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Can you imagine anything more Australian?': Bruce Beresford's ~Breaker Morant'

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Abstract

The guerrilla war was fast brutalizing both adversaries. The worst scandals on the British side concerned colonial irregulars - Australians, Canadians and South Africans - whose official contingents, ironically, had won a reputation for gallantry in so many set-piece battles. The most notorious case involved a special anti-commando unit, raised by Australians to fight in the wild northern Transvaal, and called the Bush Veldt Carbineers. Six of its officers (five Australians, one Englishman) were court-martialled for multiple murder. The facts were admitted: in August 1901, 12 Boers, earlier taken prisoner, had been shot by the Carbineers on the orders of their officers. The Australians' defence: as a reprisal, shooting prisoners was now accepted practice. Two of the Australian officers, Lieutenants 'Breaker' Morant and Handcock, were executed in February 1902, on the orders of Kitchener. The affair caused an outcry in Australia. There arose a misconception (still current) that foreign political pressures had induced Kitchener to make scapegoats of Morant and Handcock. In fact Kitchener's motives were cruder: evidence of his own army's indiscipline drove him wild with frustration.

'Can You Imagine Anything More Australian?':¹ Bruce Beresford's 'Breaker Morant'

Some 'Realities':

The guerrilla war was fast brutalizing both adversaries. The worst scandals on the British side concerned colonial irregulars — Australians, Canadians and South Africans — whose official contingents, ironically, had won a reputation for gallantry in so many set-piece battles. The most notorious case involved a special anti-commando unit, raised by Australians to fight in the wild northern Transvaal, and called the Bush Veldt Carbineers. Six of its officers (five Australians, one Englishman) were court-martialled for multiple murder. The facts were admitted: in August 1901, 12 Boers, earlier taken prisoner, had been shot by the Carbineers on the orders of their officers. The Australians' defence: as a reprisal, shooting prisoners was now accepted practice. Two of the Australian officers, Lieutenants 'Breaker' Morant and Handcock, were executed in February 1902, on the orders of Kitchener. The affair caused an outcry in Australia. There arose a misconception (still current) that foreign political pressures had induced Kitchener to make scapegoats of Morant and Handcock. In fact Kitchener's motives were cruder: evidence of his own army's indiscipline drove him wild with frustration.

(Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, Publishers, in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979)

A spy-story that has become legendary ... needs revision. Early in February a mean creature named Colyn offered himself as a recruit to Commandant Bouwer's commando, betrayed his comrades for English gold and brought some of them to their deaths. The Boers caught Colyn and brought him before Smuts. The wretched creature wept and howled and begged for his life but he deserved death and he suffered it.... So far this often-told story is true. But Deneys Reitz and other writers have over-dramatised the part that Smuts played in it. They have put into his mouth some implacable words, 'Vat hom weg en skiet hom dood'.... If Smuts did say something like this, he said it not as a man presuming to inflict death upon a fellow man by his own arbitrary will, but as the president of a duly constituted military

court. The records of the court were written out at length in a school exercise book which is preserved among Smuts's papers. They include depositions under oath of the witnesses and of the prisoner, all duly signed and counter-signed, and sentence of the court delivered in due form by its president. The procedure was scrupulously correct and the verdict was just.

(W.H. Hancock, *Smuts: The Sanguine Years 1870-1919*. Cambridge University Press, 1962)

Some Representations and Reactions:

When they speak of heroes ... of villains ... of men who look for action, who choose between honour and revenge they tell the story of ... Breaker Morant. The official Australian entry at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival ... winner of 10 Australian film awards ... and acclaimed as Australia's Most Important, Powerful and Forceful Motion Picture Ever!

(*The Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 12 September 1980)

BREAKER MORANT. ROYAL GALA CHARITY PREMIERE in the presence of **HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES....** To Aid the SOS-Stars Organisation for Spastics and the Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council.

(Information supplied by the Australian High Commission, London, October 1980)

a muscular picture that I think will prove much to the liking of South African audiences, and in Zimbabwe.... Nearly 20 countries have snapped up the chance to screen the picture ... including Mozambique and Angola.

