

SAMSON AND DELILAH: HERSTORY, TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL

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Violence within Aboriginal communities has been a hotly debated issue in Australia for the past few years, more specifically men's violence against women and children.¹ Denouncing this has been a motif of several of Indigenous director, Warwick Thornton's short films, including *Green Bush* in 2005 and *Nana* in 2007. His 2009 feature-length movie, *Samson and Delilah*, explores the problem in more detail. In the interviews that accompany the DVD, he explains his motives for making this film: he was angry about the neglect of Aboriginal children in Central Australia—'not only by governments and whites but by Aboriginal people too'. His project was to give his audience a vicarious experience of the way violence narrows these children's horizons almost—and sometimes completely—to vanishing point, but also to reveal their potential.

In this essay, I will examine Thornton's perspective on the effects of violence in the lives of two Indigenous children living in an Aboriginal community near Alice Springs, as it is presented through the film *Samson and Delilah*. I will argue that the film invites the viewer to reflect on the legacy of trauma in an Indigenous community in today's Australia and that his narrative pays tribute to the strength and healing powers of women; that it is, in other words, a 'herstory' of contemporary Indigenous experience. I will use trauma theory as a tool of analysis.

The notion of trauma emerged at the turn of the twentieth century in the work of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet (Caruth 91). Trauma theory, which focuses on the destructive repetition of violence, would appear to be an apposite tool for the analysis of the representation of violence in this film, as repetition is a structural principle in the narrative. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as:

the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience [...] suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight— [...] suggest a [...] relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (92)

In *Trauma Trails* (2002), Judy Atkinson argues that current definitions of trauma, although a good starting point, are incomplete analytical tools when dealing with Aboriginal trauma because the latter is chronic, cumulative and on-going (51). She wrote *Trauma Trails* because, like Thornton, she wanted to 'find answers to the "problems" of violence within our communities [...] which continues to escalate' (267). She records, from the 1980s, 'the

increase in intra-family violence in its multiple complexity and compounding effects', which re-traumatises the already traumatised, passing trauma on to those who have not experienced colonisation directly. She closely examines 'the chaos that has evolved from colonial conquest' (220), noting that many young Aboriginal people today 'are growing up in places of pain and disorder. The previous generations underwent the experience of the first two periods of colonisation'—frontier violence, including dispossession, then the structural violence of enforced welfare dependency, restrictive legislation and child removal.² 'These older generations have acted out their own rage and terror within their families and communities' (236-37) because, as members of a disempowered and oppressed minority, they have been denied normal outlets (69). Present generations, therefore, do not have the same experience as their parents and elders. In fact, they have frequently not been told their parents' and grandparents' trauma stories and therefore do not understand why they are being subjected to violence from within their own families (225). They 'have grown up in situations where pent-up rage, aided by alcohol consumption [, 'a self-medicating response to trauma' (165),] has been released into the chaos of family and community dysfunction (236-37).'³ The violence is thus passed on from generation to generation, 'changed yet formed by previous government and societal acts of violence' (225). Atkinson calls this 'the traumatic transference of trauma' (222). She further argues that continuing racism, traumatising in itself, compounds (178) the distress of the already suffering Indigenous people of Australia. In her view, the first step along the path to healing is narrating the trauma stories in a community context, so that victims and perpetrators can make sense of the violence they are subjected to and/or that they inflict on others. In this essay, I will use some of the concepts developed by Atkinson to analyse the on-going trauma in Indigenous communities as it is represented in *Samson and Delilah* for, indeed, we can 'read' the film as a trauma story narrated to a caring group—the spectators, who identify with the protagonists thanks to the way the film-maker presents their plight—a narrative which helps 'make sense' of the apparently senseless violence the two children are subjected to. Thornton's film also makes a suggestion regarding the first steps towards healing.

