



David Gulpilil One Red Blood

STUDYGUIDE

JO FLACK



AUSTRALIAN
FILM FINANCE
CORPORATION



DAVID GULPILIL: *ONE RED BLOOD* (2002) IS A DOCUMENTARY BY DARLENE JOHNSON and David Gulpilil that traces the life and work of David Gulpilil, dancer, actor, elder in the Maruwuyu community, family man and, like all Australians, 'one red blood.' David Gulpilil approached Darlene Johnson to document his life, stressing that there be 'no bullshit, and to show people my life and how I really live it'. The film is the result of this collaboration.

Gulpilil is internationally recognized for his work in Australian films and television in a career that spans 30 years; he is widely regarded as a representative of and spokesperson for

Indigenous Australians. Through this documentary Gulpilil sought the opportunity to communicate an understanding of his life and his approach to the dilemmas of living in two worlds. In addition, the documentary explores the representation of Indigenous Australians in film and television and acknowl-

edges the role Gulpilil has played in the significant changes occurring in this representation over the period of his career.

CURRICULUM LINKS

David Gulpilil: One Red Blood will be relevant to students of Indigenous studies, studies of Society and Environment, Australian History, Cultural studies, English and Media studies. The documentary is suitable for students in the middle to senior secondary school. The activities in this guide are developed for these levels.

Teachers should be aware that this documentary contains material that is controversial. Students may need careful guidance to avoid superficial judgement and to understand the subtleties of Gulpilil's message.

In addition, there is a segment





that, taken out of context, may be interpreted by some students as advocating the use of marijuana.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

Whilst it is possible to gain some understanding of Gulpilil's work through the film and television segments included in the text, the following activities are designed to set a context for studying the documentary.

David Gulpilil's extensive body of work stretches from *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971) to *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002). Students should watch some of these works as a class, in small groups or for homework in order to see Gulpilil at work and to understand the significant changes in the way Indigenous Australians have been represented in film over this period.

Suggested films include:

Walkabout (Nicholas Roeg, 1971)
Storm Boy (Henri Safran, 1977)
Crocodile Dundee (Peter Faiman, 1986)
Rabbit-Proof Fence (Phillip Noyce, 2002)
The Tracker (De Heer, 2002)

Many reviews of these films are avail-

able, it would be a good idea to find copies of these.

Gulpilil is from the Mandipingu tribal group (Yolngu culture) from Ramingining in Arnhem Land.

- Find out where this is, draw a map and locate Gulpilil's birthplace on it.
- Research the Yolngu culture.
- Research the type of country and weather in Arnhem Land.



- Research David Gulpilil's biography.
- Research David Gulpilil's filmography.
- Find out about the missions and how Indigenous Australian children and adults were treated on these missions.

AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Write a list of the themes and issues of the film. You may like to categorize these under the following headings:

- Gulpilil's traditional life
- Gulpilil's life outside his community
- Gulpilil's career in film
- The conflict between a traditional and western lifestyle.
- As a class write down a list of questions that arise as a result of watching the documentary.

GULPILIL'S EARLY LIFE

David Gulpilil is unsure of the exact year of his birth; 'I think I'm 48, 50'. He was born at Maningrida in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In his early years he lived a traditional life.



- What does the term 'country' mean when it is used in the context of Indigenous Australia?

I travelled with my mother and my father and my family. And when I was young it was different. This land was empty. You know, it was beautiful ... and then somebody came and spoiled (it).

- Throughout the film Gulpilil shows us aspects of his life at Ramingining. What remains 'beautiful' about Gulpilil's life at Ramingining? What are the difficulties of this life?
- Who spoiled the traditional life of the Yolgnu people in Arnhem Land? What were the motivations of these people?

- What were the effects on traditional life and culture?

It was at the Maningrida mission where Gulpilil first encountered Balanda (white people) and the English language, Mandalbingu is one of the six languages he spoke as a child.

First time I saw white people I didn't know where they came from. I thought they were ghosts all painted up. I went to mission school as a child after my mother and father died ... I was a lost child.

