

# Charlie's Country, Gulpilil's Body

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In their foundational text *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, Felicity Collins and Therese Davis sum up the career trajectory of iconic Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil by noting that he has typically 'played to and undercut the Eurocentric fantasy of an exotic or mystical figure,' often in works by white, settler filmmakers, and thereby exists 'somewhere between the canny black tracker and the noble savage' (Collins and Davis 2004, 23). In fleshing out this claim, they pay particular attention to Dutch Australian filmmaker Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002), the last feature film featuring Gulpilil prior to their book's publication in 2004. For their purposes, it is a telling professional bookend, one that sheds light on the contemporary moment in which they were writing: by making its Aboriginal lead more at home in Australia than his settler counterparts and reframing questions of land ownership in terms of 'custodial obligation and belonging' (16), the film, like the *Mabo* Decision before it, exposes the fallacy of *terra nullius* and acknowledges the validity of Aboriginal land claims. Moreover, it brings the screen persona of Gulpilil into the twenty-first century by 'reviv[ing] the exoticism of *Walkabout* and combin[ing] it with the post-colonial moral authority invested in an Aboriginal elder' (23).

Since that time Gulpilil has engaged in two other cinematic collaborations with de Heer, *Ten Canoes* (2006) and *Charlie's Country* (2013), and the results have again been noteworthy for three related reasons. First, both involved Gulpilil and other Aboriginal participants at multiple stages in their development and thus constitute something truly exceptional: as Anne Rutherford writes of *Ten Canoes*, 'hybrid, inter-cultural work that reinvents the space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures' (Rutherford 2013, 139). Second, in part because of the ongoing and considerable involvement mentioned above, they communicate with

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exceptional incision the perspectives and interests of Aboriginal Australians, thereby contributing to a counter-cinematic alternative to a dominant cinema that tends to perpetuate historically entrenched representational tropes and the colonial logic informing them. Third, they continue the work of *The Tracker* before them by recasting the figure of Gulpilil for contemporary audiences. In the case of the later work with de Heer, however, the exoticism that Collins and Davis mention is not supplemented so much as undercut by various representational strategies that make Gulpilil familiar, or at least normative, within a narrative context that nonetheless respects the specificity of his experience and the historical conditions that have contributed to its production. The result is two films that showcase what Jo Smith and Stephen Turner refer to as Indigenous 'insistence' or 'presencing,' which involves making visible a way of life that both long pre-dated colonisation and continues into the present as an alternative to colonial (or 'postcolonial') norms. Working in tandem with acts of pointed resistance, which have the capacity to thwart the operations of colonial power, acts of insistence offer up 'alternative political ontologies [that] challenge the orthodoxies of the colonial present, and open up possibilities of living other than those mandated by the state and settler status quo' (Smith and Turner 2013, 286).

As has been recounted by many scholars and critics, *Ten Canoes* (2006) represents Gulpilil's community, the people of Ramingining, on its own terms in a story that takes place prior to any contact with white, settler culture and with a style that departs from the conventions of both classical and ethnographic cinema. While the extent to which Gulpilil can be credited as a kind of co-author of *Ten Canoes*, and thus responsible for its final form, is a matter for debate (Hamby 2007; Hiatt 2007; Davis 2007), the significance of his textual presence is indisputable. Serving as the film's storyteller, he uses his voice – and his voice alone – to school the presumably Anglophone and non-Aboriginal spectator in the codes and practices of his people. In the most celebrated moment of his voice-over narration, he introduces the film to come by issuing a playful warning that signals an epistemological shift: 'I am going to tell you a story. It's not your story. It's my story, a story like you've never seen before.' In comparison, *Charlie's Country* features Gulpilil as a credited co-author who worked alongside de Heer on every aspect of the story's development, and insistently foregrounds that which remains out of frame in *Ten Canoes*, Gulpilil's body; the result is a fully fleshed-out alternative to the stock characters (again, the canny tracker and noble savage) that Collins and Davis identify with the actor. Set in the so-called 'postcolonial' present, rather than the colonial or pre-colonial past, the film narrates the myriad constraints placed on Aboriginal people in a contemporary Australia where those traditional ways of life that have not been destroyed are highly regulated and few viable alternatives seem to exist. Within this context Gulpilil, as protagonist Charlie, verbally articulates a sense of injustice and indignity in the face of the constraints he faces, but it is his embodied presence – his bearing, his gestures, his movements – that prove even more expressive, and thereby significant, than his words.

