

# FILM CRITICISM

(<https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc>)

[Login \(/fc/login/\)](/fc/login/) | [Register \(/fc/register/step/1/\)](/fc/register/step/1/)

 Search

[Home \(/fc/\)](/fc/)   [About \(https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/about/\)](https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/about/)

[Editors \(https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/editors/\)](https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/editors/)

[Submissions \(https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/submit/\)](https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/fc/site/submit/)

[Past Issues \(https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.\\*?cc=fc;c=fc;idno=13761232.\\*\)](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.*?cc=fc;c=fc;idno=13761232.*)



[Film Guides \(https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/filmguides\)](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/filmguides)

[Issues \(/fc/issues/\)](/fc/issues/)

[Account ▶](#)

FEATURE ARTICLE

## Warwick Thornton's Emotional Landscapes: Indigenous Cinema and Cultural Autonomy in Australia


**Author:** Wyatt Moss-Wellington  (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6799-4439>) (University of New England)  (<mailto:wyatt.moss-wellington@une.edu.au>)

FEATURE ARTICLE

## Warwick Thornton's Emotional Landscapes: Indigenous Cinema and Cultural Autonomy in Australia

**Author:** Wyatt Moss-Wellington  (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6799-4439>) (University of New England)  (<mailto:wyatt.moss-wellington@une.edu.au>)

Share:

 ([https://www.facebook.com/share.php?p\[url\]=https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692](https://www.facebook.com/share.php?p[url]=https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692))

 ([https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Warwick Thornton's Emotional Landscapes: Indigenous Cinema and Cultural Autonomy in Australia https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Warwick%20Thornton%27s%20Emotional%20Landscapes%3A%20Indigenous%20Cinema%20and%20Cultural%20Autonomy%20in%20Australia%20https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692))

Abstract

This article explores director Warwick Thornton's affective use of filmic emotions in the features *Samson and Delilah* (2009) and *Sweet Country* (2017). Thornton's films portray coloniser-colonised relations at two moments in Australian history, and that affective history-telling is motivated toward a more deliberative case for a future of self-determined cultural autonomy. I analyse emotive resources that cross between both films, including periods of silence and landscape aesthetics that depict subjective experience of country. I also address the place of empathy in Thornton's character studies as foundational to later political reasoning. Thornton's films call attention to the positionality of different audience members, challenging the spectator to interrogate foundational emotional responses, conflicts between their emotional responses, and subsequent prompts to think through the politics of those experiences. These provocations are united into an explicitly argumentative appeal for Indigenous cultural autonomy.

**Keywords:** Warwick Thornton, Indigenous media, Australian cinema, Fourth Cinema, empathy, film rhetoric, postcolonial studies, *Samson and Delilah*, *Sweet Country*, film and emotion

### How to Cite:

Moss-Wellington, W., (2024) "Warwick Thornton's Emotional Landscapes: Indigenous Cinema and Cultural Autonomy in Australia", *Film Criticism* 48(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692> (<https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692>)

### Downloads:

[Download XML \(/fc/article/5692/galley/3419/download/\)](/fc/article/5692/galley/3419/download/)

397

VIEWS

138

DOWNLOADS

PUBLISHED ON

05 APR 2024

PEER REVIEWED

LICENSE

Warwick Thornton is a significant figure in Indigenous film, media, and visual arts in the colonial state now known as Australia. The son of Kaytetye woman Freda Glynn, herself co-founder of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), Thornton is among several of Glynn's children who have similarly gone on to work in Australian film and television.<sup>1</sup> Alongside his work in documentaries, short films, television, media installations, and other audiovisual experiments, Thornton directed and lensed the feature films *Samson and Delilah* (2009) and *Sweet Country* (2017).<sup>2</sup> Both are landmark cinematic explorations addressed to Indigenous lives at different moments in Australian history. *Samson and Delilah* offers a post-Apology character study of two Indigenous teenagers in central Australia, while *Sweet Country* retells a story from Australia's interwar history, Willaberta Jack's 1929 shooting of veteran Harry Henty in self-defence.<sup>3</sup>

This article compares the two films and their rhetorical use of emotion – how that emotion is intended to work simultaneously as an act of history, of imagination, and of activism. I analyse the films' grounding in emotive history-telling and imaginative projection of affective consequences, revealing how each informs the more persuasive, activist functions of both films. A comparative reading locates three rhetorical effects at work in Thornton's affective use of cinema, which represents traumatic experiences, asks audiences for some level of emotional understanding of those experiences, and uses the background of those affective outcomes to make more deliberative political cases. First, Thornton uses audiovisual resources to portray not simply Australian land, but a localised phenomenal experience of land; second, each film represents the emotional toll of failures to allow First Peoples both cultural and material autonomy on their own land; and third, the implicit request for an audience to register these existential impacts generates a political critique from the affective experiences portrayed. That is, while cinematic emotions supply the rhetorical means – the reason for an audience's caring – the ends of that caring make action on Indigenous sovereignty central.

For example, from *Sweet Country*'s imaginative reworkings of history is derived what Annemarie McLaren calls a 'sense of instability – of the possibility of different future possibilities – [which] is central to *Sweet Country* despite its saturation in a racist past.'<sup>4</sup> This history, McLaren contends, fills in rhetorically forensic truths about the complex, violent and ongoing nature of Australia's colonial past, but also leverages that understanding to look more deliberately toward a different future.<sup>5</sup> Despite some historians' reticence in admitting filmic emotions as part of that history, critiquing film's capacity for what McLaren calls 'affect rather than argument,' the emotions felt by peoples past are integrated into our attempts to understand levels of heritability; both 'history and fiction offer cause and effect and historical truths,' including the more difficult truths of affective causality, of emotion and motivation.<sup>6</sup> Those seeking to understand the past do have need to understand such a causality as one important component of human histories. This is why McLaren ultimately finds that:

subverting the Western in a way that paints a picture of the causes and grim effects of colonisation in a remarkably non-partisan way, *Sweet Country* not only depicts the deeper realities of the past but does so in a way that more readily allows settler Australians to process these legacies in the present.<sup>7</sup>

Models for thinking through affective causalities are part of such a 'processing' of history. Narrational modes from Indigenous oral traditions to emotional cinema can offer such means – and the continuity between them is a topic Thornton has returned to in interviews.<sup>8</sup>

Yet this article probes what Thornton uses these affective and imaginative histories to achieve; not just ascribing emotional causalities to Australian colonial history, but the more polemical use of those causalities. At the heart of Thornton's deliberative rhetoric – his case not for what was in the past but what future we ought to work toward – is an appeal to cultural autonomy. As Thornton puts it, 'a lot of our problems come from culture ... culture should evolve, it shouldn't be chiselled in stone, we need our culture and our law to move with us.'<sup>9</sup> Taking a cue from Thornton's own language around these issues, cultural autonomy then refers to Indigenous agency to decide how cultures and practices will evolve and grow, rather than reliance on the imposed, divisive politics of land rights claims that have been the legislative and judicial focus of post-assimilation Australia.

