what they ought to be doing or what popular movements ought to accomplish. He is extremely critical of those "experts" and self appointed leaders who claim to know the line of revolutionary advance. He sometimes seems to be suggesting that Marxists should encourage self-management movements and otherwise keep out of the way.

Given the history of radical movements, his concern is laudatory. The trouble is that not all efforts by people to control what affects their lives are progressive. Community action groups can organise to keep black people out of their neighborhoods; farmers sometimes get together to break through picket lines. Marxists must do what they can to fight reactionary views and to present socialist ideas. There are good and bad ways of doing this, but if doing it at all is elitist, then I don’t see how elitism can be avoided.

However, to suggest that Roberts is one of those socialists who presents us with outdated formulas for new situations, is clearly incorrect. In many ways, he is in the vanguard (if he will excuse this expression) of thought on socialism and the environment. It will take us some time to digest all the ideas he throws out - on science and technology, economies of scale, the relation between practice and theory, etc. It will be worth the effort. If his views are not always as coherent and well developed as we would like, this only goes to show that relating the concerns of environmentalists to marxist theory and practice is not an easy task.

It should be mentioned that the book is well written and often witty. It deserves to have a much wider circulation than its price will allow.

Film Review ....

Breaker Morant

Despite the love affair which Breaker Morant has had with the media — near universal acclaim from critics and film institutions alike (witness Breaker’s clean sweep of the AFI awards last year) — as a film, it stinks. It is neither well made nor original, and without Don McAlpine’s totally undiscriminating and/or doting relatives of the performers. As a political film — which its supporters claim it to be — it stinks to high heaven. The position it adopts regarding war in general, the Boer War in particular, Australia’s colonial heritage and British imperialism are repellent and reactionary.

Let’s take the first charge: that the film is boring and imitative. It relies on a familiar western motif — a revenge killing — crossed with a military courtroom drama. The unique feature of this military trial of lower ranks is the charge: not that the defendants refused to obey orders (King and Country, Paths of Glory), or that they should have disobeyed illegal or immoral orders (The Man in the Glass Booth) but rather that, if anything, they obeyed orders — or the spirit of the orders — too well.

The case concerns three volunteers in an Australian contingent attached to the British Army fighting the Boers in 1901. The volunteers belong to an “irregular” force established to combat guerrilla activity in the countryside. In prosecuting these activities, Morant, the officer in charge, orders his men to shoot prisoners, motivated in part by the hideous murder of his best friend in a Boer attack, and in part by what he understands to be the unit’s irregular brief. The British Army court martials the three for violating the rules of war. Early on we learn that the trial is merely an elaborate ritual: the three are doomed for reasons of state, to placate the offended sensibilities of the German Kaiser who might be tempted to substantially support the Boer cause as a protest against British flouting of wartime codes of conduct.

The court martial is the central focus of the film’s “story” opened out with flashbacks to the three defendants’ lives in Australia and to the activities under review at the trial. We learn that the three — of whom one, Breaker Morant himself, is an expatriate black sheep and ne’er-do-well Englishman; another, Handcock, is a bit of a wide boy, decent but impulsive, who finds poverty and domestic regimens intolerable nuisances to be avoided in traditional ways; and a third, a young boy beloved of his mother — are basically good Aussie (in Morant’s case, Aussiefied) blokes. All the much-vaulted male Australian virtues are on display in the flashbacks — high spirits and larrikinism; resourcefulness and mateship; hard-drinking and womanising. Easy-going, non-deferential, get-the-dirty-job done qualities abound. Our outrage that these flawed-but-decent men should be sacrificed to British Realpolitik mounts as the film progresses, a dimension, I might add, which is almost the sole movement to be found in this dreary film.

Since the “drama” resides in the courtroom, no amount of well-photographed sentimentalising of Home or rhapsodising of Action against the anonymous but omnipresent Boers can rescue the film from the doldrums of a slack script. For nothing much turns on the arguments in the court; it is a foregone conclusion that they will all be found guilty and that one or all of them will pay the Supreme Penalty (sorry about the cliches, but the Boys’ Own verities of this film lend one inexorably into Capital Letter Country). The courtroom merely provides a forum where the Australian contingent can demonstrate their cocky, irrepressible, unintimidated resilience (the defendants) and their conscientious versatility (Jack Thompson, the initially outclassed defence...
counsel who almost beats the best the British have to offer in this rigged advocate game) and where the British are portrayed as totally venal, opportunistic and unprincipled. This is strictly pass-the-popcorn stuff: as the audience, you get to cheer for the goodies and boo the baddies — an exercise tinged with a frisson of sadness for the Tragedy we all know will come.

The film utilises the courtroom sequences, not as a forum for the working out of circumstance and motivation concerning the application of principles of justice, conceived wither historically or universalistically, but rather to demonstrate imperial petty-mindedness and British military justice at its most servile. The message comes through loud and clear: British justice is a sham and a charade; the defendants don’t stand a chance no matter how much “right” is on their side.

And this brings me to the second charge: that the film is morally and politically bankrupt. Although references to “duty” abound, it is clear that issues of morality are almost totally absent from this film. For the defence that Morant et al maintain — that they were only following orders — is one that would be untenable (even risible) were it presented as justification by, say, SS officers. Post-Auschwitz, post-Viet Nam, we have come to question whether the vesting of the capacity to distinguish right from wrong in “the individual” rather than in “the social” is itself a product of the rise of the Corporate State — precisely the entity most likely to issue illegal orders and to prosecute unjust wars.