The male protagonist is Samson Japanangka, his first name borrowed from Judges 13-16 of the *Old Testament* and his surname from a Warlpiri Dreaming story—it situates him in the Warlpiri moiety system that determines which 'skins' can intermarry. In the Christian story, Delilah is the treacherous woman who betrays Samson to his enemies. Christian and Aboriginal cultural references are intertwined throughout the film and when asked how the two fit together, Thornton declares that 'Jesus works perfectly in the Dreaming', the Rainbow Serpent fits harmoniously into Christianity and 'we [the blackfellas] all grew up with [Christianity] because [of the] missions in Central Australia'.⁴ Aboriginal spirituality is a construction whose hybrid origins seem to have been seamlessly absorbed into his perception. This view recalls Albert Memmi's definition of 'living culture'.⁵ The film's title invites the audience to compare its plot with that of the *Old Testament* story. Thornton's narrative takes possession of the Christian myth, modifies the relationship between the protagonists and inverses the gender roles. We will return to this point when considering the role his trauma narrative attributes to Indigenous women.

The narrative begins in a small Aboriginal community outside Alice Springs. It is isolated, stark and impoverished. We meet Samson first and are shown the violence and neglect which permeate his life, set against a backdrop of beautiful, tranquil Aboriginal land. He lives in a squalid tin shack; there is nothing to occupy him and, above all, there are no adults present to care for him. There is an older brother, who apparently spends all his time with two friends, rehearsing the same riff over and over again. The young men form a group that excludes

others through the exercise of violence. Every day Samson tries to join them, but every day his brother shoves him roughly aside and turns back to his cronies. Samson then goes off and sniffs petrol to escape from the neglect and violence, in the throes of what appears to be a post-traumatic death drive, given the toxicity of the form of self-medication he uses. He apparently possesses none of the attributes of the biblical persona, his namesake—a Nazarite, who must not cut his hair, drink alcohol or approach death if he is to remain one of God's chosen ones and retain his superhuman strength. For him, life in the community does not have the sense of purpose, mutual care and belonging of traditional Indigenous life before white invasion. The experience of colonial trauma seems to be repeating itself in the acts of these survivors, who unwittingly re-enact the destruction of their society that they can neither grasp nor leave behind (Freud, qtd in Caruth 2). At first sight, there seems to be little left of traditional Aboriginal culture here: members of the community dress like white Australians; the young play electric guitars and drums and listen to the radio; and the neglect of children is palpable, indeed there are not even any parents present to look after them.

Aboriginal culture asserts itself, however, when we are shown Delilah's life. Her life is also repetitive but, despite her young age, she has responsibility and purpose. Although there are no parents anywhere to be seen, she structures her life around caring for her ailing grandmother and painting traditional designs with her on canvases that are destined for the white galleries in Alice Springs and provide the source of the family income.⁶

Thornton's linguistic choices in making this film are significant. Delilah and her nana speak in 'language'—a vital sign of a living Indigenous culture. Caruth evokes the 'loss of culture and history' which results from 'the forgetting imposed by the assumption of a foreign language' (52). Thornton has in fact virtually eliminated dialogue from his film. But what little there is takes place in 'language' within the community and in English outside. There are English subtitles for the audience, indicating that he both refuses to forget his Aboriginal heritage and wishes to reach out to all Australians. Apart from some very isolated examples of brief exchanges in English during the children's stay in the white town, the film is almost eerily free of human speech. Poststructuralist developments in linguistic theory have cast doubt on the ability of language to refer adequately to the world (Derrida). Thornton's trauma narrative largely bypasses the dangers of story-telling in English, the language of the coloniser, which transmits the latter's world view in its attempts to represent reality.⁷ His filmic language of trauma becomes 'the silence of [the] mute repetition of suffering', a plea by the victim who is crying out to be seen and heard (Caruth 9). The two main characters communicate in gestures and we learn later in the film that Samson, the traumatised victim of a dysfunctional family and community, can barely speak, cannot even say his own name. He is unable to give voice to his-story. Thornton does it for him, largely through the use of image.

