to the situation, the few people who clearly expressed that the story could only happen in Australia were spectators who indicated that they were Australian. Two thirds of the spectators thought the story could have taken place elsewhere, even when they said that the film was specifically Aboriginal (in response to question 8). Parallels or comparisons were drawn with Canada, Africa, the USA, America, New Zealand, New Caledonia, South Africa, and Brazil. Correlations were made with “the conquest of North American territories by European colonisers”, and “all the countries where Whites have seized the power at the expense of ethnic minorities” (response from questionnaire). One respondent wrote that poverty was universally known as a source of symptoms such as violence and precarity. Another spectator wrote “universal illness” in response to question 8, probably to refer to Samson's addiction as his response to question 9 mentioned “the son of my friend who is on a similarly uncertain path” (spectator 2, response from questionnaire).

Spectators also drew more personalised connections with specific situations or experiences. Many respondents expressed what a spectator put as follows: “the film is Aboriginal but echoes the state of many people all over the world”. One respondent commented that she lives in a city where 170 nationalities live side by side and where similar cleavages and malaise exist. A woman compared the indifference towards Delilah in Alice Springs to that shown to any “tramp” (*clochard*) in the street. The almost physical impossibility of watching or engaging with the characters’ vulnerability is represented several times in the film, as a refusal to give up one’s privileges or an inability to extend compassion to another human being in need, for example when Delilah, in order to buy some food, desperately tries to sell a painting to people comfortably sitting at a restaurant. Some spectators at other European screenings also stated that the reluctance of non-indigenous people to look at the structural inequalities defining or contouring the lives of the Indigenous population found its corollary in other (European) societies where the dominant or affluent refuse to engage with the marginalised population. In Saint-Tropez, spectator 8 wrote down that she had “no notion of what non-Aboriginal people were like” and added: “They have the lack of sensitivity the affluent show towards the poor” (response from questionnaire). The idea that the oppressed and vulnerable are similar came out strongly through universalising and comparative responses of this kind; this indicates that one of the greatest achievements of the film is to have foregrounded how structural violence “structures” (Farmer 315) the lives of the two teenagers. According to Bourgois, “structural violence refers to the political-economic organization of society that imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress, from high morbidity and mortality rates to poverty and abusive working conditions” (7).<sup>8</sup> The universalising comments by spectators indicates that through *Samson and Delilah*, as film and characters, spectators identified both “the social machinery of oppression” (Farmer 307) and “*la part des sans-part [the share of the shareless]*”, “*le pouvoir des sans-pouvoir [the power of the powerless]*” (Balibar). The diversity of answers also shows that the film works differently with different audiences, and that, in many instances, the spectators’ perception of the socio-political context, narrative elements and the film as an aesthetics all contributed to affective receptions of the film. The answers also show that the affective response is rarely divorced from an “intellectual” response to the political and social issues. Spectators recognise that love and hope are a politics as well as sentiments.

Several spectators used terms such as “sincerity”, “authenticity”, “veracity”, “realisticness” (*sic*) to refer to the actors’ performance, the director’s intention, and the feelings depicted on the screen. As the responses provoked by (a film like) *Samson and Delilah* illustrate, the link between uniqueness, genuineness or sincerity and universality as an “effect produced” becomes apparent. Bergson developed the connection in an essay on laughter, in which he explained:

Each [product of art] is unique, and yet, if it bears the stamp of genius, it will come to be accepted by everybody. Why will it be accepted? And if it is unique of its kind, by what sign do we know it to be genuine? Evidently, by the very effort it forces us to make against our

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Sergio Miguel Huarcaya for suggesting the emphasis on structural violence. The concept was first defined by Johan Galtung in 1969.

predispositions in order to see sincerely. Sincerity is contagious.  
(Bergson, *Laughter*)

The choice of Bergson's translator to translate "*vrai*", which literally means "true" or "truthful" in French, as "genuine" at the end of the quote to describe products of art mirrors the diversity of adjectives ("genuine", "sincere", "authentic", "true") used almost interchangeably by spectators in questionnaires and conversations. Bergson continues:

