

Samson and Delilah, Australia, 2009. Directed by Warwick Thornton. Starring: Marissa Gibson, Rowan MacNamara, Mitjili Gibson, Scott Thornton. Screenbook: Warwick Thornton. Producer: Kath Shelper. **Reviewed by Heide Fruth-Sachs**

This film hit a nerve in Australia. It contributed greatly to intense – and controversial - public discussions about the problems in Aboriginal settlements in the remote outback and the circumstances and politics that intensified these problems.

Apart from its social and political impact *Samson and Delilah* is a great film. It draws the onlooker into the scene through close-ups which often give you the feeling that you are sitting beside or in front of the actors, as if you were part of the scene. Warwick Thornton made the film with a handheld camera. *Samson and Delilah* won the *Camera d'Or* at the Cannes Film festival 2009. Thornton is an indigenous artist, and so are all his main protagonists. Like Thornton himself, they are at home in the area around Alice Springs. Apart from the actress who played Nana, the grandmother, all others were amateurs in their first film roles.

Samson and Delilah is not easy to digest. You leave the cinema distressed because of all the sadness and violence. The cause of the violence is uprootedness and boredom. The young couple in the centre of the story are teenagers, 15 or 16 years old. There are no parents around. God knows where they are, perhaps in jail. Or have they abandoned their children? The girl lives with her grandmother. They have a small income through their dot paintings which are from time to time collected by a white dealer who supplies them with the painting material. One suspects immediately that the dealer gets a lot more money from the paintings than the artists. In a later scene the girl, after having run away with Samson, tries to sell her beautiful picture to tourists in the mall in Alice Springs and to an up-market gallery. In vain. The marketing of Aboriginal art is done by Whitefellas.

Samson, the male protagonist, lives in the house of his older brother. His possessions are an old foam mattress, some dirty blankets, old jeans, a shirt, his radio with some music cassettes and a can for petrol-sniffing. He has nothing to do all day except hang around, following Delilah, who at first rejects him. During the whole film he speaks only once. A friendly hobo who shares his meagre food with the youngsters repeatedly asks for his name. Finally, in a sickly hoarse voice, he says "Samson".

Delilah is cruelly beaten by relatives after her grandmother's death. She is wrongly accused of having neglected the old woman. The relatives want to take over the grandmother's possessions. Samson tries to play the guitar in his brother's rock band. He takes the instrument to try it out, and it ends in a struggle between the two. Samson hits his older brother with a stick, but is brutally beaten in retaliation. The film shows shocking cruelty to fellow human beings both inside and outside the native community. In town Delilah is kidnapped by three young white men, probably raped and once again beaten up. Samson in his petrol-sniffing stupor does not even realise her disappearance. Mourning her he cuts his hair with a knife – as Delilah did after the death of her grandmother. So far this rite of mourning is the only reference to the biblical story from which the names of the protagonists are taken.

Samson and Delilah is a love story, but the boy and the girl never speak to one another. They communicate only through signs and silences. The only one who expresses himself in words and song is the friendly native drunkard under the bridge. He warns Samson to stop his petrol sniffing: "It will muck up your brain".

This is what happens in the end. Delilah returns to find Samson a hopeless drug victim. She had been run down by a car, taken to a hospital and patched up again. Her broken leg is in a splint. Social service people help her to cart Samson away in a car which is then given to her (through the insurance company? As compensation?) to start a new life. She does it by finding an abandoned shack on an old cattle station; she cleans it, stacks it with tinned food, succeeds in getting the windmill to work and fills the water trough. Samson

has to be washed and fed. At the beginning of the film the grandmother sat in a wheelchair, now young Samson is the patient. Delilah, limping, takes a rifle, goes into the wilderness and comes back a successful hunter, a roo over her shoulder. In an earlier scene Samson did the hunting and walked proudly through the camp with his prey.

While Samson sits in the wheelchair clutching his radio, Delilah begins to do her dot paintings again. A circle is closed.

We are left with an uneasy feeling. What are the prospects of the couple? Is there a chance that Samson can be cured? Will they survive the loneliness of the outback, shunned by the community? Delilah is a strong girl, physically and mentally, but is she strong enough to master such a hard life? However, it is certainly better than sleeping rough under a road bridge. She takes her and Samson's lives into her own hands, caring for him and working.

Some journalists have criticized the ending of the film as too romantic. "*Samson and Delilah* continues the myth of escape, puts off the day when Samson and Delilah must be schooled in the way of living in the real world, far from the romance of the film world" writes Gary Johns in *The Australian* (June 4, 2009). Others praised the film as "heart bruising", but "joyous".