Disaster strikes when Delilah's grandmother dies. It is a trauma for both children—for Delilah because it deprives her of her loving (if reduced) family and for Samson because it deprives him of the family he clearly hoped he had finally found. When he begins his strange mute courtship of Delilah, the latter's nana plays the traditional role of the elder by identifying him as of the 'right skin' for her grand-daughter; she declares that he is 'her husband' and that the two of them should 'talk' and 'go off'. She encourages him to join in their small family group, even though Delilah is clearly reluctant. Samson's tentative 'adoption' into the family unit briefly gives him the force to stop sniffing petrol and to try out the traditional role of provider of bush tucker.

On her grandmother's death, Delilah gives herself a 'sorry haircut', in what is apparently a traditional cultural response to bereavement,⁸ and this transgression of the first Nazarite taboo robs her of her strength. Samson responds to this new trauma with violence: he attacks his brother and the latter retaliates with far greater violence, giving Samson a terrible beating. This behaviour pattern conforms to Atkinson's paradigm of re-traumatising responses to trauma, where the subject acts out previous trauma in deeds of violence against those closest to him/her (223). The violence continues as two elderly women severely beat Delilah while screaming out unjust accusations about how she neglected her nana and caused her to die—apparently another cultural response to death. The scene is shocking and the spectator outraged. Thornton is implicitly criticising this less known aspect of the violence in Aboriginal communities—that practised by elderly women in pursuance of traditional rituals.⁹ Atkinson agrees with his implicit criticism of certain elements of traditional culture, declaring that there 'is a need to name the cultural strengths and weaknesses of those times, and bring those valuable cultural strengths into the present and let go of the weaknesses' (218). Editing juxtaposes shots of the violence visited on the children within the community with shots of the beautiful and tranquil landscape it is set in. The community appears to have broken down; the young attack each other and, apart from Delilah's nana, elders only appear in order to inflict further violence. Caruth underlines the otherness of the voice that such a repetition of trauma releases—a voice that bears witness to a truth that the victims themselves cannot truly know (2). The juxtaposition of the unwitting violent repetition and the crying voice released by Thornton through the way he stages the violence (the spectator identifies with the victim and is outraged), emphasises the paradoxical inability of the Indigenous community to stop hurting itself. In Freudian terms, the survivor is unable to come to terms with the violence of the trauma and it is because of its "unassimilated nature" that it returns to haunt him/her. Trauma is the story of a wound that cries out and addresses us in an attempt to voice a reality that is not otherwise available (Caruth 4). A trauma narrative does not tell the story of an escape from death; it represents death's endless impact on a life (Caruth 7).

Samson witnesses the state Delilah is in after the beating by the elderly women and responds again with violence of his own: acts of random vandalism. Caruth notes the significance of the act of leaving after a traumatic accident: '[t]he trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is [materialised] by an act of departure' (22). In the Aboriginal context, Atkinson writes of 'trauma trails [which] run across country and generations from original locations of violence as people moved away from the places of pain. These trauma trails carried fragmented, fractured people and families' (88). In response to personal trauma, the male protagonist tries to be a Samson: he takes his intended away from the community in a car he has stolen from its members. He drives them off towards Alice Springs but, with this act of departure, his resourcefulness has run its course. In the alien urban environment, they take refuge under a bridge.

In their community, they suffered from neglect and violence; but racism, exclusion and even more extreme violence await them in the Western environment. Thornton uses their stay in the 'white town' to show the viewer the compounding traumatising effects of racism and exclusion, to borrow Atkinson's terminology. This part of the children's journey recalls the lost child motif that Felicity Collins and Therese Davis identify as 'a recurrent theme in the Australian cultural tradition' (139). They note that there is 'a subgenre of Australian action adventure films known as lost in the bush or lost children films' (139). This subgenre dates back to the 1930s but is also prevalent in the 'New Australian cinema' of the 1970s and 1980s. Peter Pierce's 1999 study of the lost child leitmotif showed that it stretches back to colonial times and has been represented not only in literature and cinema but also in other

