Australian Identity In The Rabbit Proof Fence and Samson and Delilah

Early representations of indigenous people was often stereotyped and marginalised by society. This is because these films were typically created from a European viewpoint, hence being condescending to the ‘primitive and inferior’ to Aboriginals. The portrayal of Aboriginals by popular films causes a lot of misunderstandings about Aboriginals, their culture and their identity.

Australian identity is a concept that includes dominant philosophies, mythology, and stereotypes. This identity can be thrown open to interrogation and inspection through a study of the films The Rabbit Proof Fence and Samson and Delilah.

Filmic narratives serve the interests of one dominant group in Australian society and inevitably include some and exclude others. This is mainly because film is a cultural production viewed within the constraints, imagination, and signification of the society in which it operates. The representations made within these films are also bound within these constraints, imagination, and significations. It is unfortunate that Aboriginal people, as part of this dynamism have not been given the chance to display such manifest changes within their own identity representations.

There are many examples of films in society that marginalise indigenous people. However, one of the most well-known Australian films ‘Rabbit Proof Fence’ displays this perfectly. During this film three mixed-race girls are brutally torn from their Aboriginal mothers. The girls are then sent far away to a training camp for domestic workers as part of a government policy to integrate them into white society. Towards the end the girls use the Rabbit Proof fence which links the camp and their distant home in Jigalong to find their way home.

Similarly, the Australian film ‘Samson and Delilah’ by Warwick Thornton, 2009, marginalises indigenous people significantly. Samson and Delilah is about two aboriginal teenagers who are outsiders in a marginalised community.

It allows and continues to allow Aboriginal people to be structurally marginalized from Australian histories and presents the strongest argument for Aboriginal exclusion from Australian narratives, including filmic narratives. Aboriginal exclusion extends a colonial ‘gaze’ on Aboriginal issues and ultimately Aboriginal representation in cultural productions, such as film, where Aboriginal people are shown as nothing else but victims, alcoholics, fringe, and slum dwellers. Aboriginal people were cast as something ‘Other’ and the only way in which non-Aboriginal Australians would accept Aboriginal people as having a place in the nation was to share in their (white) interests, beliefs and lifestyle.

The use and manipulation of cinematography throughout ‘Samson and Delilah’ is of massive importance as it presents exclusion of Aboriginals. A particular scene that portrays this is the telephone scene. Diegetic sound of the phone ringing three times is jarring in the ambient soundscape and is strategically contrasted with the outback bush sounds.

Thornton has chosen to juxtapose the shiny, silver phone with the country landscape; red dust, decrepit homes and dying trees to make the phone stick out like a sore thumb.

Medium-long shots of the characters acknowledging but ignoring the phone provides the impression that the phone is unsuited to its surroundings and is reinforced by the way it is regarded by the indigenous. A close up of Samson's face expressing a wary look as the phone is ringing also supports this.

In this scene, the telephone is a symbol that represents the isolation of the town and indigenous. This can be concluded due to the way the phone interferes with the indigenous community and also by the way the locals react to it. It is hinted that the phone has not been put there for the desire of the community populations but as part of the government initiative. This depicts white Australians as ruthless and impassive.

Likewise, cinematography has been used in 'Rabbit Proof Fence' to also represent the exclusion of Aboriginals. Frontal close ups and tilted angles of A.O Neville have been used to frame and highlight his power and authority. In addition to this, it shows that Neville is very isolated from the suffering of the indigenous and is only concerned with government policy.

In the kidnap scene, a tracking shot is used to follow the girls flight from policeman Riggs. This technique causes the audience to feel empathy. Moreover, eye level camera shots are juxtaposed with the tracking shot to show the girls point of view. The eye level shots are quite shaky to emphasize the fear the girls are experiencing. Low angle shots up at Riggs are used to portray intimidation and power. This represents that Riggs has control over the indigenous and has the ability to rip apart the fabric of their life. Sound in this scene underlines trepidation. When the girls are being captured the music becomes panicky and alludes to how the white society are destroying a peaceful community.

