ABOVE: DAVID GULPILIL AND FRIEND
Gulpilil: One Red Blood, directed by Darlene Johnson, follows the life and career of multi-award winning Aboriginal actor, David Gulpilil, through interviews, clips from Gulpilil’s films, and footage of his life with his family and community in Arnhem Land. Darlene Johnson talks about some of the difficulties she faced in attempting to make a documentary that would do justice to an Aboriginal sensibility, specifically to the humour, the vigour and the complexity of David Gulpilil.

Anne Rutherford: Marcia Langton has written of the desire in Indigenous cinema ‘to move onto matters of sensuality, intercultural discourses which enriched our humanity, and the love of landscape and place which might come about through such discourses’.

Gulpilil: One Red Blood seems to take up this challenge through its focus on the life and work of David Gulpilil, whose experience in Australian film culture and whose very presence throws many of these issues into relief. Could you talk about how you came to make this film?

Darlene Johnson: I first met David on the set of Rabbit-Proof Fence, and he approached me to make a documentary about his life. I just said yes, of course, surprised that it hadn’t been done before. David approached me originally as an Aboriginal—I would have never thought of approaching him to make a film about his life. He approached me, and that’s proper protocol from an Aboriginal perspective. He wanted someone to help him document his life story, something he could pass down to his family, a document with an Aboriginal sensibility.

What kind of agreement did you have with David about how you would work together?

I gave him a copy of the cultural protocol that I had developed for Stolen Generations and said, this is how I work—you can have copies of all the rushes, you look at the editing, make suggestions, check for cultural authenticity, sacredness—we do it that way, we work culturally. That helped set up trust from the outset.

Given the priority you gave to making a film with an Aboriginal sensitivity, did you get to make the film the way you wanted to make it?

Not fully. I filmed with David in Ramimgining, and there was no substantial research time. David is very camera-savvy so he said just come up and film as soon as you get up here. Also documentary is largely constructed in the editing process. A lot of it is trial and error and I didn’t have the time to really explore the possibilities, to explore fully what the documentary could have been.

How do you think it could have been different?

The approach to making a doco from an Aboriginal perspective could have been developed more. Like the way that David tells stories—it’s very poetic and that was one thing that I wanted to capture in the film, his style of telling stories was really beautiful and it wasn’t straight and bland and boring, it had a lot of colour and a lot of layers to it. There could have been more depth, more of David and his world and his personality, more feeling, more of his subjectivity. There could have been less constraint.

Were those constraints because the documentary form is linear and you couldn’t fit his personality, his subjectivity into a linear form?

Yes, it’s like there is an assumption that documentaries are made in a certain way, and the film could have pushed those boundaries more.
Do you mean giving more space to Gulpilil’s performance, the way he tells stories?

Yeah, exactly. Based more on his imagery, rather than a linear narrative. I was interested in exploring his voice—getting layers of his voice, bringing out the layers of David’s story and his life so that you weren’t just getting one single meaning in the doco that just went from beginning to end, but different levels of meaning coming through at different stages. What I love about David is that his sense of humour and insight gave me an opportunity to make connections to layers of representation in cinema, black and white sensibilities and different interpretations of history.

Do you think the film is essentially linear?

Yes, there is a sort of chronology to the way the story unfolds. That was one thing the broadcasters wanted.

So you didn’t necessarily want that chronology? Did you want to organize it differently?

I would have liked to work in different ways, exploring the possibility of cultural themes or different ideas based on facets of David’s life. Like jumping back and forward in time and being more edgy and creative and artistic with that. But I didn’t really get a chance to do that, and you can’t really know that unless you do that in the editing, try that approach out.

Why do you think a non-linear approach would be more appropriate for working with David?

Because David doesn’t tell stories that way, he doesn’t talk in any chronology—he’s such a passionate, intensely creative, interesting, complex character, he speaks and says everything at once. And it’s trying to capture that and make sense of it in a way that’s coherent but also works with his way of storytelling, trying to get that sense of meaning across in the way that he does. And if the structure of it was developed in a similar way, based on a lot of things coming together it could be more Aboriginal, a more original, culturally-appropriate approach to the structure.

Do you see that as an Aboriginal way of storytelling or a David Gulpilil way of storytelling.

