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David Gulpilil, Aboriginal humour and Australian cinema

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David Gulpilil is an iconic presence in Australian cinema from Roeg’s *Walkabout* in the 1970s through Luhrmann’s *Australia* (2008), and more recently, Catriona McKenzie’s *Satellite Boy* (2011) and Rolf de Heer’s *Charlie’s Country* (2013). Much is made of him as a ubiquitous signifier of Australian cinema and his talent as an actor, but little attention has been paid to his own important project to engage in intercultural and intracultural dialogues with Australian film-makers. This is a central consideration in understanding both his oeuvre, and his contribution to Australian national cinema over more than 30 years. This article examines how Gulpilil has engaged in a dialogue with Australian auteurs that has communicated Aboriginal identity, culture and tradition. It argues that his communication of Aboriginal knowledge and cultural belief systems (discussed as an ‘Indigenous dialogics’) is his major contribution to Australian national cinema and culture. This article also examines the way in which Aboriginal humour underpins many of these exchanges.

Ahh, you gotta see this story of mine cause it’ll make you laugh, even if you’re not a blackfella. Might cry a bit too eh? But then you laugh some more… coz this is a big true story of my people. True thing… (Gulpilil 2006)

That story of David Gulpilil’s made me laugh. I was surprised it was so funny, and so light of touch. *Ten Canoes* (2006) is a collaboration between directors Rolf de Heer, Peter Djigirr and David Gulpilil (with his mob). It begins by centring place through a spectacular aerial vista of the Arafura Wetlands of Central Arnhem Land and an accompanying soundscape of the natural environment. After teeming rain we glide, birdlike, along the river and Gulpilil’s voice narrates this story: ‘Once upon a time in a land far, far away…’, he stops, gleefully shortles and switches: ‘No, not like that. I’m only joking.’ His laughter reaches out, connecting the audience through this cliché of Western storytelling. He signals that we all have stories, but that his will have another form: ‘It’s not your story… it’s my story … a story like you’ve never seen before.’

The idea that ‘it’ll make you laugh, even if you’re not a blackfella’ signals humour as culturally specific, but also as building a bridge. This is perhaps why, over more than 30 years working in Australian cinema, humour has framed much of Gulpilil’s oeuvre. It has been an important vehicle for Gulpilil to tell this ‘story’ through Australian cinema, and has been a feature of his dealings with others. As film-maker Darlene Johnson has noted: ‘What I love about David is his sense of humour’ (Rutherford 2004, 58). Gulpilil has shared something significant about

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The genre of Indigenous comedy predominantly lives within the Indigenous community itself, unknown to mainstream Australia and is still to break through there’ (McCue 2012, n.p.). Alluding both to a distinct type of humour, and its invisibility, actor Ernie Dingo has said: ‘Aboriginal humour is basically an untapped source’ (Devlyn 1989, 58).

David Gulpilil
Australian actor David Gulpilil’s first screen role was in his teens, in Nicholas Roeg’s Walkabout (1971), a film in which he played the lead (the ‘black boy’). It was the first time that an Aboriginal had had a principal role on the screen since Robert Tadawali’s majestic performance as Marbuck in Charles Chauvel’s Jedda (1955). Walkabout has been credited as one of the key films setting the tone for the Australian revival in the 1970s (O’Regan 1996, 57). Both of these films hold a significant place in Australian cinema history for placing the Aboriginal male into the cinematic canon; indeed, there were few films to do so prior to the 2000s.1 Across more than three decades Gulpilil has acted in Australia’s most successful films, including Storm Boy (Safran 1976), Crocodile Dundee (Faiman 1986), Rabbit-Proof Fence (Noyce 2002) and Australia (Luhrmann 2008). He was the storyteller and initiated the film Ten Canoes, a tale of pre-contact and mythic dreaming time. This was the first film created entirely in Australian Aboriginal languages and is listed on Screen Australia’s top 100 all-time highest box office as number 67. He has achieved local and international attention through many awards, including an AFI Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for The Tracker (de Heer 2002). He has worked with Australian and international directors, including directors such as Baz Luhrmann and Phillip Noyce, and Aboriginal directors such as Warwick Thornton.

