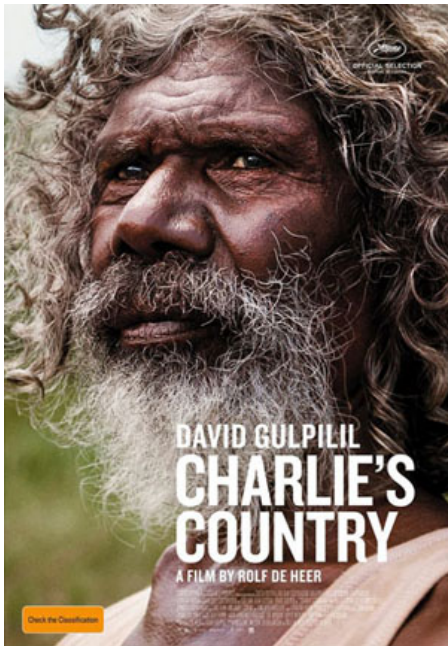


Charlie's Country

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.



Genre: Drama

Rating: M

Length: 108 minutes

Starring: David Gulpilil, Peter Djigirr, Luke Ford

Director: Rolf de Heer

Screen Writers: Rolf de Heer, David Gulpilil

Language: English, Yolngu with English sub-titles

Brief synopsis

Blackfella Charlie (Gulpilil) is getting older, and he's out of sorts. The "Intervention" is making life more difficult on his remote community, what with the proper policing of whitefella laws that don't generally make much sense. Also, Charlie's kin and ken seeming more interested in going along with things than doing anything about it. So Charlie takes off, to live the old way out in the bush, but in doing so sets off a chain of events in his life that has him return to his community chastened, and somewhat the wiser.

"De Heer's film is a slow indictment of the colonialist relationship between white law and Indigenous people. It is a film you need to settle back into and experience rather than try and get ahead of the

story. Through a slow burn, de Heer asks his audience to experience and reflect on Charlie's life and this complex clash of cultures." Jane Howard - The Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2013/oct/15/charlies-country-adelaide-review>

Questions for discussion

Some general questions might provide enough framework to get started:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there general theological themes that come to mind?

Living Under the Intervention

The *Northern Territory National Emergency Response* (also referred to as "**the intervention**") was a package of changes to welfare provision, law enforcement, land tenure and other measures, introduced by the Australian Federal Government under John Howard in 2007 to address allegations of rampant child sexual abuse and neglect in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. In the five years since the initiation of the Emergency Response there has not been one prosecution for child abuse come from the exercise.

The package was the Federal government's response to the Territory government's publication of *Little Children are Sacred*, but it implemented only two out of ninety-seven of the report's recommendations. The response has been criticised, but also received bipartisan parliamentary support, and it continued under Labor Governments in a modified form. The Emergency Response has since been replaced by the very similar *Stronger Futures Policy* which has continued under the Liberal Government. The most contentious issues have been the suspension of the Racial Discrimination legislation, the provision of housing only through leasing Aboriginal Lands back to the Commonwealth and managing Centrelink payments.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Territory_National_Emergency_Response

Charlie's Cheque/Money

After Charlie goes to the community office to receive his pension money he walks past several family members and gives them money. Aboriginal culture demands that kin are provided for as part of cultural obligations. It is often the case that a few moments after exiting the office an Aboriginal person finds that

most if not all of their pay is gone. Humbug! When I worked in an Aboriginal Community some of the workers asked me to set up a bank account for them so they could hide part of their earnings. This was not for them, they explained, but so they would have money to buy presents for family at Christmas. Charlie also bums cigarettes off family. He doesn't smoke but burns them in his campfire.

Managing money is one of many issues highlighted when the two cultures come into contact. Discuss. What other aspects of culture did you notice in the film?

The Sick Man

Charlie is asked to look after a sick man in a wheelchair. Old Lulu says he has kidney disease and is dying. Charlie relates how he will be taken from his community to Darwin and he will die alone away from his country. Later when Charlie is in hospital in Darwin he comforts the old man on his death bed.

These events indicate the strong attachment of many traditional people to their country. What cruelty is evidenced here?

