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Closing the Debate: Critical Methodology and Breaker Morant

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This essay is an attempt to close a debate conducted in Vol 2 No 3, 1982, of *Critical Arts* regarding the film *Breaker Morant*. The issue contained criticisms by Peter Strauss and MM Carlin, of articles by Susan Gardner and Michael Vaughan in a *Critical Arts* monograph on the film, and the responses of Gardner and Vaughan to these critics. A subsequent letter by Carlin, appearing in this issue, restates his position and replies to Gardner and Vaughan's dismissal of his argument.

Though Carlin and Strauss see themselves occupying conservative and left-wing positions respectively, both consider Gardner's analysis of the film, and Vaughan's discussion of Kit Denton's book *The Breaker*, as exercises in sociological overkill and moral pedantry. They also feel that the film was more questioning of imperialism than Gardner and Vaughan allow.

For Strauss, George Witton plays a 'pivotal role' in the film, his disillusionment with British imperialism reflecting "the viewer's own supposed progress to a greater understanding of the brutal reality of imperialism"². And, as Susan Gardner remarks, Strauss is right to insist that Witton be accorded more attention. Yet Witton's bewilderment at the arbitrariness of the British imperial army and his disenchantment with 'Empire' (a more distant concept for him than the army) don't seem to me to vividly specify a sense of "the brutal reality of imperialism". Imperialism as here depicted is synonymous with the inexorable/arbitrary force, the *deus ex machina*, which one encounters in traditional dramatic situations. The oft-quoted lines from *King Lear* are but one example:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods
They kill us for their sport

Carlin took issue with Gardner and Vaughan's respective arguments that the film ignored the interplay of race and class and, more specifically the impact of British imperial policies on the black inhabitants of Southern Africa. The dignified black court clerk - though seemingly a minor character - was one example by means of which

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 black².

Gardner, who directs her reply to Strauss, dismisses this line of argument in two sentences:

Because *Breaker Morant* is a popularized story, it seems no accident that the black stenographer to whom Carlin gives such importance is a marginal figure. Such tales can accomodate dissident comment or non-conformist characters if their role is peripheral or minimal³.

However, it is a moot point whether the clerk embodies dissident or non-conformist values. If anything, as Vaughan implies in his reply to Carlin, the bearing of the clerk is the expected behaviour of a colonial (black) sub-elite. In Carlin's letter, he stresses that the clerk is an effective metaphor "of Africa and History" precisely because his dignity is so much at odds with his subordinate role within the imperial system. In other words, Bruce Beresford, the director, was aware of the dramatic tension between the inner man and the role accorded him. But as Sartre has shown so wittily in his essay on a waiter playing a waiter, role and behaviour (which includes 'bearing' and 'dignity') can and do merge.

Of course, Beresford and/or the scriptwriter, may well have taken the clerk from the play on which the film is based. The playwright, in turn, could have found mention of a black stenographer in the official court records.

Carlin now cites a further example - that of a black auxiliary slipping away when the regimental doctor uncovers the body of Hunt - as proof that the film does record the plight of black Africa. But this scene reveals more of Carlin's unfamiliarity with recent historical scholarship on Southern Africa, than Beresford's grasp of the dynamics of race/class relations in the sub-continent at the turn of the century.

Blacks performed crucial auxiliary roles in the colonial and British forces. And the configuration of power relationships in the British Imperial army (including the question of discipline) demanded something more ordered and paternalistic than arbitrary and brutal treatment of black auxiliaries and irregulars. Race relations during the Second Anglo Boer War were not necessarily more savage than in contemporary South Africa.

Not only does Carlin assume that his reading of history is detailed and sensitive, he also takes Beresford's credentials as historian for granted. But the latter's understanding of the Boer War is based on outdated scholarship. For instance, his contribution to an Australian secondary school guide to *Breaker Morant* - an analysis of the war - is lifted straight from Rayne Kruger's *Goodbye Dolly Grey*.

To restate Susan Gardner's original point, the film, despite masquerading as an accurate analysis of the *Breaker Morant* story, tends to take considerable poetic licence. Viewers are not made aware that Morant was sadistic and racist, or that he was guilty of murdering Boer civilians. The viewers' perception of Morant's case (made to appear more hasty than it actually was) is conditioned by the plot and structure of the film which centres on the trial. The thrust of the film is not why Morant and Hand-

cock committed murders - Kitchener's off-the-record urgings for a hard-line policy toward Boer combatants and Morant's determination to avenge his friend's death are taken as sufficient cause - but why the British saw fit to try and execute Australian servicemen.

The billboard posters of the film which pose an apparently open choice - Hero or Villain? - serve to reinforce the mystification of Morant's crimes. The term 'hero' is smuggled in the enquiry. Also, the somewhat anachronistic word 'villain' is a good deal less vituperative than the term 'war criminal'.

