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presence of Africa - grave, formal, dignified - is impressed upon us in a role of grandeur: the role of recorder, of witness, of judge: the real witness, the final judge. This man is the only black man in the room - and the few glimpses we get of him are all the more potently expressive of that which the film is supposed to have ignored. In this scene of Africa the director is telling us something - telling us, with the tact of the artist, as opposed to the clumsy obviousness of the propaganda-monger. Here sits History, he says - and History is black.

But of course, if you hunger and thirst after obviousness - and also, if you can't *see* films - you will no doubt continue to believe that the question of the original occupants of South Africa is "remarkably absent" from *Breaker Morant*. It is not so - and the proof, I repeat, is only the most striking among more than one example.

Breaker Morant and Questions of Interpretation and Critical Strategy: A Reply to MM Carlin and P. Strauss

Michael Vaughan

M. M. Carlin and Peter Strauss (hereafter, M.C. and P.S. respectively) have written to *Critical Arts*, criticising the way in which Susan Gardner and I review the film *Breaker Morant* (my own piece was purportedly a review of *The Breaker*, a novel by the Australian Kit Denton, from which material for the film was drawn - but this is no longer really relevant). These responses of M.C. and P.S. indicate that the merit of *Breaker Morant* is the object of some controversy amongst people who are broadly on the Left. I must thank M.C. and P.S. for their criticisms, to the extent that these will alert readers of *Critical Arts* to the controversial status of the film and so encourage further debate about this status.

It seems to me that there is a noteworthy difference of emphasis between the letters of M.C. and P.S. M.C. is concerned primarily with questions of interpretation, and only secondarily with questions of critical strategy (or theory). P.S., on the other hand, is concerned primarily with questions of critical strategy (for people on the Left), and only secondarily with questions of interpretation. Taking these two letters together, then, two types of question are raised by the criticisms developed in these letters: questions of interpretation, and questions of (Left) critical strategy.

Before replying to the specific criticisms of M.C. and P.S., addressed to these two areas, I will, for the sake of clarity, recapitulate the argument of my piece, "*The Breaker* and the Questions of Imperial Justice", and situate this argument within its context. I argued there that the central concern of *Breaker Morant* was with a conflict between certain imperial and colonial

conceptions of military justice. I then criticised the narrowness (the non-radicalness) of this concern in that the forces of neither imperialism nor colonialism - which are, of course, though sometimes opposed in their local interests, absolutely interdependent - were brought seriously into question by it.

The context of this argument was that the film had achieved a kind of dual recognition. It had succeeded on the commercial circuit, and at the same time got onto the Film Festival repertoire. This rather rare duality gave the film a fascinating status, quite apart from its special interest for South African audiences. The Film Festival side of *Breaker Morant*'s success could imply that the film had a radical-critical dimension to it. It didn't simply operate within conventional attitudes: it challenged them.

My review was intended to pour cold water on the idea that *Breaker Morant* really had a radical-critical dimension. This was the point I wanted to make as simply and directly as possible, and which has now led to me being accused, amongst other things, of dogmatism, of priggishness and lack of imagination. I may well be wrong about this film. At least, subsequent interest in the film and debate about it proves me to have been over-laconic in my criticism. And here I am willing to admit that my review had limitations.

My analysis was very brief. In any case, my mandate was to review *The Breaker*, and, while I attempted to link this with *Breaker Morant* as much as possible, knowing this would be the centre of interest, I could not fully develop my case about the film. All the same, my focus was undoubtedly too narrow. I focussed upon the film's historically-given subject-matter, and directed my critique at limitations in the film's historical awareness. To some extent, of course, this historical subject has an implicit contemporary relevance. Attitudes towards historical actions such as the Boer War, taken up in the present, bear fairly obvious implications with regard to alignments in the contemporary world.

None the less, it was important that I connect the historical basis of the film's subject-matter to the question of its contemporary relevance as clearly and precisely as possible; and I didn't really push through to this connection in my argument. In her article, Susan Gardner goes into this issue very suggestively, I think. Essentially, she interprets the contemporisation of the historical subject in terms of its expressiveness for the mythological structure of the white Australian male psyche.

I agree with Susan Gardner's argument, which I find complementary to my own. Still, there were questions that needed to be asked, from the perspective of my differently-oriented approach: questions concerning contemporary provocations to the conception, production and reception of *Breaker Morant*. Like: What historical factors made a minor conflict between British imperial agents and Australian colonial volunteers, in the latter stages of the Boer war of 1899-1902, seem like good film material to some contemporary Australian film makers? What factors lie behind its dual achievement, commercially and on the Festival scene? I

readily concede, then, that my critique of *Breaker Morant* was strategically rather short-shighted. I concentrated upon exposing limitations in the historical awareness of the film, and implied that such exposure made any further account of the contemporary meaning, the contemporary 'life' of the film superfluous. P.S. takes issue with this assumption, in his reply - and rightly. Whether the way in which he interprets the contemporary 'life' of *Breaker Morant* offers a valid model for radical-critical strategy is another matter. It seems to me that reaction to my own bias of emphasis pushes him to the opposite extreme. He gives an elaborate account of the 'life' of the film, in the form of its effect upon his personal sensibility. He neglects, however, to take up - to relate to the predicament of his own sensibility - the specific historical issues raised in my critique (except in a vague reference to 'the myths of his society', and in an equally vague expression of agreement with my *historical* critique).