## Self-Determination and Cultural Autonomy

In the Native Title era and thereafter, Indigenous rights have centred around claims to uninterrupted cultural continuity, which poses problems in a country with a substantial history of dispossession including attempted genocides, assimilation, and ongoing interventions that displace First Peoples.<sup>10</sup> Land rights tend to privilege those who have suffered the least displacement, and so can draw a more direct line from their current lives to ancestral heritage. Consequently, peoples who have endured a greater degree of enforced displacement are less eligible to have rights recognised by non-indigenous legal bodies that prescribe continuity of fixed cultural identities as a prime criterion.<sup>11</sup> As Indigenous identities must adapt to suit administrative conditions that are often antithetical to existing social structures, many have critiqued the liberatory potential of rights-based western arbitrations that retrospectively apply 'rights to country' that were initially seized.<sup>12</sup> These processes are found to divide peoples into groups of 'claimants' who must then self-segregate into cultural groupings arguing separately for custodianship of land, drawing from archival and historical evidence.<sup>13</sup> They divide groups that may have previously been united in order to legitimise some claims over others.

In a nation like Australia, with its history of dispossessions and displacements, identification becomes a complex mix of locality and relationality, kinship and genealogy, deeds and practices, with Aboriginal peoples often managing multiple levels of selfhood dependent on geographical context.<sup>14</sup> Francesca Merlan argues that 'the survival of tribal identities cannot be understood as pure continuity of Aboriginal culture,' with its juridical onus to perform the proof of an unchanging authenticity.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Aboriginal peoples must be allowed to navigate changes *and* continuities across the worlds they inhabit and their

intersecting cultures, with the changing resources at their disposal, without having to meet the culturally essentialising demands of demonstrable purity. The obligations of authenticity pit Indigenous lives against one another largely to appease appetites for ‘less threatening, contained stories of the “other”’ that safely dichotomise race and identity.<sup>16</sup> Ian Anderson recognises how legacies of ‘assimilationist miscegenation’ create a ‘not-quite-otherness’ that is equally threatening to mainstream conceptions of Aboriginality that desire clear separations, clear markers of authenticity, and in turn reject hybrid being (both in terms of race and culture) as fractured and not-quite-real.<sup>17</sup> Anderson expresses the existential conditions of postcolonial hybrid identities:

As human beings we need to eat, to experience emotion, to find relief for distress. How we are propelled through life is shaped by our sense of a changing world, by our symbolic life and by our experience of being able to mobilise resources ... How I speak, act, and how I look are outcomes of a colonial history, and not a particular combination of traits from either side of the frontier.<sup>18</sup>

The hegemony of any approach founded on dividing authentic and inauthentic Indigeneity freezes people and practice in time; it sets up failures by sequestering Indigenous developments from an inexorably changing world, becoming yet another manner of displacement, another means by which Aboriginal peoples are removed from a self-determined relation to ancestry. A fundamental sovereignty ought to confer control over one’s past *and* future, the right to preserve heritage *and* decide the ongoing uses of that heritage: deciding how, given access to the knowledge and practices of one’s past, one lives amongst others, so that the terms of future living are not dictated by a removed political class that so often desires an Indigenous influence safely distanced and contained, confined to history and no longer operating within lived intercultural dynamics.

Jeff Corntassel addresses this solution as ‘sustainable self-determination,’ and as Julie Mullaney points out, the politics of self-determination are of distinct importance to Thornton and his cinema.<sup>19</sup> In a film like *Sweet Country*, such insights are evinced through characters including Archie (Gibson John) and Philomac (Tremayne and Trevon Doolan). Archie is an Aboriginal man removed from traditions and a narrative connection to his past. He conveys to the younger Philomac midway through the picture that he has not been able to argue for any degree of autonomy given his forced displacement from family, land, and – crucially – the stories of his people. This tension between fulfilling connections to the past, and the need to survive under cruel conditions (both unjust postcolonial conditions and Australia’s unforgiving yet awe-inspiring geography), lies at the heart of the film.



(fc.5692-f0001.jpg).

Figure 1:

*Figure 1:*

*Archie and Philomac in Sweet Country (2017).*

Thornton's cinema addresses these issues often through intergenerational encounters. Teenaged and pre-teenaged characters become most symbolic of the difficulties in navigating cultural autonomy. *Sweet Country's* Philomac, for example, becomes representative as a boy who has not yet absorbed self-preservatory deference to white authority. He is lectured at points throughout the film about his disconnection to the past. In the final scene, he offers one of the film's small glimmers of hope by tossing away a token of white material culture, with its lineal concepts of progression, ownership, and time: Harry's (Ewen Leslie) fob watch, pilfered from his corpse. Philomac will have to navigate the treacherous road to an autonomous relationship with the very values of his collective past and his future being in a white-dominated world. *Samson and Delilah*, on the other hand, reconfigures symptoms of youth disenfranchisement that have elicited dehumanising fear, pity, and repulsion in mainstream media, such as inhalant use, and positions them as the site of new emotional meanings: as Therese Davis suggests, a site of love.<sup>20</sup>





(fc.5692-f0002.jpg)

Figure 2:

*Figure 2:*

*Philomac regards Harry's job watch in Sweet Country (2017).*



(fc.5692-f0003.jpg)

Figure 3:

*Figure 3:*

*A darker, mirrored framing at the film's end, with the sun now casting a shadow on the watch's dial.*