This article argues that as well as being an important artist in his own right, Gulpilil’s most significant contribution to Australian culture, and his major project across more than three decades, is to engage in what Aboriginal scholar and activist Marcia Langton (2003, 46) has called ‘intercultural dialogues’. This has been undertaken in relation to representing the mutual history and interrelatedness of Aboriginal and white Australians, in recognising silences of the past, and in attempting to change consciousness in expressing Aboriginal perspectives in order to transform white Australia’s views of Aboriginality and emphasise a shared humanity. His contribution is a personal one that is about his land or country, his people, culture and language. He has said ‘I am Mandhalpuyngu’ (Johnson 2002), referring to his tribal language group, and through films such as Ten Canoes, it becomes apparent what this means; throughout his oeuvre, humour has been a vehicle to achieve ‘intercultural communication’. In the documentary about the making of Ten Canoes, The Balanda and the Bark Canoes (2006), it is apparent that the agenda at the heart of the film is to record history and the ancestors’ stories, and gain respect for them, in telling the story of the area. In the documentary, one of the cast says of the film: ‘We decided to make this film for our future. Because we lost our culture and traditions. This balanda [white person] brought these [historical] photos. …This is our memory for our people.’
Aboriginal humour

In an interview for an essay on Aboriginal humour, Aboriginal scholar Lillian Holt quotes one of her interviewees who said that true humour is always about humanism and that this is an ‘Aboriginal philosophy’ – teasing to ‘bring people in’ – which is what Gulpilil did in the playful opening of Ten Canoes (Holt 2009, 89). Critics have observed the humanism of the film, David Stratton remarking on how Gulpilil told the story to ‘the Western audience in a very friendly, humorous way’ (Stratton 2006, n.p.) and Andrew L. Urban claiming ‘[t]he humour is… recognizably universal. The humanity of the characters is so immediate and recognizable’ (Urban 2006, n.p.). As Gulpilil has repeatedly emphasised: ‘[W]e are all one red blood’ (Herald Sun, July 25, 2012).

Holt further adds that Aboriginal humour is a self-deprecating sort of humour that oppressed people use as a mechanism for easing persecution, for making fun of adversity and for satirising pompous oppressors (Holt 2009, 87). This comedy was well captured by Phillip Noyce in his 1977 film Backroads. Noyce is not Aboriginal, but is a director who has engaged directly with stories about Indigenous issues and characters across his oeuvre. In this film, he demonstrates an understanding of Aboriginal humour. The white character Jack, played by Bill Hunter, pulls his car over to the side of the road and calls out to an Aboriginal person (Trickydicky Sullivan):

Jack: Hey Jackie, can I take this road to the pub?
Sullivan: You might as well, you’ve taken everything else.

Responding with humour assists Aboriginal people, as it does all people, to endure the serious issues that they face. Aboriginal film-makers, whose work forms the most vibrant site of contemporary Australian cinema, have embraced comedy. They have communicated the centrality of comedy as Australians, and as Indigenous Australians. Holt’s (2009, 83) view is that Aboriginal humour is characterised by ‘spontaneous spoofing’, which is akin to Bakhtin’s (or Rabelais’) concept of carnival (in particular, comic verbal configurations). An example of this can be seen in The Sapphires, a recent motion picture by Aboriginal director Wayne Blair (2012). In Blair’s film, the two Aboriginal sisters, who are standing on a dusty road of a country town, try to flag down a taxi. When it does not stop for them, Cynthia (Miranda Tapsell) and Gail (Deborah Mailman) have this exchange:

Cynthia: What’s his problem? [Why didn’t he stop?]
Gail: It’s cos we’re black stupid.
Cynthia: No, it’s cos you’re ugly.
[Both share a laugh]