M.C. and P.S. have alerted me to a weakness in my own critical approach to *Breaker Morant*. However, I am not convinced by the specific content of their alternative approaches to the film, either with regard to questions of interpretation, or with regard to questions of critical strategy. Let me now take issue with this specific content. I will reply first to the criticisms of M.C.

M.C. challenges me essentially on a question of interpretation. I argued that the 'justice of imperialism' was not a 'fundamental question' in *Breaker Morant*. I saw British imperialism as brought into question only with regard to its capacity to suppress the claims of colonial culture: the values, actions and ultimately the lives of some Australian irregulars. I didn't equate this type of questioning with a 'fundamental' questioning of imperialism in that, for me, the essence of imperialism resides in the expansion of the dynamic of the home economy through the expropriation and exploitation of indigenous peoples. Of the claims of black Africa - or, with regard to the contemporary scene, the claims of the Third World - this film seemed to me to have not an inkling.

Of course, given the focal subject-matter, the claims of black Africa could only be acknowledged allusively, or tangentially. Indeed, one of the questions about the film must be why such an *incestuous* type of conflict - between members of the same imperial family - was selected for focus. Why, in our present world, should such a conflict seem worthy of such a focus? Could it be that the success of this film depends partly on its inspired choice of an intraspecific conflict - within the species of dominant male Anglo-Saxon values - from which fundamentally undermining questions of race and sex have been largely *excluded*? Could it be that the public for this film has the opportunity to enjoy simultaneously the nostalgic and reactionary dominance of a male Anglo-Saxon mythology, and the critical energy generated by a confrontation between the (good little colonial) individual and the (big bad imperial) system? If such is indeed the case, then it is clear that the critical dimension of the film is in some way subordinate to its nostalgic-mythological dimension, and thus highly ambiguous.

According to M.C., however, I have misinterpreted the film on this basic issue. M.C. argues that black Africa *does* have a

significant presence in *Breaker Morant*, which means that my whole case concerning the limitations of the film's treatment of imperialism falls away. M.C. bases everything upon a single image, that provided by the black recorder of the court proceedings in the trial scenes. According to M.C., the marginality of this image of the black recorder is merely apparent. Properly understood - properly seen (!) - this image has a potently symbolic eloquence which establishes it in a central place in the film.

M.C. takes up an issue of interpretation: but, of course, all interpretation is premised upon some conceptions about critical strategy, critical methodology. It seems to me that M.C.'s methodology - the methodology that produces the interpretation of the black recorder - is somewhat naive and threadbare. Everything is made to depend upon a language of the eyes, of 'sight'. Problems of interpretation are resolved - dissolved - in this way into the simple performance of a physiological function (thus: "I haven't read the novel, but I *have* seen the film - and 'seen' would appear to be the operative word": "But if we *look* - it is a visual medium, after all - we see something surely much more than a clerk?"). Here, M.C. makes unconscious use of a form of symbolism! The language of a simple physiological function is made to symbolise the intellectual apprehension of aesthetic images. By this means - since interpretation is understood simply as visual perception - the whole process of aesthetic experience is given an objective, non-continuous quality. Aesthetic experience, it would then appear, goes beyond issues of political contention, achieves a level of metapolitical truth.

M.C.'s disagreement with me therefore scarcely takes the form of debate at all. There can be little real discussion between one who 'sees' and one who propagandises. The only way open for me to move towards a closer understanding with M.C. as to the significance of *Breaker Morant*, given M.C.'s methodological sense, is to stop propagandising, and learn how to 'see'. (It follows quite naturally, I suppose, from this methodology, that certain aesthetic-psychological foibles are attributed to me, in order to explain my propogandistic obsession. Apparently, my kind 'expect' certain things from art: 'What did Michael Vaughan and your contributors expect? Urban labourers in rags? Peasants with hoes? Warriors with shield and assegai? Alas, art will disappoint them ...)'. Unfortunately, too, we're inclined to 'hunger and thirst after obviousness'.