What the artist has seen we shall probably never see again, or at least never see in exactly the same way; but if he has actually seen it, the attempt he has made to lift the veil compels our imitation. His work is an example which we take as a lesson. [...] The greater the work and the more profound the dimly apprehended truth, the longer may the effect be in coming, but, on the other hand, the more universal will that effect tend to become. So the universality here lies in the effect produced, and not in the cause. (Bergson, *Laughter*)

As shown above, the "effect produced" by *Samson and Delilah* involved the emotive universalising of the love story, the situation and the struggle of the characters, even when the specificity of the Australian Aboriginal context was acknowledged.<sup>9</sup> Spectators' answers in Saint-Tropez eloquently responded to the intentions of the director, who explained that in his script he talked "about the distance between S&D, "... the magnetism ... the sounds and the smells, the dust and the colour of a black eye, everything but words" (Q&A Paris). The many references to the beauty of the emotions and of the image, the quality of the cinematography, and the compelling characters suggest that these aesthetic considerations contributed to the affective reception of the film. The second part of this essay will expand on this affective impact and will pay particular attention to the cinematographic devices and choices that allowed the director to "grab the audience's heart", or, to use Léopold Sédar Senghor's terms, to invite spectators to respond to the film with their "*raison-étreinte*". Souleymane Bachir Diagne explains that as opposed to a "*raison-œil*" (eye-reason) which refers to "an analytical cognitive approach that creates a distance between the perceived object and the perceiving subject", the "*raison-étreinte*" (grabbing-reason) refers to a "synoptical and symmetrical approach that installs us at the heart of the object" (21-22).

### **The image sings—"grabbing the audience's heart"**

To me the diegetic silence and lack of verbal communication between the characters also contribute to this "grabbing" (*étreinte*) which Warwick Thornton aimed to achieve. One spectator expressed in Saint-Tropez that she was particularly struck by the "silent tenderness." Spectators in Australia and France also expressed in conversations with me that they felt very angry watching the movie. Because the violence, vulnerability and emotions are represented but never verbalised, and mostly depicted as implosive rather than explosive, the spectators are provided with a space that is not scripted, and where

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<sup>9</sup> Thanks to Stephen Muecke for pointing out that Samson and Delilah's isolation as a couple could also be seen as a universalising choice, which "enable[d] the engagement with a romantic genre familiar to the filmgoing audience". Personal communication, 29 August 2011.

they are free to go with their own responses: they are free to feel anger, pain, powerlessness, or love and hope. In other words, what the viewer takes in is evocative but not prescriptive. Viewers are thus able to identify with the characters in a particularly personal way. Ultimately, *Samson and Delilah* might in this manner encourage viewers to be *with* the characters, rather than merely look at them. The genuine interest viewers appeared to have developed in Marissa Gibson and Rowan McNamara as human beings is also evidenced by how frequently viewers enquired about the wellbeing of the two young people after the film at Q&A sessions or in post-screenings conversations in which I took part.

One of the film's greatest strengths is its depiction of characters with whom people could identify, and through which they could put a face on contemporary situations – as the photograph opening this article demonstrates. The director gave a depth as well as a face to situations not previously known or comprehended by most spectators. As Marcia Langton strikingly put it: “Paradoxically, even while Aboriginal misery dominates the national media frenzy – the perpetual Aboriginal reality show – the first peoples exist as virtual beings without power or efficacy in the national zeitgeist” (*Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show* 17). The spectator who provided the poignant reflection used for the title of this essay indicated that he was “from a small town in Quebec, Canada, near an Aboriginal reserve” (spectator 9); he explained that, although he was aware of Aboriginal people's difficulties, the film “made it more human”. Spectator 4 also responded that although he knew of the problems that Aboriginal people were facing, the film had facilitated a way to “FEEL THEIR LIFE” (response from questionnaire). The expression used by the spectator is unusual in French (“SENTIR LEUR VIE”, capitals used by spectator). It clearly emphasises the process of identification and empathy made possible by the film and suggests that the depth of the characters seemed almost palpable to the viewer.