Among contemporary Australian Aboriginal film-makers who have embraced comedy are Rachel Perkins, whose 2009 Bran Nue Day satirises Aboriginal stereotypes, combining ‘an overt critique of the deplorable legacy of colonisation with a relentlessly upbeat, visually and musically engaging story’ (Capp 2012, n.p.), and Richard Frankland, whose 2009 Stone Bros indigenises the ‘stoner comedy’ genre with a story of two Aboriginal men on a road trip with a car full of cannabis. Frankland has been quoted as saying ‘laughter is often the best medicine and the best way to build a
bridge between two cultures’ (Siemienowicz 2009, n.p.). This is an important undertaking given that, within Australian representational history, Aboriginal people have generally not been depicted as having a sense of humour and therefore in embracing it in contemporary films, Aboriginal film-makers are not just capturing something culturally important, or subverting stereotypes, but are countering a white history of representation. As academic Alan McKee has noted, by the exclusion of humour, and the attendant insistence on an ineffable dignity, Indigenous Australians have been constructed as ‘quite un-human’ (McKee 1996, 39). The move to comedy not only allows ‘a rewriting of previous images’, but as jokers they claim linguistic mastery, ‘a mastery over discourse which has previously been largely absent’ in representation (McKee 1996, 55).

**Australian humour**

There are some commonalities in the comic approach that Holt attributes to an Aboriginal sensibility with Australian humour more broadly. Making fun of adversity and satirising the pomposity of oppressors is a feature of the Australian psyche resonating from our colonial heritage, as is the tendency to anti-authoritarianism and to self-mockery. Author Nigel Parbury has observed that much of what we regard as typical Australian humour is derived from Aboriginal humour, but ‘the nation doesn’t acknowledge the Aboriginal element in our make-up’ (Anon 2013, n.p.). This is indicated by the example already given of Noyce’s *Backroads* and can be seen in other films by white Australians, such as Don Featherstone’s 1987 *Babaktiueria*, in which roles are reversed and an Aboriginal man who is asked what he thinks of white people replies: ‘I don’t know, I’ve never met one.’ Another example is a scene in *Crocodile Dundee* where Neville Bell (David Gulpilil) comes across Sue (Linda Kozlowski) and Mick (Paul Hogan) at their campsite one night in the bush and Sue goes to take Neville’s photograph:

Nev: Oh no, you can’t take my photograph.
Sue (apologetically): I’m sorry, you believe it will take your spirit, away?
Neville: No, you have a lens cap on.

And they are all united by the joke, which immediately erases Sue’s fear of the Aboriginal that had suddenly emerged from the bush. There is no documentation to support a conclusion that Gulpilil had any role in constructing the comedy here – although he could have, given the way that he has worked with white film-makers throughout his career (as described further on).2 McKee (1996, 51–52) has argued that the *Crocodile Dundee* films challenge Aboriginal stereotypes through the use of Aboriginal voices to undercut supposedly recognisable Aboriginal behaviour, and that the stereotypes reference earlier non-comic representations of Aboriginality, such as the savage or criminal. For example, *Crocodile Dundee II* (Cornell 1988) plays with the stereotype of the savage. Ernie Dingo ties up the frightened villains, striking them with terror when he suggests that the next action might be to eat them. Out of their sight he turns to the heroine and winks (McKee 1996, 51).
Humour, rethinking history and ‘intercultural’ dialogues