In the literature on sustainability and traditional knowledge, scholars argue for 'rights to self-determination and cultural evolution' together.<sup>21</sup> By whatever means, Indigenous peoples ought to be able to make these determinations of their own volition: how to preserve histories, and what to adapt of tradition. To confer 'rights' to access and preserve the past is an appeal that is easier to manage, suiting Australian lawmakers more so than more pivotal rights to both own one's past and decide what to do with

it, organically as part of an autonomous life, without stricture. Nor can we rely upon the right to preserve traditions that made sense to different people in different times; although Thornton's work shows how this knowledge and its accessibility are crucial, given the centrality of cultural memory, oral histories, and engagements with ancestry as values.<sup>22</sup> On their own, rights that are contingent upon provable, unchanging heritage and performance of authentic Indigeneity are unworkable, as where peoples do change and adapt, they also become no longer eligible for the respect of such a law as they progress from its strict benchmarks of entitlement and worth, aimed toward the past. Yet of course arguing for 'rights' to decide on one's own cultural evolution already moves from a set of assumptions that appears to justify – or at least accept – a history of colonial interventions, with its very foundational notions of unilineal progressive change. Alberto Gomes reminds us that all of these conceptions ought to 'focus on enablement' for Indigenous peoples and their choices, in identity as in activism, including the state structures they choose to engage with.<sup>23</sup>

## Filmic Emotions and Fourth Cinema

Fourth Cinema uses audiovisual resources to extend Indigenous phenomenology, or ways of seeing and knowing the world. The term was coined by Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay in 2003.<sup>24</sup> Barclay referenced cinematic choices, constitutive of a whole new film 'language,' that express aspects of Indigenous experience not bound to prevailing settler philosophies, politics, and audiovisual preferences.<sup>25</sup> In an emotive medium like film, this can include emotional experiences that call for differing modes of empathy and perspective-taking on behalf of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous spectators. To understand these operations of empathy in Thornton's features, however, a crucial distinction must first be made between cognitive and affective empathy. Much writing on film and emotion addresses affective empathy as a kind of parasocial osmosis with political effects, whether beneficial or problematic.<sup>26</sup> Yet in many instances affective empathy, or feeling an approximation of what characters feel, is simply groundwork for further cognising of a narrative's emotional experiences as communication.

A conflicted, affective empathy is indeed important in understanding Thornton's Fourth Cinema. Affective causal modelling of lives past or the compromises of current privations does foundationally engage modes of empathy – but emotions are not of themselves morally definitive. Empathy is just one component in the affective background from which audiences are asked to think through current Australian politics. These films exhibit no presumption that 'making people care' is enough, or that caring for fictional characters is political work on its own.<sup>27</sup> In Thornton's cinema empathic concern is elaborative rather than conclusive, a foundation from which to explore the politics of how one thinks and feels through other lives.

While fields like trauma theory have been sceptical of the political potential of empathic investments, at times addressing empathy as something affectively (and thus, it is assumed, unreflexively) received rather than consciously considered, in this article I address empathy as just one among many emotional resources in political cinema, evoked comparatively and in contrast with concurrent emotional tensions.<sup>28</sup>



This approach departs from accounts of empathy addressed in isolation from other emotional experiences that make up narrative communication, or the interpretive intersections between emotive experiences from which spectators draw personalised meaning from films (it thus also departs from film criticism aimed toward a unified subject, reacting as one to political cinema's provocations).<sup>29</sup> Empathy, I contend, has limited intrinsic meaning and so can be mobilised rhetorically by filmmakers as just one moving part in any broader persuasive exercise.

I address instead the ways in which Thornton's films ask us to subsequently cognise the politics of parasocial experiences, translating moments of empathic connection into a striving to understand the place of those feelings in works of fictive political communication. I call this 'foundational empathy.' While Thornton's cinema does offer inroads to felt, affective empathising across a range of represented characters, it is more instructive to look at what audiences are challenged to then do with those empathic foundations: how one is asked to think of entities those characters may symbolise, and interrogate what our responses mean for the way we think through the complex relationships of Indigeneity in Australia. For example, Davis points out how *Samson and Delilah* uses cycles and repetitions rather than traditional, progressive plot advancements to reframe emotional responses for different audience members:

the film's brilliant use of cyclical time and its highly inventive use of sound and music position both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spectators differently to a subject like Samson ... 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.<sup>30</sup>

The film is thus very difficult to understand without reflectively engaging the positionality of one's emotions, involvements, and attachments, and comparing them to others. Audiences are challenged to think back over foundational emotional responses, and how our emotions may be actively – and activistically – used.<sup>31</sup>

There are, of course, adverse material conditions, ongoing dispossessions, and the political establishments that maintain those conditions that First Nations peoples foremost contend with. These are not just emotions, but material consequences. Yet cinema is good at attaching emotions to those conditions to express something of how they are lived – and these narrativized, affective means for understanding one's world are important. Motivated as they are in Thornton's two features, they can help audiences understand their own circumstance, acknowledge differences between one's circumstances and those of others, and demonstrate how and why we ought to fight together to change those circumstances. The following readings reveal the techniques used in *Samson and Delilah* and *Sweet Country* that afford spectators the opportunity not simply to feel their way through each of those connections, but to think about their feelings and use those feelings as a resource for political reasoning.

## The Affective and Symbolic Rhetoric of Silences

Thornton's films survey a range of emotions emerging from situated experience of a land shaped by cultural forces that far too often leave Indigenous peoples behind at historic stages of development. The films engage key moments of history during which moral and political norms are at stake. *Sweet Country* locates a staple of the Western genre – fraught attempts at introducing disputative proceedings in recently occupied territories – within central Australian, coloniser-colonised relations of the 1920s, with its realities of slavery and abuse on seized lands.<sup>32</sup> While *Samson and Delilah* is clearly responsive to contemporary Indigenous lives, it is also concerned with the demonstrable impact of decades of government interventions that in various ways severed connections to family, tradition, and land, including the effects of absent generations of caregivers, and an institutional refusal to draw any connection between that violent history and its present day symptoms.<sup>33</sup>