Almost immediately after the release of *Ten Canoes*, multiple scholarly articles on it began to appear, and now, almost ten years later, there is a wealth of literature dedicated to it. *Charlie's Country*, in contrast, has not ignited the same kind of discussion. Granted, far fewer years have passed since its release, and it may be that *Charlie's Country* is catching critical fire more slowly, but the contrast is still striking. One explanation for this relatively subdued reception is the fact that, by the time *Charlie's Country* appeared, the collaborative nature of de Heer and Gulpilil's working relationship was not as novel as it had been. An even more compelling explanation, however, is that *Charlie's Country* is far less experimental formally and thus does not beg for the same kind of analysis. Unlike *Ten Canoes*, which plays with an elaborate flashback structure that involves three different time frames and a wide variety of cinematographic techniques, *Charlie's Country* is relatively straightforward: a chronological account of a single protagonist's experience, which unfolds with little stylistic embellishment. Yet despite its seeming simplicity, its arguably classical form, *Charlie's Country* actually unsettles multiple representational conventions, and in the process positions the spectator as an engaged witness to the ongoing effects of colonialism and the 'insidious trauma,' as Maria Root (1992) terms it, that those effects produce. Given the extent to which these achievements are dependent on Gulpilil's embodied presence, they come into sharpest focus when certain insights, emphases, and methods from performance studies are brought to bear on cinema studies.

### Performance As Process

Contributing to the recent 'affective turn' in cinema studies, an approach to film informed by performance studies facilitates engagement with many of the issues that phenomenologically inclined, as well as Deleuzian, film scholars bring to the table too: not only affect but also corporeality, pleasure, and excess. Yet while many such scholars, especially Vivian Sobchack and those writing in her influential wake, foreground film spectatorship, particularly its experiential dimensions, studies of cinema inflected by performance studies have the potential to illuminate issues related to production as well. One way they do so is by reconceptualising the work done by actors, defining the preferred term 'performance' against 'acting' as it is typically understood. While 'acting' tends to connote an act of simulation, a role that an actor can take on and then off, and a mandate to realise faithfully a vision already created elsewhere (in a screenplay, a story board, or a director's mind, for example), 'performance' implicitly acknowledges the shared embodiment of actor and character and thus connotes a far less contained process, one that is continuously evolving and thus capable of unscripted transformation. In short, the latter troubles the very boundaries upon which the former depends: those between diegetic and nondiegetic, textual and extratextual, art and life. When evaluated as a 'performance,' Gulpilil's turn as Charlie accrues tremendous dimension.

Having been in the public eye for over forty years, Gulpilil – particularly his career highs and personal lows – are well-known, especially in Australia, but also among certain circles of international filmgoers. For such viewers, what cannot escape notice are the ways *Charlie's Country* draws on Gulpilil's life. To be sure, there are multiple counts on which actor and character differ: as de Heer notes in interviews, Charlie lives in Ramingining during the controversial 'Intervention,' which has seen the provision of emergency governmental resources to Northern Territorial Aboriginal communities since 2007, and he spends a period of time living alone in the bush, two experiences Gulpilil cannot claim as his own (Bunbury 2014). At the same time, however, Gulpilil and Charlie share a very particular social location, one produced by a history of settler colonialism, which has led to not only political disenfranchisement but also economic, social, and cultural impoverishment for many Aboriginal communities. Moreover, certain details of their biographies are the same. First, both find themselves, at some point in their lives, relying on alcohol and then engaging in drunken behaviour that lands them in jail, a fate that cannot be understood without reference to the aforementioned structural inequality. Second, they are both dancers who can boast of having performed for the Queen at the grand opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973, an accomplishment that provides a measure of comfort and pride, even in the face of circumstantial hardship. As readily apparent as these multiple similarities are for some viewers, for other viewers Gulpilil's history is unknown. Yet, at least at the time of the film's release, various materials served to fill in any gaps in extratextual knowledge. For example, film festival catalogue copy frequently made note of the film's 'semi-autobiographical' nature and 'authenticity' (*'Charlie's Country'* 2014; Schoettle 2014) and interviews with de Heer inevitably included mention of the fact that the film was conceived and drafted during the visits he made to Gulpilil in prison (Bunbury 2014; Eeles 2014; Risker 2015).