A recent SAPA report on Kit Denton's re-evaluation of the Breaker Morant myth makes interesting reading:

The author who helped to create the film of anti-hero Breaker Morant says he feels guilty about 'perpetuating the folk hero myth.'

Kit Denton, whose novel *The Breaker* was the basis of the 1980 film hit, says he has revised his review of Morant and believes that he was 'an amoral man, frequently a drunkard, a brawler, a bully and totally without conscience'.

But Denton said people who have seen the film, by Bruce Beresford, would continue to believe the legend ... 'Morant was a perjurer in the court and a liar outside the court'. Denton said. 'He was not a scapegoat'.



The film as Gardner suggests, correctly I feel, is anti-British rather than anti-imperialist. Further, to take up another of Gardner's points, *Breaker Morant* should be situated in the context of what Australian visual arts critic, Nancy Underhill, describes as an "increasing historical interest in Australian culture which is best illustrated for the public by films like *My Brilliant Career* and *Breaker Morant*". Paul Taylor, another Australian art critic, finds that films dealing "with our histories at war" /*Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant* etc/ facilitate appropriation "by the dominant culture as proof of the truth of our Australian-ness and present national identity".

That the film is felt to be making some statement about militarism and imperialism (the latter especially), is probably an important factor in its 'critical success'. Does the film make people think somewhat more critically about core-periphery relationships or does it confirm and perpetuate the muddled, ahistoric notion of 'imperialism' as an unitary/amorphous phenomenon? A number of commercial European films purportedly exploring fascism could also be criticized on this score. And Michel Foucault's remark about fascism as "a floating signifier whose function is essentially one of denunciation" could equally apply to the frequent and uncritical usage of the word 'imperialism'.

This discussion of the film's grasp and depiction of history is not to imply that mass-popular films are potentially capable of providing substantive historical insight. Rather it is to argue, along with Gardner and Vaughan, that even if one takes into account the conditions of production of *Breaker Morant* and its frame of reference, it still does not provide an adequate critique of 'imperialism'.



Attempting to establish whose interpretation of the historical/intellectual content of the film is the more correct is not for me the chief issue in this particular debate. The ambiguity and dynamics of the reception of *Breaker Morant* constitute a theoretical problem which can't be resolved merely by an appeal to historico-empirical evidence. The central issues of this debate relate to the nature and practice of film criticism, and the question of aesthetic meaning and value.

As the interchange between Strauss, and Gardner and Vaughan is one between people who situate themselves on the political left in South Africa, let us first examine Carlin's conception of the methodology of film criticism. In both his letters, Carlin emphasises the act of seeing in responding to films. Somewhat ironically, he employs a conventional literary device - that of understatement - to criticize Gardner and Vaughan for failing to detect what he regards as Beresford's artistically nuanced direction. Yet I fail to see why understatement as opposed, for example, to techniques of juxtaposition and emphasis (both 'propaganda' devices), should be the chief canon of 'artistic merit' in mass-popular films.

Carlin's approach is, in part, based on a notion of directors as authors of a form of text (and a closed one at that). Or, to use his own words, directors are artists and by implication the film is their creation. Yet this is to neglect the often substantial role of scriptwriters, film editors and the contributions of other personnel in the making of films. A minor point, perhaps, but one often neglected. In addition, budget constraints, or what Ross Devenish calls "the censorship of money", directly affect directorial 'creativity'. A small budget, said Devenish in a discussion of the making of *Manigolds in August* "means that you are under enormous pressure during the making of the film. You have no opportunity for a second chance, if you don't get it right the first time, then that's it - you just don't get it right"¹⁰.

Linked with Carlin's emphasis on the director-as-artist is his tendency to absolutize art. By declaring art to be magical, one is in effect concealing the degree to which works of art are historical artefacts born of specific social pressures and responding to specific social needs. In basing his methodology on the art of seeing, Carlin falls into the trap of regarding cultural works as autonomous - not to be judged by reference to criteria or considerations beyond themselves. And because he tends to assume that films (or other cultural products) yield themselves to analysis without overt reference to any acknowledged method or system, and without drawing on any corpus of information - biographical, social or historical - outside the work, he is unable to find some merit in the thorough empirical research Susan Gardner has undertaken regarding the production and reception of *Breaker Morant*.

Carlin's emphasis on the act of seeing as central to a methodology of film criticism is, in a sense, stating the obvious. Without wishing to sound facetious, making such a point is akin to stressing the importance of reading in literary criticism. Furthermore, the act of seeing is not as unproblematic as

Carlin assumes it to be. To restate a now hackneyed idea: what one is not 'seeing' in a film is also important.