Tess Fisher's account of *Samson and Delilah*'s history situates the film's experimentalism against popular post-Apology Indigenous cinema, including *Bran Nue Dae* (Rachel Perkins, 2009) and *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012), both based on stage musicals from 1990 and 2004 respectively.<sup>34</sup> Fisher argues that the figurative and affective silences within *Samson and Delilah* offer a different critical resource to the accessibly 'loud and energetic performances' of the two musicals that mobilise empathic relations to character in perhaps more familiar ways. In contradistinction, Therese Davis and Mark Byron note how *Samson and Delilah*, Thornton's first feature, winner of the Cannes Palme d'Or and eight Australian Film Institute Awards, crystallised a millennial trend in Indigenous filmmaking that cast non-actors and used Indigenous languages, including Warlpiri sign language.<sup>35</sup> Bruce Isaacs likewise sees *Samson and Delilah* as a watershed moment advancing beyond a model of political cinema established in millennial Australian films *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002).<sup>36</sup>

Figure 4:

*Figure 4:*

*Thornton's work with non-actors in a scene of tacit communication.*

## Samson and Delilah: Behind the Scenes "Shame"



<https://youtu.be/CpV7Suoo3Yw> (<https://youtu.be/CpV7Suoo3Yw>)

Given the evidently important place of these silences in the emotional landscapes of Thornton's cinema, they are a good place to begin locating his unique affective rhetoric, politicisation of modes of communication in the communities his camera observes, and reflective departures from cinematic norms. *Samson and Delilah* features very limited dialogue and long stretches of solely atmospheric sound design, and *Sweet Country* is marked by the striking absence of an incidental score. Tacit communication is important in both features. In *Samson and Delilah*, Samson has only one word of dialogue when his untreated speech impediment is revealed in the latter half of the film. *Samson and Delilah*'s silences are initially broken only by bursts of incongruous music and a telephone that takes on a range of symbolic resonances across the film. When it rings and is ignored, spectators not only witness but viscerally, aurally feel the willing disconnect between a post-Apology white establishment and lived experiences far distant from that establishment's erroneous assumptions about community needs – a foundational empathy from which the film asks us to consider its broader implications. The motif is central to the film's overlapping cycles of repetition, through which we are asked to discern potentials for incremental change. Fisher writes:

In a rural landscape of red dust, parched brown trees and dilapidated homes, the silver polished phone looks alien. The impression that the phone does not belong is reinforced by the way it is regarded by locals ... The phone, much like the Apology, looks good and is designed to aid the Indigenous community, but in reality it provides no real solution. The community does not respond to the phone in the same way many Aboriginals, such as Thornton, did not respond to the Apology.<sup>37</sup>

Fisher is referring here to Thornton's comment to *The Age*:

'Sorry' doesn't fill fridges ... It makes a lot of people stronger and makes them take bigger steps towards their future, but in my camp it pretty well doesn't mean anything. The 'sorry' word was designed for our grandmothers, and it did work. But for the Samson and Delilahs of the world it doesn't mean shit. When you're starving on the streets and you're homeless, that word just doesn't cut it.<sup>38</sup>

Note that Thornton concedes both that the reframed relationship toward the past allows some community members to 'take bigger steps towards their future,' however at the same time points to the problem of cultural autonomy. On its own, reframing the past does not help one establish solutions to current, pressing problems faced by younger generations who must find a way not only to survive, but thrive – and on their own terms.

As a communications device, the phone also represents the potential for connective acts of care, a potential that is only realised toward the film's conclusion when Delilah begins her rehabilitation of both Samson and the land they live on. Finally, using communications technology as a motif primes the audience to be thinking about cinema as its own technology with its own politics of access, potential for empathy and care, and potential for misappropriating empathy and care.<sup>39</sup> In this way, a localised empathy may be inspired by each characters' situatedness within the film's stark aural and visual aesthetics and the tragic events that follow, but the film challenges viewers to understand that empathy in its rhetorical context, as communication via care. That is, affective empathy is a *foundation* from which to reveal and explore insights into broader cultures and lifeworlds, to think through the histories that have prefaced and affected those lifeworlds, to interrogate one's own phenomenal positionality and the positionality of media producers and communicators, to express a sovereignty that 'is embodied and is tied to particular tracts of country,' ancestral relations, and ways of being and knowing together, and to look forward to a different political future.<sup>40</sup>



(fc.5692-f0005.jpg).

Figure 5:

*Figure 5:*

*The phone in Samson and Delilah (2009).*

In contrast to the amusical *Sweet Country*, *Samson and Delilah* features a wide variety of musical genres that sporadically cut through the buzz track of central Australian sounds: country music on the radio; a repetitious reggae trio; a torch song Delilah escapes to listen to on a car cassette player; the hair rock Samson amplifies; Gonzo's (Scott Thornton) a capella balladry; a variety of sparse non-diegetic music; and the film's theme song, a paean to love's triumph through material adversity. This diverse use of music serves several emotional functions. It is transportive for characters whose means for escape and aesthetic stimulation are limited; it is a first point of connection for teenagers who unite over music, even if their tastes differ; it represents one struggle for autonomy given limited space and means, especially between Samson and his brother (Matthew Gibson); and it is one component in the film's presentation of Indigenous collaborative art, as the two protagonists initially approach one another's emotional worlds through acts of musical cross-pollination. Two significant early scenes portray overlap between different sources of music and its interpretation. The first is when Samson blocks one ear at a time, listening to his brother's band and the radio in turn. The second is when Delilah watches Samson dance, however she is listening to her tape player, so to her it appears he is dancing to her favoured torch song. Samson's desire to play his brother's guitar also demonstrates his affinity for aural play – this is an affinity that initially unites the two characters.



(fc.5692-f0006.jpg)

Figure 6:

*Figure 6:*

*Delilah watches Samson dance from her car in Samson and Delilah (2009).*

Tania Glyde points out that *Sweet Country* equally attaches emotions not only to silences, but to acts of *silencing*:

When white bosses abuse an Indigenous worker, the other workers stay quiet. This at first seems to indicate complicity, but they are well versed in the unpredictable ways of the master, and there is far more communication going on between them than initially appears.<sup>41</sup>

*Sweet Country* develops a cinematic emotional vocabulary of some economy, using limited screen time to convey a sense of the broader lifeworlds of its multi-protagonist ensemble, through devices such as micro-flashbacks and -flashforwards. In the space of a few silent seconds, each details traumas and histories of violence, deeply held loves and deeply felt losses that orient each character's affective motivations, or permit a brief window into the further traumas those experiences beget. In understanding each character, the spectator must imagine how those emotions are powerful and causal for each individual, but their silence also puts those emotions at a remove, signalling their imaginative nature as memory and projection. For example, on more than one occasion Harry is portrayed alone, tormented by PTSD from the war and his alcoholism. This helps fill out a more complex picture of his emotions and motivations, yet while the spectator may feel them in the moment, that affective empathy is limited and unlikely to generate either 'allegiance' or 'alignment,' to use Murray Smith's terms for dividing empathy



and varieties of audience identification.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the spectator is asked to understand complex affective causalities and their place in history. In this case, complex explanations for individuals' behaviour do not correlate at all with political sympathies.