Were one to approach Gulpilil's performance through the lens of star studies, a subfield in cinema studies with a relatively long history, one might summarise the significance of the similarities between actor and character by noting that *Charlie's Country* strategically employs Gulpilil's star persona in order to build on audience expectations and construct the character of Charlie as expeditiously as possible. In other words, one would likely start analysis with the sense of an actor as defined by a list of stable attributes and known experiences and then identify the way those things contribute to a character's construction. Approaching the performance through the lens of performance studies, however, shifts focus from a persona to a process, one that is necessarily dynamic and multi-faceted. More specifically, in the case of *Charlie's Country*, it allows for an understanding of Gulpilil's work on screen as an exercise in actualisation as well as acting, the production of a self as well as another. That Gulpilil treated the film's production as incentive to make dramatic changes in his life and enter into a period of sustained sobriety only provides further incentive to view the work in this way. If one does, the body on screen, from the moment of Charlie's introduction, exceeds the boundaries of the fiction about to be told and evokes a life that is rich in both resonance and possibility.

With its first shot of a sign posted on the side of a dirt road, *Charlie's Country* identifies the film's setting, an Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land, as a 'restricted area' in accordance with the Liquor Act of 1979. With its second shot, it features Charlie, an inhabitant of that setting, and thereby settles into the representational strategy that characterises most of the film by sticking close to its protagonist in order to offer up an image of him that is at once intimate and respectful, quotidian and engrossing, wordless and expressive. As the film's credits appear on the right side of the frame, Charlie sits to their left, cross-legged on a bed while engaging in a sequence of movements: he removes from a nearby suitcase an old photograph, looks at it intently, searches for his glasses, resumes his inspection of the photograph after finding them, puts everything away, and then sits and stares into space while lost in thought. More than two full minutes in duration and featuring action that is relatively inconsequential, this shot serves to begin establishing the texture of a life rather than to jumpstart a plot. In so doing, it conditions a mode of spectatorship that prioritises corporeal co-presence and affective engagement, thereby producing a viewer who is highly attuned to the micro-expressions and restrained gestures that film theorist Béla Balázs associated with the close-up, but that in this film feature in shots of every scale (Balázs 2011, 104).

To affirm the importance of texture over plot is not to suggest that *Charlie's Country* has no story arc or narrative momentum. On the contrary, the film follows Charlie as he negotiates his survival in a succession of places – his community, the bush, the city of Darwin, and, finally, his community again – and these various episodes in his life are linked causally: the confiscation of his gun and spear by the community police lead him to try living off the land, and when he becomes gravely ill due to exposure, he is flown to Darwin, where a series of events lead him from a hospital to a courtroom to a prison, before he eventually returns home. At the same time, however, within the context of this succession of events, which features a number of dramatic moments, more mundane moments – not only Charlie studying a photograph, but also Charlie fashioning a spear, cooking a fish, doing laundry, or interacting with friends – are given equal emphasis. Moreover, in all those moments, both large and small, Charlie takes shape through his comportment more than his words. Indeed, there are many long stretches of the film when he is silent, registering his reaction to a situation through something as subtle as a glance, a movement, or a sigh.

As much as these actions serve to construct Charlie's character, they also capture a way of life informed by histories of experience that are both personal and social in dimension and both past and present in tense. In other words, by virtue of its sustained focus on Charlie, *Charlie's Country* regularly enables the work that Diana Taylor ascribes to performances in general, functioning as a 'vital [act] of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated or what Richard Schechner has called 'twice-behaved behavior.'" (Taylor 2003, 2–3). For Taylor, this work is of essential importance, especially in cultural contexts characterised by a history of colonialism, insofar as it depends upon and sustains

forms of embodied knowledge that are integral to indigenous cultures and that have often been repressed, invalidated, and even prohibited. Reversing the norms that have prevailed historically, Taylor explores and affirms the value of embodied knowledge, as well as its performative iteration, in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003). In the process she ascribes an enduring potency to even the most ephemeral of practices.

