

Ten Canoes (Australia 2006)

In one of the most remote parts of Australia, the Arnhem Land Peninsula in the Northern Territories, there are several small aboriginal communities that were able to resist the incursion of European culture until relatively recently. In the 1930s, when a remarkable social anthropologist, Donald Thomson, visited the Yolngu people, he found a way of life seemingly unchanged for several millennia. He shot several thousand feet of nitrate film that was subsequently lost in a fire, but also some 4,000 still images on glass negatives which have survived to provide a unique record of daily life in the region.

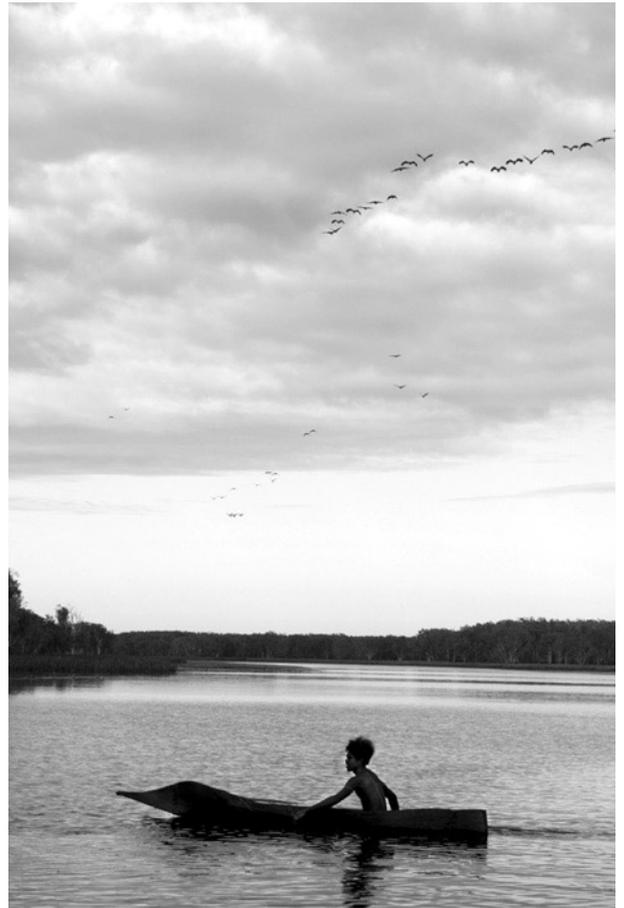
David Gulpilil, perhaps the most high profile aboriginal figure in the Australian film industry, is himself from the Yolngu tribe. His career began in the 1970s with films like Nic Roeg's *Walkabout* (UK/Australia 1971) and Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1976). More recently he appeared in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and *The Tracker* (2002). On this last film he met the Dutch-Australian director Rolf de Heer and invited him to visit Arnhem Land and make a film there. Gulpilil and de Heer, in discussion with many of the local people eventually decided on the unique structure of *Ten Canoes*. The title comes from one of Thomson's photographs, showing a hunting party taking their canoes across the Arfura swamp in search of the eggs of the magpie goose.

Telling stories

Ten Canoes presents three versions of a story, each 'nested' within another. David Gulpilil is the off-screen voice (in English) introducing the landscape from an aerial view and then taking us back to a time when the Yolngu hunted for goose eggs as part of an annual cycle of food gathering. This story is shown in black and white and the look of it derives from Thomson's photographs. The time period is not given, but it could be any time during the three hundred years or so leading up to the 1930s.

As the men (no women on hunting parties) go about the dangerous and uncomfortable task of finding eggs and fending off crocodiles and mosquitoes, one of the older men begins to tell a story to his younger brother. The older brother, who has three wives, is worried that his sibling is getting too interested in the youngest of the wives. The story he tells is a cautionary tale about what desiring another man's wife in a close-knit community can lead to.

The 'story within a story' is set within the same community many years previously, in a 'mythical time'. Of course, it looks exactly like the world of the other two stories, but like the opening shots of the film, it is shown in colour. We get to hear all of this story and its consequences.



Jamie Gulpilil (son of David) as the younger brother

Life in the Yolngu community in mythical time is on one level simple, but on another sophisticated in terms of ritual, justice, honour etc. The story involves conflict with another community and two deaths – and, of course, a lesson for the younger brother. It's important to note that the Yolngu were not at the time of the stories struggling hunter gatherers at the margins of subsistence. The land supported sufficient flora and fauna to allow the Yolngu to eat well, to build shelter and to have the 'spare time' to create rituals and develop societal structures.