- What does Gulpilil mean when he describes himself as 'a lost child'? Look at your research into the mission system to help answer this question.

David Gulpilil came to acting through his skill in dance.

- What does the film tell us about Gulpilil as a dancer?
- Research Aboriginal dance and Gulpilil's role in promoting this art form.



SIGNIFICANT FILMS IN GULPILIL'S CAREER

Walkabout is a film in which Gulpilil plays a traditional Aboriginal youth who helps two English schoolchildren find their way back to their civilization, with tragic consequences for him. *David Gulpilil: One Red Blood* devotes some time to a discussion of the significance of *Walkabout* as a film that changed the way the world saw Indigenous Australians. Several different views are put about the representation of Indigenous culture in *Walkabout*.

- What does Gary Foley see as the significance of *Walkabout*?
- Marcia Langton has a different view, what is it?
- Jack Thompson's analysis tells us much about his view of the changing nature of social values in Australia at the time. Research these values, is Thompson right?
- *Walkabout* is a film that is often analysed by film historians and cultural researchers. Many of these analyses are available on the Internet. What do reviewers and commentators have to say about *Walkabout*?

Walkabout was the first film in Gulpilil's career.

I was a bush boy, never speak English... I thought I was going to be a cowboy in a movie like John Wayne.

How did Gulpilil come to appear in *Walkabout*?

- How old was he at the time?
- What difficulties did Gulpilil experience in the making of *Walkabout*?
- What does Gulpilil's comment about John Wayne tell us about the impact of American culture?

The documentary has a lot to say about the effect of *Walkabout* on Gulpilil's life, some of these effects were immediate, some long lasting.

- What changes did Gulpilil experience in his life after making *Walkabout*?



- Which of these changes have affected him to this day?

After the film's release Gulpilil was asked to speak to many journalists, he says: 'I couldn't speak English. I just couldn't transfer my language to their language.'

- Given the contention of *David Gulpilil: One Red Blood* this statement could be interpreted on more than one level. Discuss the importance of this quote both literally and as a metaphor for Gulpilil's beliefs.

Storm Boy has been said to be the film that '... departed from the way Aboriginals had been presented on film.' Set in the Currong in South Australia, Gulpilil plays Fingerbone Bill, a young Aboriginal who befriends a small boy.

- What does the documentary have to say about the significance of *Storm Boy*?
- Compare your viewing of *Walkabout* and *Storm Boy*, what do you see as developments in the rep-

resentation of Indigenous Australians illustrated by these two films.

- Why do you think that Gulpilil became the 'Aboriginal mascot for Australian schoolchildren' as a result of *Storm Boy*?
- What have been the lasting effects of this role on Gulpilil's life?

Crocodile Dundee was another turning point in Gulpilil's career. Enormously popular around the world, the film plays on stereotypes as the source of its narrative and humour. Many characters are stereotyped whether they be Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australians, Americans, male or female. In the documentary and in numerous interviews Gulpilil discusses *Crocodile Dundee* with undisguised rancour. The film made a great deal of money yet Gulpilil was paid a very small fee.

- What is Gulpilil's view of his role in *Crocodile Dundee*?



- Use the Internet to find out how much was Gulpilil paid for his role.
- Find out how much the film grossed at the box office, in video rental and in merchandising?
- There are two stories about why Gulpilil was paid so poorly, re-search these.
- Stereotype is a word often used indiscriminately. Find out the true meaning of stereotype and archetype. Analyse *Crocodile Dundee* and Gulpilil's other films for stereotypes and archetypes.

Rabbit-Proof Fence, in which Gulpilil plays Moodoo, a tracker searching for three Aboriginal girls who have escaped from the mission and are on a long trek home, is a film in which Gulpilil's acting style is a feature. *David Gulpilil: One Red Blood* discusses this style at length.

- What do the contributors to the documentary have to say about Gulpilil's acting?
- What does Justine Saunders mean when she says of Gulpilil's technique that 'He was not acting ... he was

sharing a story.'