Those of my kind - the propagandists - who reject a methodology which reduces questions of interpretation to questions of visual perception, may be inclined to feel dissatisfied - aesthetically as well as politically - with the way in which M.C. interprets the role of the black recorder in *Breaker Morant*. Is it possible for a few brief and marginal images to achieve weight and centrality of significance within the total discourse of a film? Surely an aesthetic problem of some complexity, and requiring careful elaboration, is posed here? It is not sufficient simply to dwell upon the images in themselves, in order to 'see' how much meaning they can be made to bear. It is necessary to go further than this, and consider the relation of these marginal images to the imagery that spatially and temporally, and in terms of dramatic elaboration, dominates the film. Perhaps this dominant imagery relates to certain marginal images in such a way as

to give these latter a greater weight than is 'apparent'. If such is indeed the case, however, it should be clear that we have moved into a more complex aesthetic dimension than can be adequately handled by a methodology of visual perception. Is M.C. not aware of a strain upon language in the way in which the terminology is pressed by the needs of the argument?

> He is merely a clerk. He is not allowed to say anything. He appears to be marginal to the case. But if we *look* - it is a visual medium, after all - we see something surely much more than a clerk?

There is appearance and there is ... appearance!

So far I have dwelt largely upon the methodological implications and constraints of M.C.'s interpretation. What of the content of this interpretation? What does M.C. see?

> Here is a man dressed with the utmost formality - a man of grave demeanour, and noble bearing. Quietly, imperturbably, this man records plea, prosecution, evidence, defence (...) Surely, here, symbolically presented, is the African nation on the African continent? (...) the formal dress and kingly bearing of this solitary man - so eloquent in his enforced silence - are telling us something much more interesting and intensely relevant: here sits Africa itself (...) In this courtroom, the presence of Africa - grave, formal, dignified - is impressed upon us in a role of grandeur: the role of recorder, of witness, of judge: the real witness, the final judge. (...) Here sits History(...) and History is black.

I can allow, perhaps, that 'a man dressed with the utmost formality' presents us with an image of fairly neutral visual perception. After this introductory gambit, however, we are drawn with increasing rapidity into a perspective on black Africa that - in the consistent guise of neutral visual perception - contains a bewildering variety of specific assumptions and evaluations concerning historical, social and political processes on the African continent. We are moved from the narrow domain of neutrality to the vast domain of contention and commitment - without a wink of the perceiving 'eye'.

A few questions are begged here. According to what interpretation of black Africa is the type of black individual represented by the clerk enabled to bear the portentous symbolic role of 'Africa itself'? What has happened to the claims of other social classes and groupings on the African continent? (Labourers and peasants, indeed!) Are these diverse claims all subsumed within the perspective of this type of individual ('This solitary man')? Does Africa have a single unitary essence? Are there no significant social antagonisms in black Africa?

What is the function of the regal imagery associated with this character? How does M.C. reconcile the untainted dignity and independence ascribed to the clerk with the subordination of his

role within the imperial system? Does this subordination in no way impinge upon his faculties: is he not really subordinated at all (why does M.C. give such an approving tick to the formality of the clerk's dress, and to the gravity of his demeanour - when these are by no means unequivocal signs of cultural independence, of intrinsic nobility, or of unswerving pursuit of the liberation of the people?)?

In short, M.C.'s apocalyptic shorthand version of the historical process ignores a host of issues concerning the relation between an educated African minority and the imperial and colonial powers. and between this minority and the mass of the African peoples - issues that have surely not yet found a clear historical resolution, as at the present? M.C. offers us 'History' in the guise of a romanticisation of the role of the educated minority - a role at once regal and popular, indigenous and Westernised, its contradictory strains present in the language that refers to it, but only to be charmed away by rhetorical will.

Let me turn now to the case made by P.S., a case primarily of critical strategy. The position P.S. takes up is that of a shared political commitment, but with a significant difference of opinion as to the use this commitment should make of art. It seems to me that both M.C. and P.S. attribute an inherently liberatory quality to 'art'. P.S. is less blatant about this than M.C. (thus:M.C.: 'But art avoids the obvious - that's the whole point'; P.S. : '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'. Why does P.S. refer to art as 'embroiled' in ideology - as though art were essentially distinct from ideology, but forced into an immersion in this alien medium through some vague contingency?). Nevertheless, one can, I think, detect a defensiveness in his attitude towards art per se - and this defensiveness gives rise to what I can only see as rhetorical excesses, as in the peroration of his reply.

A concern to defend art per se seems to me mistaken from the start: given our political commitment, and the strategies associated with it. I'd like to quote Raymond Williams on this (his argument concerns the concept of 'Literature', but can equally be applied to 'Art'):

> It would be easy to say, it is a familiar rhetoric, that literature operates in the emergent cultural sector, that it represents the new feelings, the new meanings, the new values. We might persuade ourselves of this theoretically, by abstract argument, but when we read much literature, over the whole range, without the sleight-of-hand of calling Literature only that which we have already selected as embodying certain meanings and values at a certain scale of intensity, we are bound to recognize that the act of writing, the practices of discourse in writing and speech, the making of novels and poems and plays and theories, all this activity takes place in all areas of the culture. (1)

I feel, then, that an implicit term in the style of P.S.'s reply to my review is an unnecessary concern with the status of 'Art'

in Left discourse and strategy. That said, I will now consider more closely the case P.S. makes for a different kind of strategic involvement with *Breaker Morant* from mine: a more positive, sympathetic one.