Figure 7:

*Figure 7:*

*Sweet Country's ground-level aesthetics, featuring a temporally and aurally displaced cut to a traumatic event at 1:04.*

SWEET COUNTRY | Clip "Sam and Fred" - in cinemas March 9



<https://youtu.be/2BhR11ZN5dM> (<https://youtu.be/2BhR11ZN5dM>)

These are examples of the film's use of foundational empathy: not without affective appeal, but a metacognitive empathy must be latterly pieced together along with felt emotions to understand the film as causal communication. Close-ups focus not only on faces but on parts of the body that, also silently, communicate emotional states in a more direct manner: trembling hands at moments of terror, for instance, as when Sam (Hamilton Morris) grips the plate of what he suspects will be his last meal, or regretfully places his finger on the trigger of a gun he knows will doom him as much as the man it is aimed toward; and, publican Nell's (Anni Finsterer) body language that indicates silent warmth or disdain toward Sergeant Fletcher (Bryan Brown) at various moments during his dogged pursuit of a murder suspect.

In part, emphasising bodily signals fills in emotional detail that contextualises the learned stoicism of Indigenous and female characters who throughout the picture are, without remittance, posed series of loaded questions – questions for which there is no answer that will avoid unearned wrath and violence. Drawing focus to such subtle acts of communication exemplifies Indigenous capacities to 'critically appropriate ways of speaking and bargaining in order to understand and address threats to territorial and cultural autonomy.'<sup>43</sup> These filmic techniques all prompt a kind of affective seeking, looking hard for

emotional indicators within multiple aspects of people's being, across their lives, their ancestor's lives, their living in the moment, and the multiple means by which bodies communicate states in a kind of coded directionality, with conflicting motivations and desires reaching different interlocuters in different ways at different times. They ask us not so much for metacognition, but a meta-affectivity: to think through our own models for feeling through affective causalities on which our personal understandings of violent histories are founded.

Silences and their interruption, then, offer insights about the politics of communication as well as a means for feeling through those politics, understanding them both affectively and cognitively. Filmic emotions comprise both symbolisms that are cognised, and affective rhetoric that is felt; they work together, equal partners in each film's rhetorical force. What filmmakers ask audiences to do with this intersection is key to their politics. Accounts of such processes often get bogged down in questions of character and empathy, but films prompt respondents to construct those experiences into something more than simply the sum of empathic parts. They can challenge with conflicted empathic experiences and secondarily challenge the spectator to think about those experiences symbolically, tracing them against other schemata by which one knows and responds to the world.<sup>44</sup> In turn, films that request such reflective acts may feed back into the way our emotions are coded into conceptions of history, putting at hand an 'emotional reasoning' that can furnish edifices of cause-and-consequence both cognised and felt.<sup>45</sup> In *Samson and Delilah* and *Sweet Country*, this reasoning underscores demands for a more just future.

A final, powerful example of politicised, foundational empathy can be found in *Samson and Delilah*'s account of exploitation in the art industry, during a scene in which café attendees in Alice Springs refuse to engage with Delilah's representation of her traumatic experience, as it disrupts their bounded and packaged experience. Delilah's creative work, produced both with her grandmother (Mitjili Napanangka Gibson) and alone, is not recognised unless it is industrialised and commodified to a point of removal from Indigenous creators, another process of white co-optive authorisation, profiteering from abjection, and erasure of emotional experiences that motivate expressive acts (in this film, painting and music).<sup>46</sup> This refusal to see the reality of Delilah's violent experiences points to deficiencies in empathy – the material displacement of Indigenous creators in the art world allows buyers to empathise with a removed, 'false' version of Indigeneity in Australia.<sup>47</sup> *Samson and Delilah*'s audience, meanwhile, are asked to both feel the impact of and think through the effects of that false empathy. Both comprise the film's political reasoning and particularise its case for Indigenous justice.



(fc.5692-f0008.jpg).

Figure 8:

*Figure 8:*

*Delilah's art in Samson and Delilah (2009).*

## A Politics of Hope

Emotions associated with the horrors of colonial history are contrasted throughout *Sweet Country* with beautifully rendered 'sweet' landscapes. Thornton has described several cinematographic decisions that all come together to convey the land's 'spirit.'<sup>48</sup> These include the use of multiple cameras to capture a full spectrum of colours and post-production work that separates the film grains of people and environments. Juxtapositions of the visual emotions of people and the awe-inspiring country they inhabit is perhaps no more evident than in an image of preacher and flawed Indigenous advocate Fred (Sam Neill) at the end of the film, declaring hopelessness after Sam is murdered, walking with his back to the camera toward a darkened sky with a rainbow in the centre. The land affords silent, visual hope for the future, played against postcolonial despair. These images open a 'politics of hope,' with its complicating emotions arising from the aesthetics of each feature, Thornton's emphasis on subjective experience of land, and comparisons between these emotional responses that ultimately support the filmmaker's appeal to cultural autonomy.



