Reclaiming the Wasteland: Samson and Delilah and the Historical Perception and Construction of Indigenous知knowledges in Australian Cinema

It was always based on a teenage love story between the two kids. One is a sniffer and one is not. It was designed for Central Australia because we do write these kids off there. Not only in town, where the headlines for the newspapers every second day is about ‘the problem,’ ‘the teenager problem of kids wandering the streets’ and ‘why don’t we send them back to their communities’ and that sort of stuff. Then there’s the other side of it. Elders in Aboriginal communities have been taught that kids who sniff get brain damage, so as soon as they see a kid sniffing they think ‘well they’re rubbish now, they’re brain damaged.’ So the elders are writing these kids off as well, as in ‘they are brain damaged so they’re no use now, they’ll be in wheelchairs for the rest of their lives.’ This is not true, it’s just information for elders that hasn’t been given to them. That is the world I was working with. I wanted to show two incredibly beautiful children who have fought all their lives just to breathe and how incredibly strong they are and how we should be celebrating them and backing them up. I wanted to show that to Central Australia, and if the rest of Australia or the world get involved that’s fantastic. (Thornton in interview)

Warwick Thornton’s 2009 film Samson and Delilah won the hearts of Australians as well as a bag of awards — and rightly so. It is a breathtaking film that, as review after review will tell you, is about the bravery, hopelessness, optimism and struggles of two Indigenous youths. In telling this story, the film extends, inverts and challenges notions of waste: wasted youths, wasted memory, wasted history, wasted opportunities, getting wasted and wasted voices. The narrative and the film as a cultural object raise questions about being discarded and “the inescapable fact that the experience of catastrophe in the past century can only be articulated from its remains, our history sifted from among these storied deposits.” (Neville and Villeneuve 2). The purpose of this paper is to examine reaction to the film, and where this reaction has positioned the film in Australian filmmaking history. In reading the reception of the film, I want to consider the film’s contribution to dialogical cultural representations by applying Marcia Langton’s idea of intersubjectivity.
In his review, Sean Gorman argues that:

The main reason for the film’s importance is it enables white Australians who cannot be bothered reading books or engaging with Indigenous Australians in any way (other than watching them play football perhaps) the smallest sliver of a world that they have no idea about. The danger however in an engagement by settler society with a film like Samson and Delilah is that the potential shock of it may be too great, as the world which it portrays is, for many, an unknown Australia. Hence, for the settler filmgoer, the issues that the film discusses may be just too hard, too unreal, and their reaction will be limited to perhaps a brief bout of anger or astonishment followed by indifference. (81.1)

It is this “engagement by settler society” that I wish to consider: how the voices that we hear speaking about the film are shifting attention from the ‘Other’ to more dialogical cultural representations, that is, non-Indigenous Australia’s emerging awareness of what has previously been wasted, discarded and positioned as valueless. I find Gorman’s surmise of white Australia’s shock with a world they know nothing about, and their potential power to return to a state of indifference about it, to be an interesting notion. Colonisation has created the world that Samson and Delilah live in, and the white community is as involved as the Indigenous one in the struggles of Samson and Delilah. If “settler” society is unaware, that unawareness comes from a history of non-Indigenous power that denies, excludes, and ignores. For this reason, Samson and Delilah is a dialogical cultural representation: it forces a space where the mainstream doesn’t just critique the Aborigine, but their own identity and involvement in the construction of that critique.

**Wasted Voices**

Waste is a subjective notion. Items that some discard and perceive as valueless can be of importance to others, and then it also becomes a waste not to acknowledge or use that item. Rather than only focusing on the concept of “waste” as items or materials that are abandoned, I wish to consider the value in what is wasted. Centring my discussion of ‘waste’ on Thornton’s film provides the opportunity to view a wasteland of dispossession from another cultural and social perspective. Reaction to the film has constructed what could be perceived as an exceptional moment of engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices in dialogic intercultural dialogue. By revisiting early examples of ethnographic collaboration, and re-examining contemporary reactions to Samson and Delilah, I hope to forge a space for intervention in Australian film criticism that focuses on how ‘non-Aboriginality’ depends on ‘Aboriginality’ in a vast wasteland of colonial dispossession and appropriation.