I think that, to some degree, P.S.'s criticism of my approach to this work is based upon a misperception: misperception is certainly encouraged by the drift of this criticism. Thus, P.S. assumes some kind of agreement between us that *Breaker Morant* has a significantly radical element to it. It is on the basis of this assumption that his criticism of my incorrect strategy proceeds. Instead of fostering the radical element of *Breaker Morant*, I kill it off, out of a dogmatic concern with a total harmony between the historical and political perspectives of Art and those that I subscribe to in a more theoretical dimension (M.C., not so far from this attitude to me, referred to 'propoganda' and 'obviousness'). On the basis of the assumption that we concur in seeing a radical element in *Breaker Morant*, P.S. addresses some rather personal remarks to Susan Gardner and myself:

> 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.

This assumption culminates in the following statement, crucial to P.S.'s position:

> It is surely the *first* duty of a radical criticism to latch on to the potentially radical elements in a work before all else, 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 fall to the enemy, they are tainted already, the most we can do is exorcize some of their influence".

As it happens - and as I thought I had made plain in my review - I did *not* see a significantly radical dimension in *Breaker Morant*. This being the case, it seems to me that the tendency of P.S.'s comments upon my piece is inappropriate. It is, I think, necessary for him to establish much more precisely than he does the nature of the allegedly 'radical elements' in this film, before proceeding to denigrate my aesthetic sensibility in such spirited and rhetorical style. Someone who doesn't find 'radical elements' in a particular film, isn't ever going to be persuaded into the strategy of 'unravelling' them!

P.S. *does* give some indication as to where he finds the radical value of *Breaker Morant*. Before proceeding to this, however, I want to make a few reflections on the position-statement quoted above. In the first place, then, P.S. consistently refers to *Breaker Morant* as 'popular art' (a questionable definition, but I will come back to this issue later). In line with this, he casts himself momentarily in a populist role:

> 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 etc., etc.

A confusion seems to enter here. Does P.S. imagine that because the film is oriented towards 'popular' (or mass-commercial) reception, critical discourse about it must adopt an analogous orientation? Surely such an analogy, whether desired or not, cannot actually be practised? *Critical Arts* is a specialist journal for a small, radical readership, and debates conducted within its pages cannot be expected to have a significant impact on the 'popular' (or mass-commercial) reception of art - whether in the form of incontrovertible unravellings or in that of exorcisms! Criticism is a specific discourse, engaged in a specific public. P.S.'s lapse into broadly populist gestures confuses this.

A 'popular' film like *Breaker Morant* is borne along by a momentum we can't do much to affect - let's make no mistake about that! What *we* can do - for our own sakes - is come to a better understanding of the 'myths' that are directed at 'popular' (or mass-commercial) publics, and that, for reasons we also need to understand as clearly as possible, are engaged with by these publics and made some sense of. In the case of my review of *Breaker Morant*, I wanted to point out, as a contribution to this type of understanding, that some Australian film makers of undoubted talent had produced a film whose foremost effect was to celebrate reactionary Anglo-Saxon colonial attitudes. The way in which I'd like to see discussion of the film go is towards a better sense of the reasons behind resort to this kind of historical-mythological stimulus in the present conjecture, and the reasons why it comes, in this specifically talented form, from Australia, from a source outside of the mass-production film giants.

This is a different way of posing the issues for a radical readership from that of P.S., who wants us to engage in the patient labour of unravelling cocoons (this is, after all, a strange line to take with a film whose effect allegedly depends upon its 'popular' character, its telling of a 'good story' which can nevertheless 'lift some corner of the veil' and 'encourage enquiry' - it lifts a veil *and* spins a cocoon?). P.S. strives after irreconcilable ends - and thus gets his metaphors mixed - in that he wants at once to advocate a radical -critical strategy and to preserve a generalised reverence for Art. It is his reverence for Art that makes him bring out the image of the critic's patient labour in unravelling cocoons, an image which is so patently inappropriate to the popular object which he had just previously established *Breaker Morant* as. The tension between radicalism and reverence for Art leads to a confusion about the political dimensions of works of art and criticism. The context in which cocoon-unravelling is to be politically beneficial is left extremely vague: it has an aura of timeless virtue.