(Dirk de Villiers, *The Star* (Johannesburg), 12 July 1980)



Hero or Villain...
...his exploits shook an empire and made him a legend

BREAKER MORANT

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN FILM CORPORATION presents EDWARD WOODWARD-JACK THOMPSON in 'BREAKER MORANT' Starring JOHN WATERS-BRYAN BROWN CHARLES TINGWELL-TERENCE DONOVAN- RAY MEACHER featuring LEMUS FITZ-GERALD also starring ROD MULLINAR Screenplay by JOHN WATERS Produced by MATTHEW CARROLL Directed by BRUCE BERESFORD

Adapted from the Play Broken Heart by GEORGE RUSSELL - Based in association with the AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION, the GREAT BRITAIN and IRELAND PRODUCTION FITZ LTD. Distribution by GEMSTONE PICTURES (AUS) PTY LTD.

The story of an Imperial military scandal, eight decades and several wars later, has become respectable enough for royally-supported, Commonwealth-wide philanthropy, as an originally dissident, popular tale is incorporated into an Australian-funded, mass-popular commodity. Besides receiving a standing ovation at the Cannes film festival, it has been profitable as well, grossing Australian \$2 million in Australia and half a million overseas.² 'At the risk of a back-handed compliment ... the best Australian film we've seen [in London] for ... years' (Christ Peachment, *Time Out*), is now showing at three London cinemas after the BBC previewed its 'virile' appeal; and the most uninterested, exhausted wage-slave finds him or herself ordered to view it by Uncle Sam-type 'recruiting' posters aiming with phallic accuracy at the tube and bus traveller: as mundane and typical an example of 'interpellation' as one could wish for. Named for a legendary figure, and centring on his court martial and death (the last 'Australian' soldier executed in the Imperial Army), 'Breaker Morant' is a further variation, in a modern mass medium, of an already mythologised incident of the Second Anglo-Boer War: the conviction of Australian soldiers for allegedly murdering Boer prisoners. Although filmed in South Australia, considerable effort was devoted to approximating the look of the scenery of the last area of Boer resistance around Pietersburg, Kitchener's headquarters in Pretoria, and (not with entire success!) 'Afrikaan' dialogue. A London previewer, Dirk de Villiers of *The Star*, assumed the film would interest South Africans when he speculated whether some split-second scenes depicting an Australian officer's sexual escapes with two married Boer women would be cut. And a film that seems anti-Imperialist and, to some extent, anti-British, without the clichés, distortions and hagiography of Afrikaaner nationalist ideology could well appeal to some South African audiences (de Villiers draws no distinctions — does he mean 'Whites Only'?)

But 'Breaker Morant' is a sophisticated but still patent endorsement of equivalent Australian national mythologies. Despite its 'South African' backdrop and fidelity to historical detail,³ 'Breaker Morant' offers neither historical reconstruction nor interpretation, despite one reviewer's claim that 'No other Australian film has more convincingly established the mood, as well as the look, of a historical period — not even Phil Noyce's »Newsfront« [or] Fred Schepisi's »The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith«'.⁴ The credits list a military and a legal adviser, but no historian as such; nor should accuracy and analysis necessarily be expected. For 'Breaker Morant's' director/writer Bruce Beresford is working within the constraints and confines of a typical, obsessional Aus-

tralian story-type: the Australian male's usually unsuccessful quest for self-assertion, frequently taking place in the hostile environment of the former metropolis or in the trenches and frontlines of an Imperial battlefield. Beresford also made the two 'Barry Mackenzie' films. Anyone who has watched 'Bazza's' picaresque misadventures among the Poms will realise that 'Breaker Morant's' structure is almost identical: a Barry Mackenzie film by other means. For Barry's self-flattering and scatological comedy, substitute irony and tragedy; for tourism in the former colonial capital, substitute Imperial warfare ('Join the Army and see the world', as one of the Bushveldt Carbineers, Morant's regiment, remarks). Either story celebrates essential characteristics of Australian national 'identity': anti-English, male chauvinist, cynical rather than critical, spontaneously rather than self-reflectively oppositional, and aggressively, anarchistically individualist. The film's representation of history, although a useful point of entry for a review, is not a sufficient basis for criticism: its structure (a simplistic antagonism between Imperial and colonial values, 'colonial' a catch-all signifying 'irregular', 'intemperate', 'impetuous', 'wild', but also 'effective', 'pragmatic') and effects (the kind of audience identification/misrecognition that draws easy applause and unself-conscious laughter) are ideologically motivated first of all. 'Breaker Morant' has only the manifest appearance of history; its meanings are best sought by interrogating the ideological implications of its form.

