

“Cinema is a lie that tells the truth about life”

Warwick Thornton discusses *Samson and Delilah* with the WSWs

Richard Phillips
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Samson and Delilah writer, director and cinematographer Warwick Thornton spoke with the World Socialist Web Site this month when his film screened at the Message Sticks film festival in Sydney.

Thornton, who was born and raised in Alice Springs, Central Australia, began a media traineeship at the local CAAMA radio station. He learnt cinematography on the job and then studied at AFTRS film school, graduating in 1997. Since then he has directed a number of award winning documentaries and short fiction films, including Mimi (2002), Green Bush (2005) and Nana (2007). He continues to work as a cinematographer and most recently shot several episodes of the seven-part SBS documentary First Australians. His next project is a three-hour documentary series with Aboriginal art curator Hetti Perkins called Art and Soul.

Richard Phillips: *Samson and Delilah* has a subdued style with long takes and virtually no dialogue. Could you explain why you chose this approach?

Warwick Thornton: I truly respect audiences but think that they’ve been numbified and spoon-fed by a type of cinema that undermines the development of real characters. I wanted to make a teenage love story—a hard love story—and to have audiences take a journey with these kids. It was therefore important right from the beginning to create something that is real. I think the long takes help establish this.

I didn’t want the audience be one step ahead of the characters but be part of the kids’ journey. You might have noticed, but the camera often follows the characters in order to achieve this sense of a journey.

Isn’t life one long take but without the editing? But I like long-takes and in many ways they capture the pace of life where the movie is set. I grew up in Central Australia, in Alice Springs, and things often move slowly there. You can be sitting around and nothing seems to be happening for quite a long time, then suddenly bang, there’s a change, and then it’s back to nothing much going on. I wanted that sort of realism in the movie.

You couldn’t make *Samson and Delilah* with rose-tinted glasses—it wouldn’t be truthful, either to the story or the two kids. Audiences also need time to think. Instead of lots of fast little interconnected scenes, they need time to swim in the emotions of the two kids and to think carefully about what is going on and to ask themselves questions. I love watching movies when things aren’t entirely clear and audience members can have completely different opinions about a film or a scene.

RP: And the limited dialogue between the two teenagers?

WT: That’s realism to me. When you’re 14 you don’t talk about love like you’re a 40-year-old who’s been through two marriages. When I was growing up, if I liked a girl I threw a rock at her.

I also think that audiences should work as well. It’s easy for a writer to have his characters say ‘I’m happy’, ‘I’m sad’, write that into a script and then have an actor say it. It’s much harder when you have to play it without words.

RP: Could you explain something about the movie’s rhythm and the music soundtrack?

WT: I thought a lot about all this before we began shooting—from the groundhog cycle at the beginning through to the appearance of Gonzo under the bridge—and wanted to establish a certain tempo.

There are many dark emotional moments and some relief is needed. This is provided by Gonzo, with his madness, fuzzy hair, broken dialogue and his stories. But my aim was not just to provide some humour, but to create a different tone and tempo. When Gonzo says, “For f...sake say something” to the two kids, it’s like he’s working for the audience.

With the music, I’ve had country and western music drilled into me from the day I was born and I love it. Even though many people generally think of it as red-neck music, Aboriginal people have a great affiliation with country music and especially in Central Australia. They’re singing about country and the love of country, “don’t fence me in” and all that sort of stuff, so there are many connections.

RP: I particularly liked how you use Charley Pride’s “Sunshiny Day” in the first scene.

WT: The opening with Samson waking up and taking a sniff from the petrol tin and Charley Pride singing in the background gives an immediate sense of place. The scene starts at 48 frames in slow motion and then as he starts sniffing the image speeds up. All of this is to say to the audience you’re going to see something that’s going to be confronting, different and it might even dent your soul a little bit.

RP: The music is also a means of escape for the characters.

WT: Yes, and because the audience hasn’t heard much dialogue in the

film the words in the songs have an impact. The music therefore is incredibly important and has to have something to do with a character or the place.

It's a common problem with many filmmakers—and I've been guilty of it in the past—and that is to try and fatten up a film with music after you've finished shooting. This time I selected all the music before we'd even begun shooting and although it cost a bit we got the rights to some fantastic songs.

Gonzo singing Tom Waits's "Jesus Gonna Be Here" is really important and exactly right for the scene. He's about to go off to rehab and he sings, "Well I've been faithful and I've been so good, except for drinking."

As you know a lot of the rehabs in Australia are run by Christian organisations. Gonzo knows that going to rehab is going to be tough and he's wondering whether the church is only doing this because they want a convert. Is this the reason they want me here? Is this a quick way into peoples' souls by giving them a few decent meals?

