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Belatedly, I've been reading through the articles on the film Breaker Morant in the Critical Arts Monograph (1) from July and trying to work out why, when I find nearly everything their writers say valuable and illuminating and justified, I still feel they have missed the main point -- and why their articulation of all the misgivings one felt watching the film doesn't alter the sense of modest excitement one carried away from the experience at the time. Why, I've been wondering, was one excited in the first place?

Perhaps because, in spite of all the critical and directorial hoo-ha, it was really a little film, fundamentally unpretentious, even unoriginal, and yet it made some kind of point, in a way that didn't feel unsubtle, and that didn't seem to be inhibiting one's free intelligence; the excitement was the promise that a popular film of this kind could do something more than reiterate, could actually raise issues...The film produced a kind of confidence in the viewer, and not the kind that is used in order to bamboozle him -- it put him in possession of his faculties. It's plain what the main factor in producing this confidence was: a story is told, and told brilliantly. It would be a mistake of course to suppose that the film's argument is presented with the same clarity -- but because of the story's clarity, the viewer comes to expect a better argument than he gets, to respect his own impulse to figure things out. The viewer is presented with the familiar, the myths of his society being one aspect of this -- and the familiarity manages to establish a kind of security, a comfortable base camp, without producing the usual mixture of boredom and empathy (empathy because there's nothing better available, and one has to enjoy oneself somehow). The actors present stereotypes, and commit themselves to doing so -- but they don't commit their total personality and intelligence to the stereotype, as the Hollywood 'star' does. There remains a quantum of awareness that hasn't been sunk in the role, causing the actor to define the character from outside, as it were, as well as from the inside. Thus there is air to breathe in round the characters' presence -- even if they are stereotypes, and even if
the stereotypes are presented with sympathy and conviction, and
underwritten by the director; no character's consciousness or
self-made myth completely dominates the film -- not even
Morant's, in the last instance; all carry a sense of limitation,
of boundedness, the possibility of being appraised differently
from the outside. Empathy is never complete. And the moments
of emotionality in the film always leave a space for the intel-
ligence of the viewer, are dependent on it. The film follows
all the predictable curves and peaks of the old formula, but it
feels different. Finally, the care taken with the film, the
concern to do the thing a bit better at every point than is
really necessary, apparently out of responsibility to the func-
tion of narration, establishes itself like an atmosphere; it
draws a response of gratified alertness from the viewer.

It's plain, then, that I don't agree entirely with Susan
Gardner's sense that the conventional narrative techniques excl-
cude critical consciousness -- I think that some kind of alien-
ation-effect is at work in the film, sometimes even in spite of
the director's intentions. But then I disagree with her whole
sense of the film as first and foremost an exercise in myth-
building, though I can't deny the importance of this as a sub-
sidiary element; my sense is that the film works through stereo-
type, through myth, towards an end which is insight. Limited insight, but
insight all the same. Nor am I happy with Michael Vaughan's view
which seems to require that this insight should be of the same
kind as the historian's. As far as the point of the film is
concerned, Keyan Tomaselli seems near enough the mark:

Breaker Morant is an acknowledgement of social guilt, help-
lessness in the face of the higher forces which cause war,
and of the violation of human dignity and integrity consequ-
ent upon political and economic interests of the state.

Witton, the youngest of the accused, a bewildered victim of
colonialist idealism, surely plays a pivotal role in the film.
His disillusionment reflects the viewer's own supposed progress
to a greater understanding of the brutal reality of imperialism.
The philosophy the film ends up with is a mystificatory one, in
which historical forces are accepted as incomprehensible, the
forces of a fate which is to be accepted with manly stoicism; but
in terms of its action on us the film does ask us to live, or
relive, a demystification, a disillusionment, and relive it in a
fairly intense and fresh way -- above all in an intellectually
alert and circumspect way. The film's limitation is that it is
Morant -- poet, aristocrat, natural man, casting a cold eye on
life and death -- who ends up as father-figure to Witton; his
cynicism, apparently, the wisdom required by Witton's bewilder-
ment. The film, in other words, takes us a certain way, but then
it gets stuck in Morant's own bewilderment. But it is still an
achievement, however unwilling, that we can see Morant's bewilder-
ment as such, in spite of the stoic nobility of his posture, in a
way that would be impossible if he were really being given the
full mythical treatment. If I were watching a Hollywood movie, I
know I would either have to abandon such heretical thoughts about
the hero or I would have to stop believing in the character being
presented altogether; with this film I can point to the shape on
the screen and say to myself: That man is bewildered. As a
thinking man, I appreciate that.

I'm puzzled why I should defend a film at such length when it isn't even a great film, but perhaps there is something new about it which isn't what the makers are advertising. Also, I think I had a sense of something grudging in the analyses in question, a kind of moralistic priggishness about the film's orientation, a lack of imagination (or realism) about the conditions of representation in popular art. Vaughan writes, for instance:

If the analysis of the trial and execution of some officers of an Australian unit for murdering prisoners were to have a radical value, then the whole issue would have to be appraised within an ever-widening context of social and political forces. In other words, radical enquiry would have to permeate every aspect of the historical context within which the core incident was situated.

All very well and good, but how is any film-maker to put together a good story out of all that? Surely no more can be asked of a popular film than that it lift some corner of the veil on some limited aspect of reality, or register the shock between reality and illusion, preferably in such a way as to encourage enquiry. Historical analysis is something different. Nobody would deny the importance and interest of the analysis Vaughan and Gardner have made of the reactionary elements in Breaker Morant, of the myths it lives from and its shaping of them, but it is surely the first duty of a radical criticism to latch on to the potentially radical elements in a work, to unravel them from their cocoon of myth and mystique, and establish them so that they can no longer be denied or subverted. There is a kind of defeatism in doing the other thing on its own: "These works are bound to fail to the enemy, they are tainted already, the most we can do is exorcize some of their influence." In short, it's important for the Left to find a way of speaking about what is liberating in art, even when that art is embroiled in ideology; if we can't learn to do this, we succumb to a kind of romantic faddishness: deprived by our fastidiousness of artistic nourishment in the world we understand, we tramp after the exotic (whose myths we don't perceive), or respond with a spurious, self-generated thrill to the latest out of the maw of revolution (somewhere), or to amateurish splurges that reveal the right perspectives.

Reference

Breaker Morant: Missing the Point?

M. M. Carlin

The response of your contributors to the film Breaker Morant