In John Hillcoat’s 2005 film *The Proposition*, David Gulpilil plays Jacko, an interpreter for the police. In a grim scene depicting the mistreatment of Aboriginals in Australia’s colonial past, five shackled Aboriginal men are brought in for questioning. As Felicity Collins has observed, the scene does not (as might be expected) break into violence and a consequent moral condemnation of it. Instead, the iconic image from Australia’s past (Aboriginals in shackles) is shattered by laughter directed at the white captain, ‘who realizes that the Dogmann joke, shared by the black tracker and the Aboriginal men in neck chains, is on him’ (Collins 2008, 67–68). This representation shows what Langton (2005) has referred to as the ‘complexity’ of black/white relations. Collins (2008, 71) has also noted that in *The Tracker* there is a moment of laughter between the Fanatic (Gary Sweet) and the Tracker (David Gulpilil). For Collins and Meaghan Morris (2004), these moments of intersubjectivity in Australian cinema reshape public memory and enable a rethinking of history; in these instances, the insertion of humour offers a new, more human understanding of relations between first Australians and their colonisers. Collins (2008, 56) lists a number of films that are involved in this project: *One Night the Moon* (Perkins 2001), *Black and White* (Lahiff 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* and *Ten Canoes*. Three of those five films also involve Gulpilil, indicating that he has played a role in this re-engagement with history. In an interview with critic David Stratton, Rolf de Heer said that Gulpilil showed him an archival photograph of 10 canoeists on a swamp (taken by anthropologist Donald Thomson) and that initiated *Ten Canoes*. This is an example of how Gulpilil began in an ‘intercultural dialogue’ with an Australian auteur director, sharing a story of his people and his land.

The relationship that Gulpilil has developed with Rolf de Heer has significantly enabled his intercultural dialogue project. In *The Tracker*, Gulpilil (the Tracker) prays over the dead Veteran. It is a moment where he is humanised for the Follower, and the scene builds a bridge between the characters and functions to emphasizes their shared humanity. Through converting the Follower to understand the skill and value of the Tracker’s ability as a tracker, he teaches him (and the audience) something about Indigeneity. It also communicates the shared history of white and settler Australians. The film features several apologies to the Tracker. When the Follower begins to appreciate the skills of the Tracker and apologises, Gulpilil registers this on screen with one of his trademark subtle but say-all smiles. The concept of the importance of an apology is a significant one for Aboriginal people. In 2008, six years after this film, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered a broad and culturally momentous apology to Aboriginal people for the profound grief and suffering caused by the ‘Stolen Generations’.

Gulpilil’s central project in engaging in an intercultural dialogue was described by Aboriginal actor Justine Saunders when she observed ‘he was not acting, he was *sharing a story*’ (Johnson 2002); which is not to diminish his significant talent as an actor, but rather I believe she wanted to highlight Gulpilil’s agenda to achieve this engagement. At the heart of his work, his advocacy is drawn from pride in his culture and heritage. He conveys a phenomenology of his environment and world.
view. This is evident in the way that directors have described how he has communicated Aboriginal identity, culture and tradition. In a documentary about him, *Gulpilil: One Red Blood* (Johnson 2002), Phillip Noyce recalled working with Gulpilil on *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Noyce gave an insight into the subtle way in which Gulpilil communicates, if not enacts and inserts, his story about his people and culture. The story told by *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is that Moodoo tracker (Gulpilil) cannot find the three girls who have run away from the Aboriginal mission, something Noyce says greatly perturbed Gulpilil. Rather than argue about the storyline with the director, Gulpilil communicated with him through his acting: ‘I suddenly realized what David was trying to tell me, if he can’t catch them, then he doesn’t want to catch them’ (Johnson 2002, n.p.). Giving a tiny smile to the camera, Noyce recalled that ‘David was following his own script, what was being communicated to the camera of his internal process was something that even I couldn’t completely decipher until I cut the whole performance together’ (Johnson 2002, n.p.). Noyce has acknowledged that through his performance, Gulpilil taught him how a real tracker would operate; he ‘revealed a knowledge of landscape, of rocks, of every blade of grass’ (Johnson 2002, n.p.).

