

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 fall 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 traipse 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

Gardner, S., Tomaselli, K.G., Gray, S. and Vaughan, M. 1981: *Breaker Morant*. Critical Arts Monograph 1, Johannesburg

Breaker Morant: Missing the Point?

M. M. Carlin

The response of your contributors to the film *Breaker Morant*

calls for comment in one respect. There seems to be general agreement to the effect that this film of the Anglo-Boer War is one which "ignore(s) other factors such as race and class" (Susan Gardner, P. 6), and which does not, in particular, concern itself with Africa or the Africans at that time. Michael Vaughan expresses the same opinion on P. 58, in his review of the novel by Kit Denton on which the film was partly based. Here he refers to "the rights of the occupants of South Africa...in the epoch before the colonial invasions." And we are asked to believe that "this fundamental question remains remarkably absent from the field of enquiry of both novel and film"

Remarkably absent? I haven't read the novel, but I *have* seen the film - and "seen" would appear to be the operative word. Passing over the question whether "field of enquiry" is a term appropriate to a work of art, I would like to say this: in my apprehension of the film *Breaker Morant*, the original occupants of South Africa are not "remarkably absent" but, with their concerns, symbolically and all the more potently *present* - not only before the colonial era, but during it, and after it too. The film looks forward as well as back, and there is more than one example of this. But the main tribute to the presence of indigenous Africa is paid most richly and artistically in the most important sequence of the film, the scene of the British court-martial of Morant and his two Australian companions.

Michael Vaughan and other of your contributors apparently failed to notice the presence of the black court clerk here- the recorder of the proceedings. After all, this "minor" character was cut in only three or four times; and they which do hunger and thirst after obviousness will no doubt find black Africa "remarkably absent" from this scene too. But art avoids the obvious - that's the whole point. That is one of the differences between art and propaganda.

Who then - what then - is this black man, in this courtroom, in this film? 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? 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 - those same "institutional procedures" - "questions of imperial justice" - which, according to Vaughan, are uncritically accepted/evaded in the film. Now and again this black court clerk looks across at the participants in this imperial-colonial quarrel, with a hint of aloof judgment in his gaze.

Surely, here, symbolically presented, is the African nation on the African continent? What did Vaughan and your contributors expect? Urban labourers in rags? Peasants with hoes? Warriors with shield and assegai? Alas, art will disappoint them: 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, writing down with imperturbable precision the annals of imperial rule, together with its passing tensions. 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. This man is the only black man in the room - and the few glimpses we get of him are all the more potentially 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