### Performance As Contingency

Taylor's work takes as its starting point what she calls a 'rift' between the two entities in her book's title. On the one hand, the archive is characterised by permanence and fixity and contains 'documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change' (19). The repertoire, on the other, 'enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dances, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge' (20). Despite their differences, the archive and the repertoire, according to Taylor, continually interact with each other and no account of a culture could be complete without reference to both. Moreover, neither is uniquely or innately equipped to uphold the political and social status quo or, alternately, to challenge its authority. At the same time, however, colonial ideology has not only reduced native populations to their bodies, and native culture to the various embodied practices Taylor locates in the repertoire, but it has also predicated colonial authority on, among other things, attributes associated with the archive, especially empiricism and objectivity. Thus, to take the repertoire seriously is both to imbue all embodied practices with an epistemological power they are normally denied and to acknowledge that many embodied practices, not inevitably but due to historical circumstances, contribute to a critique of colonial culture insofar as they allow for modes of expression that operate outside of the logic of the archive, or history as written by the victor.

To suggest that *Charlie's Country* functions as a performance and is thus aligned with the repertoire may seem counter-intuitive given the way Taylor catalogues the archive: films are among the items she describes as resistant to change. Moreover, in the case of those films that most typically represent Aboriginal people, ethnographic films, her characterisation make perfect sense. As Fatimah Tobing Rony notes, ethnographic cinema is animated by a taxidermic impulse, a desire to arrest historical change in an effort 'to make that which is dead look as if it were still living' (Rony 1996, 101). Consequently, many ethnographic films produce a constructed image of a 'traditional' way of life that disavows changes wrought by the ethnographer's presence and, more broadly, the history of colonialism that gave rise to the discipline of anthropology and its attendant methods of data collection, including filmmaking. That they do this in relation to people



whose ways of life – indeed, whose very lives – are assumed to be on the verge of extinction only makes the imperative to produce taxidermic representations that much more pressing. Despite the distinctly archival project of ethnographic cinema, however, there is cause to complicate Taylor's schema and to acknowledge the ways in which film straddles the boundary between archive and repertoire. Doing so creates the conditions of possibility for a mode of spectatorship that recognises the potential for historical and cultural change, even in those films that are most invested in resisting it.

An understanding of film in archival terms exclusively depends upon the recognition of certain qualities of the medium at the expense of others. Specifically, it depends upon a privileging of the means by which the profilmic event is preserved over the profilmic event itself. Alternately, to invoke Mary Ann Doane, it depends upon a privileging of cinema's capacity to structure events defined by their contingency over that upon which contingency depends: 'a nonteleological time in which each moment can produce the unexpected, the unpredicted' (Doane 2002, 22). In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* Doane suggests that the tendency on the part of film scholars and cultural critics to downplay contingency in the face of its control by the cinematic medium is a result of two chief factors. First is the sense of inevitability that recording an event lends that event, no matter how unexpected or unpredicted it may have originally been; as Doane puts it, cinema produces for its spectator 'a present haunted by historicity' (23) rather than the present pure and simple. Second, the conventions of classical form tend to press all events, no matter how spontaneous, in the service of a story, thereby imposing on them legibility, significance, and a sense of being, in some way or another, planned.