It’s definitely an Aboriginal way but David has a specificity to his mode of telling stories because he’s such a worldly person and he’s got so much in his life to talk about. David talks in circles so that there’s no clean beginning, middle and end, and it’s that way of telling stories that comes back around and around, and sometimes the story gets bigger or longer with each telling or more dramatic, or there’s a little bit more added to it, and that’s where the fun is. I think that’s an Aboriginal thing, but also a Gulpilil thing, because he’s a bit of a drama queen, he’s a performer, he knows how to keep an audience captive. He has his own dramatic build-up technique in the way he develops stories and I think it’s pretty hilarious.

How do you imagine that you could work with film in a way that would do justice to that?

I would really love to make a film based on the Aboriginal sense of time. Like the notion of Dreamtime—past, present and future are all in one, so time is here and back there and in the future. And I would have liked to get more of an in-depth look at David’s cultural interior world, from a Mandalpingu perspective, to open up the cultural space—looking at the culture from within, so that it’s not just observed from outside ... 

Do you feel that the film just scrapes the surface?

Oh yeah, there could have been so much more, definitely. I think for people that know nothing, it’s pretty informative, but for me there’s so much more that could have gone in there. Like being able to illustrate and work with the cultural belief system, the Dreamtime and the cultural things that relate to that particular group up there, being able to use that in a way structurally, to transmit information about cultural stuff. Like using paintings as devices to transmit a whole lot of things to do with maintaining land and culture—it’s a very powerful tool for the people up there. David’s also a painter. I wanted to film David working on a painting and telling me stories about the importance of that, but we only had three weeks in Arnhem Land.

I can see the potential for One Red Blood—the sequel. If you were going to do part two, what would you do?

[Laughs] You could have a series of paintings based on the Dreamtime and Aboriginal law that would be like little chapters, and that would be a way of structuring it, like chapters, but also to show the mythic qualities and realm. You could show traditional songs or legends that have relevance today and use visual techniques to link them to contemporary footage. It could be so creatively interesting and artistic. I didn’t get to work with the contrast between the cultures as much as David lives it. I wanted to play visually with the contrast so it wasn’t just transmitting information but made sense in a visual way, more poetic, so you see meaning and interpret meaning in different ways rather than a type of didacticism.

So you wanted to push those boundaries?

Yes. My whole reason for making the film was about who David is as a person. I’ve tried to let the subject—in this case David and his world, his story—dictate how we make the film. I feel that what gets set up a bit is like culture versus technique. There’s a cultural perspective that I’m interested in and committed to, and people don’t trust that as a basis to work from. You could do that so much more if there was a clearer recognition that that can be a way of working. The implication is that you have to do it the way that’s familiar and secure.

Do you think this is to do with ideas about who the audience is?
Maybe it is. In this case it was made for the ABC and has to work for an ABC audience. When I asked what the criteria are for what kind of films you make for an ABC audience, I was told, ‘so long as it’s a good film’!

Would you say that the imaginary ABC audience was implicitly a white audience or a non-Aboriginal audience?

Definitely a non-Aboriginal audience.

From the discussions we had at the time of the editing, I had a sense that you were constantly negotiating to keep things in there that addressed an Aboriginal viewer, things that might not be clear or might be obscure to a non-Aboriginal viewer. But your position was that to an Aboriginal audience, they would be very clear.

Definitely, and that’s why I was keen to leave those things in. In the film, there are things that Aboriginal people get. Like the ceremony [footage of a young boy’s initiation ceremony], and other points throughout the film that’ll speak specifically, directly to an Aboriginal audience. It would be nice if other people got it too, but if they don’t then that’s fine, because not everyone’s going to get everything. There seems to be this whole process about documentary, everything’s collaborative, everyone has to have their say, but who owns the story? I mean foremost this is David’s life story. It’s not my story, but I’m the director, so I have a responsibility to his story and the way it should be told.

Is that a big part of the challenge you face, to get people to understand that it’s not a unified audience, that you’re catering to several different audiences?

Yeah, I realized that more in the editing, that that’s what was important in terms of this film—there is a multiplicity of audiences, and we shouldn’t be making films just for one particular audience.

So how do you work with that sense that in a film one part of the audience will understand some parts and not others, and there will be other sections that other parts of the audience will get?