**Indigenous dialogics**

Gulpilil has initiated what I would describe as ‘Indigenous dialogics’. This is derived from Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of dialogism. The dialogic has a connotation of togetherness, talking, exchanging and arguing – the importance of voice, of presence and of deliberate intersubjectivity is asserted. Gulpilil’s practice, his engagement with Australian auteurs, exemplifies this idea of ‘Indigenous dialogics’ because it has enabled him to amplify the marginalised Aboriginal voice. Gulpilil’s process elicits these repressed vocalities (e.g. those of an Indigenous perspective), making what Langton has described as ‘intercultural dialogues’ possible. For Bakhtin, all languages are ‘heteroglossia’, that is, all languages commonly have extralinguistic qualities such as ideological positioning and perspective grounded in a particular context. Bakhtin (1981, 291) has written that languages constitute ‘specific points of view on the world’ and within discourse, they are unstable and evolving:

> like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects for a world that is broader, more multi-levelled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language, or a single mirror. (Bakhtin 1981, 415)

So while acknowledging that Bakhtinian theory comes from another context, it is possible to use this idea to understand and think about Gulpilil’s project: he uses his performance to share and invite an engagement with ‘varied horizons’. Through his craft, he has told his story and world view of Aboriginal social experience to the directors he has worked with – he engages them through a process of ‘Indigenous dialogics’.

Director Peter Weir has described a dialogic exchange. He said that Gulpilil had made nonsensical remarks, but that was ‘one of the things that drew me to write a part for him. I’d never written a part for a person. It’s dangerous: you might not be
able to get the person (Kass 1979, n.p.). Weir described a dialogic, intercultural exchange that informed his film *The Last Wave* (1977), a film where he cast Gulpilil in one of the leading roles (playing Chris Lee):

...we were chatting in a bar one night after work and he said some things about his family and then suddenly he said some English sentence. It was something like, “You see my father and I and that’s why because the moon isn’t.” And I said, “What’s that mean – your father and I and the moon isn’t?” And he repeated it. I said, “David, I don’t understand.” And he said it again. This was ridiculous – we’d been talking. I said “What are you talking about?” So he rearranged the sentence. It still made no sense. Well, I had to leave it, otherwise we couldn’t continue the conversation. And I thought about it that night and the next morning and suddenly I realized what it was. That he was talking about another perception. He was talking about an experience for which there is no words. He’d seen something in another way. (Kass 1979, n.p.)

Gulpilil has taught Weir ‘deep listening’ (*dadirri*), which is a respectful listening developed through taking time to develop relationships and ‘means listening with a sense of responsibility to the stories being told’ (Thompson 2009, 12). Through this dialogue Gulpilil has informed the work of the auteur – extending and informing it from its conception (through the experience of confusion and exclusion). He enabled Weir to perceive that there were other modes of understanding – other ways of seeing things. Darleen Johnson has said, ‘David talks in circles so that there’s no clean beginning, middle and end’ – a way of storytelling that she describes as both Aboriginal and also a ‘Gulpilil thing’ (Rutherford 2004, 58). Presumably Gulpilil would then have been able to continue what he had contributed in the formation of the screenplay through his performance in the film. This mismatched alternative ‘perception’ plays out in *The Last Wave* in numerous ways, for example, in relation to the law (European versus Aboriginal law), or through the way that dreams are represented in the film (for Aboriginal people, dreams hold a place as reality and the dream is as meaningful as the real experience). Additionally, there is a link to Aboriginal dreamtime, which is non-linear: the past, present and future all happen simultaneously (time and dreams are also Weir’s preoccupations).

There are modes of expression that Gulpilil brings to his performance in *The Last Wave* that simultaneously express his cultural point of view and progress the narrative. In an early scene Gulpilil starts to communicate with the lawyer David Burton; he offers that there are other ways of being in the world and understanding it. He pinches the skin on his arm, indicating that he will have a bodily reaction should he need to communicate with him, and moving the overhead light without taking his intense gaze off Burton, he says that a dream is just ‘a shadow of something real’, expressing the idea that dreams are reality from an Aboriginal perspective. Through this, the film story moves to show that it is necessary to think outside one’s own perceptual schema. As an actor, Gulpilil’s body, his gaze and his uses of pauses or silence provide enormous space for him to communicate an Aboriginal perspective.