The Yolngu world is presented as patriarchal. The older men live with one or more wives in the central community – adolescent males must live separately in a boys' community. Full initiation into the adult world is controlled and organised.

Filmmaking, culture and the European gaze

How should we engage with a film like this? One concern must be a question about how much the film crew misrepresents or distorts/disrupts the lives of the people in the community and misrepresents their story. To a certain extent, this

is a consequence of all media production. Yolngu culture can only appear on screen in a mediated form. However, there are several mitigating features in the approach adopted here.

First, it is worth stressing that the fictional world presented on screen is just that – a recreated fiction. The contemporary Yolngu live in a world that uses SUVs, internet banking and satellite television. When the idea of the film was first discussed, the goose egg hunt had lapsed as an annual event and it was the circulation of photographs from the Thomson Archive that stimulated interest. The idea to develop the story around the ‘Ten Canoes’ photograph came from within the community.

When it came to actually shooting the film, the small crew led by de Heer (the ‘Balanda’ as white men are termed) lived within the community for the duration of the shoot, much like the ‘participant observers’ of social anthropology. All of the characters in the story are played by Yolngu people, many of whom are or have been artists or live performers, but none previously film actors. Casting and scripting was not straightforward. Individuals wanted to play the characters who were recognisable in the photographs as their ancestors and tradition forbade people from representing characters from the ‘wrong’ family group. As a consequence some roles had only one possible player. The script (everything is spoken in one of the Yolngu languages) was difficult to formalise since some players spoke different local languages and the lines had to be translated and re-translated to create some form of continuity. One of the community, Peter Djigirr acted as co-director as well as actor and translator.

In the completed film it is clear that all these difficulties were overcome and ‘ownership’ of the narrative appears to rest with the Yolngu themselves – certainly they express themselves as more than satisfied with the outcome. In fact the process of filmmaking became a vibrant exercise in oral history and re-discovery of a way of life. There was sufficient knowledge amongst the older Yolngu to make it possible to build the canoes shown in the photographs and the work on memory and culture has subsequently spawned a whole series of cultural productions, including exhibitions, books and training programmes. The film also exists in three different versions with the narration available in English and the local language and the subtitles removed for local screening.

The unique structure of the film derives from the compromise between the demands of American/European film narratives and the sensibilities of the Yolngu. The local people were attracted to the idea of reconstructing the goose egg hunt, but this was essentially non-dramatic. For the Yolngu it would be

wrong to insert dramatic conflict into the reconstruction – but it was allowable in the ‘mythical time’ and this was how the film developed.

If the film had remained as an interesting cultural project enjoyed by the Yolngu, it would have been a worthwhile project in itself. But a feature film is a potentially universal cultural artefact. How would other audiences, especially non-indigenous Australian audiences react? In her blog, the Australian academic Liz Conor, a former editor of the Australian media education magazine, *Metro*, offers a perceptive observation. She describes an Australian audience anticipating something that will take them into the mythical time (the ‘dreaming’, as Australian writing has it) – a time when ‘original Australia’ was not sullied by capitalism and industrialism. They are, as she puts it, “Western Moderns appraising the difference of the ‘Native’”. What will happen?

With utmost respect the non-indigenous patrons take in the opening scene. Naked perfectly fit men, with all the gravitas of millennia of tradition, stride out in single file to hunt. Very intently we watch as the trailing man calls them to halt. This is surely serious but unfathomable ‘business’ of some sort. “I refuse to walk at the back” he declares. Has some law been violated? Is this a challenge to customary command? Has the hunt lost its way, or an ancestor made a sign? “Somebody is farting” he says, and audible relief staggers down the aisles.

Conor’s short entry is well worth reading in full at lizconorcomment.blogspot.com/2006/07/ten-canoes-timely-release_15.html She argues that *Ten Canoes* allows us to think about a particular kind of society that survived for thousands of years and to do so without suffering the curse of the colonialist’s imagination and treating aboriginal communities as either ‘noble savages’ or ‘primitive’ and ‘simple’ people. Part of the success of the film is in the leisurely pacing and refusal to overdramatise the conflicts. This is a different, not inferior, mode of story telling and we may have to ‘work’ to appreciate it – working hard to resist the urge to look for conventional narrative pleasures, enjoying what else is on offer and thinking about aboriginal culture in new ways.

Roy Stafford 5/6/07

If you enjoyed *Ten Canoes*, don’t miss the double bill next Sunday, 10 June of *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*, a ‘making of’ documentary about Ten Canoes plus *Kanyini* another documentary about Aboriginal life. *Kanyini* screens first at 18.10.

There is plenty of background material on *Ten Canoes* in the press kit downloadable from: <http://www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/info.htm>