'Breaker Morant's' realism and documentation should not blind us to the fact that we're getting a traditional Australian tale retold, its appeal springing from the archetypes and stereotypes it revitalises. Yet the assurance of its closed mode does not entirely obscure the complexities and ragged ends of the original story: complexities to which it alludes but without exploring their ramifications. Material for more subtle and searching treatment is available but unused, as if the conventions and expectations of the genre have outweighed the feasibility of challenging its limitations from within. Alert viewers will note the implications of the authoritative, if anonymous, introductory titles which 'summarise' the Boer War: 'The causes were complex, but basically the Boers wished to preserve their independence from Britain.' (Something which, politically at least, and at exactly the same time — 1901 — the Australian colonies were achieving through Federation.) Displacing (or ignoring) such factors as race and class onto nationality is a mystification occurring throughout: the last words penned by Lt. Handcock (a junior officer of the BVC, executed with Morant) are 'Australia Forever, Amen'.

(*Gender*, very significantly, hardly matters at all, a point to which I return.) Kitchener is allocated a line to mention gold and diamonds influencing possible German intervention, but 'basically' (as the film would say) we are presented with a Boer War without the struggle of international mining capital to control the resources and labour of the Witwatersrand. Of course, many Australian volunteers (and there were many — more than half of the 30,000 troops from colonies outside South Africa) did conceive of their duty in terms of a conflated Imperial and racial loyalty nationally or locally inflected (the names of their regiments, such as the 'Queensland Imperial Bushmen', indicate this). For them the question, 'How many sides are you fighting on?' (as a disgusted Handcock demands of a Boer collaborator) would have received an obvious, single answer.

But for others the war questioned and threatened their complicated affiliations. The Irish-Australian Hubert Murray, later Lieutenant-Governor of the Australian Territory of Papua, although 'bitterly opposed' to the war, nonetheless organised his New South Wales Irish Rifles to fight with the Imperial Army, while a small Irish cohort fought on the side of the Boers. Because the film's signifying structure, typical of popularised stories, consists of over-simplified oppositions generating stock characters, symbols (the military paraphernalia throughout) and voiced 'messages', objective historical contradictions are displaced or absent, and mediations and links are suppressed. In some regards Boer and (Australian) Bushman had more in common than Boer or Bushman with Briton, but this similarity is not stressed. 'Breaker Morant' does occasionally refer to fratricidal aspects of the war, as when Kitchener and his aide Ian Hamilton briefly speculate about the loyalty of an Anglo-Irish officer on their staff. He is, they conclude, more Anglo- than Irish, and therefore to be protected *even though* guilty of the same 'war crime' as the Australians. (The film does not pursue the irony that the Australians were acquitted of the charge they were very probably guilty of — murdering a German missionary — and executed for deeds which, arguably, and with greater or lesser scrupulousness, were committed by both sides, as Hancock's account of a similar although not identical Boer incident quoted at the beginning of this paper suggests.)

The biographical Harry Morant was the black sheep of an Anglo-Irish and County English family who repudiated him even after his death. His social position seems to have been ambivalent and agonising enough to facilitate his recognition that colonials and outcasts made useful pawns. ('Hell! All on account of unity of Empire!' he wrote during his court

martial, ending the letter with, 'God save Oireland!')⁶ His sacrifice, or crucifixion as he called it, as a 'scapegoat of Empire', has contributed ever since to making him an Australian folk hero by adoption; another factor was his ballad-making. In the 1890s, during a hard-drinking existence of cattle-droving and horse-breaking, he wrote for *The Bulletin*, a widely-read, brash, nationalist Sydney weekly. (Its centenary issue of 29 January 1980 reprints his 1895 'In Such a Night'.)⁷ Beresford has skilfully selected portions of 'The Breaker's' verse as ironic and emotive comment, particularly as the film moves towards its pre-ordained close. Comparing the elegiac singing of 'A Soldier of the Queen' by Breaker Morant in the film to its demagogic, raucous rendition in the BBC 2's televised interviews with two surviving British veterans of Modder River and Tweefontein, for instance (the first in a series of 'Yesterday's Witness: Distant Guns' programmes, shown in London on 9 November 1980), testifies to the enduring power of this predominantly collective, oral form. The role of ballads within the film could be viewed as models of the process of popular legendary creation of which Beresford's film is a most recent extension.