While these claims constitute the jumping off point for Doane's discussion of film's role in the rationalisation of society at the end of the nineteenth century, they are also generative insofar as they lay the groundwork for work on cinematic performance or, even more to the point, cinema *as* performance. In other words, they contribute to an account of cinema that recognises it, or at least certain components of it, as aligned with Taylor's repertoire. To wit, when George Kouvaros discusses performance on screen, he implicitly acknowledges the same tension that Doane posits, one between contingency and its control, and then describes the power of performance to unsettle the controlling tendencies she describes: 'the activity of performance has a corrosive effect on the film, eating away at its structures' (Kouvaros 2004, 34). Elaborating on this claim, he identifies a certain instability that prevails when performance is foregrounded:

[A]t the same time it opens up the film to a range of different readings, sensations, and temporal configurations. There is something paradoxical here: the outbursts and gestures that move across the scene and destabilise our reading suggest a one-time-only status. Yet in the cinema, provoked into being and caught by the camera, they are there to be viewed over and over again. (34)

Informing this quotation are two interrelated assumptions that undergird the work of multiple contemporary film scholars interested in performance. First, in as much as a film features embodied performances, it constitutes a performance. Granted, the medium may capture those performances through technological means and contain them through narrative ones, but the performances nonetheless persist, as does their potential to produce a spectatorial response that is both immediate and affective. Approaching the study of cinema with a focus on performance initiates a shift in perspective that opens up multiple analytical possibilities. It allows film spectators, and scholars, to take seriously the idea that every film is a documentary of its own making and thus to think about films as not only products defined by their fixity, stability, and capacity to be both commodified and consumed but also as records of a process involving, among other things, chance and change, activity and interactivity, flux and fluidity. Second, foregrounding performance has the potential to multiply, or even confound, meaning. Take, for instance, gestures, which Kouvaros invokes in the above quotation. Some gestures can, by social convention, denote something specific: for example, a head nod signifies 'yes.' In these cases, the performance of the gesture by a particular body thickens that gesture's meaning, but rarely undercuts its commonly understood significance. Far more often, however, gestures, much like extra-linguistic sounds, do not signify anything specific and are more open to interpretation. More evocative than denotative, they tend to leave the spectator affected rather than informed.

Insofar as they feature volatile and provocative bodies, certain films, or kinds of films, lend themselves to a discussion of performance more readily than others. To name just a few scholars whose work is sited at the intersection of cinema studies and performance studies and is thus informed by the above assumptions, Kouvaros makes his claims about the power of performance within the context of a book on the films of John Cassavetes, who is frequently labelled an 'actor's director'; Elena del Rio routes her interest in performance through a discussion of filmmakers who strategically use actors (among other things) to create a cinema of formal excess and affective charge, such as Douglas Sirk, Claire Denis, and David Lynch; and both Douglas Rosenberg and Erin Brannigan have written books on what Rosenberg (2012) calls 'screendance,' a hybrid of film and dance that depends upon the choreography of both bodies and film technology. As different as *Charlie's Country* may be from these objects of analysis on certain counts, it shares with them one common, and key, attribute: as already mentioned, it too relies centrally on an embodied presence, that of Gulpilil, who appears in every scene. Yet, in keeping with Taylor's discussion of the repertoire, the fact that Gulpilil is Aboriginal makes the stakes of his performance different, and arguably higher, than they are for other actors upon whose shoulders entire movies rest. His body provides access to a history of experience that is not only under-represented in popular culture but also in danger of complete erasure. For this reason the end of the film, which is hopeful despite the increasingly dire circumstances narrated, is quite noteworthy: when released from jail, Charlie returns to his community and begins instructing



youth in the art of traditional dance, thereby passing on knowledge of an embodied practice that might otherwise be forgotten. What Charlie does in the world of the film, Gulpilil does in the world at large; he engages in, to invoke Taylor's turn of phrase again, 'vital acts of transfer.' A far cry from the taxidermic display of ethnographic cinema, these acts are vital in both senses of the word. Not only are they important but they are also in service of a culture that is decidedly alive, characterised by both continuity and ongoing transformation.