What I love about David is that his sense of humour and insight gave me an opportunity to make connections to layers of representation in cinema, black and white sensibilities and different interpretations of history.
That will vary every time you make a film. It’s a negotiation. You could have examples of where it works successfully in film, but in making films you have to arrive at that through the process of doing it. I think it’s important to acknowledge that as a framework for thinking about documentary film-making, and making films that deal with cultural stuff. I didn’t really think a lot about it as a way of working before One Red Blood, but I intuitively knew that David’s Aboriginality, things that would speak to blackfellas, had to be in there.

What difference does that acknowledge make to the kind of film you would produce?

Well, it would definitely have more humour in it, a particular Aboriginal approach to humour, it wouldn’t be so straight and flat. It would have more of a black sensibility in lots of things—in telling stories, in the interactions and relationships between people. For example, when Gulpilil tells the ‘yes story’ [the story of his first meeting with director, Nicholas Roeg] he tells it four times and it’s the drama of how long it takes him to tell that, and having its own sense of style and drama to the telling, which is hilarious. And the reaction of Aboriginal audiences is that they relate to the flow and laugh their heads off. Thankfully, a lot of whitefellas find it funny too.

I would like to have more of that style. Not that everything would be a comedy, but more based on an Aboriginal way of seeing and doing things. It can be little things, from family-oriented events or ceremonies, the respect and acknowledgment that Aboriginal people give to each other, the way that things are understood and known between people—lifestyle things, connections to family, connections to country.

Do you think that if a film is seen as addressing a non-Aboriginal audience you can’t include those things, that there is an assumption that they wouldn’t translate?

Well, I think there is a general assumption of that, and somehow it constrains you when you know that in the editing stage there is more of a push for the conventional approach. But I think that I can include things that speak more directly to an Aboriginal audience, and I think, all right, so not everyone’s going to get it. When you think about Aboriginal people watching films that are white films made for white audiences, well sometimes it works the other way around. I just think there is a lack of cultural understanding about making films for a plural audience.

In the process of making a film the way that you’d like it to be, are you actually inventing a new form?

It’s not just a question of form, it’s within the form. Every time you construct meaning in the editing you’re making so many decisions about what you’re constructing as a story. That’s hard to identify and it does come down to personalities and opinions. The difficulty was because it’s so fluid. It was hard to argue why something didn’t necessarily work, or was right for the sort of documentary that I wanted to make, because it then comes across as a personal issue rather than as an issue of a cultural framework.

Would you say that there’s a documentary form that’s like a skeleton, but the way people interpret and fill that out is very intuitive—what feels appropriate to them in a culturally-specific way?

Yes, as well as the type of documentary they make. It’s very instinctive.

If your intuitive judgements were sometimes not understood, do you think that was because they did not match recognized documentary practice?

Sometimes, yes. Because there wasn’t a framework for what I was saying.

Meaning nothing that’s already been done?

No template, nothing to point to saying ‘see, this is how it’s been done before. This is how Aboriginal people do this’. That’s not to say that there aren’t any, but I didn’t have one at the time. It’s hard unless you actually spend so much time up in Ramingining with David and his mob and understand their cultural references, their way of telling stories and communicating. That was one of the main challenges.

Is it something you know as lived, but maybe haven’t seen represented on the screen?

Not fully. I think it’s a common problem across the board, unless it’s films made specifically for Aboriginal people, for their own purposes and in their own communities. I’ve seen instances of what I was attempting to do, which was making a film that can be for lots of audiences, not just for Aboriginal audiences, but which included an Aboriginal mode of storytelling.

How about something like Bush Mechanics? Do you think that works well with an Aboriginal sensibility?

Yeah, definitely—there you’ve got a whole black perspective on bush mechanics. It’s a whole other take on how they maintain their cars and survive that no-one else would have thought of, but blackfellas do because they’ve had to survive with that kind of humour and quick thinking. And in terms of the overall story, it’s not a conventional story. There’s no climactic ending or a set-up and a pay-off like in a conventional storytelling sense.

Are there other films you’ve seen that achieve that?

Mitch Torres’ film, A Whispering in Our Hearts—it’s an oral storytelling history and that’s based on a cultural perspective on knowledge and family. Hers is such a personal thing, and you don’t often see that. Like Erica Glynn’s film about the spirit man, Ngungkari Way, you don’t often see that kind of culture in film either. Even in fiction—Atanarjuaq, the Inuit film. It was exciting seeing that film from an Inuit cultural perspective.