media, such as painting; the eponymous 1886 work of Heidelberg school artist Frederick McCubbin springs to mind. Pierce suggests that, in colonial times, the trope of the lost child denoted both settler anxiety about the material hardships of life in an alien and hostile environment and more metaphysical fears about not belonging in this alien place. In *Samson and Delilah*, Thornton reprises the colonial leitmotif through his representation of two Aboriginal children from an Indigenous community lost in the alien and hostile environment of white urban Australia. The fears of the colonial period may be a thing of the past for settler Australians but, even if today's Aboriginal children no longer face the dangers of the Stolen Generations, they are still suffering the very real after-effects of this trauma. Thornton's reworking of the white Australian trope is also used to symbolise Aboriginal anxiety about not belonging in contemporary Australian society. Atkinson quotes O'Shane on the psychological impact of colonisation on Indigenous people: '[w]e are the most ancient people in the most ancient land on Earth. Yet, we question who we are, what we are doing here, where we belong' (256).

The film implicitly raises the issue of what white Australians consider to be 'authentic' Aboriginality, in a scene that takes place in the 'Native Affairs Gallery' in Alice Springs. Through the use of a subjective camera, the viewer has seen, 'through Delilah's eyes', in the window of this art gallery, a painting we know was done by her nana *and* Delilah herself, working together in accordance with traditional practice. Next to the painting there is a price tag (\$22,000) and a photo of Delilah's visibly Aboriginal nana. Delilah however, is golden-skinned and has the 'crossover' beauty¹⁰ of an Everlyn Sampi or a Halle Berry. In dire need of subsistence funds, she later enters the gallery holding out a painting representing exactly the same patterns as those on the 'authentic' work. Thornton has arranged the shot so that the smaller painting is held against a background of the larger one; thus, the spectator cannot miss the point. The gallery manager does not even offer Delilah the courtesy of a greeting, let alone a glance at her work; he simply barks 'Not interested' at her. She apparently does not look like a 'real' Aborigine to him, does not correspond to his phenotype of the 'authentic' Indigenous artist. Indeed, the woman who plays Delilah's nana—her grandmother in real life—is not of mixed blood; according to Thornton, she only 'came out of the desert' in the 1950s or 1960s and has about ten words of English.¹¹ Her appearance corresponds to the white colonial stereotype which, the above-mentioned scene implies, still influences white attitudes despite the definition of Aboriginality which has been in circulation since the 1970s, and which makes no difference between mixed-blood and 'pure-blood' people.¹²

In the city, Samson can only 'cope' by living permanently in a drug-induced haze. Delilah is abducted from under his nose and presumably raped by white boys in a *mise-en-abyme* of the systematic kidnapping and rape of Indigenous women by whites during the colonial period.¹³ In what may be interpreted as a self-destructive repetition compulsion, she thus helplessly reproduces one of her people's colonial traumas. Samson does not immediately notice her absence, which reflects the latency inherent in the experience of trauma, typically first experienced through forgetting and belatedness. As Caruth puts it, the history of trauma 'can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence' (18). When Samson does notice that she is missing and deduces that she has been kidnapped, he staggers about in distress and appeals for help to the alcoholic they share their bridge with, but the latter is equally incapable of action, comatose on 'chateau-collapseau'.¹⁴ Samson is distraught but powerless. His 'awakening' to Delilah's absence is the story of a repeated failure to respond adequately to trauma experienced by a loved one¹⁵—Aboriginal men failed to protect their women from white rapists. The incomprehensibility of *his* survival, and his failure to respond adequately, stimulate his death drive and he once more takes refuge in the psychological 'departure'

induced by petrol-sniffing. Collins and Davis argue that cinema allows the transmission of traumatic events indirectly, through what is *not* said and shown (146). This concept applies to the sequence of events surrounding Delilah's abduction and abuse: nothing is ever said, the scene of her abduction is a collage of disjointed fragments, and the actual rape and beating are not shown.