Spectator 1 indicated her favourite moment in the film occurs when Samson starts dancing outside his house. Here, the viewer is gradually invited to enter Delilah's vision and sensory perception. In Paris, Saint-Tropez, London and Brisbane, many spectators similarly highlighted this scene in which a shot showing Samson dancing to the beat of “Warlpiri Woman” loudly playing on his brother's loudspeaker alternates with a close-up of Delilah's fire-lit face watching him from the car while listening to a ballad by Mexican Singer Ana Gabriel. Delilah's song intersects with Samson's then gradually overlays the sequence as Ana Gabriel's passionate ballad becomes the only diegetic song the viewer can hear while Samson appears in a medium close-up that slowly tilts down and up his face and upper body in slow motion, as if to follow Delilah's gaze. When Samson's brother taps Samson on the head and switches off the music, a close-up shows Delilah's admiring face light up with a smile, and the image sings.<sup>10</sup> The sequence offers an extraordinary cinematic representation of two worlds and subjectivities meeting and merging, and, more particularly, of the decisive moment when one person enters another's person's imagination and heart. In response to stereotypical and colonial assumptions—that some people would have and that the media perpetuate (Langton, *Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show*)—that the lives and places the film depicts are hopeless, *Samson and Delilah* shows how beauty, love and caring

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<sup>10</sup> I am here taking up an expression used by Norman King in his analysis of silent films (43).

relationships can bloom in these places and in Aboriginal teenagers' lives. The film also allows the spectators to conceive of the beauty of the young man—whom many in society would give up on—despite his difficulties.

On many occasions Samson is seen sniffing petrol, and in one sequence Delilah tragically grabs the tin can from him and starts sniffing herself after a traumatic event in Alice Springs. Although many spectators commented on the heartbreaking eeriness of such scenes, at all times the gaze of the camera remains respectful of the characters' dignity, depicting substance abuse in a way that is realistic in image and simple gesture, but not cinematically harrowing or lampooning. Spectators who have followed the two youths' journey are encouraged to empathise with the characters' distress and sadness and to understand the escapism that petrol represents. Poet, scholar and filmmaker Romaine Moreton depicts such a situation and feeling perfectly in her poem, "Tin can II":

at the bottom of my tin can  
there is no oppression  
just a constant feeling that everything  
will be all right

at the bottom of my tin can  
I sometimes wish for peace  
or just the throbbing in my brain  
to stop (Moreton 51)

As well as encouraging compassion, the film also succeeded in grabbing the audience's heart through humour and laughter. As an example, many viewers commented on how endearing they found the character of Delilah's Nana. Her cheekiness seemed to translate well across borders. At the screenings that I attended, laughter in the audience followed Nana's contagious laughter when she discusses Samson with Delilah. Nana's reaction is all the more humorous as it contrasts with the images of Delilah's face attempting to remain serious.

The above techniques or narrative features encouraged spectators to identify with and feel compassion for the characters, and therefore to see beauty and hope in the story and its central relationships. However, Q&A sessions as well as post-screening conversations have highlighted specific contextual information or cultural and insider knowledge that spectators or reviewers did not have, the lack of which would have prevented some from reading the film as a narrative of hope. I will now focus on several particular key aspects that I heard or read repeatedly, as post-screening discussions with spectators in France, England and Australia revealed to me that contextual reference on these topics or sequences could change the reading of the film.

The aforementioned scene in which Delilah discusses Samson with her Nana is spoken in Warlpiri and subtitled in English or French; through these multiple languages the viewer also learns that Samson is the right skin for Delilah.<sup>11</sup> To Aboriginal people or people familiar with Aboriginal kinship systems, the scene adds another layer of

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<sup>11</sup> On "skin", see Warlpiri thinker Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-kurlpurlurnu (11-16).

meaning as it reveals that Samson and Delilah's relationship is legitimated. Although she might not have known what skin names were, one respondent in Saint-Tropez wrote that what she liked the most in the movie was that "the old lady was happily thinking about the adventure the two teenagers would embark on—something she saw as a sign of hope". The same viewer also wrote that to her the movie was a "universal movie", even though there were some actions undertaken by the Aboriginal characters that she did not understand.