- Find a range of effective examples of Gulpilil's acting in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and from his other films. Show these examples to the class and discuss the features of his technique that make these scenes stand out as exemplars.

Gulpilil himself says of his work; 'Acting to me is a piece of cake. That's it. I live on it. Because I can't do nothing else.'

- What does Gulpilil mean?
- What other things does the documentary show Gulpilil doing?

The Tracker is the first film of Gulpilil's career in which he plays the lead. In this film he is once again a tracker, although this tracker has his own agenda. *The Tracker* is set in 1922 but its values are those of 2002, it is not a film about characters but about the system, discrimination, exploitation and racial intolerance. Commercially successful, it reveals a great deal about what Australians, film-makers and the film going public think. David Gulpilil has received rave reviews for his role in the film which has won a number of prestigious awards.

- What does Gulpilil think about his role in *The Tracker*?
- Research the Indigenous and mainstream press to compare analyses of *The Tracker*.
- Watch the film yourself and compare your reactions to those of the press.
- 'God respects Aboriginal law as much as he respects white man's law—maybe more.' What does this quote from *The Tracker* reveal about changing values?

REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS IN FILM AND TELEVISION TEXTS

Professor Marcia Langton holds the Foundation Chair of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University. In

David Gulpilil: One Red Blood she describes *Walkabout* as representing 'in that very classical way the social Darwinist theory of the inevitable demise of the native races which was the catch cry of the Empire throughout the world.'

Whilst *Walkabout* was Gulpilil's first film it was certainly not the first film in which Indigenous Australians appeared, or were represented by white actors in blackface. Indeed it is possible to chart the history of white Australia's attitudes towards its original inhabitants through their depiction in film, and more recently, television.

- What texts have influenced your understanding of Indigenous Australians? In what way?
- What do the commentators in the documentary have to say about the representation of Indigenous Australians in film?
- Historian Gary Foley describes acting opportunities as limited to a few 'Jacky Jacky' roles. What is meant by this term and why is it offensive?
- What is Gulpilil's view on the representation of Indigenous Australians in film?
- Research the history of the representation of Indigenous Australians in film.
- Draw up a timeline that illustrates the changing features of this representation from 1900 to the present day.
- Place each of Gulpilil's films on the timeline.
- What does the timeline reveal about changing social values in Australia?
- Can you make some predictions about the representation of Indigenous Australians in film and television over the next decade?

David Gulpilil asked the writer and director of this documentary, Darlene Johnson to 'show people my life and how I really live it.' This film is a representation of his life.

- What features of his life and work does Gulpilil want the audience to understand?





- Discuss how these features are represented in the film through:
 - the selection of shots
 - the range of interview subjects
 - editing and the juxtaposition of images
 - sound
 - music
- Gulpilil often uses very subtle humour gently mocking himself and others to make a point, find examples of this in the documentary. Why does Gulpilil do this?

Some of the material in the documentary is controversial. It is indeed, 'no bullshit.'

- What do you consider to be controversial material in this documentary?
- What is the effect of viewing this material on you as an audience?
- Discuss the possible effect on different audiences: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, young and old people, city and country folk.
- What do you think is Gulpilil's purpose in sharing these aspects of his life with his audience?

Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people is revealing. The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists.

Australasian Legal Information



Institute. A joint facility of UTS and UNSW Faculties of Law. <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/car/1993/3/3.html>

Most media in Australia is owned and produced by white Australians for a mass market. Media products that seek to represent Indigenous Australians reflect this 'reality' through bias, stereotyping, selective and inaccurate reporting and misrepresentation and, often, racism. This documentary represents Gulpilil as he chooses to be represented.

All media products are constructions. The material in this documentary has been constructed to reveal a great deal about the breadth of David Gulpilil's life. This material could have been edited together in different ways to produce different messages.

- Select a range of shots, interviews and sounds that would portray Gulpilil in a positive light and a range that would portray him in a negative light. Storyboard these shots into two 3 minute segments that twist the material to portray



and entirely 'good' and a 'bad' David Gulpilil.