In this national imaginary, Aboriginal people were eternally and spiritually foreclosed from the chalk circle of modernity, of white settler society and culture. While it is true that overt racist representations of a homogenised, assimilated, and dying Aboriginal culture no longer exist, there still operates within filmic texts, the stereotyping of Aboriginal identity. For Australian audiences, Australian film texts have provided and continue to provide vicarious experiences of an imaginary and lived reality of the life of the 'Other'. From such a vicarious experience, attitudes and values about the Indigenous 'Other' are extracted.

The use of aesthetic features and stylistic devices in 'Rabbit Proof Fence' helps portray the marginalisation of Aboriginals in film. By juxtaposing images of white men and indigenous women creates a divide in 'Australian people'. This then presents the weak and the strong and the distinct black and the white. These stereotypes intensify the gap between the natives and their opponents and provides marginalisation of Aborigines. The stereotypes portrayed in the film create a familiar theme which is cruelty of masculinity and innocence of femineity. This has been used in the film to increase the effect white society had on Indigenous people and highlights the idea of aboriginals being marginalised in film.

In addition, 'Samson and Delilah' also uses cinematic features to portray how Indigenous stereotyping causes marginalisation of Aboriginals. These stereotypes create misconceptions about indigenous people and cause them to become marginalised.

Thornton uses props throughout the film with the most prominent one being the petrol can which is associated with Samson. In the first scene when Samson is sniffing the petrol Thornton has used an eyelevel, close up shot placing him in the centre of the screen. This highlights the addiction that Samson has for the petrol. Samson becomes so heavily addicted to petrol sniffing due to being pushed away from his community and becoming depressed. Therefore, this shows the social marginality that aboriginals experience.

Lighting is effectively used in the film such as when Samson is sniffing the petrol. The dark lighting is combined with Samson sniffing the petrol which creates a sad and depressing mood. Samson becomes addicted to petrol which is a very stereotypical characteristics of Indigenous people.

“The Aboriginal has simply been bred out” – A.O Neville

Racism in films has caused a lot of misunderstandings about Aboriginals, their culture and their identity.

An example in the film ‘Rabbit Proof Fence’ where racism has marginalised Aboriginals is the scene where Neville checks the colour of their skin to see if they are worthy enough to attend school and live in white society. When Molly is called low camera, angles are aimed at Neville to show Molly’s point of view where he appears to tower menacingly over her. From the viewpoint of Molly, Neville is very threatening. This causes Molly to be marginalised and Neville to be represented as cruel and oppressive

The use of cinematography throughout ‘Samson and Delilah’ is of massive importance as it presents racism towards Aboriginals and portrays many misunderstandings about Aboriginal culture and identity. Thornton has used props, acting style and setting to demonstrate the exclusion and marginalisation of Aboriginals. This can be understood in the scene where Delilah enters the gallery holding out her painting which replicates her Nana’s painting and they refuse to take it. Viewers can not miss this point as Thornton has purposely arranged the shot so that Delilah’s smaller painting is held against the background of the larger one. The use of subjective camera angles allows the viewer to see through Delilah’s eyes as she notices her nanas painting and the price tag of $22000. In this scene Delilah’s acting style is embarrassing and she’s too scared to make eye contact with gallery employees. This demonstrates how Aboriginals are marginalised and how the white community have forced this behaviour on the aboriginal community. In this scene Thornton uses juxtaposition to show the difference between the two societies as Delilah is dressed in dirty ragged clothes while white society are clean and in an upper-class dress. This then also represents the idea of Aboriginals being cast as ‘other’ and their culture is viewed as being primitive in comparison to white society. The use of props, camera angles, costuming and acting style in this film represents how Aboriginal people are marginalised.

Both film use a variety of cinematic techniques to portray the misunderstandings about Aboriginals, their culture and their identity which causes them to become marginalised. In both these movies, the audience is positioned through the language and images and by the way the producer characterises and contextualises the issues presented. These movies deal with cultural racism, exclusion and stereotyping due to government policy and assimilation that occurred in Australia. These films demonstrate how far we still need to go to rebuild and improve the lives of aboriginal people.