"Joyous" is perhaps not the right word, but glimpses of hope and humanity can be seen in spite of the tragedy. We are touched by the unobtrusive understanding of the drunken clochard, who shares his food and the warmth of his fire with strangers and who tries to cheer the frightened children up without expecting something for himself. The outcast helps other outcasts. Not so the priest, who does not ask young Delilah what was the matter with her when she walked slowly through his church with hollow cheeks, a bruised face and dirty clothes. I do not think (as does Gary Johns in the above-mentioned review does) that Thornton in this scene accuses the Christian priest or missionaries in general of cold-heartedness. He only points out that their role as helpers and developers in the Australian outback has come to an end. Delilah does not expect help from the priest, she does not even look at him, she only looks at a big

cross on the wall, then leaves and shuts the door softly, while the priest passively follows her with his eyes.

Wherein lies the beauty of the film? It is in the young faces of both the protagonists, it is in the colourful dot paintings, it is in Samson's dance for Delilah when he succeeds in drawing her attention to his sensual dance, while his shadow dances with him on the wall behind the open fire, until his brother pulls the plug of the radio. Certainly, there is more distress than beauty, but beauty is there too.

The film is also a documentary. The houses in the community are built of soulless concrete. All the buildings are worn down and dirty, the walls covered with graffiti. The only shop has little to offer. Waiting in front of the health centre, a trailer home, you had better sit on the back of the chairs because if you do not, the ants will get you. The public telephone in front of the health-centre rings and rings and nobody bothers to answer. Only once, when Samson and Delilah are back, he with his damaged brain in a wheelchair, she still limping, does she pick up the phone. There is no-one at the other end.

Shortly after this film Peter Sutton's book *The Politics of Suffering – Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus* appeared (MUP, 2009, 268 pp. ISBN 978-0-522-85636-1). Sutton, a well known anthropologist who spent decades in the northern territories, demonstrates that the liberal politics of the Australian Government in the last 30 years have been a disaster. After the missions lost their power and influence, Aboriginal societies in the outback began to decline in spite of the huge amount of money spent on them. Welfare was a one-sided affair and encouraged passivity. A wrong understanding of "freedom" allowed alcohol, drugs and pornography a takeover in many Aboriginal communities. The consequences were a brutal degradation of behaviour and norms. If crimes were committed, Australian law was often not applied, the excuse being a protection of old traditions – for example punishment by spearing. However, the old culture of the First Australian Nations was no longer alive and could not be restored. Official indulgence for doubtful Aboriginal law practices, corruption and egotistical clan loyalties led

to grave injustices in many outback areas. Women and children suffered and still suffer from a male dominated, often violent group order. The young had and have too few prospects of a good future. There always was and still is a high rate of unemployment. Separated from the mainstream culture in Australia the ghettos in the outback have become places of stagnation and hopelessness.

Self-government has been a failure in too many outback communities and black Australians must be blamed for this. However, the idea of political correctness and the resulting principle of non-intervention are concepts which were born in white brains; the idea of liberalism or democracy did not exist in the traditions of the indigenous peoples – these have been forced onto the Blacks. The money for the unsuccessful outback projects has always come from the white Government; therefore the Government must be considered equally guilty of the resulting tragedy. Peter Sutton asks: was it not irresponsible on the Government's part, toward the Australian nation as a whole, to throw money into a bottomless pit, with no real supervision as to how it was being spent?

Dating from the Intervention of 2007, problems are now being discussed that for too long were swept under a liberal carpet of self-deception. Naturally this development has a long and complicated history, the impetus of which, however, has always come from white politicians, who invariably decided what was best for the Aborigines. W.E.H. Stanner, the famous Australian anthropologist (1905-1981) who was Advisor to several governments in the 1960s and early 70s, was aware that many Aborigines preferred to live like Whites. Nevertheless he espoused the view that they could only be truly happy in their native culture.

The culture clash between black and white Australians is still going on. It will take time to adjust it. Jenny Macklin, the new Minister for Aboriginal affairs, is endeavouring to solve these problems by listening to men like Peter Sutton and Noel Pearson. Both campaign for a much more active participation of indigenous people in changing their situation for the better. Mission-educated Noel Pearson, today a well known indigenous politician, is the man who might be able to

show how to tackle these problems. He confronts his native people and white Australians with uncomfortable truths, but he also points a way towards a better future. In a recent speech he said: "We do not want a sit-down culture, we want a hands-up culture."

In her quiet and persistent way Warwick Thornton's *Delilah* has put her hand up.