Responses from the Saint-Tropez questionnaires indicate that most spectators there interpreted the end of the movie as bringing hope. Yet some spectators and reviewers have interpreted the end of the movie as "going back to square one", a tragic return to dire poverty "in the middle of nowhere". Although Samson's brother repeats twice that Delilah is taking Samson to her country to look after him, some viewers only saw the rudimentary material conditions of the last scenes, and missed the significance of Delilah's taking Samson back to her homeland as well as the gift of her graceful and gracious love. Viewers familiar with the meaning of "country" would have understood that Delilah's country symbolises and embodies the notion that everything can be renewed. In *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose and six Mak Mak women provide poetic descriptions of country. For "those of us who were not born and raised to it", Rose explains, an understanding of country "starts with the idea that country is "a nourishing terrain" (13), "the place of belonging" (116). She indicates that "MakMak people do not mark their presence by enduring monuments; indeed, one could say that the country is their enduring monument" (160). One of the Mak Mak women, April Bright states: "Traditional ownership to country for my Mum was everything—everything. It was the songs, the ceremony, the land, themselves, their family—everything that life was all about. This place here was her heart. That's what she lived for, and that's what she died for" (15).<sup>12</sup>

The message delivered by the radio at the end of the film, which causes Samson's delightful and cheerful laughter, also conveys to the attentive listener where Samson's father is: "That was going out to Samson from his father Jimmy. Only six months to go son and he'll be coming home" (*Samson and Delilah*). Viewers who had seen Warwick Thornton's short film, *Green Bush*, would have recognised the programme that passes on music and information for and from people in prison earlier in the film.

I would also like to suggest a personal interpretation of what critics or reviewers have seen as the "going-nowhere riff of [Samson's] bro's band" (Henderson 75). In the early part of the film, the riff is played live several times by a band rehearsing at Samson's home. The riff is repeated one more time at the end of the movie, but this time it is delivered by the radio. By this time, Samson has been taken to Delilah's country. Is it therefore possible to see this riff as characterised by the same qualities as a refrain ("ritournelle") which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is "essential territorial, territorializing, or reterritorializing" (331)?<sup>13</sup> Earlier in the film, Samson's attempts to play the guitar are met with rejection. At the end of the film, Samson has the song back and played specifically for him, with an announcement that his father is coming home.

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<sup>12</sup> For further development on "country", see Wanta Jampijinpa (2008) and Préaud (23-24, 30).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Philippe Guerre for bringing the notion of "ritournelle" to my attention.

The song now serenades his belonging with Delilah, who is at the same time taking up her Nana's painting vocation. The restoration of territorialising acts (painting, listening to a specific song) in a new situation suggests a hopeful continuity. Moreover, surmising that the band plays their own riff earlier in the movie, viewers are then encouraged to see this community band not as epitomising boredom and hopelessness but as talented musicians, whose musical piece is aired beyond their own community.

Finally, French audience members would not have been likely to understand the lyrics of the song with which the movie ends, when the two teenagers look at each other and smile to the symbolic lyric: "all I have to offer you is me". However, some viewers who did not know about the specific meaning of country, hear the radio's message or understand the song lyrics in English did see the end of the film as the epitome of redemption—or at least as an ending with hope.