For Carlin, the evaluation of films is essentially a private spontaneous act. In other words, a work of art is a vehicle, a stimulus to reproduction of the 'real' work in an observer's mind. Hence the magical quality of art and the capriciousness of *Table Mountain*. Also, by associating works of art with magic and inspiration is to obscure the fact that the process of composition of creation is characterised by hard intellectual labour.

Carlin appears to endorse an impressionistic brand of film criticism in which the play of the critic/viewer's imagination is central. But even this kind of criticism - which is the dominant approach in the mass media in South Africa - draws at times, explicitly and implicitly, from analyses of how films are made, distributed, what 'messages' they encode, and how they are received. And such analyses, because they usually demand systematic research, are necessarily academic or "sociological" in nature.

Strauss takes a different tack than Carlin in that he perceives a need for an interaction of academic film study and conventional/mass media film criticism. A central issue for him, it appears, is how people on the left can meaningfully contribute to a criticism of mass/commercial films. His response to Gardner and Vaughan's analyses is to find them overly destructive and characterised by "a kind of moralistic priggishness about the film's orientation, a lack of imagination (or realism) about the conditions of representation in popular art"¹¹.

Breaker Morant, while not a great film, was well made and "produced a kind of confidence in the viewer, and not the kind that is used in order to bamboozle him". Strauss disagrees with Gardner that "conventional narrative techniques" necessarily exclude "critical consciousness", declaring that rather than an exercise in myth building, the film worked through *stereotype* and *through* myth. After all, was not the need to put together 'a good story' at the heart of the film maker's concern? Little more could be asked of a mass-commercial film 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". Therefore "it is surely the *first* duty of radical criticism to catch on to the potentially radical elements in a work to unravel them from their cocoon of myth and establish them so that they can no longer be denied or subverted"¹².

Vaughan finds little merit in Strauss' arguments. He considers Strauss' professed radicalism and "reverence for art" irreconcilable and questions the validity of trying to separate art and ideology. Radical critics, Vaughan declares, cannot change the content of mass-commercial films. Their main task is to arrive at "a better understanding of the 'myths' that are directed at 'popular' (or mass-commercial) publics"¹³.

Gardner is less severe in her response to Strauss. While maintaining that the central characteristic of *Breaker Morant* lies in its "ideological misuse of history", she accepts that the

film is well crafted and more nuanced than is usually the case with Hollywood feature films¹⁴. (Whether comparing Australian and Hollywood films is an instructive exercise is an issue which will have to be contested elsewhere). Gardner considers useful Strauss' suggestion that the radical/progressive elements of mass-commercial films be teased out. This procedure, she remarks, need not "happen ~~fast~~ in every instance"; rather "a more dialectical movement back and forth between "reactionary" and "progressive" elements would surely encompass more of a film's structure and meaning"¹⁵.

However, like Vaughan, I have serious doubts about the viability of unravelling "potentially radical elements ... from their co-con of myth and mystique". Apart from Strauss' failure to specify what he means by "radical elements", there are very real practical problems in finding a suitable medium to affirm the radical/progressive elements in mass-commercial films - especially to find a way so as not only to reach the converted. However, is Barthes is right in describing contemporary myth as "constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things", then how does Strauss envisage a film like *Breaker Morant* working through myth?¹⁶

Gardner's idea of relating the progressive/radical and reactionary "elements" of films does not appear to represent much of an advance. For instance, it fails to take adequately into account the disjunction between the content of a film (as perceived by its makers) and the dynamics and ambiguity of its reception. This is not to argue that the radical critic should concern herself/himself with the myth/ideology which structures and is embodied in mass cultural products. While the establishment of a distinct aesthetic realm is a feature of capitalist society, the role(s) and specificity of creative and imaginative work need to be taken into account in any materialist analysis. I therefore don't endorse Vaughan's criticism of Strauss for depicting art and ideology as "essentially distinct". Apart from caricaturing somewhat Strauss' position, Vaughan leaves himself open to a charge of conflating art and ideology.

As Terry Eagleton insists, 'the aesthetic' is too valuable to be surrendered without a struggle to the bourgeois aestheticians, and too contaminated by that ideology to be appropriated¹⁷. Certainly, it would seem that the common sense notion of art has to be interrogated and that it cannot be deployed unentically. Also, with the tendency in Western Marxist thought to question Althusserian derived notions of ideology - in particular to re-introduce the problem of human agency - ideology itself is a concept that Strauss, Gardner and Vaughan could have used with more theoretical precision. The relationship between 'art' and 'ideology' and the meaning of these concepts should, then, not be taken as given.