Her battered face bearing witness to the trauma that she is unable to give voice to, Delilah eventually gets *herself* back to the bridge, where she digs out a hollow in the ground, lies in it, and then symbolically cleanses herself by covering her body with earth—the matrix. In despair, she also succumbs to the death drive¹⁶ and begins to sniff petrol. Caruth suggests that one can only grasp individual trauma, like that experienced by Delilah and Samson, as an experience of departure within the context of a collective, transgenerational history passed on by the survivors (67). She underlines that the theory of individual trauma offers us a key to understanding the trauma of a larger history via the paradoxical complexity of both destruction and survival (71-2). History is not only the passing on of a crisis; it is also the passing on of a survival (71).

The two children wander about the streets, both now stoned, and Delilah, blindly following Samson, totters onto the road into the path of an oncoming car. Samson, oblivious, does not even notice, even though she is just behind him; he wanders on, leaving her lying injured in the road, where she is succoured by the white driver. When Samson finally realises what must have happened, despair engulfs him, he gives himself a 'sorry haircut', symbolically putting an end to his (shaky) status as a Nazirite, one of God's chosen ones, and sapping the small supply of his remaining strength. Through a series of jerkily edited fragments, it is made clear that he will probably end up dying under the bridge. But, to borrow Caruth's formulation: 'through the act of survival, the repeated failure to have seen in time—in itself a pure repetition compulsion, a repeated nightmare—can be transformed into the imperative of speaking that awakens others' (108). According to Lacan, between traumatic repetition and the ethical burden of survival, lies the imperative to awaken others (qtd in Caruth 108). Samson, who cannot even speak, is unable to respond to the ethical responsibility of the survivor to bear witness, to tell the story of the other's trauma, but Thornton assumes this responsibility for him.

Then comes a scene shot from Samson's drug-befuddled perspective: in a series of fragmentary, low-angle, initially blurry shots, he sees Delilah's face emerge from a halo of white light. In realist narratives, 'the delayed, fragmented nature of traumatic memory' (Collins and Davis 147) can be mimicked via 'flashbacks, sudden changes in camera angle, fragmentation'. This scene is redolent with such techniques, signalling that Samson is suffering from trauma.

Delilah's near encounter with death has apparently finally spurred the white authorities on to at least offering her medical care. Atkinson writes that a crisis can act as a catalyst, creating a situation where it is possible to undertake healing (199, 217). This second personal crisis spurs Delilah on to extract both herself and her companion, firstly from the white urban environment, but then also from the dysfunctional Aboriginal community. She is able to find the strength to do this because she has been brought up in a loving 'family' and nurtured on traditional culture. She returns to the bridge to fetch a dying Samson, her face healed, her damaged leg in a brace, having convinced Samson's neglectful older brother to come and fetch them in a car; she has in fact begun to reconstruct family and community. The female protagonist has once again become the main controlling character with whom the spectator

can identify, as she was before their escape from the community. She breaks out of the destructive repetition compulsion which bears witness to historical trauma and wreaks continuing damage on today's victims. She begins to mould their life-story into 'herstory' and, from this moment, there is hope for a better future for the children.

Samson's brother drives the children back to the community to pick up some belongings. On arrival there, we witness yet another scene of distressing violence: one of the elder women tries to attack semi-comatose Samson and beat his hands with a big stick to punish him for stealing the community-owned car. She is so obsessed with her desire for retribution that she does not even seem to see how ill the boy is and, if she does, it leaves her indifferent. The cycle of violence is mindlessly passed on within the community. Delilah and the older brother fend her off, explaining that she is going to take the addicted boy back to her own land to look after him. The film suggests the healing capacity of place or, as Atkinson phrases it, 'the quiet revitalising of [one's] country' (196).

