The Afterlife of Colonial Violence in the ‘Double Life’ of David Gulpilil

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If trauma is both a temporality (of afterwardsness) and the foundation of subjectivity (constituted by an encounter with the strangeness of the other, as Jean Laplanche argues), how might a history of media encounters with Australia’s most prominent Aboriginal screen actor, David Gulpilil, unsettle current thinking about traumatic events and traumatised subjects? This paper draws on archival research into ‘the double life’ of David Gulpilil (a theme repeated compulsively for 40 years), in order to explore the relation between media temporality and the nation’s symbolic attempts to come to grips with the traumatic impact of settler colonialism. One of the aims of this project is to look more closely at the capacity of the media, including cinema, to engage in a process of ‘working through’ scenarios of colonial and ethical violence, which have congealed in the nation’s social imaginary over time—to the extent that an iconography of settler colonialism (featuring floggings, spearings, massacres, rapes and hangings) has become banal rather than shocking, entertaining rather than politicising. Yet, it is possible to argue that this tired iconography occasionally recovers its capacity to shock, to sting, to open up a space for affective response and ethical engagement with the unfinished business of a colonial past which doggedly refuses to be consigned to the history books.

One such moment occurred in October-November 2008, when SBS Television (the national multicultural broadcaster) screened the documentary series First Australians to much critical acclaim but, predictably, ordinary ratings (see Age television critic, Debi Enker, lamenting the neglect by audiences of this ‘quality’ series in favour of reality TV and crime shows). While I have no doubt that the series will have a long life in the educational market as a landmark, archival history of the colonial violence which founded the nation, my interest in First Australians has to do with the way it crystallises the dialectic of ‘energising’ and ‘exhausting’ the iconography of colonial violence in the Australian media. This innovative series is an outstanding example of media historiography, and, as such, it reveals the limits of historiography as a mode of working through historical trauma. By contrast, the media archive, collected and catalogued under the name of David Gulpilil, is an open-ended text with multiple entry points and pathways, constituting something like a ‘working through’ without cure or closure, resolution or redemption. To engage with this media archive is to become immersed in an intersubjective space where the traumatic afterwardsness of colonial violence is bound up with, and registered in, the strangeness of the question Gulpilil asks of us: “Who am I?”