(fc.5692-f0009.jpg)

Figure 9:

*Figure 9:*

*Hope and despair in Sweet Country (2017).*

Thornton explains how his background, growing up in and around Alice Springs, affects not only his knowledge of weather patterns and light capture but compositional framing as well.<sup>49</sup> A POV of his youth, he says, 'would have consisted of shots looking to the ground, eyes searching for goanna tracks out bush or looking for dropped coins in the gutters around town. This was my landscape.'<sup>50</sup> One effect of this inclination to ground-level framing across both features is to mitigate against the affective power imbalances of focalisation and point-of-view. But crucially, Thornton is not only thinking about how to portray his own experience of the land, he is thinking about how it will be received by diverse audiences as emotive, and thus politically charged communication. While surveying the resilience and hope that comes from embedded experience of land, Thornton goes on to demonstrate how that sense of hope is contingent on Indigenous autonomy, writing that in his short film *Payback* (1996):

landscape is almost non-existent. Once again at the end of the film we open up the view to a country, giving a sense of place. But in this instance it is blocked by hungry reporters who are there to witness the young man receive traditional payback from his own people—he is speared in the leg—the idea being that his very freedom is quickly distorted by sensationalist media.<sup>51</sup>

These reflexive representations of violence require foundational cultural competencies to understand the particulars of how coloniser media affects Indigenous tradition.<sup>52</sup> This is true of both acts of violence and reactions to violence portrayed in *Samson and Delilah* and *Sweet Country*, which presuppose an audience with either apposite knowledge or the orientation to learn about cultural precedents, colonial effects on Indigenous traditions, and entanglements of violence and law that take place across unequal cultural relations.<sup>53</sup>

Yet there remains rehabilitative hope in communal acts of care. At the conclusion of *Samson and Delilah*, a series of powerful images communicate as much: Delilah's arm around a Samson who has given up hope, near death from inhalants, or answering the phone after hospitalisation, signalling a self-determined contact with carers presumably informed by recent experiences with the medical community. Samson's brother brings offerings of musical rehabilitation over the radio. This rehabilitation of body and soul coincides with rehabilitation of land, as Delilah works to recover a water supply from the local windmill, using it to bathe Samson, as well as clothing and feeding him in a home she has built, reversing the role he had imagined for himself as male provider.<sup>54</sup> Isaacs notes the aesthetic appeal of the film's final act in contrast to preceding images, Thornton's visual 'opening up' to country.<sup>55</sup> But these images are qualified, played against Delilah's ongoing sorrow. Her torch song is revisited and reconfigured. Where once Delilah listened to the song with relief and joy, now it is imbued with post-traumatic memory, and she cries to herself in a once safe space, the car. For audiences, this is a space of mixed emotion as well. Collins emphasises the negative valence that comes with empathy, love, and care – for if loved, someone's painful histories must also be grieved:

*Samson and Delilah* does more than rehumanize generic images of 'bare lives' reduced to violence and suffering. The film makes these lives human and grievable. The experience of seeing the film with a receptive and responsive audience lingers as a powerful bodily affect long after the initial viewing ... By reframing 'bare lives' as vulnerable and grievable lives, the film provokes an ethical response that has been numbed by the hyperbolic flow of media images, government reports and expert debate.<sup>56</sup>

Again, foundational empathy becomes a resource for subsequent emotions, such as those associated with grieving – in this case, emotions that provide a locus for grieving the devastating effects of racist political interventions.

At stake in the affectively coloured landscapes of Thornton's aesthetic is a sense of meaning of one's own choosing, and not just of one's current identity, but one's ability to shape their future within a collective, changing the world by changing how we move through it together. At the same time, in Thornton's view, the crucial components of any sovereignty that evolves with its people are the narratives those people have at hand to both nourish a sense of social selfhood, and to reason with. This includes histories that fill in those parts of Indigenous past that would otherwise be untold, or that other mediums do not capture the way cinema can: representing the subjective, emotional experiences of being on country, or of changing connections to people and land. It is a kind of history that belongs to modes of storytelling like oral traditions and affective filmmaking, which for Thornton cannot be separated as mutual parts of the same storytelling, meaning-making processes.

## From Personal Affect to Political Response

Emotions, then, are communicating on several levels: they communicate symbolically about problems faced by characters and about relationships to country; they not only fill out narrative histories with emotional detail, but ask audiences to imaginatively feel through how those histories may have been lived; they request a foundational empathy for those who have suffered and make connections to those who continue to suffer as a result of this history, asking audiences to feel emotionally connected to and thus have an implicatory stake in ongoing wellbeing. Thornton's cinema averts what Suzanne Keen calls 'false empathy,' an act of appropriative misunderstanding, by insisting that spectators consider distances between those emotional experiences drawn on lines of inherited power.<sup>57</sup>

Each of these aspects of emotional communication will affect different audiences in unique ways. Thornton's cinema is aimed at both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. It represents emotional experiences of land, demonstrates impacts of severing connections to land, and appeals to changes that confer autonomy to peoples whose longstanding history of care for land and each other can be mobilised in new ways. It thus combines Keen's 'bounded' and 'ambassadorial' empathies (aimed at ingroup and outgroup respectively) into a 'strategic broadcast' empathy (addressing each), providing inroads for various acts of empathy by various groups, together marshalled toward an activist agenda.<sup>58</sup> For instance, having these histories told presumably matters differently to Indigenous audiences seeking a sense of connectedness to ancestry than to settlers seeking to understand those relationships; and while audiences are provided the same film, and thus the same resources for empathy with each character, the symbolic nature of the emotions allows us to think about characteristics we may or may not share, affecting alignments if not allegiances (to again borrow Smith's terms). But I am most concerned, in this essay, with the deliberative, rhetorical effect of all these emotions: what are spectators asked to then do with them? At the disquieting, comparative intersection of these emotional experiences lies a political argument, its reasoning charged by a diversity of appeals to pathos that call to be reconciled.

Fictional film is rarely so prescriptive as to tell us, directly, how we ought to behave – but it can be politically forceful, as in the case of Thornton's work. Its political impetus comes in part from how it asks audiences to make sense of an intersection of these emotional experiences, inspiring particular modes of emotion-led thought. To make sense of the film as communication, one has to navigate those experiences and piece them together into personal meaning. Thornton's films ask us to interrogate moments of affective empathy, to read them symbolically as acts of communication about Indigenous history, and then marshal affectively loaded notions of history – and especially thoughts about the felt consequences of colonial violence – into an agenda for current Australian politics. Of course, spectators not inclined toward these emotions and their politics could evidently dismiss the films' more polemical aspects as not for them, reaffirming a simpler sense of history that does not implicate white audiences; but it is difficult



to do this if one has engaged the emotions during spectatorship in any way. Bringing these aspects of emotional communication together simply makes it more difficult to deny the centrality of Indigenous sovereignty.