### Conclusion

Warwick Thornton explained that for this feature, he wanted to work with a small crew chosen "for their hearts, not their CVs" (83). As he had worked with most of the crew before, notably in making his short films, this statement suggests that by clearly establishing that heart was to be a criterion from the beginning and throughout the process, the director probably ensured that heart would be in the end product. Not only were the viewers invited to have compassion for the characters, but they felt that they learnt a lot about the context. They also felt that they were called to action (see also Collins 3; Henderson 80-81); this was evidenced by the frequency of people asking "what can we do?" after viewing the film. It is also possible that spectators were able to see and be touched by the love story between the two characters, and ask "what can we do?" precisely because of the heroism of Delilah, who faces adversity with love. As Bergson suggests: "[t]he truth is that heroism may be the only way to love. Now, heroism cannot be preached, it has only to show itself, and its mere presence may stir others to action" (*The Two Sources* 32).

In the FAQs section of the film website, in response to the question: "what can we do?", viewers are invited to "practic[e] random acts of kindness". In Paris, the director answered this question more directly: "You may never ever meet two children in Central Australia called Samson and Delilah", he said, "but when you walk out of the cinema right here, maybe on the corner there will be two children who are homeless and in trouble, but in love and using love to survive. [...] Maybe after watching the film you will recognise that they are in trouble and maybe you will give them a helping hand" (Q&A London). Through his film and through the interviews he gave about the film, Warwick Thornton refused the stance of victim-blaming theories of human suffering (qtd. in Farmer 317) and encouraged a multiplicity of interpretive communities to dismiss stereotypes about Aboriginal people but also about other people in difficulties, and to extend a compassionate heart and hand to (young) people trying to survive.

In tracing, non-exhaustively, the conditions of possibility that allowed *Samson and Delilah* to receive wide acclaim internationally, this essay has foregrounded the notions and interconnected roles of beauty, emotions, humour and the ethics of representation as critical to rethink the efficacy and power of works of art. Although it is difficult to measure the long term ripple effect of watching the movie, the fact that DVD sales are doing reasonably well in France (900 were sold in France by October 2012), especially

in institutional networks (in libraries, high schools)<sup>14</sup>, suggests a promise of cultural longevity for the film.

In 2010, the prehistory museum of the Gorges du Verdon in the south of France curated an exhibition entitled: “Australia, 60,000 years of Aboriginal culture”. The photograph accompanying this essay features one of the exhibition panels, which focused on “Aboriginal people today”. The text illustrated by the photos from *Samson and Delilah* proposed a reflection on outmoded preconceptions of Aboriginal peoples and on Aboriginal history, cosmology, and contemporary cultural production.<sup>15</sup> A fifth of the text, written by the Museum director, was dedicated to *Samson and Delilah*. In his final lines, Jean Gagnepain wrote that the film was also about “the desire for some to return on their ancestral lands, where they try to create a way of life anew”. This way of life “would not be that of yesteryear or that of Europeans”. Rather it would be “a social and cultural model in the making”. From the profound comment which serves as the title of this essay to Jean Gagnepain’s concluding lines, various receptions suggest the film’s capacity to shift people’s vision on Aboriginal Australia and on many social and human issues.

## Appendix:

### Questionnaire

1. Did you like the movie?
2. What struck you the most in the movie?
3. What did you like the most? (if different from 2)
4. Have you learnt something thanks to this movie? Can you explain what? Or why?
5. Has your perception of Australia changed? Why?
6. Has your perception of Aboriginal people changed? Why?
7. Has your perception of non-Aboriginal people in Australia changed? Why?
8. Would you say that the movie is specifically Aboriginal or Australian? Could it have taken place elsewhere? Why?
9. Could you relate to the movie? Do you feel concerned by the issues tackled by the movie? Why?
10. What did you take away from the festival?
11. Is this the first time you have come to the festival des Antipodes? Yes - No  
Do you regularly go to festivals? Yes – No. How many a year?  
Are you male? Female?  
How old are you? 10-15 / 15-20 / 20-25 / 25-35 / 35-45 / 45-55 / 55-65/ 65 et+
12. Would you like to share any information about yourself—that you think may have influenced your understanding or reception of the movie? (age, sex, profession, nationality, religion, background)

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Thomas Rosso for providing this information.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Isabelle Dubset, Attachée de conservation du patrimoine at the Museum, for providing this text.

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