What of the concrete radical value that P.S. attributes to *Breaker Morant*? The crux of the matter, here, seems to reside in the way in which the film's public is confronted with the 'bewilderment' and 'disillusionment' of its central characters' experience of 'the brutal reality of imperialism'. P.S. quotes from Keyan Tomaselli's article in corroboration of his view. Now, I can see that, in an age of totalitarian structures and

pressures, the view of this theme as radical is certainly plausible. I doubt, though, whether such a *generalised* conception of a theme has much significant political meaning. What productive political consciousness is it supposed to promote? What 'enquiry' is it likely to 'encourage'? It is dangerous to abstract so generalised a theme from its context in the overall discourse of the film. We need to remind ourselves that bewilderment and disillusionment are generated in the film by the monstrous ingratitute of imperialism's response to the eagerly helping hands that are volunteered in its cause, without any question as to the validity of this cause - either before ingratitude or afterwards. We need to remind ourselves, too, that there are far more significant aspects to the 'reality of imperialism' than are highlighted in the perhaps rather facile confrontation between the naive enthusiasm of the 'good little colonials' and the cynical brutality of the imperial system which catches the radical fancies of P.S. and K.T. Indeed it is my suggestion that, crucially, the specific confrontation with which *Breaker Morant* is concerned has the property of *inhibiting* the development of questions concerning the basic rationale of imperialism.

A final comment is, I think, called for on the use to which P.S. puts the concept of the 'popular' in connection with *Breaker Morant*. This film is constantly referred to in his letter as an example of popular art'; as 'popular film'. Speaking generally, it is surely the case that the concept of the 'popular' requires very careful and explicit elaboration in the context of radical-critical discourse, especially when this concept is applied in relation to mass-commercial aesthetic genres? How is the 'people' seen as constituted? What role is the 'people seen as playing in art that is allegedly its own: that is, 'popular'? It seems to me illegitimate for P.S. to make the forceful strategic use that he does of the concept of the 'popular', without in any way attempting to define his understanding of this concept, without in any way acknowledging the issues involved in the concept. Is something like *Breaker Morant* all we can mean when we conceptualise 'popular art'? P.S. would seem to say so.

Speaking more particularly, it is surely doubly questionable to make use of this concept in the context of the film's circulation in South Africa? To what extent has the 'people' of South Africa had any say in this film? This question could be addressed to M.C. as much as to P.S.

Reference

1. Williams, R. 1980: "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory". *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. Verso, London

Reassuring the Politicians": A Reply to Peter Strauss

Susan Gardner

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Peter Strauss' concern with potentially pregressive aspects of mass/popular cultural products is most welcome: particularly his implication that materialist aesthetics must account for the *pleasure* (presumably more complicated than wish-fulfillment or escape) that they can afford. Although he caricatures "radical criticism" at the end of his letter, it must fairly be conceded that some unnecessarily sombre analyses of popular films have appeared. Moreover, such analyses are sometimes tainted by condescending or conspiratorial attitudes towards producers and consumers. Granted that an audience's class and other interests may be manipulated in a popularised story, assertions that aud audiences are simply dupes or pawns lead understanding no further when we speculate about the appeal of films such as *The Deerhunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, or, in this case, *Breaker Morant*. Moreover, the positive potential of traditional story-telling devices is frequently undersetimated. As Colin McArthur of the British Film Institute has argued concerning a television series on Scottish history, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil*:

> There is a tendency among those seeking alternatives to the dominant bourgeois forms and practices to reject out of hand the whole catalogue of techniques and effects of bourgeois art and pose radical alternatives on a one-to-one basis. As an example ... the central reliance of bourgeois art on dramatic climaxes and *crescendi* is felt to require, on the part of some radical practitioners, a commitment on severely cerebral structures and to forms of de-dramatization. This, of course, is ... to be decided within the overall strategy of particular works, but an across-the-board rejection of dramatic pacing and climax should be viewed with great caution. ... it is difficult to resist the conviction that, *in an appropriate mix of methods and techniques designed to foreground conceptual issues and provoke reflection*, traditional strategies must retain a place.

Yet I think it is misleading to assume that an argument shaped as mine was (an exercise stressing deconstruction) consisted only of negative criticism rather than a fuller critique: both analysis and synthesis were involved. Since Strauss has written candidly about his responses to *Breaker Morant*, I shall give a similarily personal account of the method I attempted for understanding a film which I, too, found compelling. A joke and a dare ("Let's see if a feminist can write anything sensible about a 'military'" - this when neither my challenger nor I had seen it) became an ebgrossing probe into what Raymond Williams would call *Breaker Morant's* "conditions and circumstances of production". What began as scribbling virtually indecipherable notes in the dark, popcorn-saturated atmosphere of cinemas in Brisbane, London and Grahamstown turned into questions about this particular film's circuit of production, distribution and exchange, and consumption. This process is, of course, inter-active and spiralling, as each aspect of the circuit can affect others, and an individual film must also be located in other contexts. (In this case, such contexts would include other nationally-subsidized films, especially those taking place in a semi-fictionalised near-past; other films by same writer/director, Bruce Beresford; films with similar generic characteristsics or themes, i.e. war, "following orders", "justice").