But the personality of 'the Byron of the Bushveldt Carbineers, the Tennyson of the Transvaal, quite a Renaissance man' as the British sarcastically dub him, has remained problematic (for another slant, see the enumeration supplied by Russell Ward, author of *The Australian Legend*: 'a confidence man, a cheat, a bare-faced liar, possibly the greatest male chauvinist pig of all time, a sponger, an exhibitionist, a racist and a sadist').⁸ Hence the film's emphasis (and, it seems, misrepresentation and exaggeration) of the all-Australian Handcock, who is assigned the manly qualities of inarticulacy, cultural ignorance, and subordination or denigration of women. During the court martial, questioned about his 'visits' to two Boer women in one afternoon, he comments, 'They say a slice off a cut loaf is never missed.'

Nor would these fragmentary scenes be missed if cut; but the representation of women, such as it is, deserves attention because of the 'obviousness' of their marginality and muting in the Australian picaresque genre to which, in this respect, 'Breaker Morant' emphatically belongs. The toast proposed by Morant — 'To Freedom, Australia, Horses and Women!' — gets the priorities about right. Not that one necessarily expects women to play major roles in a film about guerrilla warfare. But it is important to notice that, when they do briefly appear (always in relation to the male protagonists, and in flashbacks or dreams), Handcock's wife is faceless and voiceless, and Morant's fiancée

speechless. (She is the sister of his friend Captain Hunt, whose murder and mutilation by Boers instigates Morant's campaign of vengeance, including the vow to take 'no more prisoners'.) The credits identify the 'English-speaking' (as pointed out, none of them actually does speak) women in their kinship relations to the male characters ('the strongest line-up of male talent in an Australian film since 'Sunday [Too Far Away]');⁹ they are themselves nameless, and the 'Boer girls', of course, are unintelligible to most viewers.

Sex is displaced onto singing when Morant performs some of his own verses set to music. We, voyeuristically, and *as males*, gaze protractedly at his fiancée at the same time as he and Hunt do. The affective relationship between the men, sealed by exchanging her, is signalled by these lingering looks of appropriation. Hunt confers her; Morant celebrates the possibility of claiming her someday. The brevity of such a sophisticated scene contrasts forcibly with the more frequent, sexist playing-to-the-gallery which encourages speculation about the necessity of the latter in popular Australian cinema. It's as if, in the circuit of production, distribution, exchange, and reception, the expectations (and gender?) of those who relish the Barry Mackenzie films — without seeming to realise they are themselves lampooned — reacted upon Beresford's latest script. The pandering to sexist conventions undermines the effectiveness of what should be the most powerful and moving scene. Certainly it is the most technically accomplished, as a brief resort to slow motion extends the seconds between the shots of the firing squad and Morant and Handcock's deaths. The two men go hand in hand to their execution, accompanied, in Brisbane at least, by giggles and cat-calls from an evening audience which, when younger, probably preferred its Saturday matinées with 'lots of blood and no women'. The Australian glorification of male 'mateship' vies with the horror of any physical expression of emotion between men — and loses.

'Breaker Morant' is 'about' a number of surface messages.

'This is what comes of Empire building.' (Morant)

'If you're mug enough to join a Pommy regiment, you can take what's coming to you.' (Handcock)

'If you encounter any Boers,
You really must not loot 'em,
And if you wish to leave these shores,
For pity's sake don't shoot 'em.'
(One of Morant's last poems)

'The tragedy is that these horrors are committed by normal men in abnormal conditions' (Major Thomas, the defence counsel), begging questions about what 'normality' might be: *does* 'war change men's natures'? Isn't a 'lawless' or 'irregular' situation still embedded in, and constructed by, social relations to which it also contributes?

Political expediency which has little to do with justice.
(*The Courier-Mail*, 20 September 1980)

Where do orders stop and personal morality take over?
(Dirk de Villiers, *The Star*, 12 July 1980)

'...a group of men with a strong central character »having a go« defying the system of authority'

(Matt Carroll, 'Breaker Morant's' producer, quoted in Peter Welch, '»Breaker« Best Thing Since »Sunday«, in Trans-Australia Airline's in-flight magazine distributed during August, 1980, p. 28)

In the BVC of 1901 may be distinguished an ugly phenomenon that pululated throughout this century, spawning the Black and Tans ... as well as the Lieutenant Calleys of modern times.