Charlie's House

Charlie has a house but he lives on the edge of the community because his allocated house is overcrowded with family. His home is a self made shelter using bits of scrap timber and corrugated iron over a mattress. He goes to the Community Manager to ask for a house for himself. The answer is no, you've already got a house. "But Errol, you've got a house and a job, on my land. Where is my house and my job?" asks Charlie. *Overcrowding in houses in Aboriginal communities is a common problem. It is also a cultural problem for people who have not been used to living in close proximity? What problems do you see as a result of overcrowding? What other issues are raised by this incident?*

Charlie Helps Out

The Police are in need of help to track some white fellas that are trafficking dope on Aboriginal Lands. They ask Charlie for help. Unbeknownst to them Charlie has already helped the traffickers find a safe place to camp. He has his fun with fooling the police into thinking he is a clever tracker and then points them to the dope runners' camp. He high-tails it back to the community on foot so the traffickers don't know. The police "owe him one" but the debt is never paid.

How do the police behave towards Aboriginal people in this film? On the APY Lands in South Australia policing in communities is done by trained Aboriginal Police Aides and there are now Aboriginal people fully trained as police officers in South Australia. Do you think Aboriginal police would have made a difference?

Whitefella Law

Charlie and his mate, Bobby, go hunting in the bush. They shoot a large buffalo and are excited to be going back to the community with so much meat. However they are stopped at the community border by the white police who confiscate their guns - no licences - and their catch. Later Charlie goes to get a licence but needs \$60 which he hasn't got. His gun has been modified and is therefore an illegal firearm. He won't get it back, licence or not. So Charlie decides he will make a spear to go hunting the old way. The police catch him walking down the road with it and confiscate it as a "dangerous weapon".

Would this experience be repeated in a non-Aboriginal Country town. Do you think the police would act differently? Why?

Hungry

Charlie rails against the bad food in the shop. On the APY Lands we saw community stores selling poor quality food (e.g. very fat, cheap cuts of meat) at big prices because of transport costs and the overpriced fresh vegetables were no longer fresh at the end of the week. It was easier to afford and to eat the bad stuff. As for fizzy drinks and sugar heaped into tea! Match that with the high incidence of diabetes and kidney disease. Charlie is hungry and asks his friend for food. Bobby points out there is a whole supermarket out in the bush. So Charlie and Bobby take off to live in the old way.

Health is a crucial issue in traditional Aboriginal communities like Ramingining. Is Charlie right about the food? How could Charlie's response have been supported?

I'm a hunter

Charlie loses his friend when the car he has borrowed from the police, borrowed not stolen because they haven't paid him for his work, runs out of petrol at the edge of town. Charlie continues into the bush. He builds a shelter and fashions spears. He finds bush food and catches a barramundi which he cooks to perfection and eats with relish. He starts to paint with bush materials. Just as it seems things are going well

the rain comes. Charlie get wet, cold and hungry. He develops a cough and makes for the cave shelter of his ancestors but then feels they have left. He returns to his camp and is found by his friend Bobby and taken to Darwin by Air Ambulance.

What options are there in the old ways? Discuss?

The system is broken

Charlie discharges himself from hospital and makes for the streets. He is found by an Aboriginal woman who uses him to get beer and wine from the liquor outlet as she is banned and Charlie's ID works. Charlie goes on the grog with his new friends in the long grass on the edge of Darwin. Police raids just send them into hiding. Eventually two elders confront Charlie and accuse him of shaming their people because he is associating with a woman of the 'wrong skin', thus breaking cultural law.

During a raid Charlie takes a shovel to the window of a police car. He is beaten up by the young police officer who had previously worked in Charlie's Community and then is arrested. The young policeman announces he won't be soft on Charlie anymore? "Sorry I hit you" he says after the door of the paddy wagon is closed! Charlie ends up in prison.

Aboriginal people represent only 3% of the total population, yet more than 28% of Australia's prison population are Aboriginal. In the NT it is far worse.

<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/aboriginal-prison-rates>

Something is clearly wrong. Does this film suggest any reasons what this might be? Discuss.

Back to his roots

Charlie ends up back in the community. Bobby announces he has a gun licence and has his rifle back. He has also trained as a ranger and is uniformed and employed. He comes with one of the elders to ask again if Charlie will teach the young people to dance. Charlie, from time to time in the film remembers the time when he danced for the Queen when she opened the Opera House, and one of his prize possessions is a photo of the event. Again he suggests another person to do it but when told that person is sick and gone to Darwin he agrees. Charlie has his job.

For Aboriginal people culture and identity are paramount to understanding who they are. It provides meaning and purpose that is otherwise lost in a whitefella world. *How is this shown in the film? How does the well meaning whitefella intervention miss the point? Do you see any answers?*

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