How do you think you can overcome these problems that arise in cross-cultural collaboration?

There are people who regardless of
their ethnicity or culture have spent time with Aboriginal people, have lived with them, worked with them, who actually understand an Aboriginal aesthetic, or storytelling or a point of view. It's not so much who you are, but that intercultural experience ... that knowledge base. I find that it is an obstacle, not having a knowledge or an awareness about a sensibility that is so in antithesis to your own, and why the conventional process may not be appropriate. I'm told that even in the case of camera operators, it's better that they can have this objectivity, with an Aboriginal context that is such a complex cultural system, surely by being familiar with the way it works, codes of behaviour, attitudes, cultural beliefs, it would inform the film-making approach much better. Because otherwise you're shooting in the dark a bit.

**What do you want from the collaboration process?**

Rather than me having to go over into my collaborators' head-space and translate what they are doing I wish that would come the other way. That a white person would know this stuff from a cultural framework position or from an instinctual one, and could translate my perspective. To have that communication, that shorthand. I want to get to that point where interesting work can be produced, so we can start developing things that take us to another level.

**Do you think there is a misunderstanding about cross-cultural film-making, thinking of it as translating one culture into the terms of another, into the mainstream?**

Yeah, I think so—for example I could want to do something one way but it could end up being interpreted with a very white perspective.

**But what is the white perspective that it would be translated into?**

Just something that speaks to white people. It takes the whole black thing, and turns it into a white thing. It just changes its meaning.

**Do you think a model of cross-cultural film-making is a good model to work with?**

Sometimes. One of the ways I like to work in documentary when dealing with Aboriginal people is that the Aboriginal subject has input and control over the way their story is represented. But I think that in the white way of making the film, with the director and the producer, there's a hierarchy. When you're dealing with cultural stuff, say with Aboriginal people, if it's their story, their culture, it's important that they look at the film. Other people get really nervous with that and don't like it because it's like the subject has veto. The difference, say, with many whitefellas, is that everything comes down to control and power, but it's not really about power, it's about a cultural understanding. You're dealing with a different culture that tells stories in different ways, communicates in different ways and expresses themselves differently. So I'm trying to work out other ways of understanding how that is and documenting it.

**So that it has some integrity?**

Yes. It's their culture, they know more about their country, their language, their law than we do. It makes much better sense if they can look, comment and give us feedback during and after the filming about things to do with authenticity or culture, sacredness or gender issues. Because you think you might be getting something at the time which is correct, but it might not be correct or later you might alter its meaning in the editing. A sense of cultural ownership is important and should be acknowledged. There's an economic ownership—it's the Western thing, it's the white way of doing it. Then there's cultural ownership, and that's not valued or respected.

**What struck me about the way the film ends is how you asked David and the community, 'are you happy with the film?'. Clearly that was important to ask, but also to demonstrate that protocol within the film itself. It's unusual to see that kind of negotiation on film. How significant is that within the film?**

Well, take the ceremony, for example. People might just look at that and say 'Aw, yeah, it's blackfellas just dancing around', or some other people might find it truly amazing, which it is. What's more important for me is that it's actually a big deal for the people up there, because it speaks to them. And it took weeks to negotiate [its inclusion]. There are actually people in the film who are negotiating, and only those people know that that's what's going on, to do with that ceremony. And that's great too, I love it. It's very specific to that mob up there at Ramingining and Maningrida, and only they know the real importance of that. There's stuff I don't know and can't even ask, but it was a big deal for them, and involved a long process and a lot of people to make a decision to have it in the documentary. And that was one of the best things about making that film, going through that and then flying back up to Ramingining in a little plane, showing it to the elders and to the community before I locked it off. My producer was tearing his hair out, but I said, 'Well, this film won't be finished till I go back up there'. I couldn't imagine doing it in any other way. It was just the best outcome for the whole process, the documentary, my relationship with David and the people, the elders. And at the end of it there was a film that they [the community] were proud of it, they believe me now'. A lot of the young people in the community had no idea of the body of work that he had produced over the years. They hadn't seen him in that light before. So it was really an important process for a lot of reasons. It was amazing.

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