Many of the reviews of Thornton’s film (Buckmaster; Collins; Davis; Gorman; Hall; Isaac; Ravier; Redwood; Rennie; Simpson) pay attention to the emotional reaction of non-Indigenous viewers. Langton states that historically non-Indigenous audiences know ‘the Aborigine’ through non-Indigenous representations and monologues about Aboriginality: “In film, as in other media, there is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people” (24). The power to define has meant that ethnographic discourses in the early days of colonisation established their need to record
Indigenous peoples, knowledges and traditions before they ‘wasted away.’ At the 1966 Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area, Stanley Hawes recounts how Ian Dunlop, an Australian documentary filmmaker, commented that “someone ought to film the aborigines of the Western Desert before it was too late. They had already almost all disappeared or gone to live on Mission stations” (69). This popular belief was one of the main motivations for research on Indigenous peoples and led to the notion of “smoothing the dying pillow,” which maintained that since Aborigines were a dying race, they should be allowed to all die out peacefully (Chandra-Shekeran 120). It was only the ‘real’ Aborigine that was valued: the mission Black, the urban Black, the assimilated Black, was a waste (Cowlishaw 108). These representations of Aboriginality depended on non-Indigenous people speaking about Aboriginality to non-Indigenous people. Yet, the impetus to speak, as well as what was being spoken about, and the knowledge being discussed and used, relied on Indigenous voices and presences. When Australia made its “important contribution to ethnographic films of its Aborigines” (McCarthy 81), it could not have done so without the involvement of Indigenous peoples.

In her work on intersubjectivity, Langton describes “Aboriginality” as a “social thing” that is continually remade through dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation. She describes three broad categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal intersubjectivity: when Aboriginal people interact with other Aboriginal people; when non-Aboriginal people stereotype, iconise, and mythologise Aboriginal people without any Aboriginal contact; and when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in dialogue (81). Since W. Baldwin Spencer’s first ethnographic film, made between 1901 and 1912, which recorded the customs of the Aranda and neighbouring Central Australian tribes (McCarthy 80), the development of Australian cinema depended on these categories of intersubjectivity. While the success of Samson and Delilah could be interpreted as opening mainstream eyes to the waste that Indigenous communities have experienced since colonisation — wasted knowledge, wasted youths, wasted communities — it could also signify that what was once perceived by dominant non-Indigenous society as trash is now viewed as treasure.

Much like the dot paintings which Delilah and her nana paint in exchange for a few bucks, and which the white man then sells for thousands of dollars, Aboriginal stories come to us out of context and filtered through appropriation and misinterpretation. Beyond its undeniable worth as a piece of top-notch filmmaking, Samson and Delilah’s value also resides in its ability to share with a wide audience, and in a language we can all understand, a largely untold story steeped in the painful truth of this country’s bloody history. (Ravier)

In reading the many reviews of Samson and Delilah, it is apparent there is an underlying notion of such a story being secret, and that mainstream Australia chose to engage with the film’s dialogical representation because it was sharing this secret. When Ravier states that Aboriginal stories are distorted by appropriation and misinterpretation, I would add that such stories are examples of Langton’s second category of intersubjectivity: they reveal more about the processes of non-Indigenous constructions of ‘the Aborigine’ and the need to stereotype, iconise and mythologise. These processes have usually involved
judgements about what is to be retained as ‘valuable’ in Indigenous cultures and knowledges, and what can be discarded — in the same way that the film’s characters Samson and Delilah are discarded. The secret that Samson and Delilah is sharing with white Australia has never been a secret: it is that non-Indigenous Australia chooses what it wants to see or hear.

Wasted Silences

In 1976 Michael Edols directed and produced Floating about the Mowanjum communities experiences of colonisation, mission life and resistance. That same year Alessandro Cavadini directed and Carolyn Strachan produced Protected, a dramatised documentary about life on the Queensland Aboriginal reserve of Palm Island — “a dumping ground for unwanted persons or those deemed to be in need of ‘protection’” (Treole 38). Phillip Noyce’s Backroads, a story about the hardships facing a young man from a reserve in outback New South Wales, was released in 1977. In 1979, Essie Coffey produced and directed My Survival as an Aboriginal, where she documented her community’s struggles living under white domination. Two Laws, a feature film made by four of the language groups around Borroloola in 1981, examines the communities’ histories of massacre, dispossession and institutionalisation. These are just some of many films that have dealt with the ‘secrets’ about Indigenous peoples. In more recent times the work of Noyce, Rolf de Heer, Stephen Johnson, Iven Sen, Rachel Perkins and Romaine Moreton, to name only a few, have inspired mainstream engagement with films representing Indigenous experiences and knowledges. “We live in a world in which, increasingly, people learn of their own and other cultures and histories through a range of visual media — film, television, and video,” writes Faye Ginsburg (5). Changing understandings of culture and representation means that there appears to be a shift away from the “monologic, observational and privileged Western gaze” towards more dialogic, reflexive and imaginative mediation. Perhaps Samson and Delilah’s success is partly due to its contribution to social action through compelling the non-Indigenous viewer to “revise our comfortable and taken for granted narrative conventions that fetishise the text and reify ‘culture’ and ‘cultural difference.’ Instead, we — as producers, audiences, and ethnographers — are challenged to comprehend the multiple ways that media operate as a site where culture is produced, contested, mediated and continually re-imagined” (Ginsburg 14).