The consideration of the question of whether the lodging of normativity within the individual is the condition of existence of a state and state institutions without norms is clearly a fundamental question of the modern age. We live in the shadow of Auschwitz: whom can we blame? Who is guilty — everyone? no one? Are blame and guilt even relevant categories? And how should we live in a no-fault world, where issues of responsibility and obligation have no purchase? Is the living of modern life tantamount to the negotiation of a guaranteed insurance policy?

Well, if you’d rather not bother your heads with these matters, Breaker Morant is the film for you, for it represses its clear opportunity to consider these issues. Instead, it trades on colonial jingoism for its “analysis” of Australian-British relations for which the film is highly praised. The wide range of film reviewers in this country have fallen all over themselves in an orgy of critical impoverishment, lauding Breaker Morant’s courageous criticism of Britian’s imperialism vis-a-vis Australia, and its calling into question Australia’s colonial past.

All of this is sheer nonsense. For what the film specifically does not do is analyse that network of colonial inter-relationships that led (1) a brink-of-Federation Australia to send a contingent of volunteers — not conscripts — to South Africa to prosecute a British imperial enterprise and (2) a group of men with so hazy a definition of who they were and what might be the difference between Right and Wrong — in short, a group of men haplessly dependent upon imperial authority — that they would willingly and loyally engage in a war which, with its concentration camps, interrogation techniques, and “elimination” of prisoners ushered in the “modern” era of political control.

So this is the first point of Breaker Morant’s reactionary politics: the mystification of the colonial experience. The film milks “history” for some cheap Pommie-bashing; as we gaze admiringly at the film’s audacious anti-British stand, the fact that the film at no point turns its gaze upon the plight of the Boers, clear objects of a strategy of British imperial domination in which Australia is unquestioningly implicated, simply escapes our notice. The systematic way in which imperialism sets the colonised against one another goes unrecognised. Apparently, according to Breaker Morant, the only thing wrong with being colonised is that every now and again a few colonials become the meat in the imperial sandwich.

The film is not anti-British, or anti-imperialist at all. It simply states that the Brits can be shits to friend as well as foe; that they are more likely to manipulate, use and ultimately sacrifice lesser orders like the Anglo-Irish, Australians, etc. and isn’t that a shame? Given this description of Anglo-Australian relations all we can do, it would appear, is to keep on following orders and hope for better treatment next time. This message is an self-servving whine, not a vigorous critique. No issue of principle — colonial or otherwise — is at stake in this film. By eliminating the Boers from the equation, the game is simply between the evil powerful — the Kitcheners and their machinations — and the simple virtues of comrades in arms.

And this is the second area of mystification — war as adventure, as mateship, as a haven from the petty routines of civvy street. Breaker Morant must be the longest Army recruiting commercial ever made: death and glory; danger and excitement; women in their place; weepily sending the boys off to serve the cause, or readily available for the odd roll in the hay; resourceful officers who stand by you; no unnecessary spit and polish. The only drawback appears to be the possibility of being victimised by Machiavellian British politicians and spineless British generals. But then you get to die so beautifully — with a clear conscience, righteously outraged at your plight — blasted into oblivion in the glorious sunrise, holding your mate’s hand in a vindication of the human over the political. Oh my stars and garters; how can the 16-year olds resist? — which
is undoubtedly why the current Join the Army advertisements echo Breaker Morant.

But the real question is, how could almost all the critics in Australia not resist? How could they almost uniformly admire this nasty and mediocre film? The imprimatur of Cannes may have helped, together with a canny commercial appraisal. But it may be more than that — the critics’ confusion is more widely based: it is the whole society’s inability to think through the issue of our colonial heritage — witness My Brilliant Career.

Right now, local filmmakers are agonising over the “problem” — as they see it — of saying something “Australian” in an industry so internationalised and corporatised that anything really distinctive has almost no chance of being accepted by film bureaucrats at home or abroad. My view is that the desire of the Oz industry to be both Oz and international bespeaks a still colonised mind, unable to recognise the real limitations of both the medium and the message. The role of film critics in exacerbating the confusion, in celebrating as “real achievements” the crippled attempts of derivative and damaged “creators”, is appalling. It bespeaks their cultural colonisation as well, demonstrated by a structured inability to recognise both the absence of historical vision and of the necessity to raise hard questions about the colonial past. It also demonstrates that hallmark of underdevelopment, a well-developed tolerance for unmerited self-congratulation.

— Kathe Boehringer.

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Intervention No. 17

SPECIAL ISSUE : BEYOND MARXISM?

In recent years, it has become common to speak of a “crisis in Marxism”. While the precise focus of this term is unclear, it is apparent that there is a widespread disenchantment among radicals with some of the central tenets of Marxist orthodoxy. For example: there is increasing scepticism concerning the alleged primacy of material production in social life; there is suspicion of the claim that any coherent and liberating political practice must be based on the leadership of the working class. A number of issues which have come into prominence since the early 1970s have posed problems for Marxism. These include: power and the state; feminism, politics of sexuality, family, marginal social movements; language, ideology, the politics of signs; the nature of socialist politics, the revolution-reform dichotomy. To many, the attempt to deal adequately with these issues has seemed to involve recourse to categories and theories not recognisably Marxist.

Intervention No. 17 (to be published in January 1982) will be devoted to these issues. We invite contributions. The deadline will be 1 November, 1981; however, it is important that we be informed of any work that is being planned as soon as possible - certainly not later than mid-July. If there is enough interest, we may organise a weekend seminar-discussion of potential contributions in August.

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