This article is interested in the depth of Gulpilil’s acting in specific relation to engaging in intercultural dialogues with Australian film-makers. Reg Cribb has made an observation that illustrates how performance (particularly the deployment of humour, his relationship to other characters and the powerful use of silence) works to enhance Gulpilil’s agenda in this regard:
David’s… best moments have usually come at the expense of a hapless whitefella. His cheeky maniacal laugh at the efforts of the two young schoolchildren to find water in *Walkabout*, Fingerbone Bill’s steely but graceful stride through the reeds of the Coorong with an eager Greg Rowe in tow in *Storm Boy*, and him standing in the rain waiting patiently for the understanding of a scared and dubious Richard Chamberlain in *The Last Wave* – to name but a few. Be afraid for those performers who have to stand next to Gulpilil in a scene. He acts the proverbial pants off them by doing absolutely nothing. The best film actors all have this rare quality. (Cribb 2008, n.p.)

‘Intracultural’ communication

Gulpilil initiated the documentary about his life, *Gulpilil: One Red Blood*. He was interested in ‘something he could pass on to his family, a document with an Aboriginal sensibility’, so he approached Darlene Johnson who has said that he asked her to do it and this was ‘the proper protocol from an Aboriginal perspective’ (Rutherford 2004, 57). The intracultural communication in his work (as opposed to the intercultural communication already described here) has become particularly evident in his recent collaborations, with Indigenous film-makers such as Catriona McKenzie on the feature *Satellite Boy* (2011); Darlene Johnson with her documentary *Gulpilil: One Red Blood* and short film *Crocodile Dreaming* (2007); Mojgan Khadem with *Serenades* (2001); and Warwick Thornton with his short comedy *Mimi* (2002), which uses humour to expose stereotypes and offer serious commentary on Aboriginal issues. Thornton shares a similar agenda to Gulpilil, as can be seen by his summary of the importance of cinema:

…telling these true stories… it’s a longer term idea of changing Australia, and changing… how people see us, and changing ourselves as well… making a film for your mob and making sure that when they watch it they say yeh, there is something wrong with our community or the way this is working… we need as blackfellas to sit down and talk about it and change it, that’s what cinema to me is. (ACMI 2009, n.p.)

This indicates that Gulpilil’s project has been taken up by a younger generation, who are telling Indigenous stories for their mob, and settler Australians, who are also employing comedy but whose work is seriously underpinned by a political agenda. This is true of Gulpilil also, who achieved this as King George in *Australia*, which Langton says ‘subverts the idea of the lurking savage made famous in much of colonial literature’, representing instead ‘the power and fragility of Aboriginal religion and culture’ (Collins 2009, 190).

Conclusion

Through intercultural and intracultural dialogues, Gulpilil has engaged in open, respectful exchanges that communicate Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives. Through his creative practice and his ability to connect with people to develop deep understandings, he has been a significant force in imbuing Australian cinema with Indigenous knowledge, both paving the way for new generations of Aboriginal film-makers and collaborating with them, and in engaging white film-makers with insights that have contributed to their innovation and creative output. Over more than 30 years David Gulpilil has shared a phenomenology of environment and world view
that has communicated Indigenous knowledge and cultural belief systems. Throughout, humour has underpinned these ‘big true’ stories of his people, land and culture.

Notes
2. Gulpilil is, however, on record as expressing some disdain for this role (Byrne n.d.). This was because he played a city blackfella ‘scared of the bush’ and wasn’t a ‘Marwyu’ man.
3. The ‘Stolen Generations’ or ‘Stolen children’ describes the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families by Australian federal and state governments and church missions between approximately 1869 and 1969 or the early 1970s.

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