In his review, Tom Redwood writes about the film

Like life in the desert, everything is kept to a minimum here and nothing is wasted. ... Perhaps it took an Indigenous filmmaker from Alice Springs to do this, to lead the way in reinstating meaningfulness and honesty as core values in Australian cinema. But, whatever the case, Thornton's Indigenous heritage won't make his difficult vision any easier for local audiences to swallow. Most Australians aren't used to this degree of seriousness at the movies and though many here will embrace Samson and Delilah, there will no doubt also be a minority who, unable to reject the film as a cultural curiosity, will resist its uncompromising nature with cries of 'pessimism!' or even 'reverse-racism!' (28-29)
Perhaps the film’s success has to do with the way the story is told? — “everything kept to a minimum” and “nothing is wasted.” In attempts to construct Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal intersubjectivity in previous representations perhaps language, words, English got in the way of communication? For mainstream white Australian society’s engagement in dialogic representations, for Indigenous voices to speak and be heard, for non-Indigenous monologues to be challenged, perhaps silence was called for? As the reviews for the film have emphasised, non-Indigenous reactions contribute to the dialogic nature of the film, its story, as well as its positioning as a site of cultural meaning, social relations, and power. Yet even while critiquing constructions of Aboriginality, non-Aboriginality has historically remained uncritiqued—non-Aboriginal endorsement and reaction is discussed, but what this reaction and engagement, or lack of engagement (whether because of ignorance, unawareness, or racism) reveals is not. That is, non-Aboriginality has not had to critique the power it has to continue to remain ignorant of stories about wasted Indigenous lives. Thornton’s film appears to have disrupted this form of non-engagement.

With the emergence of Indigenous media and Indigenous media makers, ethnographic films have been reconceptualised in terms of aesthetics, cultural observations and epistemological processes. By re-exploring the history of ethnographic film making and shifting attention from constructions of the ‘other’ to reception by the mainstream, past films, past representations of colonisation, and past dialogues will not be wasted. With the focus on constructing Aboriginality, the cultural value of non-Aboriginality has remained unquestioned and invisible. By re-examining the reactions of mainstream Australians over the last one hundred years in light of the success of Samson and Delilah, cultural and historical questions about ‘the Aborigine’ can be reframed so that the influence Indigenous discourses have in Australian nation-building will be more apparent. The reception of Samson and Delilah signifies the transformational power in wasted voices, wasted dialogues and the wasted opportunities to listen.

**Wasted Dialogues**

Felicity Collins argues that certain “cinematic events that address Indigenous-settler relations do have the capacity to galvanise public attention, under certain conditions” (65). Collins states that after recent historical events, mainstream response to Aboriginal deprivation and otherness has evoked greater awareness of “anti-colonial politics of subjectivity” (65). The concern here is with mainstream Australia dismantling generations of colonialist representations and objectifications of the ‘other.’ What also needs to be re-examined is the paradox and polemic of how reaction to Aboriginal dispossession and deprivation is perceived. Non-Indigenous reaction remains a powerful framework for understanding, viewing and positioning Indigenous presence and representation — the power to see or not to see, to hear or to ignore. Collins argues that Samson and Delilah, along with Australia (Luhrmann, 2009) and First Australians (Perkins, 2008), are national events in Australian screen culture and that post-apology films “reframe a familiar iconography so that what is lost or ignored in the incessant flow of media temporality is precisely what invites an affective and ethical response in cinematic spaces” (75).
It is the notion of reframing what is lost or ignored to evoke “ethical responses” that captures my attention; to shift the gaze from Aboriginal subjectivity, momentarily, to non-Aboriginal subjectivity and examine how choosing to discard or ignore narratives of violence and suffering needs to be critiqued as much as the film, documentary or representation of Indigenality. Perhaps then we can start to engage in dialogues of intersubjectivity rather than monologues about Aboriginality.

I made [Samson and Delilah] for my mob but I made sure that it can work with a wider audience as well, and it’s just been incredible that it’s been completely embraced by a much wider audience. It’s interesting because as soon as you knock down that black wall between Aboriginals and white Australia, a film like this does become an Australian film and an Australian story. Not an Aboriginal story but a story about Australians, in a sense. It’s just as much a white story as it is a black one when you get to that position. (Thornton in interview)

When we “get to that position” described by Thornton, intercultural and intersubjective dialogue allows both Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality to co-exist. When a powerful story of Indigenous experiences and representations becomes perceived as an Australian story, it provides a space for what has historically been ignored and rendered invisible to become visible. It offers a different cultural lens for all Australians to question and critique notions of value and waste, to re-assess what had been relegated to the wasteland by ethnographic editing and Westernised labels. Ever since Spencer, Melies, Abbie and Elkin decided to retain an image of Aboriginality on film, which they did with specific purposes and embedded values, it has been ‘the Aborigine’ that has been dissected and discussed. It would be a waste not to open this historiography up to include mainstream reaction, or lack of reaction, in the development of cultural and cinematic critique. A wasteland is often perceived as a dumping ground, but by re-visiting that space and unearthing, new possibilities are discovered in that wasteland, and more complex strategies for intersubjectivity are produced.