(K. Connolly, 'Australian Directors: The Films of Bruce Beresford', *Cinema Papers* No 28, August-September 1980, p. 18)

However, if, as most foreign audiences must do, one is confined to the film's language of cinematic techniques, what does 'Breaker Morant' say about 'how the concrete historical forces of a particular period have become concentrated in the life of this particular individual'?¹⁰

The polarised advertisements ('Hero or Villain?') simplify a more daunting intellectual task facing Beresford and his audience: how to achieve (in Lukács' slightly outdated terminology), 'dramatic plasticity, individualization, and, at the same time, historicism'? (Lukács, p. 138). If 'the individuality of the dramatic hero is the decisive problem' (Lukács, p. 129), how to create, not an ideological mouthpiece, but 'a figure in whom the deepest individual and personal traits merge with historical authenticity and truth to form an organic, inseparable, directly effective unity'? (Lukács, p. 128). The title, by focussing upon Morant (more precisely, by focussing on his nickname, which preselects and highlights a forceful aspect of his personality), invites speculation about his part in shaping and being shaped by history. Thus the internecine Imperial conflict can be viewed as a projection/externalisation of his divided consciousness, and he, in turn, embodies contradictory social forces. But how does Beresford conceive of the mutually determining

relationships between individual biography and history? After a number of viewings, one can still find it difficult to be sure, in part because the screenplay borrows unevenly from a mixture of fictional and historical sources: differing narrative modes which convey and contain varying notions about historical and social conditioning of character. Ken Ross's play about the court martial is the screenplay's core: the producer Matt Carroll admits that it 'showed the way' with the promising but apparently intractable material contained in Kit Denton's novel *The Breaker*.¹¹ 'In drama everything revolves around the reflection of ... critical and crisis-producing heightening and climaxes of life, because this is the centre whence the parallelogram of forces ... arises' (Lukács, p. 123), and by using the court martial as the episode around which all other action, past and future, revolves, 'Breaker Morant' resorts to the 'calling to account' in one's dying hour which, from classical times if not before, has taken the form of revealing 'the bankruptcy of an erring life ... in a compressed and concentrated form' (Lukács, p. 124). Such a form, Lukács claims, is actually vitiated by 'so-called period details describing individual historical facts': 'The description of the times, of specific historical factors is in drama only a means of giving the collision [of a character with her/his »fate«] itself a clear and concrete expression' (Lukács, p. 176).

But the screenplay also contains the implied priorities and viewpoints of more 'factual' forms such as official history and revendicatory biography. The resultant clash of focusses produces a decentred character (or, more accurately, a protagonist split amongst three characters: Morant, Handcock and Thomas). Morant's function as condensation, expression and response to historical forces is therefore attenuated. Since he does voice much of the film's structural comment, and the film never gives a version of the catastrophe significantly different from his own statement in the dock at the beginning, he seems to be the 'hero' in a formal, functional sense. But the only character development is allotted to Major Thomas (a role for which Jack Thompson won the Best Supporting Actor award at Cannes, as well as applause from the grudging Brisbane audience): again, the tensions between formal imperatives of drama, novel and history out of which the screenplay is constructed (not to mention Morant's own ballads, letters and reports) result in confusion. The play-within-a-play structure (trial interwoven with flashbacks), by taking place largely in the narrative present, necessarily suppresses direct representation of biography and simplifies motives. 'But to portray the whole environment of an action, including nature and society, as stages along [the] path ... the action must be based

on retrogressive motifs' (Lukács, p. 172) — and this is precisely what the flashbacks and dreams could have done, 'reflect[ing] correctly', in the process, 'the dialectics of freedom and necessity' (Lukács, p. 172). How, then, does 'Breaker Morant's' chronology construct character, and what does it suggest about causality?