RP: I understand that you wrote the movie during the government's "intervention" into the Northern Territory?

WT: No, I wrote it a long time before the intervention, before the army came in. I didn't know anything about the intervention when it first happened. No one did. Suddenly we were told that there were Aboriginal paedophiles all over Central Australia and that signs and gates had to be put outside the town camps and communities and people's rights taken away.

My response was one of total anger and a real emotional darkness. Here I am an Aboriginal man, and yet now when I walk down the street I'm forced to think whether people are looking at me and wondering if I'm a paedophile. It's almost as if we, as Aboriginal men, have to prove that we're not paedophiles.

I'd actually written the script a year before the intervention and when it happened I was really angry and decided that I would rewrite it into the script. After a week of thinking about it though, I came to the conclusion that this would be wrong. Although there's a certain sadness about this decision, the reason I did it was because the intervention will come and go, and yet Aboriginal kids will still be in the same position. Not putting the intervention into the movie means that it will not date; it'll have a longer life.

RP: But aren't you assuming that the intervention is aimed at assisting the children as the government claimed?

WT: Well it's like the whole Stolen Generation business. When this policy was implemented, Australia and all its governments believed that taking the half-caste kids from their parents and giving them some sort of education was the right thing to do. They truly believed this. But what's the difference between this policy and the intervention?

And how gorgeously perfect was it that [former prime minister] Howard announced the intervention and claimed to be helping the children just before an election. The last time he did this sort of thing was the children overboard issue and the lie that refugees trying to get into Australia had thrown their children from the refugee boats and into the sea. This time the government claimed it was saving children from being buggered in the desert.

RP: Now it continues under the Labor government. Were you surprised by that?

WT: I've grown up watching the regular Labor-Liberal disaster that happens in this country. The Liberals run amok and then Labor comes in and says it's for the working man but keeps the Liberals' policies. And then the Liberals get back in and the whole cycle starts all over again.

RP: But in this case Labor is not just keeping the Liberals' policies, but extending the attacks.

WT: Yes, that's absolutely right. Labor is now trying to get around the human rights issues—the suspension of the racial discrimination act that came with the intervention. Labor is now working out how to get around that hurdle by rewriting the legislation and keeping all the intervention measures. Is it possible to do this sort of thing in life? Oh, I've just killed someone, but it's OK, I'm just going to remove murder from the law books.

Governments simply operate on the basis of the length of their terms—4-, 6- or 8-year terms. They don't believe that there is a 50-year 100-year process in anything that should outlive a prime minister or the individuals in government. This is so stupid and wrong.

RP: There are countless stories that could be dramatised about life for Aboriginal people. Why did you choose to make a film about teenagers?

WT: Because they're our future. Our kids in Central Australia are caught in this incredibly hard world. There is Aboriginal law and culture, which fights to stay strong and there are the pressures of capitalism with rappers 50 Cent and P. Diddy and all the illusions that go with this scene.

As a teenager, Aboriginal law and culture is so incredibly strict that you almost want to reject it. But what are you gonna look for? Well, there are all these rich rapper kids on TV covered in gold jewellery, and with their Ferraris and 20 beautiful women dancing behind them. Our kids don't know who they are and how they fit into this world of bling and all the get-rich quick stuff on television. I was an Aboriginal teenager in Central Australia and grew up on the streets of Alice Springs, so I know something about this.

At the same time, teenage kids falling in love and substance abuse are universal issues that can happen anywhere, even in Kirribilli [one of Sydney's wealthiest suburbs]. I'm hoping that the movie connects with audiences and makes Australians realise that they've all gone through some form of Samson and Delilah.

The question that I asked myself when I was writing the movie—my first feature film and therefore the possibility of talking to all of Australia and maybe the rest of the world—was "Have I got something to say?"

Cinema is a lie that tells the truth about life, but everyone should have a fight—something they believe in and that they will stand up for and fight for change. Filmmakers should always be asking themselves, "Is there something you believe in or do you just want to go straight to Hollywood and make enough money to buy a mansion in LA? Where do you fit into the world? Have you got a good fight?"

I truly believe that cinema has to tell real stories. It needs to work that way. There is the financial side of it—making money and being in business—but its existence lies in its story-telling abilities. If you go right back to the times that pre-date writing, communication was through

images and story-telling; the old man under the tree, not just in Central Australia, but in Europe and everywhere else. Movies have to tell stories—moral stories, stories of change, stories that kids and everyone else can take into their lives and make them better human beings.

This author also recommends:

Samson and Delilah: a searing portrait of life for Central Australian Aboriginal youth

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