Film may be a small part of that which convinces us of a political agenda, and it may only convince one step, one story at a time – but the cumulation of those emotive experiences adds to a richer background of recollections, rehearsed schemata, and motivating emotional causalities one can draw upon to reaffirm a purpose to any political commitment. Recalling emotions recalls reasons to care. Political cinema such as Thornton's, with its emotional framings of history and of imagining better futures, is but one means for furnishing the reasoning behind action on Indigenous issues, today.

## Acknowledgements

My gratitude to Mariko Smith, peer reviewers, and participants in a NECS panel on 'Care for Country' for their invaluable advice.

## Author Biography

Wyatt Moss-Wellington is Senior Lecturer in Digital Storytelling at the University of New England. He is the author of *Cognitive Film and Media Ethics* (Oxford UP, 2021), *Narrative Humanism: Kindness and Complexity in Fiction and Film* (Edinburgh UP, 2019) and co-editor of *ReFocus: The Films of Spike Jonze* (Edinburgh UP, 2019). Moss-Wellington is also a progressive folk multi-instrumentalist and singer-songwriter with four studio albums: *The Kinder We* (2017), *Sanitary Apocalypse* (2014), *Gen Y Irony Stole My Heart* (2011) and *The Supermarket and the Turncoat* (2009).

## Notes

1. Amanda Duthie, *Kin: An Extraordinary Australian Filmmaking Family* (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2018), 9. ↴
2. Thornton's third narrative feature, *The New Boy*, also releases this year, making it a good time to revisit his earlier contributions. ↴
3. This article refers to three significant events in Australian postcolonial history: the Native Title era, which commences after the recognition of Aboriginal precolonial land rights in the 1992 Mabo vs Queensland High Court Decision and the Paul Keating government's 1993 Native Title Act; the John Howard government's Northern Territory Intervention of 2007, which restricted the rights and welfare of Indigenous peoples on the basis of false claims of child neglect; and Kevin Rudd's 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations, acknowledging Australia's forced removal of Indigenous children from their parents until the 1970s. Thornton's films are conversant with the ongoing, felt effects of these historical events. ↴
4. Annemarie McLaren, "A Many-Sided Frontier: History and 'Shades of Grey' in *Sweet Country*," *Australian Historical Studies* 50, no. 2 (2019): 253. ↴
5. Similar cases have been made for the affective specifics of trauma cinema. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001). ↴

6. McLaren, "Many-Sided," 237. ↴
7. Ibid., 253. ↴
8. Warwick Thornton, "An Interview with Australia's Filmic Conscience," interview by Patrick Marlborough, *VICE*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/a347k5/an-interview-with-australias-filmic-conscience-warwick-thornton> (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/a347k5/an-interview-with-australias-filmic-conscience-warwick-thornton>). ↴
9. Warwick Thornton, "In Conversation with Daniel Browning," *Awaye!*, ABC Radio National, 18 April 2009. ↴
10. Land rights cases as an expression of Australian utopian 'multicultural imaginary,' intended to erase implication in crimes past, are addressed in Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 575-610. ↴
11. Intra-group conflicts arising from these processes, the positive aspects of control over land management, and the discovery of new avenues for researching Indigenous connections are all documented in anthropological work such as Eve Vincent, "'Sticking up for the land': Aboriginality, mining and the lived effects of native title," *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 1 (2013): 155-174. ↴
12. Benjamin R. Smith and Frances Morphy express these as harmful 'mistranslations' between Australian common law and Indigenous law, while Irene Watson's work makes Aboriginal law or 'raw law' central to postcolonial legal discussions that have remained reliant on western modes of arbitration. Irene Watson, *Aboriginal peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Benjamin R. Smith and Frances Morphy, *The Social Effects of Native Title* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2007), 2. ↴
13. Earlier, Roy Wagner termed these 'dogmas of descent.' Roy Wagner, "Are there social groups in the Papua New Guinea highlands?" in *Frontiers of Anthropology*, ed. Murray J. Leaf (New York: Van Nostrand Co, 1974), 118. ↴
14. Yuriko Yamanouchi, "Managing 'Aboriginal selves' in South-Western Sydney," *Oceania* 82, no. 1 (2012): 62-73; Myrna Tonkinson, "Being Mardu: Change and challenge for some Western Desert young people today," in *Growing up in Central Australia*, ed. Ute Eickelkamp (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011), 213-238. ↴
15. Francesca Merlan, *Caging the Rainbow* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 241. ↴
16. Sonja Kurtzer, "Wandering Girl: who defines 'authenticity' in Aboriginal literature?" in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Ian Anderson (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2003), 168. ↴
17. Ian Anderson, "Black Bit, White Bit," in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, ed. Ian Anderson (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2003), 53-54. ↴
18. Ibid., 47-54. ↴
19. Jeff Corntassel, "Towards Sustainable Self-Determination: Rethinking the Contemporary Indigenous-Rights Discourse," *Alternatives* 33 (2008): 105-132; Julie Mullaney, "Storying Sovereignty and

- 'Sustainable Self-Determination': Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah*," in *Performing Identities: Celebrating Indigeneity in the Arts*, eds. G.N. Devy, Geoffrey V. Davis, and K.K. Chakravarty (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015), 126-140. [↑](#)
20. Therese Davis, "Love and Social Marginality in *Samson and Delilah*," *Senses of Cinema* 51 (July 2009), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/feature-articles/samson-and-delilah> (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/feature-articles/samson-and-delilah>). [↑](#)
21. Jennifer Amriott, "Investigating the Convention on Biological Diversity's Protections for Traditional Knowledge," *Journal of Environmental and Sustainability Law* 11, no. 1 (2003): 8, 36. See also Eva Marie Garrouette, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 71. [↑](#)
22. Thornton, "An Interview." [↑](#)
23. Alberto Gomes, "Anthropology and the politics of indigeneity," *Anthropological Forum* 23, no. 1 (2013): 14. [↑](#)
24. Barry Barclay, "Celebrating Fourth Cinema," *Illusions* 35 (2003), 7-11. [↑](#)
25. As an expression of 'embodied sovereignty' Fourth Cinema is therefore, to use Aileen Moreton-Robinson's words, 'ontological [expressing ways of being] and epistemological [expressing ways of knowing], and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land.' Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ed., *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 75. [↑](#)
26. Wyatt Moss-Wellington, *Cognitive Film and Media Ethics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2021), 16. [↑](#)
27. The presumption of 'automatic' racial empathy as an inherent virtue is what Lisa Nakamura considers a toxic 'feeling good about feeling bad,' or mistranslation of others' imagined traumas into self-exonerating positive affect. Lisa Nakamura, "Feeling good about feeling bad: Virtuous virtual reality and the automation of racial empathy," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020), 47-64. [↑](#)
28. For a discussion of trauma theory and Indigenous media in Australia, see Felicity Collins, "After the Apology: Reframing Violence and Suffering in *First Australians*, *Australia*, and *Samson and Delilah*," *Continuum* 24, no. 1 (2010): 66-67. [↑](#)
29. These problems are outlined in Jane Stadler, "Empathy in Film," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. Heidi Maiborn (London: Routledge, 2017), 317-326. [↑](#)
30. Davis, "Love." [↑](#)
31. Collins, "After," 67. [↑](#)
32. McLaren, "Many-Sided," 242. [↑](#)
33. Mullaney, "Storying," 133. [↑](#)
34. Tess Fisher, review of *Samson and Delilah*, directed by Warwick Thornton, *Senses of Cinema* 70 (March 2014), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2014/key-moments-in-australian-cinema-issue-70-march-2014/samson-and-delilah-warwick-thornton-2009> (<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2014/key-moments-in-australian-cinema-issue-70-march-2014/samson-and-delilah-warwick-thornton-2009>). [↑](#)