### Performance As Encounter

*Charlie's Country* ensures the transferral of embodied knowledge by pressing its form in the service of a sustained and affectively charged intersubjective encounter, one that involves both Gulpilil as Charlie and the viewer. In the context of this encounter, the viewer is ideally positioned to bear witness to Gulpilil's/Charlie's experience, an act that, in the words of Dori Laub, involves knowing that experience 'from within' while simultaneously 'preserv[ing one's] own separate place, position and perspective' (Felman and Laub 1992, 58). As noted above, the film offers up an image of Charlie in its second shot, and the camera never leaves his presence from that point on, focusing on him and his experiences until the final shot, a close-up of his face as he looks offscreen and the credits roll. While this kind of sustained focus on a single character is already unusual, what distinguishes *Charlie's Country* even further is the fact that Charlie features in almost every shot of the film. To be sure, there are exceptions to this general tendency. Most importantly, the film contains multiple shot-reverse shot sequences that depict Charlie as he engages in exchanges with other people. Additionally, there are a limited number of, first, establishing shots that are unmoored from Charlie's exact location in order to give a more general sense of a scene's setting and, second, point of view shots that are followed, as per the conventions of suture, by a shot of Charlie looking. Far more frequently, however, the film presents a shot, usually of a space, that initially *seems* to be either an establishing or point of view shot, only to have Charlie then enter the frame, assuming the position of the camera's subject. In this way, *Charlie's Country* is a telling title: repeatedly over the course of the film's duration, the space on screen gets reorganised around Charlie's presence, existing as an environment to be interacted with rather than a landscape to be contemplated at a distance. These shots, in conjunction with the many that feature Charlie throughout their duration, ensure that the spectator maintains a position of proximity and access as events unfold.

Of the unusual shot varieties mentioned above, the one that best crystallises the general representational strategy of *Charlie's Country* is that which seems to be a point of view shot, but then turns out to be a(nother) shot of Charlie. The film's sixth shot is a case in point. After the sequence of actions that Charlie is engaged



**Figure 2.1** The camera's tracking movement coordinates with Charlie's mobile perspective. Source: *Charlie's Country* (2013). Directed by Rolf de Heer. Produced by Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal/Vertigo Productions. Frame Grab by Helen Krionas.

in when first introduced, he leaves his sleeping quarters in order to take a walk through his community. Accordingly, shots three, four, and five all feature him, at varying scales, in motion; additionally, shot five shows him looking at something as he walks. Shot six, in turn, begins as a long shot of a police station that seems to be a view from Charlie's mobile perspective (Figure 2.1). Not only does the syntax of shots suggest as much – shot five is a perfect set-up for an eyeline match – but the camera's tracking movement is perfectly coordinated in both pace and direction with Charlie's movement in previous shots. Before the shot ends, however, Charlie's hair and shoulder appear on the left side of the frame and remain there until shot seven is introduced one second later. As piecemeal and short-lived as the imagery of Charlie's body is in this shot, it is nonetheless salient since it jars viewers schooled in classical conventions, forcing them suddenly to reorient themselves and reread the image.

What shot six, and the many subsequent variations on it, achieve on a micro level, the film as a whole does on a macro one: it ensures that the spectator experience the film's events *with* Charlie rather than *as* him. In other words, it foregoes the means of producing a textually determined act of spectatorial identification and instead locates the spectator nearby. At first glance, this might seem like a lost opportunity for a film invested in realising the same kind of epistemological shift that *Ten Canoes* announces at its start, one that supplants a familiar story with one 'like you've never,' or at least rarely, 'seen before.' After all, in many of the foundational works of apparatus theory, most notably Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' identification with a figure on screen is a means of ensuring that figure's narrative authority while its alternative, objectification, is associated with lack of agency, power, and subjectivity. *Charlie's Country*, however, operates outside of such binaristic logic and embraces a third possibility, as if acutely aware that identification poses risks as well as rewards, the most significant of which is a

displacement of the figure of identification in all of his/her specificity. In other words, insofar as cinematic identification inevitably involves projection – projection of the spectating self onto the on-screen other – it has the potential to overwrite the subject whose experience is being narrated. Being located nearby, in contrast, accords the spectator the position of someone who has first-hand knowledge of Charlie's experiences but never at his expense.