Caruth writes of the duality of Jewish history, where one section of the community endured traumatic experience which another section was spared (12). The situation is even more polarised in postcolonial settler societies, where indigenous populations were subjected to colonial violence by whites, and the two communities must cohabit after decolonisation. The narrative of Anglo-Australian history has effaced the traumatic events of the Indigenous past and re-inscribed them as a positive referent—white colonisation of Australia, an incomprehensible holocaust for Aboriginal people, is represented as a discovery, a beginning, a birth, in 'official' history. Aboriginal trauma is not only simultaneous with white Australian nation-building but 'part of what theoretically has made [it] possible'.¹⁷ In symbolic terms, Samson's drug-induced oblivion may represent his inability to accept the additional violence of white erasure of Indigenous trauma, white refusal to see that their national identity has been enabled by the forgetting and the obliteration of the Other. But in personal terms, modern trauma theory focuses on 'the destructive repetition of the trauma' (Caruth 63) and emphasises that repetition compulsion may lead to self-destruction, what Freud referred to as a drive to death in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This is surely what Samson is doing, but also what the Aboriginal community is doing to its own most vulnerable members – its children. Thornton uses repetitive violence as a structural principle in the film, refracting the repetition compulsion of traumatised subjects. Freud also suggests interpreting History as the history of a trauma, adding that the latter is not simply a response to any terrible event but to the perplexing experience of survival when others have died (qtd in Caruth 60)—the case of today's Indigenous Australians. Atkinson is less concerned with this Historical view of trauma than with the healing process which, in her view, necessitates listening to individual trauma stories in a group situation, in order to 'individually and collectively make sense of [...] histories and her-stories [...] that have previously seemed senseless' (255).

Samson and Delilah is an almost mute discourse enacted on the site of Indigenous trauma. Its filmic form is uniquely adapted to representing repetitions of traumatic events 'which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight'. The protagonists missed the events of their trauma, as white colonisation of the Aborigines came to an end in the 1970s, before they were born. It is therefore impossible for them to confront their own past; the community trauma remains unknowable for them. This film is Thornton's answer to the seemingly insurmountable problem of how to write the history of the on-going after-effects of colonisation, his response to the question of why Indigenous communities that have already been so badly hurt by colonial violence continue to hurt themselves. It transmits the ethical imperative of an awakening that has not yet occurred in Australian society. As Freud posited

in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where he applied psychoanalytic theory to the study of historical events, history is the way we are implicated in each other's traumas.

Atkinson argues that the single most important need for people who have been traumatised is 'a supportive and caring family and community' (199). Delilah had a reduced but caring family before her nana died, Samson has never had either, and they both lived in a community where child neglect was endemic. Delilah begins to create a new family/community composed of just the two of them, with a little help from Samson's elder brother. This evolution in the construction of community is symbolised by three scenes showing an incongruous-looking public phone booth standing isolated in the middle of the settlement. The first time, it rings and rings but nobody, including the two main characters, feels concerned enough to answer it—a symbol of the general lack of care within the postcolonial Aboriginal community for those in need of help. After being raped in Alice Springs, Delilah tries to ring the community for help but, typically, nobody answers the phone, once again denoting the lack of care offered within the community. Before the children leave together for her land, the phone rings again, but this time Delilah answers and passes on a message, signifying her acceptance of responsibility for members of her community who may be in distress.

'Culture, spirit and identity are linked across time and place to country and kin. Healing occurs when these re-connections begin to be made' (Atkinson, 204). Here, Delilah begins to work on re-establishing these connections; she returns to her country and, with the help of Samson's brother, she returns there with a boy whom her nana, wise in lore, declared to be 'the right skin for her'. On a small scale, she has begun to reconstruct family and community. Her departure from the white town and the dysfunctional Aboriginal community is transformed into a return; it celebrates the Aboriginal cultural belief in one's traditional land as the locus of identity and spirituality. She takes Samson to an isolated place in the bush—her land—where, alone, she undertakes to cure him and herself of the after-effects of trauma. Despite her injured leg, she takes on sole responsibility for their day-to-day survival, while Samson remains passive in his wheelchair, offering a visual parallel with the image of Delilah pushing her grandmother around the community at the beginning of the film.

