

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-sighted. 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 potentially 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 propagandistic 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 'propaganda' 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 conjuncture, 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 ingratitude 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