Not only does the film ensure that the viewer is consistently in Charlie's presence as he engages in daily activities, thereby making his world readily accessible, but it also inscribes the viewer's presence in the film with the way it renders that world. In particular, the camerawork in the film is almost exclusively handheld. Thus even static shots, of which there are many, are only relatively static; as their framing shifts slightly, they produce the sense of an embodied look at the same time that they take another body, that of Charlie, as their subject. In bringing these two bodies together, the film produces an intersubjective encounter that is strikingly similar to those that Taylor describes in a chapter of *The Archive and the Repertoire* dedicated to Yuyachkani, the leading theatre collective in Peru. On one side of Taylor's encounters is the collective itself, which consistently pays heed to Peru's history of conflict, injustice, and violence in an effort to make it legible; as Taylor writes of one production in particular, 'trauma becomes transmittable, understandable through performance – through the reexperienced shudder, the retelling, the repeat' (208). On the other side is the audience, which comes through the act of viewing to constitute a community of witnesses, a wide and varied group of observers who occupy the liminal position that Laub identifies. As a result of that position, they are, Taylor argues, at enough of a remove to escape trauma's immediate effects, but sufficiently close to recognise 'their role in the ongoing history of oppression which, directly or indirectly, implicates them' (211). In the case of *Charlie's Country* a similar dynamic takes shape. While Gulipilil's performance as Charlie involves the (re)staging of fleeting embodied experiences that bespeak a history of victimisation and survival in the face of colonial trauma, the film's single-minded focus and handheld cinematography make the act of spectatorship one of witnessing as well.

While the role of witness might seem to be a passive one insofar as it involves acts of reception (watching and listening) rather than those of production (that is, acting in some fashion), both Laub and Taylor suggest that it is actually one endowed with considerable power. For Laub, the witness is integral to the very structure of testimony. As she writes in a landmark study of the genre, which she co-authored with Shoshana Felman, it is the witness's presence that allows the speaker's speech to 'assume the form of testimony' (Felman and Laub 1992, 58). In other words, as Roseanne Kennedy writes, testimony foregrounds the act of reception, being 'understood, rhetorically, as an address to an audience, which optimistically hopes for a response' (Kennedy 2011, 263). For Taylor, the witness not only participates in, and thereby enables, the production of an account of an experience, but also ensures that experience's ongoing acknowledgement.

More specifically, and more surprisingly in light of her association of performance with the repertoire, she ascribes to the audience of the Yuyachkani troupe an archival function: able to testify to the fact of trauma long after its performance concludes, that audience ensures the active memory of that which would otherwise be forgotten. Granted, *Charlie's Country* does not qualify as testimony per se due to the emphasis that scholars of it tend to place on acts of verbal narration: as Jane Kilby and Anthony Rowland write, image-based modes of representation 'require the supplement of language to do the work of testimony' (Kilby and Rowland 2014, 2); nor does it allow for the kind of encounter that theatre facilitates, one that brings performers and audience together in a particular space at a particular time. Yet insofar as the film's form simulates a defining attribute of both testimony and theatre – that is, the capacity for two bodies (be they individual or collective) to be present to each other in an act of communication – the claims made by Laub and Taylor can be extended to it as well. Indeed, Gulpilil's performance and its presentation condition an act of sustained intimacy and exchange, and the result is a record of something elusive: one man's way of being in a world built upon his marginalisation that lives on in both the material artifact of the film and the memory of the film's viewers.

What makes this encounter even more powerful is the fact that this way of being both grounds and exceeds the text, and context, of its presentation: the country at issue is not only Charlie's but Gulpilil's as well. On this count, Charlie's arrival at prison in the last quarter of the film is particularly noteworthy since it precipitates an act that is not only dehumanising but also incapable of being simulated: the shaving of Charlie's, and Gulpilil's, head (Figure 2.2). Underscoring the authenticity of this act with its form, the film captures the majority of the shaving process in one long take and positions Charlie in such a way – against a black background and facing the camera – that the scene's diegetic trappings



**Figure 2.2** The dehumanising act of shaving Charlie/Gulpilil's head. Source: *Charlie's Country* (2013). Directed by Rolf de Heer. Produced by Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal/Vertigo Productions. Frame Grab by Helen Krionas.

recede from view. What remains is the performance laid bare, 'the reexperienced shudder, the retelling, the repeat,' as it affects and transforms character, actor, and audience alike. While this moment may be exceptional in its starkness, it is nonetheless representative of the film as a whole. By virtue of the performer that lends it coherence from start to finish, *Charlie's Country* issues an embodied appeal to the viewer, speaking volumes on its own resistant and insistent terms.

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