Thornton's belief in the strength and healing abilities of Aboriginal women is reflected in his choice of actors for the two protagonists. He states that, when casting his lead actress, he was looking for a girl who was pretty, strong and looked confident. He rejected one likely candidate because she was 'too beautiful' and, as the film's producer, Kath Shelper, put it,¹⁸ she would have been the object of Samson's lust, not his 'true love'. The choice of Marissa Gibson thus deliberately short-circuited the stereotypical "'black velvet' perception of the lascivious white male gaze on Aboriginal woman". As Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton has remarked, this "term has passed into 'redneckspeak', and the subliminal power of the concept [...] ricochets around most of the sexual images of Aboriginal women" (50). For Samson's part, however, Thornton wanted a handsome boy of around 14, with a wiry build, perhaps a footballer. Rowan McNamara corresponded to this description.

The unorthodox power relationship between the two is suggested in a striking scene, one night before they leave the settlement, when Samson takes his ghetto blaster outside, plugs it into his brother's amplifier and does what Thornton prescribed as a 'sexy dance' for Delilah, who is sitting some way off in a car listening to her own music on the vehicle's sound system. This scene subverts the traditional use of gaze in mainstream cinema as described in Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Samson displays himself to Delilah and to the cinema auditorium as an erotic object.¹⁹ The scene is shot so that Samson

looks like a performer on the stage – everything around him is dark as he sways and gyrates in the spotlight. Like the cinema audience, Delilah watches him from a distance, seated in the dark and looking through a ‘screen’ (the car’s windscreen). Thornton makes liberal use of a subjective camera from the point of view of the female protagonist and the spectator is invited to identify with her, is drawn into her perspective and made to share her gaze as she looks at his bare torso, his hips and face. This process inverts the gender roles described in Mulvey’s essay (15). We are invited to identify with a voyeuristic female position within the diegesis, a position which parallels our own extradiegetic situation in the cinema – sitting in the dark in front of a screen through/on which the decorative male performs for her/us. This voyeuristic gaze is underlined by a final close-up of Delilah’s fascinated face as she watches Samson dance, until the elder brother comes outside, cuffs Samson over the ear and cuts the display short.

According to Mulvey’s reading of mainstream narrative cinema, the latter owes its popularity to a ‘skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure’ (8), which she divides into two types. The first type is the scopophilic pleasure derived from using the image of another person (traditionally the beautiful and passive female character) as an object of sexual stimulation through gaze. The second visual pleasure derives from identification with the image of an active (male) character who, like the specular image in Jacques Lacan’s mirror phase of child development, resembles the subject but is neither dependent nor impeded by his/her lack of motor skills: the recognition/misrecognition binary allows pleasurable identification with the more powerful and perfect mirror image, the *ideal ego*, in Lacanian terminology (93). Mainstream film thus neatly combines spectacle and narrative. The visual presence of the woman tends to interrupt the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation (Mulvey 11). It is the male character’s role, as the active one, to break this pause and forward the story (Mulvey 12). Thornton inverts the roles.

Near the end of the film there is a sensual scene, shot once again from Delilah’s perspective, where she washes the dirt and petrol²⁰ off Samson’s bare torso while he lies back, passive under her hands, reminding the viewer of a ritual cleansing. Atkinson suggests that ceremony can aid the healing process (213). The scene may be a reference to the *mikvah*, or ritual bath, that the Nazirite was supposed to take before making his sin-offering to God.²¹ It emphasises Thornton’s reversal of gender roles in the creation of visual pleasure for the spectator in his narrative film. Once again the passive male character is the erotic object of the combined gaze of the female character and the audience—the silent ‘bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning’ (Mulvey 8)—while the female character is the more powerful and perfect *ideal ego* we identify with in the mirror of the screen.