- Discuss how the material you have selected produces a biased view of Gulpilil.
- Find documentary footage of Indigenous Australians that is similarly biased. Analyse this footage in the light of what you now know about media construction of reality.
- Can there ever be any truth in the media? If so, to whom does it belong?

INDIGENOUS MEDIA AND RECONCILIATION

In recent years Indigenous Australians have sought to control their own media content and delivery. Communities across the country are creating media products that service their own needs and provide Indigenous material for national broadcasters.

In addition media organizations around Australia have set up guidelines for the representation of Indigenous Australians in the media. There

are a number of resources that are available to help those working in the media or who wish to work in the media to develop their skills. Some you may like to look at include:

Indigenous media organizations: http://www.idb.org/oz_m.htm

Message stick, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders online: <http://www.abc.net.au/message/>

Australian Legal Information Institute Indigenous resources: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/>

Reconciliation Australia: <http://www.reconciliationaustralia.org/>

DAVID GULPILIL, ONE MAN, TWO WORLDS

It is a strength of this documentary that it seeks to illustrate the line Gulpilil walks between his commitments to his community at Ramingining and his commitment to his career as an actor and dancer. These two lives can be

demanding and contradictory, or as Gulpilil puts it:

I like living in both worlds. I like being in my home. But these two lives (have) also spoiled me. (On one hand) I can live free in my world and the other hand in the Western world I have to pay the rent ... white man's world and blackfella's world.

The documentary examines why Gulpilil is sought after as an actor.

- Write down the reasons the guests appearing in the documentary give for Gulpilil's appeal to directors and audiences.

In November 2002 Gulpilil was awarded the IF award for best actor for his role in *The Tracker*. As well as this prize, Gulpilil received the Living Legend IF Award, which goes to an individual 'who has made a significant contribution to the Australian film industry, become a role model in their area of specialization and who has shown singular dedication to realizing their creative vision.'

- David Gulpilil has received many awards over the course of his career, research these.
- What has been the effect of receiving awards on Gulpilil's life?

Gulpilil has been described as a '... connection to finding our culture for our people living in a city life.' He sees his responsibilities in this area as a major focus of his life.

- Which responsibilities does Gulpilil perform in his role:
 - As an actor
 - As a dancer
 - As an Australian
 - As an Indigenous Australian
 - As an elder
 - To his family
- In what ways does he fulfill these roles?
- What conflicts emerge in the documentary between the conflicting needs of Gulpilil's responsibilities?

During the 1990s David Gulpilil struggled with alcohol and depression. This documentary acknowledges this period and also gives an explanation for it.

- In what ways has Gulpilil sought to overcome his problems?
- Listen to one of several radio interviews Gulpilil has given that give a more detailed explanation of that time. Search the ABC web site to find them: <http://abc.net.au/>

CLASS DISCUSSION AND ESSAY TOPICS

- David Gulpilil has a great deal to teach all Australians. Discuss the following quotes from Gulpilil and then use one as the subject of an essay.
 - *It's like a football game what I done in Australia.'*
 - *The problem is for me, big name, David Gulpilil, and I done a lot of movies and I didn't make money, and I live in Arnhem land in a tin shed.*
 - *I respect my country, I respect my people, I respect my culture.*
 - *Ganga, clothes, alcohol. You*

brought it into our world.

- *In the blackfella world we share everything. Everything is ours. In the white fella world it is private property and everything belong to someone else.*
- *We are the brothers and sisters of the world. It doesn't matter if you're bird, snake, fish or kangaroo. One red blood.*

FURTHER RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Honouring David Gulpilil (an American fan site): <http://www.gulpilil.com/>

The Internet Movie Database for a filmography: <http://www.imdb.com/>

Gary Foley's Koori history page: http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/essays/essays_page.html

Indigenous media organizations http://www.ldb.org/oz_m.htm

Message stick, Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders online: <http://www.abc.net.au/message/>

Australian Legal Information Institute Indigenous resources: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/In-digLRes/>

Reconciliation Australia: <http://www.reconciliationaustralia.org/>

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