Using *Breaker Morant* as springboard, then, I sought to examine topics relevant ot film and literary critics alike, such as:

... what dynamics and structures typical of popularised stories affect (some) audiences so powerfully? Here (confining observation to "the film itself"), it seems that *Breaker Morant* functions by identification/misrecognition with the main characters rather than encouraging self-realization or reflection in the audience. (See pp. 6-9 of the *Breaker Morant* monograph for my fuller argumant. Here, I would simply mention that the Danish title - "Strong Wills" (or "Characters") highlights the film's reliance on firm, verging-on-universal personalities, a procedure encouraged by the Australian secondary school guide to *Breaker Morant* which refers to Lt. Handcock as "Everyman" and an "Australian nationalist voice"). Also, wondering how structural studies of myth and tales such as those lived by Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp might apply to modern mass-produced cultural forms and commodities, *Breaker Morant* seemed to me to conform to Umberto Eco's contentions in his studies of James Bond: popular stories are constructed from simplified/falsified oppositions which, far from revealing social contradictions and relations, conceal them. (See my comments about "Queensland"/ Devon" and "Imperial"/"colonial" on p.5). Because *Breaker Morant* is a popularised story, it seems no accident, but rather characteristic, that the black stenographer to whom Carlin gives such importance is a marginal figure. Such tales can accommodate dissident comment or non-conformist characters *if* their role is peripheral or minimal.

... how was *Breaker Morant*'s impact influenced by such factors as pre-release distribution publicity (from the South Australian Film Corporation, the Australian government, and various national distributors), reviews, and advertisements? This area - reception aesthetics - seems particularky underplayed by critics of the most varied ideological and theoretical persuasions. My own research about popular colonial fiction concerning the South Seas, for example, has sought to delineate an impact which is always assumed but seldom demonstrated. No-one questions the enormous popularity, in their time, of authors such as Louis Becke, Jack London or Robert Louis Stevenson. But few have troubled to uncover or map their influence in any detail. (George Orwell's "Boys' Weeklies" and Claude Cockburn's *Best Seller: the books everyone read, 1900-1939* were forerunners of this kind of enquiry, but many studies have inferred audience composition and consciousness from textual analysis alone, rather than by patient empirical drudgery (3). Far more common to much criticism of colonial fiction is unqualified, unspecified acceptance of its effects. Catch-phrases like "the place of Tahitii in the popular imagination", for instance, short-circuit the fascinating challenges of tracing influence through reviews, interviews, advertisements, fan letters (if private papers exist), plagiarisng, translations, adaptations for broadcasting and film, numbers and kinds of reprintings (railway/ airport bookstall paperbacks, book clubs, syndication, serialisations), remainderings and pulping. Agents' and publishers' records (sales slips, memoranda of agreement, royalty statements, profit and loss ledgers) can reveal not only the area of an author's greatest financial success - in one case I investigated

this proved to be the U.S., not Australia as assumed - but also political coloration in editorial policies, and class and gender differentiation in audiences. Within a body of work by a single author, kinds of publication influence contant, and ideologies inherent or voiced, types of characters, plot patterns, functions of setting, imagery, tone etc., can depend on whether her/his fiction was serialised in a large-circulation urban, rural or provincial newspaper, a weekly or monthly women's magazine, a monthly devoted to adventure fiction "founded on fact", or an expensive journal that few could afford to own. As one discovers stories by one author or group of similar authors in magazines long since defunct - *Tip Top Tales*, *The Empire News*, *Betty's Paper*, *Week--End Novels*, *Woman's Life*, *The Sporting Chronicle*, *The Lady's Realm*, *Argosy*, *Hutchinson's Adventure and Mystery Story Magazine*, *The Popular View*, *True Story*, *The Wide World*, or Australia's *The Bulletin* (for which Breaker Morant wrote, and which featured the motto, "Australia for the White Man" on its masthead for decades) - the importance of contemporary writers' manuals also becomes apparent. For some of their pragmatic advice can rival the most sophisticated of present-day theorizing:

> The appeal of popular fiction is largely based on the dream phantasy of the average reader... The pallid, underpaid, underfed city clerk does not want to read about cheap boarding-houses, suburban back-gardens and dingy offices. In his dreams he is wild, untamed, primitive man, and with Jack London sails strange seas, or with Tarzan fights lions single-handed.
>
> If poison must be used it must be one of the known kinds... Keep the Scenes of a story mainly to England. The average reader of *Pearson's Weekly* doesn't know enough about countries abroad... Let the characters go abroad and have experiences abroad, but let them come back to England before the story ends... All the characters should be English unless their nationality has a definite dealing with the story, such as Dr. Fu Manchu... Introduce, if you like, a French count or Russian Bolshevik, but keep the main characters British. Never let politics enter into a story. It would never be popular, and no serial editor would be keen on it (4).

