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Breaker Morant and Magic



In his eight-page reply (Vol 2 No 3) to "P.S." and "M.C." on *Breaker Morant*, Michael Vaughan accuses himself of being "over-iaconic" in his criticism. Over-what? What was that? "M.V." may be a number of things, but iaconic he isn't.

He still insists that the "fundamental question" of the "justice of imperialism" was "remarkably absent" from this film; and as for the aloof black clerk at the court-marshal (a metaphor for History and for Africa), he responds with a rather solemn question: "How does M.C. reconcile the untainted dignity and independence ascribed to the clerk with the subordination of his role within the imperial system?".

I don't reconcile them. On the contrary, the two are utterly irreconcilable -- that's the point!

The same imperviousness to metaphor is shown by Susan Gardner in the same issue, when she refers to the clerk as "a marginal figure". Alfred Hitchcock used to say that one could be interested in cinema without "wanting to make a religion of it". M.V., S.G. and others want to make a sociology of it. If you reduce every film from a work of imagination to a documentary treatise -- something to be taken literally, and needing a "methodology" to see it -- you will certainly tend to suppose that brevity and inconsequence are one and the same.

However, there is another scene in *Breaker Morant*, which (though brief too), is not metaphorical. Pace M.V., I am not one who "bases everything on a single image" (I said -- twice -- that there were others). This particular image is a piece of straight incident, in which the race relations of the era are exposed directly, suddenly, and with shocking effect.

I refer to the scene in which the wagon bearing the body of the mutilated officer (the cause of Morant's anger, leading to his own atrocities) arrives at a camp or field hospital. A detail of Bush Veldt Carbineers (including Morant) are approaching at a gallop. A white regimental doctor throws back the covering over the body, and his face expresses horror. He is helped by a black assistant (possibly the wagon-driver, who has not seen his load until now). With Morant and his men approaching, the black driver takes one look, and instantly slips away sideways, off camera: that is to say, he runs for his life.

It is true that there is conflict about those mutilations: the British blamed the Boers, the Boers blamed the "witchdoctors". If you wish to take a simple pro-Boer view of this scene, you can say that the black driver "recognised" the mutilations, and fled believing that the soldiers might recognise them too. If you prefer (as I do) to give the director more credit than that, then you have another motivation -- one revealed in a savage flash-exposure of what a black man could expect from white people at the time: the black assistant knows full well that white men are dangerous when enraged; because -- *no matter what the cause* -- the nearest black man will bear the brunt of it. So, he darts away. The scene is brief indeed.

For that reason, again, it is all the more effective. In contrast to the heavy hammers of propaganda, understatement increases the impact -- that's art. And if Michael Vaughan is really concerned about the imputed association with propaganda, let him show a little more interest in these "brief and marginal images" on the screen: directors, who are artists, are using them to tell us something. As for my emphasis on the act of *seeing* -- who can say it wasn't necessary?

Which brings us back to his "fundamental question" -- "the justice of imperialism". Does he still maintain that this film has "not an inkling" of that question? Does he still suppose those claims and concerns to be "remarkably absent" from *Breaker Morant*?

One last point: it would be dishonest to pass without comment Michael Vaughan's description of me. I am not "broadly on the Left". I am broadly on the Right (I suppose -- it depends who I'm talking to, and what about). But I certainly do believe in "art per se" -- which is not the same thing as Art for Art's Sake. I also believe that art is magical. I believe in magic. I believe that Table Mountain is alive, for instance. You can see it thinking, and throwing off its moods.

That is *my* methodology -- and I think I've done rather better with it, in respect of the film *Breaker Morant*. I wonder how many of your readers will write in to disagree?