Flashbacks can potentially suggest alternative actions and consequences, interfering, for creative and critical purposes, with normally accepted concepts of time as continuous and character as stable. But 'Breaker Morant's' use of the technique is conservative, little more challenging to order and outcome than a live action replay of Lions versus Springboks. The characters (except, perhaps, Thomas) react to circumstances from a pre-determined personality base, and Morant from one major motive ('Avenge Captain Hunt'); beginning and end of the film are indissolubly linked, as its 'explanation' of events simply confirms Morant's opening statements. The story gradually takes shape for viewers, as different versions are related by mostly hostile and unreliable witnesses, but the possibility that events and persons could have developed differently is not considered. These flashbacks simply rearrange the presentation of the past; they do not question its fatality. (Time is never slowed down or speeded up in these past sequences, nor are images superimposed.) Their effect could be conceptualised by comparing the sequences of the finished film to the succession of images in a loaded slide carousel. Narrative may move forwards or backwards, but only within a set pattern. The implication is that mere chronological succession somehow explains historical consequences; the concept of causality is little more subtle than *post hoc propter hoc*. (Of course, the film's ending is known in advance — although perhaps not to most audiences — but this is no barrier to suspense or innovation, or none of the world's tales would be twice told.) The film, then, is as stacked as the court martial itself was, and the Kitchener conspiracy theme further deprives the characters of initiative or even indeterminacy. That the truth is never told and justice not done in 'a new war for a new century', set in a no man's land where 'there are no rules', nonetheless suggests that normally truth is knowable and justice definable; unreliable narrators, moreover, do not undermine the conception of narration itself as fundamentally unproblematic.

It would be an exaggeration, then, to regard Beresford's Morant as a Hegelian/Lukácsian 'world-historical individual', 'portrayed in such a way that he not only finds an immediate and complete expression for his personality in the need evoked by the collision, but also draws the general

social, historical and human inferences of the collision — without losing or weakening ... either his personality or its immediacy' (Lukács, pp. 143-4). That would require a 'pathos' and 'quality of ... passion which is neither abstractly general nor individually pathological, which enables the concentration of personality upon pathos to find a direct response among the masses' (Lukács, p. 162). Such an individual, according to Lukács, would forecast progressive tendencies of her/his time already stirring, but in fragmentary and inchoate form, among 'the people'. But the whole thrust of 'Breaker Morant' is fatalistic. At the end Morant and Handcock are hastily buried to the restrained irony of Morant's voice singing 'A Soldier of the Queen', while titles again intrude to inform us — very partially — what happened to everyone else. (Witton, released from gaol in England, wrote *Scapegoats of Empire*; Thomas retired to his country law practice in New South Wales and became a recluse.) If Beresford's intention is to confine the story to what the defeated characters themselves could have known, the apparent determinisms of character, circumstance and conspiracy are understandable. But not necessary.

For in fact the ending was more progressive than anyone could guess from the film, the closure of which reaffirms an Imperial, hierarchical, apparently immutable social order. This very war, coupled with the Irish rebellion of Easter 1916, began the end of the Empire that seems so eternal in 'Breaker Morant'. In Australia, L.M. Field's *The Forgotten War* claims that, after an initially spineless government reaction ('no less reprehensible than the bloody deeds themselves, or the callousness of Kitchener. It took the forms of a supine attitude ... towards Imperial authorities, an unseemly haste ... of the press to disown the wrong-doers, and apparent public acquiescence in the executions'):¹²

...a process of national introspection ... had already begun. The affair of the Bushveldt Carbineers represented the greatest shock of the war to Australian complacency over the nation's military image in South Africa ... [and] disenchantment with the cult of the warrior ... [Australians] were embroiled in a war that brought no national honour ... the nation turned its back on the war, although it clearly marked the beginnings of the Anzac legend and the tentative emergence of the soldier as folk hero in place of the bushman.¹³

I return, then, to my contention that 'Breaker Morant' is not a film about history (if it were, the depredations of Kitchener's 'scorched earth' policy would have to appear), but one which uses history as local colour, entertainment predominating over enlightenment. Truly historical films now tend to project a critique of the very sources and processes of

documentation and narration: 'The Song of the Shirt', for instance, combines material from official British records, contemporary Victorian novels, reportage, cartoons and lithographs, and then uses montage to reveal its own procedures of reassembly and re-presentation. Its techniques are deliberately visible; 'Breaker Morant's' are so 'natural' (or 'cohesive', as Jack Thompson symptomatically described them) as to pass unnoticed. Just as it mixes elements of different story-types within a more encompassing genre, 'Breaker Morant' borrows from different *modes* of retelling the legend (which has always gone underground only to reappear: 'They still talk about him in the back country of the [Northern] Territory and Queensland.')