As far as *Breaker Morant* was concerned, I pored through files of press clippings kept by the South Australian Agent General in London, and the English distributor. (Such files vary in their sociological significance. Some, if purchased from a press cutting agency, are a market-oriented preselection; some originate with the interested office or party). An amusing spin-off is that the four of us who contributed to the *Breaker Morant* monograph have also joined this aspect of the circuit, as have Strauss and Carlin in their letters. And the fact that one bookseller to whom I advertised the monograph exclaimed, "This is supposed to *promote* the film?" shows that reception/cconsumption is not the simple matter that some market researchers or theoreticians of popular culture assume.

--- What material conditions and ideological preoccupations induced a culturally self-conscious, "young" nation (of recent white conquest and settlement) to subsidize this particular historical film? (It would be intriguing if the present conservative

government in Australia would sponsor a film about the 1854 rebellion at Eureka Stockade, for instance-- whose flag is used on the badges of those favouring a republican Australia.) Does the Breaker Morant legend bear any resemblancw to other "national-popular" myths there? (I regret not having applied this Gramscian concept, as well as his conception of 'common sense', and work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies using Gramsci's concept of popular religion to investigate the appeal of popular feminine romance.) In this case, the family resemblance between Breaker Morant and Ned Kelly seemed too obvious to ignore. This led to speculation about what current needs these stories of apparent individual rebellion and colonial self-assertion serve in Australian society (which is only mildly civil-libertarian politically and economically subservient both to the previous colonial power and to Japanese and American multinationals). Furthermore, why was an "anti-Imperialist" film acceptable to British royal sponsorship? And when does a healthy preoccupation with cultural specificity become national chauvinism? What Australians are omitted from most national-historical legends? (For a start: Aboriginals, Pacific Islanders, Southern and Eastern European migrants, Asians, and most women--unless they are good villain material.) Why is a *déclassé* but still "superior" *English* man heroic to a society priding itself (erroneously) on the absence of class distinctions, which are viewed as an unfortunate, endemic British problem which withered away in the Antipodes (5). What *is* the relationship of an "historical" film to history? (A number of people have countered my arguments about *Breaker Morant* with the simple connection, "But it *is* history"! Again, is I may cite some of my previous work about popular colonial fiction, I have often found that it is used by historians and sociologists as unproblematical evidence. One typical relationship between fiction and its socio-historical matrix is assumed to be thinly disguised transcription or reflection of actual events. Another is that fiction is any mass/popular medium is obviously evidence of collective representations of some kind--mis/apprehensions of ideas and ideologies, or less conscious fantasies, obsessions, and projections. My purpose is not to disagree with such propositions, but to render them less self-confirming. In my opinion, fictionalised history, in whatever medium, can offer evidence of a historical-conceptual nature, if the story is critically conceived and self-reflectively received. But the more common, restricted notion of automatic historical-empirical validity can be naive. Failure to recognise realism as an aesthetic device can lead readers or viewers to mistake mimetic plausibility for verification or documentation.

I would not want, however, to endorse views that colonial fiction, or other popular media, only function ideologically. That colonial fiction legitimates and naturalises foreign domination is obvious: it reiterates, extends, and defends commercial, religious and bureaucratic interests, while excluding some values or possibilities from awareness. But although all cultural production is conditioned by its ideological horizon and surroundings, research should re-specify in each instance how particular works are linked to the values or interests of specific groups. Stating that fictions are rooted either in "reality" or in ideology h hardly faces the kinds of consciousness (or unconsciousness) they represent, unless critics ask in what ways a completed artifact diverges from its points of departure. Individual works vary

considerably in their transformation and transmission of pre-existing belief systems. Texts and films are elaborated in a narrow "free space" between ideological reproduction and fiction-alfictional creation.

From this standpoint, investigation of *Breaker Morant* should ideally involve examination of as many historical and factual sources of the legend as possible. These range from military and government archives in the metropolitan and post-colonial countries to biographical records, contemporary newspaper reports, and the Breaker Morant industry (fiction, ballads, leaders and letter to the editor, hagiography, soldiers' recollections, political speeches and pamphlets, dissent) already burgeoning in Australia shortly after the Second Anglo-Boer War (6).