Atkinson argues that ‘[t]elling and listening to stories can be ceremonial and therefore healing’ (202). The trauma stories must be narrated to a group, representing community support. In order for people to tell their stories, a safe place must be constructed (203). Only then can victims trace the trauma trails, make sense of the violence, and begin to heal. This process can be compared to Thornton’s procedure in creating *Samson and Delilah*. He responds to the crisis situation, wherein Indigenous children are victims of violence from both inside and outside their communities, by telling the trauma narratives of two such children. His film is a ‘safe place’ for the narration of these stories because he tells them with empathy and presents both characters in such a way that the spectators identify with their pain. The film becomes a ceremony, where his-story and her-story are given meaning. Thornton’s vision locates salvation in Aboriginal women and the land, mother of all life: *his-story*,

Samson and Delilah, offers 'herstory of trauma and survival' as a ray of hope amid the havoc visited by *History* on Indigenous Australians.

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¹ See the 2006 *Breaking the Silence* Report.

² According to her analysis, the third and final phase consists of subsequent government 'attempts to rectify past wrongs while making no allowance for the levels of traumatisation in the lived reality' (184-85), an approach which only served to compound the trauma.

³ Atkinson defines the term 'dysfunctional' as follows: 'The word *dysfunctional* denotes people, as individuals or in groups, who are functioning with difficulty and in pain' (ix).

⁴ Interview, DVD *Samson and Delilah*.

⁵ In his view, culture is as a more or less coherent series of answers a group gives to the problems of its existence. This series changes constantly since survival entails constant adaptation. In the long term, there are more new elements than traditional ones: every people borrows new elements from its neighbours, partners or even from its enemies. They especially borrow elements from those enemies who have vanquished them for they are to be admired. But they also borrow any admirable traits from the culture of those enemies who have been vanquished. A nation's culture is like a Harlequin suit where the patches take up more space than the original fabric. There is no such thing as a 'pure' culture. Every culture evolves. Memmi emphasises that identity is both constant and changing (47-48).

⁶ It is, however, implied that the white management of the suggestively named 'Native Affairs Gallery' in Alice Springs, and the white manager of the store in the Indigenous community, make a great deal more profit from the paintings than the artists themselves.

⁷ Obvious examples are representing the invasion of Australia as a 'settlement', colonisers as 'settlers' and 'pioneers', etc.

⁸ As Thornton explains, this is culturally appropriate because when someone passes away you feel despair and you have to make yourself ugly (interview, DVD *Samson and Delilah*).

⁹ He had already denounced this in *Nana*, in 2007.

¹⁰ To borrow the expression used by Ingo Petzke in, *Phillip Noyce: Backroads to Hollywood*.

¹¹ Interview, DVD *Samson and Delilah*.

¹² To borrow Langton's formulation: 'an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal' (29).

¹³ The rape may also be an oblique reference to the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children within Indigenous communities.

¹⁴ My thanks to Kerry Greenwood, from whom I have borrowed this term, which so graphically evokes its referent.

¹⁵ Formulation borrowed from a Lacanian reinterpretation of a dream analysed by Freud, quoted in Caruth (103).

¹⁶ I will return to this concept later in the essay.

¹⁷ To borrow a turn of phrase used by Caruth when analysing *Hiroshima, mon amour*, 30.

¹⁸ During the interview, 'Making of *Samson and Delilah*'.

¹⁹ This could also perhaps be construed as a repetition of the old trend of eroticising the black male, but the perspective here is specifically that of the black female and the (male) film-maker is also Indigenous.

²⁰ She had earlier poured petrol all over him in anger when he went back to petrol-sniffing after their arrival at her place. Washing the petrol residue off him thus signifies his rebirth and his release from the death drive.

²¹ Perhaps Delilah can recreate him as a Samson?