¹⁴ These include Morant's own ballads, sung and printed; biographies; Ross's play; and Kit Denton's instant 'classic' novel which I bought in the Australiana section of Tullamarine, Melbourne's International Airport. The story, it seems, is as 'Australian' as the dried apricots, beef jerky and Kraft Cheestiks also available to the departing traveller; hence its acceptability to the Australian Film Commission, which reneged on sponsoring David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner*, and hence also, one can speculate, the popularity of the jingoistic Barry Mackenzie films during the Vietnam years. Each of these modes has a specific intent and impact, and one way to historicise the film would have been to juxtapose them in their original state (with contemporary archive footage as well), so that each could highlight the stances and special pleadings inherent in the others. Again, the material is there, but because of the flawless and coherent orchestration, its critical potential is only partially exploited. Perhaps Beresford's mixing and then concealing the contradictory pull of different genres and modes is not just one man's artistic blunder, but a problem of representation characteristic of our time:

It is easy to see what ideological inhibitions work against [authentic historical drama] in modern writers. The development of capitalism inevitably alienates writers from popular life, they find it more and more difficult to see into the inner active forces of capitalist society ... [and] of all the factors which determine the complex content of life only the immediate causal connexion between two related spatial-temporal phenomena is recognised ... this alienation ... leads [modern writers] to over-rate immediate causation, which they generally and inevitably see in terms of biographical-psychological causation, and so to acquire their preference for biographical form. (Lukács, p. 376)

Perhaps I have overstressed my historically and politically concerned response to 'Breaker Morant'. Beresford's renderings of Australian myths can be more disturbing and provoking, as with 'The Getting of Wisdom' (originally a female *Bildungsroman* by an Australian woman writer, 'Henry Handel' Richardson), and his adaptations of David Williamson's biting plays 'Don's Party' and (forthcoming) 'The Club'. To attain even limited autonomy, or more — one London reviewer awarded the final sections of the screenplay 'Ibsenite' status — when subsidised by a self-conscious government, and working with commercialised cultural forms, is a significant achievement. (Yet the reception of 'Don's Party' again raises the question of whether send-ups are recognised for the social criticism they are, a problem familiar no doubt to Bosman and Pieter-Dirk Uys as well). Did the reviewer who concluded, '»Breaker Morant« deserves to be popular and successful, and will be, whether or not it touches on Australian and contemporary nerve spots as it might',¹⁵ have Southern African audiences in mind? Or another who notes that 'Beresford scarcely needs to stress the modern parallels; they are distressingly obvious'?¹⁶ How will all South Africans, whose media daily insult them with the evasive rhetoric of 'unrest', 'borders', and 'occupational areas', perceive the 'obvious' and feel the 'distress'? And how will 'Breaker Morant' be viewed in Mozambique and Angola?

NOTES

1. Jack Thompson (who plays the role of Major Thomas), quoted by Peter Welch, '»Breaker« Best Thing Since »Sunday«', Trans-Australia Airline's in-flight magazine, distributed during August 1980, p. 29. Thompson is referring to the 'extremely strong and laconic Aussie character' of Lt. Handcock.
2. *The Bulletin* (Sydney), 23 September 1980, p. 47.
3. That is, the information available. As various writers, e.g. F.M. Cutlack in *'Breaker' Morant: a Horseman Who Made History* (1962) and Kit Denton in *The Breaker* (1973) have shown, destruction or inaccessibility of War Office records adds to the mythic power of the story by ensuring that 'the whole truth' can never be known.
4. Quoted by K. Connolly, *Cinema Papers* No 28 (August-September 1980), p. 17.
5. 'Breaker Morant' combines strands from various narrative traditions. I am using 'Australian male picaresque' as a shorthand notation: this is a particularly complex

form for, as numerous cultural commentators have observed, reckless rebelliousness is usually cancelled by defeat. The producer Matt Carroll's pin-pointing (in the article referred to in note 1 above) 'A dramatic storyline about a group of men with a strong central character »having a go« defying the system of authority' as 'the well-spring of our original success' (referring to the South Australian Film Corporation's 'Sunday Too Far Away' as a prototype of the appeal of this story-pattern) does not really clash with reviewer Jack Clancy's observation, 'It is striking that ten years of Australian film-making has failed to produce anything much resembling a hero figure. The gallery of defeated males, characterised at best by a sort of stoic resignation, at worst by a despairing laconicism, is a long one' ('Breaker Morant', *Cinema Papers* 28, p. 283). A zig-zagging of contradictory character traits within one individual was perceived by D.H. Lawrence in Australia, and his notions have been discussed by Patrick Morgan in his paper, 'Hard Work and Idle Dissipation', delivered in Frankfurt at the March 1981 conference of the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies.