At the centre of Samson and Delilah is the poverty and loss that Indigenous communities experience on a daily basis. The experiences endured by the main characters are not new or recent ones and whether cinematic reception of them produces guilt, pity, sympathy, empathy, fear or defensiveness, it is the very potential to be able to react that needs to be critiqued. As Williamson Chang points out, the “wasteland paradigm is invisible to those embedded in its structure” (852). By looking more closely at white society’s responses in order to discern more clearly if they are motivated by feelings that their wealth—whether material, cultural or social—or their sense of belonging is being challenged or reinforced then ruling values and epistemologies are challenged and dialogic negotiations engaged. If dominant non-Indigenous society has the power to classify Indigenous narratives and representation as either garbage or something of value, then colonialist structures remain intact. If they have the self-reflexive power to question their own response to Indigenous narratives and representations, then perhaps more anti-colonial discourses emerge. Notions of value and waste are tied to cultural hierarchies, and it is through questioning how a dominant culture determines value that processes of transformation and mediation take place and the intersubjective dialogue sparked by Samson and Delilah can continue.
In her review of *Samson and Delilah*, Therese Davis suggests that the film brings people closer to truthfulness, forcing the audience to engage with that realism: “those of us ‘outside’ of the community looking in can come to know ourselves differently through the new languages of this film, both cultural and cinematic. Reformulating the space of the national from an ‘insider,’ Aboriginal community-based perspective, the film positions its spectators, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in a shared space, a space that allows for new forms of attachment, involvement and self-knowledge, new lines of communication.” Davis goes on to caution that while the film is groundbreaking, the reviews situating the film as what Australian cinema should be need to be mindful of feeding “notions of anti-diversity, which “is an old debate in Australian Cinema Studies, but in this instance anti-diversity is doubly problematic because it also runs the risk of narrowly defining Indigenous cinema.” The danger, historically, is that anything Indigenous, has always been narrowly defined by the mainstream and yes, to continue to limit Indigenous work in any medium is colonising and problematic. However, rather than just caution against this reaction, I am suggesting that reaction itself be critiqued. While currently contemporary mainstream response to *Samson and Delilah* is one of adoration, is the centre from which it comes the same centre which less than fifty years ago critiqued Indigenous Australians as a savage, noble, and/or dying race wasting away?

Davis writes that the film constructs a new “relation” in Australian cinema but that it should not be used as a marker against which “all new (and old) Indigenous cinema is measured.” This concern resembles, in part, my concern that until recently mainstream society has constructed their own markers of Aboriginal cultural authenticity, deciding what is to be valued and what can be discarded. I agree with Davis’s caution, yet I cannot easily untangle the notion of ‘measuring.’ As a profound Australian film, certainly cinematic criticism will use it as a signifier of ‘quality.’ But by locating it singularly in the category of Indigenous cinema, the anti-colonial and discursive Indigenous discourses the film deploys and evokes are limited to the margins of Australian film and film critique once more.

After considering the idea of measuring, and asking who would be conducting this process of measuring, my fear is that the gaze returns to ‘the Aborigine’ and the power to react remains solely, and invisibly, with the mainstream. Certainly it would be a waste to position the film in such a way that limits other Indigenous filmmakers’ processes, experiences and representations. I see no problem with forcing non-Indigenous filmmakers, audiences and perceptions to have to ‘measure’ up as a result of the film. It would be yet another waste if they didn’t, and *Samson and Delilah* was relegated to being simply a great ‘Indigenous Australian film,’ instead of a great Australian film that challenges, inverts and re-negotiates the construction of both Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality. By examining reaction to the film, and not just reading the film itself, discussions of dialogical cultural representation can include non-Aboriginality as well as Aboriginality.

Films like this are designed to create a dialogue and I’m happy if someone doesn’t like the film and they tell me why, because we’re creating dialogue. We’re talking about this stuff and taking a step forward. That’s important. (Thornton)
The dialogue opened up by the success of Thornton’s beautiful film is one that also explores non-Aboriginality. If we waste the opportunity that *Samson and Delilah* provides, then Australia’s ongoing cinematic history will remain a wasteland, and many more Indigenous voices, stories, and experiences will continue to be wasted.

References


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