

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

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 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 underestimated. 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 similarly 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 egrossing 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 characteristics or themes, i.e. war, "following orders", "justice").

Using *Breaker Morant* as springboard, then, I sought to examine topics relevant to 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 argument. 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 particularly 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 Tahiti in the popular imagination", for instance, short-circuit the fascinating challenges of tracing influence through reviews, interviews, advertisements, fan letters (if private papers exist), plagiarising, 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 content, 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, under-paid, 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/consumption 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 resemblance 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: Aborigines, Pacific Islanders, Southern and Eastern European migrants, Asians, and most women--unless they are good villain material.) Why is a *déclassé* but still "superior" Englishman 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, as 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 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 valid 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* put "the" viewer "in possession of his faculties" (and who *is* this seemingly co-ere herent, homogeneous, and--perhaps not accidentally--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 that 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 determinism in favour of determination 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 enquiry; 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 similarities (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 conclusion (somewhat modified, however, thanks to Strauss) that *Breaker Morant*, like Beresford'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 previously thought. See Youngusband, 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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