But other genres, such as 'war films' concerned with the morality/expediency of 'following orders' (such as, to give a South African example, 'The Wild Geese'), have contributed elements from their specific codes and conventions as well. To such a grouping one can also add 'The Outsider', acclaimed as the first popular-cinematic portrayal of 1970s Belfast. Its protagonist, like Harry Morant, explores the complications of a divided identity (as paraphrased from J. Dunsmore Clarkson's *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, 'a religion he has not got and a politics he does not understand'), insofar as the limited horizons of a commercialised American film will permit him. The revival of romantic motifs and archetypes often occurring in frontier situations is striking in the biographies of Morant which view him in quasi-chivalrous terms: distinctions between knight, buccaneer, and bandit become blurry at times. Northrop Frye (in *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Fables of Identity*) regards the loss of personal identity as the most terrifying ordeal in the romance archetype, and mentions the nightmarish suitability of a rigged trial to symbolise this. Frye uses the term 'kidnapped romance' for the exploitation by ascendant ideologies of romantic themes and motifs, mentioning Kipling, Haggard and Buchan. In the Morant film, elements of these old stories are retold and modified by a young nation validating its cultural competence and overcoming the famous 'cultural cringe'.

6. F.M. Cutlack, 'Breaker Morant: a Horseman Who Made History' (1962) (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1980), p. 75.
7. Isabel Hofmeyr's characterisation of the roughly contemporaneous Kimberley digger journalism — 'libellous, tendentious, partisan, humorous, satirical and iconoclastic in the extreme' ('The Mad Poets: An Analysis of an Early Sub-tradition of Johannesburg Literature and its Subsequent Developments' in Belinda Bozzoli, comp., *Labour, Townships and Protest: Studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979, p. 125) — could also apply to the influential *Bulletin* during the 1890s Depression and at the time of Australian Federation. Comparative studies of the Australian and South African colonies would certainly reveal many more institutional and ideological parallels.
8. Quoted by Jack Clancy, 'Breaker Morant', *Cinema Papers* No 28 (August-September 1980), p. 283.
9. Welch, '»Breaker« Best Thing Since »Sunday«', p. 29.

10. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Peregrine, 1976), p. 380. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
11. Welch, p. 29.
12. L.M. Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899-1902* (Melbourne Univ. Press, 1979), p. 173.
13. Ibid. I should add that the 'ending' probably hasn't happened: the revival of an imperialist-period legend during the hegemony of multi-national world capital, and its appropriation by national-popular discourse, implies that there is almost no end to the uses of this story. The problem of exploring cultural identity without promoting jingoistic nationalism is a recurrent dilemma amongst colonial and post-colonial cultural workers. In an interview with *Semper* (Brisbane, 25 September 1980, pp. 19-20), probed about the Australian film industry's spate of nostalgia films and the prominence of the Australian flag in advertisements for 'Breaker Morant', actor Jack Thompson claimed, 'I think there's a sort of nationalism associated with it, but ... Americans applaud it too, and Englishmen applaud it. The film isn't simply an Australian showpiece nor does it present the flag as the thing that's being fought for ... I think it must give the Australian people overall a greater sense of ... cultural identity. I don't know where to go from there, really. That [question] floors me, that one.' He then makes the suggestive comment that this accomplished, perhaps overpraised national film industry may have resorted to the near-past because 'It's difficult to make contemporary pieces because you always have an argument with your audience' (!); for him, 'Breaker Morant' is able to be 'a very contemporary film' precisely because it's 'not a film about the Boer War'. The rationale seems to be that film-audience Australians can only approach their conservative, still-colonial, multi-national controlled present *via* the past.
14. Thompson in Welch, p. 29.
15. Clancy, p. 283.
16. Connolly, p. 19.

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Trial scene from *Breaker Morant*.