In short, I tried to evolve and apply a method for the area where fiction, history, and economics intersect in one cultural artefact. Admittedly a single film's production and reception history cannot bear such weight, and I drew only speculative conclusions about both method and film. A more vaild procedure would be for a team of researchers to scrutinize systematically a broad sample of related film types. What might we then conclude if, adhering to Strauss' insightful proposition that "radical criticism /should/ latch on to the potentially radical elements in a work, to unravel them from their cocoon of myth and mystique, and to establish them so that they can no longer be denied or subverted, "we watched *"Wild Geese, The Outsider* and *Gallipoli?* (I don't agree with Strauss that this procedure need happen *first* in every instance; a more dialectical movement back and forth between "reactionary" and "progressive" elements would surely encompass more of a film's structure and meaning.)

A few questions about some of Strauss' assumptions and unqualified statements. What are the insights he found in *Breaker Morant*, however "limited"? I can't agree that *Breaker Morant* pt "the" viewer "in possession of his faculties" (and who *is* this seemingly co-ere herent, homogeneous, and--perhaps not accidently--male subject?). Too many of the devices I mentioned ensure just the opposite (see pp. 6 and 14-15 of the Monograph about inaccurate or misleading titles, the conservative use of flashbacks, etc.): they mystify or even bully viewers because problems and complications are suppressed that *could* have "raised issues" and thus encouraged the play of the viewer's "free intelligence". Technical accomplishment and sophistication (Strauss' "the care taken with the film, the concern to do the thing a bit better at every point than is really necessary") need not convey objectivity or inventiveness in the sense of subtle alienation effects: I suspect thst if we could all watch *Breaker Morant* on an editing machine, its inexorability and fatalism would be even more apparent. This I regret that my approach struck Strauss as defeatist, for I was attempting to avoid determin*ism* in favour of determin*ation* as defined by Raymond Williams: the setting of limits and the exerting of pressures. And I remain unabashedly unapologetic for taking *Breaker Morant* so seriously, agreeing with Fredric Jameson that "an integration--of the ideological nature of *form*--can alone rescue literary /and cultural/ study from its trivialisation at the hands of antiquarian and aesthete, can alone restore to literature itself its gravity as a mode of organising experience and thereby a social and political act in its own right"(7).

Let me add more positively, finally, that I think Strauss is correct to insist on the differences between the constraints and conventions of Hollywood and Australian feature films, for this opens up yet another intriguing space for popular cultural enquirry; and his discussion of Witton's relationship with Morant is most valuable, for almost all reviewers have omitted it. Above all, I'm pleased to see possible comparative study of A Australian and South African films on our critical horizon. Having lived in both countries (as an outsider in both), I've been impressed by simularities (and significant differences) in their colonial and post-colonial social histories; I feel that political and other factors inhibiting the exchange of ideas injure the development of radical criticism in both places. If Beresford films *Commando* as he would like to do, the ability he has shown in many of his other films (*The Getting of Wisdom, Don's Party, The Club*) for combining exposé or enlightenment with entertainment might be more fully realised. Meanwhile, I remain with my original conclusión (somewhat modified, however, thanks to Strauss) that *Breaker Morant*, like Bereford's more conservative Barry MacKenzie films, has once again "reassured the politicians". "The main point" Strauss seeks to discern in puzzling over *Breaker Morant's* appeal still seems to me to be the ideological misuse of history; the film naturalizes (if not wholly endorsing), the many inequalities in Australian society, particularly by displacing nearly all race, class and gender conflicts onto an anti-British theme.

Notes and References

1. I have adapted this phrase from Bruce Beresford, who used it in connection with his Barry MacKenzie films: "... you must start off with a commercial film, if only to reassure the politicians ..." Interview with David Robinson, *The Times*, 23 October, 1980

2. McArthur, C. 1978: *Television and History*. British Film Institute Monograph No. 8, London, pp. 52-3. Italics his.

3. David Maughan Brown's "Myths on the March" presented at the Conference on Literature and Society in Southern Africa at the Univ. of York's Centre for Southern African Studies, 8-11 September, 1981, is an enheartening step in this empirical direction: he examined some library circulation figures for post-colonial settler fiction.

4. These examples come from contributions to Michael Joseph's 1938: *Complete Writing for Profit*. Hutchinson, London, pp. 717-18 and 868. The guidebook itself was in its fifth thousand at this time.

5. See Connell, R.W. and Irving, T.H. 1980: *Class Structure in Australian History: Documents, Narrative, Argument*. Longman Cheshire, Melbourne

6. The facts of the Breaker Morant/Peter Handcock case have yet to be told. But since the court marshall papers and graves of Morant and Handcock have been located in South Africa, and the Pretoria Historical Society and the Van Riebeeck Society will be publishing information about them, we may soon be

able to assess if the story we now accept as factual is more fictional than prevoously thought. See Younghusband, P. "Morant Papers Found in South Africa", *Sydney Herald*, 21 August 1981

7. Jameson, F. 1975: "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre", *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 161-2. Emphasis his.

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