35. Therese Davis, "Australian indigenous screen in the 2000s: crossing into the mainstream" in *Australian Screen in the 2000s*, ed. Mark David Ryan (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 231–259; Mark Byron, review of *Samson and Delilah*, directed by Warwick Thornton, *English Studies in Africa* 61, no. 1 (2018): 42. [↑](#)
36. Bruce Isaacs, "Screening 'Australia': 'Samson and Delilah'," *Screen Education* 54 (2009): 17. [↑](#)
37. Fisher, rev. of *Samson*. [↑](#)
38. Jim Schembri, "Samson makes tilt at Oscar," *The Age*, October 21, 2009, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/samson-makes-tilt-at-oscar-20091021-ge85ik.html> (<https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/movies/samson-makes-tilt-at-oscar-20091021-ge85ik.html>). [↑](#)
39. Fisher, rev. of *Samson*. [↑](#)
40. Tracey Bunda, "The sovereign Aboriginal woman," in *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 75. [↑](#)
41. Tania Glyde, "Sadness and silencing," *The Lancet* 391, March 17, 2018, 1015. [↑](#)
42. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995). [↑](#)
43. Laurel Smith, "The Search for Well-being: Placing Development with Indigenous Identity," in *Global Indigenous Media*, eds. Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2008), 185. [↑](#)
44. C.f. Carl Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (New York: Oxford UP, 2018), 56. [↑](#)
45. Thornton positions his own work within a lineage of emotionally powerful, silent histories on film through engagement with *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906), a mostly lost piece of cinema history that has nonetheless significantly influenced Australian mythmaking. [↑](#)
46. Exploitations from 'fake art' to business practices that bully Indigenous creators into disadvantageous licensing arrangements are known problems in Australia. Australian Government Productivity Commission, "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and Crafts," 19 July, 2022, <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/indigenous-arts/draft> (<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/indigenous-arts/draft>). [↑](#)
47. C.f. Suzanne Keen's 'false empathy' in *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 159. [↑](#)
48. Jackie Keast, "Reinventing the Western: Warwick Thornton's *Sweet Country*," *Inside Film*, 23 January, 2018, <https://if.com.au/reinventing-the-western-warwick-thorntons-sweet-country> (<https://if.com.au/reinventing-the-western-warwick-thorntons-sweet-country>). [↑](#)
49. Luke Buckmaster, "Warwick Thornton on Sweet Country: 'Australia is ready for films like this'," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/24/warwick-thornton-on-sweet-country-australia-is-ready-for-films-like-this> (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/24/warwick-thornton-on-sweet-country-australia-is-ready-for-films-like-this>). [↑](#)
50. Warwick Thornton, "Sense of place," *Art and Australia* 50, no. 1 (2012): 83. [↑](#)

51. Thornton, "Sense," 87. [↕](#)
52. Byron, review of *Samson and Delilah*, 44. [↕](#)
53. For some viewers the film's assumption of prerequisite knowledge or 'cultural competency' on behalf of its audience invalidates *Samson and Delilah* as effective communication, where for others its ability to speak to different communities is its strength (importantly, Thornton made *Samson and Delilah* foremost to speak to his own community, premiering the feature in Alice Springs). Oliver Haag, 'Racializing the social problem: Reception of *Samson and Delilah* in Germany', *Continuum*, vol. 28, no. 5 (2014), pp. 666-677. [↕](#)
54. *Ibid.* [↕](#)
55. Isaacs, "Screening," 17. [↕](#)
56. Collins, "After," 74. [↕](#)
57. Keen, *Empathy*, 159. [↕](#)
58. *Ibid.* [↕](#)

(<https://www.altmetric.com/details.php?domain=journals.publishing.umich.edu&doi=10.3998%2Ffc.5692>)

---

## DOWNLOAD

[Download XML](#)  
(</fc/article/5692/galley/3419/download/>)

---

## ISSUE

[Volume 48 · Issue 1 · 2024](#)  
(</fc/issue/248/info/>)

---

## IDENTIFIERS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692>  
(<https://doi.org/10.3998/fc.5692>)

---

## JUMP TO

[Self-Determination and Cultural  
Autonomy](#)

[Filmic Emotions and Fourth Cinema](#)

[The Affective and Symbolic Rhetoric of  
Silences](#)

[A Politics of Hope](#)

[From Personal Affect to Political  
Response](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Author Biography](#)

[Notes](#)

---

## FILE CHECKSUMS (MD5)

XML: f33851a5e6ef9e3f2025611ba728beba

---

[\\_\(<https://journals.publishing.umich.edu>\)](https://journals.publishing.umich.edu)

| ISSN: 2471-4364 | Published by [Michigan Publishing](https://publishing.umich.edu/) |

**[PRIVACY POLICY \(/FC/SITE/PRIVACY/\)](#)**

**[CONTACT \(/FC/CONTACT/\)](#)**

**[LOGIN \(/FC/LOGIN/\)](#)**