It is not so much Strauss' invocation of the potentially liberatory quality of the aesthetic imagination, but rather his tendency to conflate art/aesthetic imagination with progressivism. 'Good'/'great' bourgeois works of art are not always, or simply, the bearer of progressive values. Eagleton, in a discussion of literary criticism based on Marx's discussion of ancient Greek

art in *Grundrisse*, argues that the world views of literary figures such as Pound, Eliot, Lawrence and Yeats, are not particularly progressive. Rather their value/'greatness' lies in their tangential relationship to the hegemonic bourgeois ideology of their era. In other words, "valuable art comes into being not despite its historical limitations ... but by virtue of them"¹⁸.

A further point, and one which none of the participants in this *Breaker Morant* debate, have seen fit to explore, relates to the kind of knowledge we can expect from works of art. Terry Lovell contends, while works of art do produce ideas about history and society, such ideas are not determined in the "polysemic language" of art, but rather in the "univocal language of science and history"¹⁹. In other words, the cognitive dimension of art has been generally over-emphasised by Marxist aestheticians who regard 'art' as essentially the carrier of ideology or as a means for the propagation of politically progressive knowledge.

Lovell also argues that Marxist aesthetics lack a systematic analysis of the social creation of aesthetic pleasure and meaning (i.e. non-material needs) and the ways in which they are/may be met. Susan Gardner, while noting that reception aesthetics is an area particularly underplayed by critics of the most varied, ideological and theoretical persuasions, and illustrating, from her own research in colonial fiction, the ways in which readers encounter texts, stops short of discussing the role of audiences (or readers) in the creation of aesthetic pleasure and meaning.

The need to scrutinise the domain of aesthetic pleasure is not an issue raised by any of the authors. Yet an exploration of this domain - the social character of art as cultural production and art as radical/cultural politics. There is a tendency in materialist aesthetics to separate analyses of cultural production from a theory of intervention. It is this tendency Vaughan seems to be avoiding when in his reply to Strauss, he mentions a "radical critical strategy". Yet Vaughan neglects to specify what he means by the term, despite somewhat ironically taking Strauss to task for an uncritical use of the term "popular culture".

In short, the real problem in this particular debate about *Breaker Morant* is not about the kind(s) of knowledge the film is providing audiences, or whether it is good bourgeois art. Rather it concerns the way radical art/media critics in South Africa should integrate analyses of cultural production with the strategy and tactics of cultural activism.

Certainly a fundamental tenet in this operation is that cultural interventionism should be underpinned by a comprehensive understanding of contemporary cultural production (in South Africa and elsewhere); otherwise such interventionism may be hopeless or counter-productive. It is crucial to have a relatively clear idea at which level(s) cultural struggle would be more effective in certain instances than others.

The nature of the political struggle in South Africa presents such critics with a particular set of problems. For instance, given that many black intellectuals (including a number employing a

class analysis) are concerned with identifying and affirming black/African culture, what role should white radicals play in the realm of cultural politics? Furthermore, should feminist theory and practice be distinct from (though contributing to), or be incorporated in a "radical critical strategy"?

We have strayed considerably from the discussion of an individual film, and Carlin in particular, may feel too much attention has been paid to the question of materialist aesthetics. I would like to make it clear, however, that I'm not glibly dismissing conventional film study and criticism. Such criticism - especially of an intelligent and libertarian kind - can identify and affirm certain progressive features in mass-commercial films. And, by contrast, especially in its more impressionistic and superficial forms, such criticism provides something of an index to the 'common sense' reception of films.

Two final points. Firstly, my intervention in this debate has been essentially that of an amateur in the field of film study. And interestingly, the original participants in this debate are teachers of literature. Perhaps therefore, one of the objectives of 'radical critical strategy' in South Africa should be the promotion of specialised/academic study of film in South Africa. Secondly, one needs to be aware of the dangers of reifying materialist aesthetics. A useful corrective is contained in Barthes' deceptively simple statement:

Anything that was worn out, trivial or so commonplace that it no longer made one think, they did not like it at all. ('You get nothing out of it'.) If one needed an aesthetic, one could find it here²⁰.



NOTES AND REFERENCES

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14. Gardner, *op. cit.* p. 67
15. Ibid
16. Barthes, R. 1982: *Mythologies*. Granada, London, p. 142
17. Eagleton, T. 1982: *Criticism and Ideology*. NLB Verso, London, p. 187
18. Ibid, p. 179
19. Lovell, T. 1980: *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure*. BFI, London, pp. 87-91 and *passim*. See also Barrett, M. 1981: "Materialist Aesthetics", *New Left Review*, 126, pp. 86-93
20. "Brecht Against Lukacs", *New Left Review*, 84, 1974, cited in Eagleton, *op. cit.* p. 169

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